

A Comparative Study of Symbols Between *Sons and Lovers* and *The Family of Opium Poppy*

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Abstract—Both Lawrence and Su Tong showed their concerns about the impact on human beings caused by the social changes. The two writers used symbolic images in their novels. Lawrence and Su Tong showed different writing skills in using symbols. Su Tong was influenced a lot by modern western literature, so their writing styles are different even on the similar topic. Since symbols are so important in *Sons and Lovers* and *The Family of Opium Poppy*, this paper tries to make a comparative study of the symbols in the two novels and try to find out the reason for the usage of symbols.

Keywords—symbol; comparative study; *Sons and Lovers*; *The Family of Opium Poppy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sons and Lovers is a work of striking original genius. In *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence used a lot of symbolic images to serve the theme. The symbolism in this novel has a unique feature. Lawrence didn't reject the traditional forms, but absorbed the modern forms extensively. He tried to find out the resemblance of objects, concept and moods. Traditional symbols, natural environment symbols, character symbols and subconscious symbol are skillfully used, which make up the world of Lawrence's symbolism artistry. Lawrence's symbolism is not only unique in the history of novels, but also has aesthetic value. His excellent skill in symbolism makes his limited words embody rich meanings.

The Family of Opium Poppy is written by Su Tong, a great author in Modern Chinese literature, who has received popularity both at home and abroad. Su Tong has been influenced by some foreign writers, who helped to shape his writing style. In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, the use of symbolic signs gives profound meaning of the novel. However, little attention is paid to Su Tong's symbols in *The Family of Opium Poppy*.

Just like Lawrence, Su Tong is also an expert in describing the female characters and family relationship. Both *Sons and Lovers* and *The Family of Opium Poppy* tells family story and describes the relationship between mother and son. What's more, symbols play an important role in both novels. This paper will try to analyze the symbolic signs

in *Sons and Lovers* and *The Family of Opium Poppy* and try to reveal the hidden reasons why symbols are used.

II. SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM

Symbols are quite common in literature. Authors would like to use some images with symbolic meanings to deepen the theme. In this way the works can arouse the readers' imagination and make the readers share the same feelings with the characters. In simple words, a symbol is an image with symbolic meanings. *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* defined symbol as "something standing for calling up something else, esp. a concrete object which stands for an intangible object or idea; a character, letter, or cipher which by convention or arbitrary usage has come to represent something; an image which embodies a web of interrelated meanings or which evokes a complex of emotion" (Bergquist, 1981: 994).

Symbolism is the art of use of symbols. To be exact, symbolism means "the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them directly, not by defining their overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are and by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols" (Chadwick, 1971: 3).

III. THE SYMBOLS IN *SONS AND LOVERS*

A. Symbols of Color

Different colors not only produce different visional effect but also convey deep meanings. Lawrence gives various colors deep symbolic implications so as to shape the characterization.

The color of "red" and "black" are mentioned many times in this novel. Red symbolizes fervency, enthusiasm and energy. On the other hand, black symbolizes mystery, sorrow and even death. But black can also stand for health.

When Mrs. Morel first met her husband, Lawrence showed the readers the appearance like this: "black hair", "black beard", "ruddy cheeks", and "red mouth". The two

kinds of color imply the features of this character. Mr. Morel was strong, healthy, energetic and simple. Although his work was very dangerous, he still felt happy and was not worried about it. But black also stands for death, so it symbolizes the fate of Walter Morel. He was excluded from the family. His wife and his children did not love him and even despised him. He was nothing in his family.

In Chapter 6 and 7 when Lawrence introduced Miriam, the color of "black" is used again.

"She was about fourteen years old, had a rosy dark face, a bunch of short black curls, very fine and free, and dark eyes..." (Lawrence, 2004:127)

"All the life of Miriam's body was in her eyes, which were usually dark as a dark church, but could flame with light like a conflagration." (Lawrence, 2004:156)

It seems unsuitable to describe a young girl by using such deep color. She was only fourteen years old while her black eyes were as dark as a church. Black made her more mysterious than other young girls. This mystery came from her strong belief in the religion. Young as she was, she accepted much more about the religious idea than what she could accept at her age, which resulted in her lack of judgment of love. She abandoned the physical love and aspires the spiritual love. Of course, this is against human nature. So her love with Paul couldn't produce a good result. Lawrence used the color of black to describe Miriam with particular purpose.

