



Significance of Symbolism in D. H. Lawrence

Vinita Singh

PGT, Government Boys Senior Secondary School

Abstract: *In most of D.H. Lawrence's major novels, the symbolic aspect is much more important than the psychological. The influence of the Russian novel, particularly Dostoevsky, and the emergence of psychoanalysis leads to the triumph of the symbolic mode in Lawrence. He uses it to reveal the unconscious states through which his characters pass in progression from Sons And Lovers to Lady Chatterley's Lover. From The Rainbow onwards symbolism becomes his inevitable tool of expression. This paper tries to analyse the symbolic aspect in Lawrence's works.*

Keywords:- *Symbolism, Psychoanalysis, D.H. Lawrence, The Russian Novel, Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, Women In Love, Cosmic Symbols, symbolic mode.*

The emergence of psychoanalysis and the discovery of the Russian novel, particularly of Dostoevsky, conspired towards the disintegration of the static character and the triumph of the symbolic mode in Lawrence. Now he finds his most natural form of expression in symbolism. In most of his major novels, the symbolic aspect is much more important than the psychological. For him no explanations of symbols are final. In writing about Melville's Moby Dick, he makes the point explicit: 'You can't give a great symbol a 'meaning'. Symbols are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away...; A symbol has a life of its own, 'which cannot be explained away or exhausted. It is a mode of thought whose relevance and power have their sources in the unconscious'.

In his novels, Lawrence is primarily concerned with a body of darkness located within the self, a darkness which the light of consciousness is unable to penetrate. To present the realm of human consciousness, Lawrence develops the symbolic mode which helps in revealing the unconscious states through which his characters pass in the progression from Sons and Lovers to Lady Chatterley's Lover. From Rainbow onwards, symbolism becomes an inevitable tool of expressing Lawrence's sensuous mysticism and his novels now are triumphs in the symbolic mode. Lawrence believes that there is the dual way of looking at things. 'Our way, which is to say 'I am all. All other things are but radiation out from me.' – The other way is to try to conceive the whole, to build up a whole by means of symbolism, because symbolism avoids the I and puts aside the egotist; and, in the whole, to take our decent place. That is how man built the cathedrals. He didn't say, 'out of my breast springs this cathedral !' But 'in this vast whole I am a small part, I move and live and have my being.' The enclosure of the cathedrals echoes the circumvent universe, the cosmic womb that would shelter him in isolation, that by its animate palpableness confirmed his physical being and centrality. Lawrence is deeply passionate about religion. He tries to express his deep religious experience as well his longing for the instinctive through symbols which are 'charged with meanings, all human and emotional and vaguely cosmic.' They bring into harmony, the two halves of experience the inner and the outer; the subjective and the communicable. Consequently, his ideas become an organic part of the aesthetic organization of his work.

Lawrence makes use of symbolism to express his sensuous mysticism. It helps to impart 'subjective correlatives' as well as 'objective correlatives' to his emotional experience 'to grasp the whole' and to give universality to his experience. Symbols, in Lawrence, comprise 'art symbols', not the 'authorized symbol', '.....art speech, art utterance, is and always will be, the greatest universal language of mankind, greater than any esoteric symbolism. Art speech is always a language of pure symbols. But whereas the authorized symbol stands always for a thought or an idea, some mental concept; the art symbol or art term stands for a pure experience-emotional and passionate; spiritual and explicit, latent and nascent. Art communicates a whole thought, an emotional idea. Art speech



is a use of symbols which are pulsations on the blood and seizures upon the nerves and at the same time pure percepts of the mind and pure terms of spiritual aspiration.’

The symbolical bias that was innate to Lawrence is accentuated due to the influence of Dostoevsky. It is most pervasive in *Women in Love*. In both Lawrence and Dostoevsky, there is the preoccupation with evil and good, the ambivalence of love and hate. In Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* the characters are torn alternately by frenzies of love and hatred. This ecstasy of love and hate reached its culmination when Rogozhin murders Nastasya in *Women in Love*. We have an exact replica of the scene when Gerald tries to throttle Gudrum to death. In both instances murder symbolizes the desire to achieve complete sensual possession. Gerald feels- “What a perfect voluptuous consummation it would be to strangle her, to strangle every spark of life out of her, till she lay completely inert, soft, relaxed for ever, a soft heap lying dead between his hand utterly dead. Then he would have her finally and for ever, there would be such a perfect voluptuous finality.’

