

Symbolism in D. H. Lawrence's Works and the Role It Plays

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Abstract: In some of D. H. Lawrence's literary works, including his poetry and fiction, we can see his skillful use of symbolism. Through text analysis, we can clearly see that the use of symbols plays quite important role in deepening the themes, enriching the connotations, expanding the reader's imagination space and enhancing the tension of D. H. Lawrence's literary works. As a kind of literary expression approach, symbolism is of vital importance in literary creation. D. H. Lawrence's skillful use of symbolism creates striking artistic effect. Probing into D. H. Lawrence's use of symbolism is beneficial for one's correctly grasping the deeper meaning of his literary works and enhancing understanding of his artistic styles.

1. Introduction

The use of symbol is one of the important artistic expression techniques of D. H. Lawrence. This paper intends to probe into D. H. Lawrence's use of symbolism in some of his literary works through some commonly seen literary criticism approaches.

In the history of literary criticism, some commonly seen literary criticism approaches are New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, New Historicism, etc. When we analyze a poem, if we are limited to one literary criticism approach, it is often insufficient to fully and objectively interpret a literary work. Different literary criticism approaches usually have their different emphasis. "Placing little emphasis on the author, the social context, or a text's historical situation as a source for discovering a poem's meaning, the New Critics also assert that a reader's emotional response to the text is neither important nor equivalent to its interpretation."^[1] The New Critics think that a poem's meaning "must reside within its own structure" and a text has "only one correct interpretation". They think that by giving a text a close reading, readers can find the correct interpretation of the text. What Reader-Response Criticism differs from New Criticism is "the shift in emphasis away from the text as the sole determiner of meaning and toward the significance of the reader as an essential participant in the reading process and the creation of meaning". (Bressler, 2007, p.61) According to New Historicism, "an intricate connection exists between an aesthetic object—a text or any work of art—and society, while denying that a text can be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context." (Bressler, 2007, p.185) Sometimes, only by combining them together can we achieve a precise interpretation. When analyzing a poem, we shouldn't neglect its historical background, reader's response, its cultural context, the author's thinking and the text itself. Sometimes, Psychoanalytic Criticism and Feminism Criticism are also necessary in achieving a precise interpretation of a text. Psychoanalytic Criticism refers to the application of the methods of Freud's psychoanalysis to interpreting works of literature, while "a goal of feminism is to change this degrading view of women so that each woman will realize

that she is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man.” (Bressler, 2007, p.268)

“A symbol is a special kind of image—It is usually a visual object or an action which suggests some further meaning in addition to itself.”^[2] The use of symbol can enrich the connotations of literary works. We can see this clearly from both Lawrence’s poetry and his fiction.

2. Symbolism in D. H. Lawrence’s Works and the Role it Plays

2.1 Symbolism in D. H. Lawrence’s Poetry and the Role it Plays

In Lawrence’s poem “Craving for Spring”, we can see the striking artistic effect that the use of symbol brings:

I wish it were spring in the world.
Let it be spring!
Come, bubbling, surging tide of sap!
Come, rush of creation!
Come, life! surge through this mass of mortification!
Come, sweep away these exquisite, ghastly first-flowers,
which are rather last-flowers!
Come, thaw down their cool portentousness, dissolve them:
snowdrops, straight, death-veined exhalations of white and purple crocuses,
flowers of the penumbra, issue of corruption, nourished in mortification,
jets of exquisite finality;
Come, spring, make havoc of them!^[3]

In this poem, spring symbolizes creation, intuitive force of life, vigor, the irresistible force of nature, and so on. The symbolic meanings of spring greatly enhance the artistic effect of this poem and leave readers with profound impression and imaginative space.

Lawrence hopes that spring can sweep away the flavor of death and corruption, thaw down the cool portentousness, lift people towards their culmination, bring people to their summer, and change this globe into a new world.

