

Symbols of Passion and Conflicts: A Study of Symbolism in Sons and Lovers

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted use of symbolism in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, exploring how the novel utilizes a “reversal of sequential flow” and an “open up the world unknown” approach to meaning. It delves into the nature of symbolic representation, distinguishing between simple symbols with fixed meanings and complex symbols that are multivocal and resistant to singular interpretations. The text emphasizes that symbols in *Sons and Lovers* are not always definitive but rather evoke varied associations, often drawing upon universal archetypes, cultural traditions, and personal experiences. The study also highlights the novel's reliance on “imaginative perception” for understanding these layered symbols, which shift in meaning throughout the narrative. It specifically discusses the symbolic significance of characters like Paul and Clara, and the rich symbolic language used to depict natural elements such as the Trent River, plants, and animals, linking them to themes of fertility, rebirth, and human emotions. Furthermore, the analysis touches upon the connection between physical and conceptual or spiritual realities within the symbolic framework, noting how Lawrence's use of symbolism enriches the narrative's depth and allows for a “multidimensional” reading experience. The study suggests that *Sons and Lovers* is a “dense network of symbols” that continually renews its meaning upon each reading.

Keywords: Symbolism, universal, Multidimensional, Natural, Emotion.

Introduction

Symbolism destabilizes time frame of a narrative, reverses its sequential flow and opens up the world unknown, unlimited in front of the reader. Language itself is symbolic in character for referring something by using something different, but literary symbols are so indefinite, so much complex that can stand for things/ideas at once contradictory and operating in multi-levels. Human mind can't comprehend the whole references suggested by a symbol. When it is animated by imaginative perception, it reveals a vast multifarious world in a time, which goes on changing its spatiotemporal dimensions each time one goes through the symbol. To state that, one can't translate the symbolic suggestion to the original concepts or ideas is to underline the poly-phonic and untranslatable nature of symbolic significance. *Sons and Lovers* is a dense network of symbols that suggests the novel's world as infinitely incomprehensible, which renews itself in each reading. The present study undertakes to investigate symbolism's destabilizing the linearity of the novel.

The novel *Sons and Lovers* open with clear description of mines and the miners who were depicted going into the earth like ants creating some strange heaps and black spots in otherwise calm fields and meadows. Later, when Walter Morel talks to Gertrude Coppard at the first

meeting between the two, he compares the life of miner to the existence of mice, explaining, "You live like th mice, an' you pop out at night to snoop round about and see what is happening." With these metaphors, a thematic contrast of light and darkness, civilized and lower animal world are instantly created and we are elevated to the world of Gertrude as beautiful and spiritually inclined, and we are cast in a lower, earthier level of Morel.

The working-class miner, Walter Morel marries Gertrude whom he educates on a higher social platform. The way he is fascinated with her brings an imagery of a blending of opposites, the darkness with light, the instinct with intellect. Such symbolic parallel can be applied to mythical stories of Pluto and Persephone: Walter appears out of the underworld of the mines to meet and possess the radiant Gertrude, similar to Persephone picking flowers and being brought to the underworld by Pluto.

The mine as a background gets increasingly sophisticated as the story progresses; it acquires the meaning of the legendary underworld. This mythical perspective brings about the second and paralleled world in the novel that interrupts the chronicle narration and open a room to symbolic interpretation. However, Gertrude is fascinated by the new environment at the beginning but her happiness does not last long. When reality dawns on her, she is eager to get out of the darkness which she is lured to, and she tells in bitter words of her desperation: I should be much glad. I had not better laugh, laugh, my lord, than my best was, was I able to escape thee."

Unable to liberate herself physically, Gertrude channels her unfulfilled aspirations into her children. She seeks to elevate them beyond the miner's world to raise them into educated, respectable members of society. Her inner conflict, and the projection of her hopes onto her children, becomes the emotional and symbolic foundation of the entire novel.