In *Apocalypse*, Lawrence declares that symbols ‘mean something : but they mean something different to every man. Fix the meaning of a symbol and you have fallen into the commonplace of allegory.” And allegory, Lawrence disliked as much as Melville. A symbol can never be fully explained; its core of meaning may be delimited but never defined. ‘The rider on the white horse !” Lawrence writes of the apocalyptic symbol.’ who is he then ? The man who needs an explanation will never know.’ This attitude towards symbols is reminiscent of Jung. There is the symbol of the horse in the *Apocalypse*. ‘Horses, always horses ! How the horse dominated the mind of the early races. For back, far back and our dark soul the horse prances. He is a dominant symbol. He gives us lordship: he links us, the first palpable and throbbing link with the ruddy-glowing Almighty of Potence: he is the beginning even of our godhead in the flesh. And as a symbol he roams the dark underworld meadows of the soul. He stamps and threshes in the dark fields of your soul and mine.’

In *The Rainbow*, and *Women in Love* and *St. Mawr*, the archetype appears repeatedly and is creatively employed in the image of the horses prancing in Ursula’s consciousness. Lawrence, like Donne, Wordsworth and Blake, reads the invisible world in the visible. He visualizes the presence of the dark Gods in various ways, as Wordsworth sees the mysterious power in ‘underpresences’, ‘underpowers’, ‘under soul’ and ‘under consciousness’. Lawrence’s apathy with Wordsworth’s ‘Unknown modes of being’ is clearly indicated in Ursula’s spiritual exhaustion after the frenzied vision of the horses towards the end of *The Rainbow*. Lawrence seeks symbols in nature to give “objective correlative” to his deeper emotional ideas which cannot be expressed in abstract terms; for he has learnt from Dostoevsky and Tolstoy the presentation of moral ideas at a supreme level of artistry – in his own individual style. In ‘*The Rainbow*, the sheaves gathering scene is a striking instance of Lawrence’s capacity, as E.M. Forster pointed out, of ‘irradiating nature from within’, presenting it with unusual intensity. The scene, however, does not appear in the novel as a wholly isolated descriptive passage; it has thematic relevance. Neither the symbol, nor the content can be dropped to have a fuller grasp of his vision.

The hidden unconscious states in Lawrence’s novels are revealed in the form of dramatic presentation – the rabbit, the mare, the moon shattering, ice-disaster scene in *Women in Love*, the encounter between Ursula and a herd of horses in *The Rainbow*, the chicken hatching scene in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* are so congenial that thoughts and personalities of the characters seem to emerge from them. ‘Like Blake’, noted W.H. Auden, ‘Lawrence was interested not in ‘individuals’ but in stales’. He presents the rabbit as a symbol of pure life force, the snake stands for the mystery of dark life, and the horse for “the passions to be blowed”.

In *Sons and Lovers* when Paul goes out for a walk with Clara: ‘The big red beast seemed to dance romantically through that dimness of green hazel drift, away there where the air was shadowy, as if it were in the past, among the fading bluebells that might have bloomed for Deidre or Iseult.’ Here the bluebells and the stallion, in their connection with Iseult convey the impression of a dark, primeval world of passion. Clara who remained sexually unsatisfied approaches the stallion ‘half-fascinated, half-contemptuous,’ She goes forward to stroke its neck in acceptance, and finally thinks and calls it ‘a beauty’. Her adoration of the horse is symbolic of the fact that she needs a man. The horse stands for the phallic reality. Lawrence writes, “In modern symbolism the Horse is supposed to stand for passions.” “always the symbol of strong animal life of man: and sometimes he rises, a sea-horse, from the ocean: and sometimes he is a land creature, and half-man. In his short story *St. Mawr* the symbolism of the horse is presented through *St. Mawr* as “the last male thing in the universe” which drives the heroine to possess her horse. It is the



classic of stallion worship. Paul in *Sons and Lovers* senses Clara's desire and Clara appears to him like one of the open space sort, apprehensive of going into the darkness of the woods. Now she is 'awakened' by Paul and together they have 'the baptism of fire in passion.'