Come quickly, and vindicate us
against too much death.
Come quickly, and stir the rotten globe of the world from within,
burst it with germination, with world anew. (Lawrence, 1994, p.216)

Lawrence writes a lot of poems with symbolic meanings. Besides the above-mentioned poems, “Bat”, “Snake”, “Almond Blossom” and “The Ship of Death” are all such poems.

In the poem “Bat”, Lawrence gives a detailed description of the bat’s movements, appearance, voice, shape and its habits, making the conclusion that the bat is not a mascot at all. Under Lawrence’s writing, the bat does not symbolize happiness but symbolize an ugly dark force. This kind of dark force makes humans uneasy, bringing an ominous feeling to humanity.

Creatures that hang themselves up like an old rag, to sleep;
And disgustingly upside down.
Hanging upside down like rows of disgusting old rags
And grinning in their sleep.
Bats!

In China the bat is symbol of happiness.
Not for me! (Lawrence, 1994, p.275)

As Lawrence mentions in this poem, in Chinese culture, the bat is used to symbolize happiness. In Chinese traditional culture, bat is regarded as mascot. And Chinese people even paint the image of

bats on New Year paintings. In China, this symbol has its historical origin. In fact, as early as the Neolithic Age, there was a jade bat sculpture in the Hongshan culture. During the Shang Dynasty to the Warring States period, bronze vessels with bat patterns and bat-shaped designs were not uncommon. During China's Tang Dynasty (618-907), the image of bats began to appear in some literary works. Yuan Zhen, a famous poet in Tang Dynasty, described bats in one of his poems like this: "Door curtain broken, fireflies enter, while bats fly at the window." In the Song Dynasty, bat patterns ushered in a complete turning point. The emperor's enthusiasm for auspiciousness led to the prosperity of auspiciousness culture, and the prosperity of civilian culture added vitality to bat patterns, which began to flourish among the common people. The Chinese pronunciation of "bats" contains the sound of the Chinese words which signify "universal happiness". Perhaps, this is why bats are treated as symbol of happiness in China. Yet, under Lawrence's writing, bat has become a complete opposite symbol, which is used to illustrate his point of view. In the western culture, the bat is symbol of the evil. To interpret this poem correctly, a reader needs to know the difference between the Western culture and the Eastern culture. And the historical background and cultural factors are also needed to be taken into consideration. If we only interpret this poem through close reading proposed by New Criticism, neglecting the above-mentioned factors, together with the author's ideas and the reader's response, it will be insufficient for us readers to fully understand the meaning of it.

In Lawrence's poem "Snake", snake symbolizes a kind of mysterious force. It is a purely natural thing. It signifies a kind of primitive intuition. It also signifies the human fear of unknown and mysterious things. Through this poem with symbolic meanings, Lawrence explores the defects of human education, and probes into human nature and divinity. In the very beginning, the author describes the movements of the snake in a very detailed way. Gradually, the author plunges into the deep thinking of humans' negative attitude towards the natural and mysterious things, which is resulted from the defects of human education. It's human education that prevents the protagonist of this poem from getting in touch with and caring about the snake, and even encourages him to take action to harm the snake.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.
And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.
For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.
And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords of life.
And I have something to expiate;
A pettiness. (Lawrence, 1994, p.284)

In the long poem "Almond Blossom", Lawrence makes a vivid and lively description of almond blossom in great details. Almond blossom symbolizes strong living force. Although the harsh winter blocks the apricot branches into iron, when spring arrives and climbs onto the branches, this iron can sprout and bloom into brilliant flowers.

Even iron can put forth,
Even iron.
This is the iron age,
But let us take heart
Seeing iron break and bud,
Seeing rusty iron puff with clouds of blossom.
The almond tree,

December's bare iron hooks sticking out of earth.
 The almond tree,
 That knows the deadliest poison, like a snake
 In supreme bitterness.
 Upon the iron, and upon the steel,
 Odd flakes as if of snow, odd bits of snow,
 Odd crumbs of melting snow.
 But you mistake, it is not from the sky;
 From out the iron, and from out the steel,
 Flying not down from heaven, but storming up,
 Strange storming up from the dense under-earth
 Along the iron, to the living steel
 In rose-hot tips, and flakes of rose-pale snow
 Setting supreme annunciation to the world. (Lawrence, 1994, p.241)

This poem is a hymn of natural life. The primitive vitality and natural intuition cannot be suppressed. Through this poem, Lawrence eulogizes the strong but natural vitality.