If the reader is not aware of the parallel of Pluto/Persephone, he is still struck by the drama of at action-repulsion of Lawrentian male-female relationship, how they are united as if by the magnetic force of instinct in a moment and fall out in fierce fighting in another. Replacement of one idea by another, or association of ideas on the basis of similarity is the function of a metaphor or symbol. A cross may symbolize Christianity in one context and a road intersection in another, but these uses are limited and easily decodable, whereas, literary symbols are not easily decoded that tend towards a rich plurality, even ambiguity of meaning. Similarity of a metaphor/simile consists of likening-A to B. while a literary symbol is a B that suggests A or a number of correlatives of A (David Lodge 139). If a symbol is different from a metaphor by its recurrence, it also varies from an allegory so far as it suggests one idea by another without being particular or definite. Lawrence, however, doesn't define the object or incident before he uses it as symbol, which adventurous step generally provides a sensuous and realistic detail of the scene that helps the reader to easily perceive the symbolic significance. In relation to myth, symbol too is very indefinite and general, for myth traces the original proto-type of the genesis and can't be invented; it stands for characters, events, initiated in the sacred time and are imitated down the generations, like celebration of festivals, rituals. In this sense, symbol is both myth and history, it stands for mental concepts as well as historical events. Thus, figures like metaphor, allegory, myth, and symbol are all images that evoke different pictures, physical or conceptual. The delicate difference between these figures is often overlapping, which can't be

reduced to mathematical formula. They depend more on perceptive faculty of the reader than on objectively definable categories. The point that this discussion underlines is how the image takes the reader beyond the presented world of narrative to the imaginative world, the leap that obliterates the temporal framework of the narrative for multi-texts.

The River Trent that is flooded is used as a strong reoccurring symbol throughout the *Sons and Lovers* especially in the events that surround the relationship between Paul and Clara. At the moment of their encounter, the river is painted as full and silent which flows under the bridge like a living being but soft. Following a downpour of rain, it appears grey in hue with silver light being reflected on its surface, and its flow is breaking and bending and flowing like an elusive and complex creature.

The imagery is enhanced as the descriptions of the green lush meadows down below and the silence of the grazing cattle is referred to. Paul and Clara then face each other and because of the immense silence both are physically close to each other and this reflects the intensity of the quiet river. The unpredictable splash of gurgling water in the lower part gently supplements the sexual subtext of the situation.

This description of the Trent is not really a setting; it is part of the natural forces, fluid, instinctive and emotional. That completeness and the still movement reminds the physical and emotional awakening between Paul and Clara, and a hint to fertility, desire and natural progression of human passion and emotion. Complexity of the river parallels that of the unresolved and interwoven relationship developing between the two characters, to where the rhythms of nature are symbolically compared to that of human coupling.

The River Trent described in *Sons and Lovers* is not just another symbol of fertility or a symbol of sexual relationship between Paul and Clara. The combinations of the phrases such as full, soft body, rain, green meadows, slide by in a body, swift, gurgle, and insidious make the feeling about the unstoppable natural power I cannot describe in other words than an instinctive stream of cosmic hours and human feeling. Such pictures do not only portray physical closeness but a primordial urge that supersedes thought and reasoning.

An extremely instructive example is when the story compares the act of love, as Paul gives in to his emotions during sex; to that of the river, compelling, and compulsive. His passion sweeps the mind, soul, blood into one continuous roll, as the darker waters of the Trent itself. This transition makes him into an animal of instinct with no thoughts being conscious.

The physical setting, a riverbank to which Paul and Clara find themselves together, is not what it seems: it represents the totality of their connection, in place of the thing they cannot say, at its most intimate. In this case Lawrence brings out metonymy and metaphor to move meaning between literal and the figurative. Such intertwining of images becomes at the center of the symbolic texture of the novel in which emotional and physical experience are not described directly but rather found and captured in the details of the layering of associations.

“If a woman were to grab up a bottle of Grade A and say to her husband ‘Get away from me or I’ll hit you with the milk’ that would be a thing contained for the container (Campbell 116). This is a metonymical inversion of Miss Groby’s student Thurber, and the whole class laughs.