In *The Rainbow*, there is Ursula's heart stopping encounter with the horses, hallucination or reality: she knew they had not gone, she knew they awaited her still. But she went on over the log bridge that their hoofs had churned and drummed, she went on, knowing things about them. She was aware of their breasts gripped, clinched narrow in a hold that never relaxed, she was aware of their red nostrils flaming with long endurance, and of their bunches, so rounded, so massive, pressing forever till they went mad, running against the walls of time, and never bursting free. Their great hunches were smoothed and darkened with rain. But the darkness and wetness of rain could not put on the hard, urgent, massive fire that was locked within these flanks, never, never.'

One of the finest symbolic scenes in *Sons and Lovers* is the occasion when Morel locks his wife out in the garden at night. The image of the moon presents withdrawal from the heat of human passion into solitary self-assertion. 'She hurried out of the side garden to the front, where she could stand as if in an immense gulf of white light, the moon streaming high in face of her, the moonlight standing up from the hills in front, and felling the valley where the Bottoms crouched, almost blindingly.' We observe, in Lawrence, that a withdrawal from a crisis in human relationships is followed by solitary, quasi sexual union with nature, that can recharge the individual with power: 'The tall white lilies where reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence. Mrs. Morel gasped slightly in fear. She touched the big, pallid flowers on the petals, then shivered. They seemed to be stretching in the moonlight. She put her hand into one white bin: the hold scarcely showed on her fingers by moonlight..... She rested with the hills and lilies and houses, all sworn together in a kind of swum.' And later when she comes inside the house and stands in front of the mirror. 'She smiled faintly to see her face all smeared with yellow dust of lilies.'

In Lawrence, the flower symbol occurs repeatedly. One evening in *Sons & Lovers*. Miriam shows a beautiful red bush to Paul, that is the physical, feminine equivalent of the male pine trees in the red sunset-glare, that he had painted as 'God's burning bush.....that burned not away'. 'The dusk came like smoke around, and still did not put out the roses. Paul looked into Miriam's eyes she was pale and expectant with wonder, her lips were parted, and her dark eyes lay open to him....something made him feel anxious and imprisoned. As soon as he (had left her, and) was out of the wood, in the free open meadow, where he could breathe, he started to run as fast as he could. It was like a delirium in the veins'. Paul is inhibited in the encounter, his passion is released in flight. His mother counter-attacks immediately, and repossesses him. Now Paul is too inhibited for normal feeling- 'if she put her arm in his, it caused him almost torture'. At the seaside with Miriam one night, he is possessed by a vision of the moon, in all the stimulating, passionate power that it had for Lawrence: 'His blood was concentrated like a flame in his chest. But he could not get across to her. There were flashes in his blood.. she was expecting some religious state in him.... He was afraid of her. The fact that he might want her as a man wants a woman had in him been suppressed into a shame. When she shrank in her convulsed, coiled torture from the thought of such a thing, he had winced to the depths of his soul.'

When Paul's filial response is transferred to Clara, taking the pressure off Miriam and when Clara tells him that Miriam does desire him sexually, he returns to make 'The Test On Miriam.' The 'consummation' begins one evening when Paul is high on the Cherry tree (high positions are throughout the novel associated with power & self-assertion) that is reminiscent of his childhood's ash-tree: 'The wind, moaning steadily, made the whole tree rock with a subtle, thrilling motion that stirred the blood.....' He looks down on her.. 'Beside her, on the rhubarb leaves, were four dead birds, thieves that had been shot. Paul saw some cherry stones hanging quite bleached, like skeletons, picked clean of flesh.' Miriam hangs some cherries over her ears, and Paul comes down to take her and devour her, in the darkness of the fir trees and pines: pine trees, savagery, and sacrifice in the cause of phallic assertion remain associated throughout Lawrence's writing. Afterwards, Paul feels that 'like seemed a shadow, day a white shadow; night, and death, and stillness, and inaction, this seemed like being. To be alive, to be urgent and insistent- that was not to be. The highest of all was to melt out into the darkness and sway there, identified with the great Being'. In the first meeting of Gertrude and Walter Morel in *Sons and Lovers* Lawrence presents the vitality and male glamour of Walter Morel as a kind of flame and the romantic appeal he has for her: 'She was a puritan, like her father, high



mindful and really stern. Therefore the dusky, golden softness of this man's sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like a flame from a candle, not baffled and gripped into incandescence by thought and spirit as her life was, seemed to her something wonderful, beyond her.....'