In the poem titled "Quite Forsaken", the poet describes the scenes that he wouldn't see after the dawn: It is raining outside. Four labourers are passing with their scythes dejectedly. A deer has become a hunter's load. It has been bunched up, with its four feet clustered dead. The poet is eager to see the dawn, yet after the dawn finally comes, what he sees can only make him feel more lonely and unhappier.

This then at last is the dawn, and the bell
 Clanging at the farm! Such bewilderment
 Comes with the sight of the room, I cannot tell.
 It is raining. Down the half-obscure road
 Four labourers pass with their scythes
 Dejectedly; - a huntsman goes by with his load:
 A gun, and a bunched-up deer, its four little feet
 Clustered dead. - And this is the dawn
 For which I wanted the night to retreat! (Lawrence, 1994, p.168)

In this poem, the scenes of four labourers passing dejectedly and a bunched-up deer with its four little feet clustered dead symbolize the state of human natural vitality being suppressed, constrained and destroyed. The deer should have galloped freely among the mountains and forests, yet it has lost its freedom, with its feet tightly bound. The labourers should have been full of vigor and spirituality, yet under the suppression and restraint of the mechanical civilization, they have lost their natural vigor and natural instinct. The scenes that the poet sees in the early morning are undoubtedly dismal ones, which are contrary to his hope and expectation.

In some poems, Lawrence uses the symbol "sun" to symbolize the natural vigor and mankind's deep instinct. "Sun in Me", "Space", "Sun-Men", "Sun-Women", "Democracy", "Aristocracy of the Sun", "Conscience", "The Middle Classes" and "Immortality" are all such poems. In these poems, the use of symbolism is very impressive, creating striking artistic effect. In "Sun in Me", Lawrence writes:

A sun will rise in me
 I shall slowly resurrect
 already the whiteness of false dawn is on my inner ocean.
 A sun in me.
 And a sun in heaven.
 And beyond that, the immense sun behind the sun,
 the sun of immense distances, that fold themselves together

within the genitals of living space.

And further, the sun within the atom

which is god in the atom. (Lawrence, 1994, p.426)

With the rise of the “sun” in a person, the poet believes that the person will resurrect, will regain life, will relive a real life, a life that is without the suppression of mechanicalness, a life that is full of natural vigor and creativity. The process might be slow, for it is not easy to eliminate the mechanicalness that has become deep-rooted. Yet one will ultimately come back to life if he welcomes that “sun” to rise in him. The use of symbolism undoubtedly increases the sense of mystery and the tension of this poem, moreover, it enriches this poem’s connotation. There is “the immense sun behind the sun” and there is “the sun within the atom”. Such descriptions leave readers with a vast space for imagination. The poet is reminding readers not to forget the sun in them, the sun in the sky, the sun in heaven, the immense sun behind the sun, and the sun within the atom. Obviously, the poet wishes that the natural vitality and instincts of humanity could be resurrected layer by layer by the “sun” that exists at every level.

In another poem entitled “Space”, which also contains the symbol “sun”, Lawrence writes:

Space, of course, is alive

that's why it moves about;

and that's what makes it eternally spacious and unstuffy.

And somewhere it has a wild heart

that sends pulses even through me;

and I call it the sun;

and I feel aristocratic, noble, when I feel a pulse go through me

from the wild heart of space, that I call the sun of suns. (Lawrence, 1994, p.438)

In this poem, Lawrence directly refers to the space as a living thing with a heart, which is called by him the sun. And it is just this sun that sends pulses through people and injects vigor and energy into their hearts. It can make people feel aristocratic and noble. Here, the sun symbolizes the source of energy, light and life. It also symbolizes the powerful force of nature and instinct. The use of the concrete and vivid symbol “sun” makes this poem successfully convey the poet’s abstract and deep thought to the readers.