The figure recalls Antonio's funeral speech- "Lend me your ears". Lawrence shifts the narrative frame of the novel from social container to the things contained. The realistic tradition has focused on the container to which individuals must accommodate themselves. Campbell draws our notice to the point that for Lawrence the social institutions, constructs, provide inadequate tools to measure the source of character's impulses and instincts (116-17). Roman Jakobson recognizes the metaphoric process of literary schools of romanticism and symbolism as the real source of metonymy. He states that the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere, and from the characters to the settings in time and space (Two Aspects of...124). If Thurber parodies Miss Groby, it is not just a joke, but it states something deeper beyond our notice. The narrative with the use of

Flooded Trent digresses from the verbal signs to the revelation of new world. The metonymic digression further comes to our knowledge in the episode of Paul-Miriam that covers second half of the novel. From the very beginning of their relationship the reader understands that the girl is romantic, otherworldly, and abnormal and in her reflection, "the queen in swine girl". Regarding her love she articulates in prayer: "But, Lord, if it is Thy will that I should love him, make me love him-as Christ would, who died for the souls of men...because he is Thy son" ...then she fell into that rapture of self-sacrifice, identifying herself with a God who was sacrificed" (SL 150-51). Her intention and end are well defined with the images of sacrifice, guardian angel, hope, suffering. nun, nunnery, paradisaal entry. The irony of the situation compels the reader to perceive the symbolic significance. During the visit to Hemlock Stone the narrative presents: "A feeling of stillness, almost of ecstasy, came over her. It felt almost as if she were alone with him in this garden" (145). May it be Willy Farm, or Hemlock Stone, or the sea beach, the garden metaphor is configured to the Paradise. In the next development, seeing Paul interested in things of lesser value she is hurt: "She believed that there were in him desires for higher things and desires for lower, and that the desire for the higher would conquer" (199). Then she puts Paul to test with another woman Clara Dawes. As his intimacy with Clara develops the narrative presents Paul and Clara:

He took her by the arm, held her facing him, holding her eyes with him. Something fretted him, 'Not sinners, are we?' he, said with an uneasy little frown. "No", she replied. He kissed her, laughing. 'You like your little bit of guiltiness, I believe', he said. 'I believe Eve enjoyed it, when she went cowering out of Paradise' (272- 73)

Paradisaal entry and the Paradise lost are two poles of Miriam and Clara between which is put Paul. His steep swing towards Clara suggests Paul's choice and use of free will. The choice to remain human compels Paul to reject Paradise and otherworldly interest of Miriam. He is to quit Paradise and desire human follies, guilt that Clara offers. The narrative of the novel describes the relationship between Paul, Miriam, and Clara, but symbolism used reveals another world, the narrative of the Bible, God's creation, the guardian angels set to protect Adam and Eve. The complexity of the temporal presentation and opening onto the atemporal draws attention to the real human world where Miriam desperately tries to be united with Paul: the biblical world where Adam and Eve had their immortality, and also the fall that states exercise of choice and free will. This complexity and multi-level association of the narrative figures are the result of symbolism and imagery. Towards the closing part "Derelict" the speech

of Miriam echoes the voice of the guardian angel, the last effort to save Paul being defeated: “Suddenly she saw again his lack of religion, his restless instability. He would destroy himself like a perverse child” (364).

Conclusion:

Lawrence's use of symbolism with myth transforms the narrative into a field where not only meaning within the meaning but also meaning against meaning clash and collide. The text becomes a textile. Within the given text infinite sub-texts are embedded, the intertexts of the text. While the Bloomsbury group aims at achieving the purpose of Lawrence with innovative structural techniques, the latter tends to turn down intentional meaning and stable author God more articulatively, being a fore runner of the post-modern, who subvert the linearity of the text and highlight that meaning is a construct, involving spatio-temporal dimensions.

Symbols, by nature, are anti-narrative and drive the reader to instantaneous perception of their multi-texts. General significance of the work corresponds to the sum of particular details, but when the significance is caught, the particular incidents seem to be ignored. Symbol does that in order to foreground the significance, which release arrests the passage of time. To recall William Troy's response to symbolism of Virginia Woolf: “The symbol may be considered as something spatial”, he argues, “whether separate or integrated into a vision symbols are capable of being grasped, like other aspect of space by a single and instantaneous effort of perception” (Selected Essays 76). Joseph Frank observes from his study of Troy, Wilson Knight, Clive Bell, Herbert Read, Worringer, T. E. Hulme, and Edwin Muir that symbol, like image, performs the function of picture to spread time in space (“Foreword to SFN” 8-9)

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