

Interpreting the Symbolism of “Flowers” in Sons and Lovers by David Herbert Lawrence

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Abstract: David Herbert Lawrence is one of the major writers of 20th-century English literature. His representative works include *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, and *Women in Love*, which cover different fields such as novels, poems, essays, and dramas. He is known for his depiction of human emotions, sexuality, and social issues. His novel *Sons and Lovers* uses symbolism skillfully and intensely, in which darkness, coal mine, sunset, the moon, flowers, and so on are imagery. The use of this imagery profoundly reveals the complex emotions and feelings of the characters, thus better interpreting the various psychological activities deep inside the characters as well as the complex relationships between the characters. This paper contains two parts. The first part discusses the functions of symbolism in this novel, including four aspects: enriching the meaning, revealing the characters in depth, intensifying the emotional experience, and focusing on the theme. The second part focuses on the three aspects of the symbolism represented by the “flowers”, namely, the “flower” as a symbol of family, the “flower” as a symbol of freedom, and the “flower” as a symbol of growth and change. Through these interpretations, this study hopes to interpret the main idea of the novel in a deeper way and to enable readers to have a better understanding of the characters, the plot, the relationship between the characters, and the use of symbolism in the novel.

Keywords: Symbolism; *Sons and Lovers*; David Herbert Lawrence; Interpretation; Flowers

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1. Introduction

David Herbert Lawrence was an English novelist, critic, poet, and painter, born in 1885 and died in 1930^[1]. His representative works include *Sons and Lovers*, *The Rainbow*, and *Women in Love*, which cover different fields such as novels, poems, essays, and dramas, and he is known for his depiction of human emotions, sexuality, and social issues^[2]. Lawrence is considered one of the pioneers of modernist literature, and his works have had a significant impact on subsequent literary creations. Symbolism has a large degree of space in a large number of works written by Lawrence^[3]. Among them, *Sons and Lovers* is considered one of Lawrence’s most important works, which is an autobiographical novel with unique family experiences from his early years^[4]. The novel

describes the complex relationships and personal emotional struggles in a family. In this novel, “flower” plays an important role, reflecting the author’s complex concepts of family, freedom, growth and change.

2. The function of symbolism

In David Herbert Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, symbolism is widely used to represent deeper emotions, conflicts, and themes through physical things, symbols, and imagery. It appeals to the reader’s senses, stirs our imagination and thought, and adds beauty and intensity to the text ^[5]. In this novel, the use of symbolism has the following functions.

2.1. Enriching the meaning

Symbolism can bring deep meaning to the work beyond the surface storyline. It can help readers better understand and explore the emotions, themes, and inner world of the characters in the work ^[6]. Through the power of symbolism, Lawrence can show the inner experiences and emotional conflicts of the characters and how the social context affects them. For example, in the novel, “darkness” symbolizes William’s death and the scene when his coffin is carried home. The darkness outside the window makes the original hopeful ash trees all black and charming, making people feel hopeless. The darkness outside the window symbolizes despair and death, while the light inside symbolizes hope. William’s death makes Mrs. Morrell’s love affair with her son all over Paul. On the other hand, “darkness” symbolizes the final failure of Paul and Miriam’s love. Miriam likes the day and craves transparent and pure love, while Paul likes the night and is not satisfied with pure love. They believe that the intersection of night and day is dusk, so each time they date at dusk, to achieve love resonance and harmony. But dusk is not the intersection of night and day. Dusk is disagreement and the beginning of darkness. The darkness also predicts the final failure of the two people’s different love pursuits.

2.2. Revealing the characters in depth

Through symbolism, Lawrence can reveal the hidden motives, desires, and conflicts of his characters. He uses symbols to express his characters’ emotional state, psychological development, and relationship with others. This enables readers to understand and feel the complexity and inner world of the characters more fully. For example, in the novel, the depiction of sunset in different scenarios can be echoed with the psychological state of the character, which in turn reveals the world of the character’s heart. In Lawrence’s novels, he is extremely good at using detailed scenes with symbolic meanings to express the subtleties and changes in the character’s inner world.

2.3. Intensifying the emotional experience

Symbolism can enhance readers’ empathy and experience of the story and the characters’ emotions. By transforming emotions and abstract concepts into concrete images and symbols, Lawrence can make readers feel the emotional conflicts and themes in his works more deeply and evoke their empathy and emotional resonance. For example, in the novel, Gertrude Morel’s garden and her flowers are used as a symbol to represent her deep emotions and relationship with her son Paul. This symbol makes the reader pay more attention and understand the mother-son entanglement and emotional connection between them.

2.4. Focusing on the theme

Symbolism can help Lawrence to express the theme and explore social issues in a powerful way. By observing and describing the real world through the lens of symbols, Lawrence can explore the themes in his works, such

as gender roles, family relationships, social norms, and so on, in greater depth. This mode of expression makes the themes more vividly and powerfully conveyed to the readers. For example, the coal mine is an important symbol in the novel, representing the male character and social oppression. Through the description and symbolization of the coal mine, Lawrence can express the plight of the male character and his desire for self-realization, and at the same time reveal the social constraints and confinement on men.