Lawrence wrote in a letter in 1913 : 'I conceive a man's body as a kind of flame, like a candle flame, forever upright and yet flowing: and the intellect is just the light that is shed on to the things around..... we only think we know such a lot. A flame isn't a flame because it lights up two, or twenty objects on a table. It's a flame because it is itself. And we have forgotten ourselves.' In Lawrence's magnificent short story- the *Odour of Chrysanthemums*, the flowers as symbols again appear very powerfully – 'It was chrysanthemums when I married him, and chrysanthemums when you were born, and the first time they ever brought him home drunk he'd got brown chrysanthemums in his button-hole.' In *The Rainbow*, Anna is possessed by the spirit of the moonlight. In the *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence says:- 'The moon is the centre of our terrestrial individuality in the cosmos..... she is the fierce centre of retraction of frictional withdrawal into separateness.....that cold, proud white fire of furious, almost malignant apartness....The moon, the planet of women, sways us. Back from day-self, sways us back from our real social unison, sways us back, like a retreating tide, in a friction of criticism and separateness and social disintegration. That is woman's inevitable mode, let her words be what they will.....' We also have the image is of the dolphin (sometimes the flying fish) leaping in the dark blue water. (The importance of blue- as in water or flowers- may be traced back to Lawrence's mother's blue eyes); this is the self sufficient 'phallic' being, free from emotional demands, delighting in its own energy for its own sake, and uniting itself only with its mother element, the womb-water of the sea. The phoenix, of course, is Lawrence's most famous symbol, the unique motherless bird that knows no male but recurrently re-enters its nest, dies, and is reborn out of flame. The phoenix anciently symbolises the death and rebirth of the libido, it is, of course, traditionally a type of Christ and its life cycles are equated with the cycles of human existence; the next re-incarnation will be the last, heralding apocalypse and new heaven and earth.

As in the case of Swinburne, the recurring antinomy of the spirit and the flesh is essential to Lawrence. Somewhat crudely Swinburne expresses it through the opposition between 'the pale maiden, sister to sorrow' and Aphrodite 'a blossom of flowering seas clothed round with the world's desire.' In Lawrence, it finds expression in an endless variety of opposed symbols- the cathedral and the farm in *The Rainbow*, the mountain and the plain in *Women in Love*, the unicorn and the lion of *The Crown*, love and law in the *Study of Thomas Hardy*. The torment of desire, the bitterness in ecstasy, the strife in sex are motifs common to Swinburne and Lawrence, and Poe and Blaudelaire – the co-existence of physical pain and sensual pleasure. In the *Bitterness of Ecstasy* chapter in *The Rainbow*, we find Lawrence ransacking all the Swinburnian rein imagery to create the symbolic scene and the symbolic characters. The scene is enacted on the edge of the sea; the moon is incandescent as a round furnace door, out of which comes the high blast of moonlight, over the seaward half of the world, Ursula herself, 'Chill and burning as the sea, glittering with phosphorescence' hovers on the edge of pure symbolism. A character in prose fiction, she yet has her supreme reality with the eternal symbols of poetry and merges into Swinburne's Hesperia, into Sappho of Anactoria, into Aphrodite born of sea foam. When she clasps Anton Skrebensky it seems as if the stars are lying with her, it is not he, and the bitterness of ecstasy is reminiscent of Swinburne. Ursula wants the moon in her bitter passion- the moon conflagration is the symbol of her intolerable, infinite desire. In place of Swinburne's description of 'gleaming eyes' and 'hissing tongue', Lawrence's Ursula has the 'fierce beaked harpy's kiss, and cries in the high hard voice like the scream of gulls. Anton the inadequate symbol, is the victim and recoils in bitterness.

Lawrence, like Schopenhauer, searches the animal kingdom for his symbols and images. We have the ass that 'howls in that agony that is half insatiable desire and half unquenchable humiliation.' The tortoise is 'doomed in the long crucifixion of desire'. Lawrence shared a great affinity with Blake who believed that 'without contraries, there can be no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to human existence. For Lawrence, likewise, the symbols of eternal contraries are love and power, light and darkness, the lion and the unicorn. The sexual imagery is Lawrence matches that of Whitman. The lovely macrocosm is to them, a woman. To Sigmund in *The Trespasser*. 'the great downs are naked like a breast, leaning kind to him'. Ursula in *The Rainbow* is aware of 'the dark limbs of the tress in the summer night'. Lydia Lensky is described as a flower that unsheathes itself and stands, ready, waiting, receptive. The opening pages of *The Rainbow* describing the teeming, palpitant life of the earth and its intercourse with heaven constitute one of the most vividly sensual visions in



literature. The birds, beasts and flowers are all used as sexual symbols in Lawrence. Figs, Peach, Pomegranate- all become symbols of the female mystery. The nature of all of Lawrence's creative writing is determined by the symbolical process, conscious or unconscious.