As for the hero Paul, blue was his mark. The following is an example:

"The baby was looking up at her. It had blue eyes like her own, but its look was heavy, steady, as if it had realized something that she and her husband were guilty. The baby was looking up at her. It had blue eyes like her own ..." (Lawrence, 2004:39)

When Mrs. Morel was introduced, Lawrence also used the color of blue. Blue stands for sorrow, intelligence and nobility. Lawrence used the same color to introduce the mother and son, which implied the unusual relationship between mother and son. By using blue, it also implied this relationship is not the happy mother-son relationship in general sense.

B. Symbols of Flowers

Sons and Lovers is also a garden full of the flowers. Among the images created by Lawrence, flowers are the most representative images. The colors, the types and even the perfume of the flowers have different symbolic meanings. They contribute a great deal to the revelation of the main idea of the work. These are means Lawrence employed to reveal his thoughts and feelings. The flowers in *Sons and Lovers* are not simple plants but the symbols of three heroines, which can be proved in Chapter 11.

"It grew late. Through the open door, stealthily, came the scent of Madonna lilies, almost as if it were prowling abroad ... Nearer, a dim white fence of lilies went across the garden, and the air all round seemed to stir with scent, as if it

were alive. He went across the bed of pinks, whose keen perfume came sharply across the rocking, heavy scent of the lilies, and stood alongside the white barrier of flowers. They flagged all loose, as if they were panting. The scent made him drunk..."

And then, like a shock, he caught another perfume, something raw and coarse. Hunting round, he found the purple iris, touched their fleshy throats and their dark, grasping hands. At any rate, he had found something. They stood stiff in the darkness. Their scent was brutal." (Lawrence, 2004:294-295)

Paul smelt three different scents. Flowers symbolize the love. Paul's feeling toward three flowers symbolizes his three different loves. The first love is Oedipus complex with his mother; the second is Platonic love with Miriam; the next is physical love with Clara.

Three flowers stands for three heroines. The first mentioned one is lily in Chapter 1:

"She became aware of something about her. With an effort she roused herself to see what it was that penetrated her consciousness. The tall white lilies were 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 their petals, and then shivered. They seemed to be stretching in the moonlight. She put her hand into one white bin; the gold scarcely showed on her fingers by moonlight. She bent down to look at the bibful of yellow pollen; but it only appeared dusky. Then she drank a deep draught of the scent. It almost made her dizzy." (Lawrence, 2004:26)

After a quarrel with her husband, Mrs. Morel was kept outside of the door. She stopped anger when she saw the beautiful lilies. The lilies were so attractive that she felt as if lilies, her son and herself had become an entirety. It was through her touch and her smell of the flowers that her son was connected with the nature. The lilies were the embodiment of Mrs. Morel, which symbolizes her life-force. And the yellow pollen implies the birth of the new things. Her unhappiness went away soon. Now she was indulged in the perfume. This feeling made her dizzy and brought back her memory of the past happy life. Mrs. Morel had the desire to control others. The indulgent in the perfume implies her controlling on her husband and sons.

Miriam, pure and shy, was the first girl-friend of Paul. She lived with her family and confines herself to her house. She had few friends. Affected by her mother, she showed excessive passion on the spirit. In her opinion, the pure soul was the only and the most important thing, which brought about her abnormal view of love. She refused the physical love. Even after she had sex with Paul, she thought it was a way not the expression of love to help Paul.

Miriam loved flowers very much, especially the white rose and the daffodils. When she saw the two kinds of flowers, great passion broke out.

"She looked at her roses. They were white, some incurved and holy, others expanded in an ecstasy. The tree

was dark as a shadow. She lifted her hand impulsively to the flowers; she went forward and touched them in worship.

‘Let us go’, he said. There was a cool scent of ivory roses, a white, virgin scent. Something made him feel anxious and imprisoned.” (Lawrence, 2004:263)

As it has been mentioned, the white color is the symbol of pure. Miriam touched these flowers in worship, which symbolizes her worship toward the spirit. Since rose stands for love, Lawrence used white rose to symbolize Miriam’s love to Paul. Her love was Platonic love without sex, which was against the human nature. She worshiped the flowers as she worshiped Paul.