3. The symbolism of “flowers”

In the novel *Sons and Lovers*, the imagery of “flowers” runs throughout the novel ^[7]. The author Lawrence combines his love of flowers with his affection for women into one. Different colors of flowers and different aromas of flowers are given special meaning by Lawrence, which represents the main character Paul’s different real emotions and changes in thought for the three women.

3.1. “Flower” as a symbol of family

The flower as a symbol of family in David Herbert Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* can be regarded as a kind of metaphor, representing the relationship between family members, emotional entanglements, and dynamic changes within the family.

Firstly, the “flower” symbolizes the mother-son relationship between Paul and his mother, Gertrude Morel. Passionate about flowers and plants, her garden is depicted as a place that she cares for with great care, reflecting her concern for her family and her desire to create a beautiful environment. Her intimate relationship with flowers hints at the deep emotional bond she has with her sons. Flowers can also be seen as an expression of motherhood, demonstrating her love and care for her family. “She sat on Sunday evenings in her best dress on the high-backed chair, singing in her low voice. Paul sat on the floor beside her, resting against her, his brow pressed against her knees. He loved the scent of violets on her dress.” This sentence describes Paul’s close relationship with his mother and emphasizes his dependence and desire for her love. The scent of violets symbolizes motherly love and comfort, and they symbolize Paul’s deep emotional connection to his mother in the story.

Secondly, the “flower” can also be used to symbolize tensions and unstable relationships within the family. Lawrence expresses the emotions, distress, and flux of the Morel family by describing the beauty, fading, and short lifespan of the flowers. While the beauty of the flowers is associated with the warmth of the family, the wilting or fading of the flowers may suggest the tensions, conflicts, and emotional distress that exist within the family. The fleeting presence of the flower echoes the instability of the family, suggesting the fragility and fickleness of the relationships between family members. For example, “She loved the crimson fires of the nasturtiums... The passion flower that pressed its blooded mouth against the window panes at dusk, and drooped out, trapped and helpless, never struggling free till it fell (Chapter 1).” In this description, the “flower” symbolizes the passion and ardent emotions in the family. The blossoming and decay of the “flower” coincides with the feelings and relationships between the family members, expressing the vitality of the family and the distress between the family members.

Finally, the “flower” can be seen as a symbol of growth and change in the family members. In the novel, the life cycle of the “flower” is linked to the changes of the family members. Over time, the flower opens, fades, and blooms again, echoing the changing experiences, emotions, and relationships of the family members. This demonstrates the dynamics and changes in the family, such as changes in the living environment, and the changes that the family members go through as they grow up. “And in places, where the water ran quite clear, blue flowers like anemones leaned down their color in the stream, untouched.” This quote paints a picture of the

natural environment. The blue flowers of the violets symbolize purity and unsullied beauty. It represents Paul's desire for freedom and innocence, but also relates to his dependence on his mother for that purity.

To summarize, flowers play an important role as symbols of family in *Sons and Lovers*. The image of flowers enriches the novel's expressiveness, and Lawrence emphasizes the emotional entanglement and complexity among family members through the image and description of flowers, enabling readers to better understand the complexity of family relationships and Lawrence's revelation and exploration of family.

3.2. "Flower" as a symbol of freedom

In *Sons and Lovers*, the "flower" can be interpreted as a symbol of freedom, reflecting the individual's desire to seek independence and liberation at both the natural and emotional levels.

First of all, the "flower" is usually associated with the beauty and purity of nature. They grow in nature without any constraints and are free to display their beauty. This characteristic of freedom echoes the psychological state of some characters in the novel who long to escape from repression and constraints. The freedom represented by the flowers symbolizes vast and unrestrained possibilities and inspires the protagonist's pursuit of freedom. "He ran towards the little field that sloped away from the garden... (Chapter 5)." In this description, the image of the flower appears in the scene where the protagonist tries to escape from the confines of his family. The presence of the flower suggests the possibility and pursuit of freedom. "The buttercups along the blue-shadowed river bank suddenly lit their gold candles... (Chapter 13)." In this description, the image of marigolds represents the allure and attraction of freedom to the main character. The golden color and bright glow of the flowers symbolize the glittering point of freedom and inspire Paul's desire to pursue freedom.

In addition, the "flower" is often found in the novel in scenes of freedom, such as gardens, fields, and countryside. These places are depicted as places of contact with the forces of nature and isolation from social norms and constraints. The presence of flowers in these scenes symbolizes freedom and the individual's quest for his or her true self. "He sat there on the grass and watched the rich, red clusters of the wild strawberries burn in the green darkness (Chapter 11)." The wild strawberries in this example symbolize wildness and freedom. The brightness and ripeness of the strawberries represent spontaneous growth and prosperity, echoing Paul's impulse for freedom.