'When I began *Lady C.*' says Lawrence, 'of course I did not know what I was doing- I did not deliberately work symbolically. But by the time he book was finished I realised what the unconscious symbolism was...yes, the paralysis of Sir Clifford is symbolic.... The wood is of course unconscious symbolism- perhaps even the mines- even Mrs. Bolton.' We notice that when the symbols are instinctive, unconscious and not over-precise, they blossom in their purity as in the scene in *Women In Love* where Birkin throws stones into the water at night to shatter the image of the moon. It is an example of the Jungian archetypal symbol that touches chords that had never resounded before. Lawrence, according to E.M. Forster could not get such a moon and water otherwise.

The most important in Lawrence, is the Christ symbol. Like Nietzsche, Lawrence is an intensely religious person turning his back on religion. Their self identification with Christ is the measure of their instinctive sympathy with Christianity, In their rebellion, they violently project 'antichrist'. Born to love, they idealise hatred; emotionally susceptible to tenderness and pity, they glorify hardness, instinctively spiritual, they glorify sensuality. Lawrence states in the Apocalypse: 'From earliest years right into manhood, like any other non conformist child I had the Bible poured every day into my helpless consciousness, till there came almost a saturation point. Long before one could think or even vaguely understand the Bible language, these 'portions' of the Bible were douched over the mind and consciousness, till they become soaked in, they became an influence which affected all the processes of emotion and thought. So that today, although I have 'forgotten my Bible, I need only begin to read a chapter to realise that I "know" it with an almost nauseating fixity and I must confess, my first reaction is one of dislike, repulsion and even resentment. My very instincts resent the Bible'.

Both in Nietzsche and Lawrence, this resentment leads them to break loose from their spiritual propensities and moral upbringing and takes form in an extreme assertion of the body and an extreme denunciation of the Christian morality. Where Nietzsche condemns Christianity as 'the one great curse', Lawrence also asserts that 'Christianity is based on reaction, on negation really. It says 'Renounce all worldly desires, and live for heaven.' Whereas I think people ought to fulfil sacredly their desires... The way to immortality is the fulfilment of desire.' And that 'I do not worship hands nailed and running with blood upon a cross.' In *Meeting Among the Mountains*, Lawrence makes the symbols explicit by associating the crucifix with the mountain snow. 'Lo! I am ashamed. To gaze any more at the Christ, whom the mountain snows whitely confront.'

We find him turning back towards 'the averted pansies, below the white peaks of snow. The contrast between the mountain and the valley recurs again in *Twilight in Italy* and *Woman in Love*. In *The Rainbow*, we have the juxtaposition of the cathedral and the farm, representing the aspirations of the spirit in contrast to the warm, sensual life of the body. In Lawrence's later works, the predilection deepens and now symbolism is no longer an aesthetic exercise, it becomes part of his Prophetic vision. With the ordeal of realism over, and with the discovery of symbolism, Lawrence recovers, what Forster calls 'the accent of his voice, his song.'

References

1. Sons and Lovers, D.H. Lawrence, London, Martin Secker, 1930.
2. The Rainbow, D.H. Lawrence, London, Secker, 1933.
3. Women in Love, D.H. Lawrence, London, Heinemann, 1927.
4. St. Mawr, D.H. Lawrence, London, Secker, 1923.
5. Birds, Beasts and Flowers, D.H. Lawrence, London, Secker, 1923,
6. Collected Poems, D.H. Lawrence, London, Heinemann, 1933.
7. The Tales of D.H. Lawrence, London, Heinemann, 1934.
8. The Collected Short Stories, Heinemann, Phoenix, Vols. 1-3, 1962.
9. The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Edited with an Introduction by Aldous Huxley, London, Heinemann, 1937.
10. The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Vols. 1-3, Edited by H.T. Moore, Heinemann, 1962.



11. Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence.
12. Selected Literary Criticism, Edited by Anthony Beal.
13. The Symbolic Meaning, Edited by Armin Arnold, London, 1962.
14. Apocalypse, D.H. Lawrence, with an Introduction By Richard Aldington, London, Martin Secker, 1932.