In the long poem “The Ship of Death”, Lawrence ponders over death and rebirth. Building and taking the ship of death symbolizes taking the journey toward departing from the old self and molding a new self.

Build then the ship of death, for you must take

the longest journey, to oblivion.

And die the death, the long and painful death

that lies between the old self and the new. (Lawrence, 1994, p.604)

In Lawrence’s eyes, “there is the dawn, the cruel dawn of coming back of life out of oblivion.” After going through oblivion, the dawn will come, life will come back, and it will be a new start:

Ah wait, wait, for there is the dawn,

drifting, beneath the deathly ashy grey

of a flood-dawn.

Wait, wait! even so, a flush of yellow

and strangely, O chilled wan soul, a flush of rose.

A flush of rose, and the whole thing starts again. (Lawrence, 1994, p.606)

After the flood of death subsides, a strange and lovely body will appear. At this time, the former fragile soul will be able to live in this new house and fill the heart with peace and quietness:

The flood subsides, and the body, like a worn sea-shell,

Emerges strange and lovely.

And the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
on the pink flood,
and the fragile soul steps out into the house again
filling the heart with peace. (Lawrence, 1994, p.606)

In another poem titled “Difficult Death”, Lawrence continues to call on people to build their ship of death. He thinks that “the bitter passage of oblivion” is a process which can’t be avoided and that only after going through such a process might life be still our portion:

So build your ship of death, and let the soul drift
To dark oblivion.

Maybe life is still our portion

After the bitter passage of oblivion. (Lawrence, 1994, p.607)

The use of symbolism makes this poem full of mystery, enhances the tension of the poem, and more vividly expresses the originally abstract thinking. The use of symbolism can play an important role in the creation of poems. It can leave a deep impression on readers and convey things that can only be sensed but not expressed. It can convey subtle, abstract and complex ideas to readers in concrete and perceptible ways, and build a bridge of understanding between the author and readers. Moreover, it can add poetic flavor to a poem.

From the above poems, we can see that Lawrence is very skilled in the literary expression technique of symbolism, and the use of symbolism greatly enhances the expressive power of poetry and deepens its connotation.

2.2 Symbolism in D. H. Lawrence’s Fiction and the Role it Plays

In the novel *The Rainbow*, we can see that machine has corrupted many people, such as Ursula’s uncle Tom and her former teacher Winifred. Their real mistress is the machine. They adore “the mechanisms of matter”. Yet, Ursula has departed. “No more would she subscribe to the great colliery, to the great machine which has taken us all captives. In her souls, she was against it, she disowned even its power. It had only to be forsaken to be inane, meaningless.” [4]

“The great machine” symbolizes the mechanical civilization, which deprives a lot of people of their natural vigor and instincts, making them slaves to wage and money. They have lost their spirituality and true emotions and become walking corpses. In the course of fighting against the corruption of machine, Ursula is undergoing great change. She has seen the essence of the machine clearly. She will not give in towards the machine. She will not be a captive of it. In the course of fighting against all the darkness, she is pursuing her ideal:

Ursula, inflamed in soul, was suffering all the anguish of youth’s reaching for some unknown ideal, that it can’t grasp, can’t even distinguish or conceive. Maddened, she was fighting all the darkness she was up against. (Lawrence, 2003, p.594)

Here “the darkness” symbolizes the state of being constrained by mechanicalness. Ursula isolates herself from the constraints of mechanicalness, and becomes “a foreigner in a new life, of work and mechanical consideration”. (Lawrence, 2003, p.685) She begins to have strange, passionate knowledge of religion and living. And she wants to be free so that she can get somewhere, “the wonderful, real somewhere that is beyond her, the somewhere that she felt deep, deep inside her.” She wants to read great books and get knowledgeable; she wants to get to know big, free people; she wants to see and appreciate beautiful things. In the period of being a schoolteacher, she suffers a lot, yet her real, individual self acquires development. “She was not going to be put down, prevented from standing free...She would fight and hold her place in this state also, in the world of work and man’s convention.”