But Paul was not as happy as Miriam. On the contrary, he felt anxious and imprisoned. Obviously Paul was reluctant to accept the platonic love. Doubts began to emerge in his mind.

When Paul and Miriam saw the daffodils, they showed differently. At this time, he understood what love Miriam needed is.

“Round the wild, tussocky lawn at the back of the house was a thorn hedge, under which daffodils were craning forward from among their sheaves of grey-green blades. The cheeks of the flowers were greenish with cold. But still some had burst, and their gold ruffled and glowed. Miriam went on her knees before one cluster, took a wild-looking daffodil between her hands, turned up its face of gold to her, and bowed down, caressing it with her mouth and cheeks and brow...

She bowed again to her flowers at his censure of her praise. He watched her crouching, sipping the flowers with fervid kisses.

She looked up at him full of pain, then continued slowly to stroke her lips against a ruffled flower. Their scent, as she smelled it, was so much kinder than he; it almost made her cry.

‘You wheedle the soul out of things’, he said.” (Lawrence, 2004:220)

In this passage, Miriam showed a crazy love to the daffodils. She kissed the flowers as if she were in love with the flowers. Her love toward daffodils symbolizes her love to Paul. Just as Paul said, “You wheedle the soul out of thing”. Paul felt she loved nothing but her soul. Miriam thought she loved Paul just because he needed help. Miriam’s ignorance of human’s instinct made Paul very painful. What he needed was not such kind of love. He couldn’t stand up with it any more and his passion cooled down until he met Clara.

Clara gave Paul a new experience which he never had before. Clara lived with her mother in Bluebell Hill. Bluebell is a kind of flower, which is also called bell of fairy. Wherever they went, they would see bluebell. Clara was such a charming woman that Lawrence used the image of bluebell.

Clara was not so restrained as Miriam. She was passionate and beautiful. Lawrence used the red flowers to symbolize her, which was the symbol of her fire-like passion.

When Paul and Clara first met, “Nasturtiums were coming out crimson under the cool green shadow of their leaves. The girl stood, dark-haired, glad to see him.” (Lawrence, 2004:231) The crimson nasturtiums indicate the passion of Clara. Paul was completely attracted by her so that his long – time restrained desire broke out. So he even couldn’t control his action.

C. Symbols of Moon and Darkness

The image of moon appeared many times in *Sons and Lovers*, which played a key role to show the theme. In old Greek tales, the god of moon was a very charming woman. She would bring love to the human beings in the world. The old Greece thought soul and the flesh was an entirety. They loved beauty, especially human body, which was considered the most beautiful in the nature. The culture of beauty affected Lawrence a lot. So he took a favor over the moon which symbolized the tender and the beauty of female. Representing the beautiful nature, moon in this novel symbolized the females. But it did not refer to the females in common sense but referred to the females in natural condition or sub-consciousness.

In Chapter 7 Lawrence describes Paul’s reaction to the moon.

“Suddenly he started. The whole of his blood seemed to burst into flame, and he could scarcely breathe. An enormous orange moon was staring at them from the rim of the sandhills. He stood still, looking at it.

...

He remained perfectly still, staring at the immense and ruddy moon, the only thing in the far-reaching darkness of the level. His heart beat heavily, the muscles of his arms contracted.” (Lawrence, 2004:181)

It happened when Paul was walking with Miriam. Paul’s reaction to the moon was so great that he could scarcely breathe with fast-beating heart. To other people it might be hard to understand. But it was not strange for Paul to have such reaction. There was only Platonic love between Paul and Miriam. Paul couldn’t make any offence to Miriam. But as a normal man with human instinct of needing physical love, it was impossible for Paul to accept the love only in spirit. He was so painful that he became nervous and excited when he saw the moon. Paul did so because he was aroused by the moon, which aroused the inside desire of the true love-the combination of spirit and flesh. The appearance of moon helped Paul, as a man, makes a communication with the moon, the symbol of a female.

“The beauty of the night made him want to shout. A half-moon, dusky gold, was sinking behind the black sycamore at the end of the garden, making the sky dull purple with its glow. He went down to the field to watch the moon sink under.

A corncrake in the hay-close called insistently. The moon slid quickly downwards, growing more flushed.