Last but not least, the "flower" represents emotional freedom and expression. People often choose to use flowers as gifts or decorations to express emotions and thoughts. This right to freedom of choice enables people to express their deepest emotions through flowers, free from external limitations and restrictions. In the novel, Paul often expresses his emotions in a very romantic way by sending flowers^[8]. "He gave her the rose, and she bowed her head almost with a gesture of homage and took it (Chapter 12)." This line describes that she took the rose he handed her, and then bowed her head and took the flower almost with a gesture of reverence. Here the rose symbolizes love and praise. It expresses Paul's gesture of love to Miriam, and Miriam's acceptance of the rose expresses her gratitude and reverence for Paul.

In a word, in the novel *Sons and Lovers*, flowers are used as symbols of freedom to convey the characters' desire and quest for freedom. The beauty, fragrance, and unfettered growth of flowers represent the essence of freedom. By portraying flowers and revealing the characters' desire for freedom, Lawrence explores the relationship between the pursuit of freedom and dependence on it by individuals and society. The flower as a symbol of freedom enriches the novel's theme and its expression of humanity's inherent desire for freedom.

3.3. "Flowers" as a symbol of growth and change

In *Sons and Lovers*, the flower as a symbol of growth and change reflects the individual and emotional

development experienced by the protagonist as well as other characters in the novel.

First, the “flower” is often associated with beauty and purity in nature throughout the novel. For example, at the beginning of the story, Gertrude Morel, the mother of the protagonist Paul, stands in a garden, surrounded by flowers. These flowers symbolize the beauty of the mother and her warm role in the family. These flowers also reflect the kindness and selflessness of nature. “Through the archway of roses, Paul saw Miriam come, her dress floating like a rose, her face upturned and white, and she came towards him like a rose coming out to meet him (Chapter 5).” This line describes Miriam coming through the archway of roses, her dress floating like a rose, her face upturned and white, and she came towards him like a rose to meet him. Here the rose symbolizes Miriam’s beauty, purity, and expression of love. It provides a symbolic depiction of Miriam’s personality and emotional state.

What’s more, the “flower” is also frequently used in the novel to denote the metamorphosis between adolescence and the sexual awakening of the protagonist. Paul gradually realizes the complexity of love and sex through his encounters with women, especially in his relationships with Miriam and Clara. The flower, as a symbol of love and attraction between women, helps Paul understand his own emotions and desires. When Paul first formalizes his relationship with Clara, “the golden lotus blossomed crimson in the shade of the morose green leaves,” suggesting that Paul is about to embark on a baptism of passion ^[9]. During their outing together, Paul is so attracted to her that he can’t help but sprinkle a handful of wild cherry blossoms in her hair and around her neck. Later, the simultaneous appearance of lilies and gypsophila symbolizes Paul’s choice. The scents of the two flowers are combined, that is, Miriam and Clara’s feelings for Paul are intertwined.

Lastly, the “flower” represents the cycle of life and change. Throughout the novel, flowers go through the change of seasons, from bud to bloom, and eventually fade. This change echoes the process of human growth and aging. The opening of the flower may be linked to the beginning of puberty or a new phase for Paul or other characters, while the wilting of the flower may echo life’s difficulties, setbacks, or shifts in individual experiences. Through the depiction of flowers, the author expresses his observation of the passage of time and the character’s growth and emotional experiences. “She held in her fingers a small twig of cherry blossom, which Paul had given her that morning ... She could hardly bear it, it was so lovely (Chapter 9).” This line describes Miriam holding in her hands a small twig of cherry blossom, which Paul had given her that morning, and expresses her love and gratitude for this beautiful gift. The cherry blossom is also a symbol of a flower that represents a short but beautiful life, love, and innocence. The flower here symbolizes the value of life and beauty.

To sum up, in the novel *Sons and Lovers*, flowers are widely used as a symbol of growth and change. It not only represents the beauty and purity of nature but also reveals the complexity of human emotions and the finiteness of life. The life of a flower is short and beautiful, reminding the readers to cherish every moment of life.

4. Conclusion

The use of symbolism makes many images, details, or situations in Lawrence’s works have deeper spatial imagination and stronger artistic influence. This paper mainly focuses on four functions of symbolism in the novel, including enriching the meaning, revealing the characters in depth, intensifying the emotional experience, and focusing on the theme. In the process of using these symbols, Lawrence achieves a vivid and accurate outline of the psychological condition and complex feelings of the characters and shows the plot development and the deepening of the theme of the novel ^[10].

By analyzing the symbolism of flowers in *Sons and Lovers*, it can be seen that flowers represent family, freedom, growth, and change in the novel. These symbolisms add depth and diversity to the novel, better portray the psychological activities of the characters, characterize them, reveal the theme of the novel, and make the readers better understand the purity of nature, the complexity of human nature, and the disturbances of family relationships, while also provide inspiration and ideas for the literary creation of later generations.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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