She had suffered bitterly in this school of St Philip’s. She was like a young filly that has been

broken in to the shafts, and has lost its freedom. And now she was suffering bitterly from the agony of the shafts. The agony, the galling, the ignominy of her breaking in. This wore into her soul. But she would never submit. To shafts like these she would never submit for long. But she would know them. She would serve them that she might destroy them. (Lawrence, 2003, p.686)

“This school of St Philip’s” also has its symbolic meaning. It is a microcosm of the society that has become mechanical. From Lawrence’s descriptions of Ursula, we can see she has possessed feminist consciousness to some extent. She would not be looked down upon. She wants to get the position she deserves through her efforts. She is unwilling to accept the manipulation of fate. She dares to fight for equal rights. And she would never submit.

In *The Rainbow*, Lawrence ponders over the future of mankind by means of the symbol of the rainbow through the perspective of Ursula:

Steadily the colour gathered, mysteriously, from nowhere, it took presence upon itself, there was a faint, vast rainbow...And the rainbow stood on the earth. She knew that the sordid people who crept hard-scaled and separate on the face of the world’s corruption were living still, that the rainbow was arched in their blood and would quiver to life in their spirit, that they would cast off their horny covering of disintegration, that new, clean, naked bodies would issue to a new germination, to a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clean rain of heaven. She saw in the rainbow the earth’s new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven. (Lawrence, 2003, pp.839-841)

Here, “the rainbow” symbolizes a beautiful and natural life, a new and clean life, that has got rid of the corruption of mechanical civilization. “The rainbow” also symbolizes the beautiful hope that the author harbors toward the future. Through the perspective of Ursula, Lawrence expresses such a hope: A new life will gradually take shape in people’s blood and come into being in their spirit, and new clean bodies would also be formed and developed. Thus, new individuals with new spirit and body will emerge, possessing sound natural vitality and instincts. The use of the rainbow as a symbol serves as the finishing touch. It plays a crucial role in highlighting the theme and enhancing the artistic expression of this novel.

In D. H. Lawrence’s short story “Sun”, the female protagonist is in a disharmonious relationship with her husband:

“And in their two lives, the stroke of power was hostile, his and hers. Like two engines running at variance, they shattered one another.”^[5]

She becomes haggard and lonely, falling into a pathological state. Later on, she goes to nature and integrates into nature to receive the baptism of the sun. Gradually, the sun drives away her pathological state:

She could feel the sun penetrating into her bones; nay, further, even into her emotions and thoughts. The dark tensions of her emotion began to give way, the cold dark clots of her thoughts began to dissolve. (Lawrence, 2011, p.181)

Ultimately, she, along with her son, is spiritually revitalized and reborn. In this short story, the sun symbolizes the source of light and energy, as well as the natural blaze of life. It is the heart of nature and has great power to heal the mind and body. By integrating with it, one’s spiritual decay and mechanicalness brought about by mechanical civilization can finally be removed. The female protagonist regains her healthy instincts and returns to a state of dual mental and physical health. These are the ideas that Lawrence attempts to convey to readers by using the sun as a symbol. Through the use of symbolism, the author presents abstract and complex ideas in vivid and concrete language. Moreover, the use of symbolism expands the reader’s imagination space.

3. Conclusion

To interpret a literary work better, it is necessary to combine various literary criticism methods to analyze the text, so as to grasp the meaning of the literary work comprehensively and correctly.

From the illustrations of the above-mentioned literary works through some commonly seen literary criticism approaches, we can clearly see that as an artistic expression technique, the role of symbolism in Lawrence's works cannot be underestimated. D. H. Lawrence's skillful use of symbolism can play the role of deepening the themes, enriching the connotations, expanding the reader's imagination space and enhancing the tension of literary works. D. H. Lawrence's skillful use of symbolism creates striking artistic effect.

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