The moon was melting down upon the crest of the hill. It was gone; all was dark. The corncrake called still.” (Lawrence, 2004: 294-295)

The moon, as a symbol of female, appeared four times in this passage. This first time symbolized Mrs. Morel’s and Miriam’s efforts to possess Paul in spirit, the second time, the moon’s set down symbolizes their power become less.

The moon is associated with darkness in this novel. Lawrence thought that a person might have two faces: one is on the surface and another in the deep. Self on the surface is related with the daylight while self in the inner mind with the night. According to Lawrence, “The moon is the mother of the darkness.” (Zhu Botong, 2003: 21-27) Darkness symbolizes the inner mind of people, which refers to the subconsciousness or unconsciousness. Darkness also symbolizes death and it is linked to the color of coal, which symbolizes the real life of the working class.

IV. THE SYMBOLS IN *THE FAMILY OF OPIUM POPPY*

A. *Symbol of Red*

Red is common color in *The Family of Opium Poppy*. Chinese tradition prefers to give good meanings of red. Red is the symbol of happiness and joy. In China, wedding is the world of red – red wedding dress, red wedding bed and red decoration; in Spring Festival, red envelope is very popular; in birthday, red implies good luck in the following age... Red is not only a color but also the symbolic sign of people’s psychology of longing for the festivity and happiness.

In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, Su Tong shows the readers a different red, which can be regarded as the rebellion of tradition. Red in the novel has nothing to do with happiness. On the contrary, red is a symbol of decay and disaster. In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, all red things are in a state of falling from climax to “decay”, which is much closer to red things in western countries, where red is a foreshadowing color of disaster and death. So, in the shadow of red, Liu Chencao along with his family ended his life at last. This is not only the death of a family but also the disaster caused by ugliness of human nature.

B. *Symbol of Opium Poppy*

Opium poppy is the most important symbol. As we know, opium poppy flowers, with a variety of colors, are prized for its beauty. Poppies are so charming that people cannot resist the lure. The internal desire is inspired by poppies under the influence of poppies. People almost cannot control themselves and get on the way to touch and taste the beauty. In reality, such beautiful flowers are so dangerous as to make people addicted. Many people become the victims of poppies. It is better called “the flower of evil” since it can destroy a person, a family and even a nation.

Since the title is symbol, the novel can also be read as the symbolic sign. Just as it was mentioned above, opium poppy is the lure of desire and the symbol of depravity. In the novel, people have become the slaves of desire. When the characters began to get addicted to poppies, they were

alienated into desire carriers and set on the way of a permanent degeneration and addiction. Thus the title is a hint, which foretells the characters’ life in the future. The whole story is filled with the decadent and evil atmosphere of poppies, creating a gloomy and declining atmosphere. On the surface, poppy is the direct reason for the end of the family. However, the essential factor is nobody but the self. In this way the whole story is the revelation of the complexities and darkness of human nature.

C. *Symbol of the Protagonist*

Liu Chencao, the protagonist, had two identities. On one hand, he was the landlord’s youngest son in the family. So he represented the last generation of landlords in China. On the other hand, Liu Chencao received a new education and loved tennis. In this way, he was a symbol of modern life. The old and new life style cannot be in a harmonious relationship. There was a dramatic conflict in the same character. This conflict became stronger especially when Liu Chencao met poppies. At first, he felt disgusting and even fainting from the smell of poppies, finally selectively accustomed to it. This implied the old life style conquered the new one at last. Liu Chencao became the symbol of the existence of deformity and ecology.

Liu Chencao was born in the poppies and was killed by the killed by the land reform team members in the poppy vat. He was unable to surpass the fate of the family blood with poppies, and eventually slipped to the predetermined end. His death was the notice of the last generation of landlords.

V. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SYMBOLS IN THE TWO NOVELS

A. *Similarities*

Both *Sons and Lovers* and *The Family of Opium Poppy* probe into original desire of human beings by using different symbols. Lawrence emphasized the primitive instinct of human beings, abandoned reason as a factor to suppress nature, and advocated giving full play to human instinct. Su Tong also made an exploration in the primitive instinct, which is more complicated, including the original desire not only for sex but also for food. In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, the landlord has a son, Yan Yi, who was an idiot. Almost everyday Yan Yi cried for steamed bread as if he had never been full. The desire for food is quite normal; however, Yan Yi’s great hunger kept himself away from others, even his parents treated him as a monster. The steamed bread shouted by Yan Yi was the food for hunger turned out to be a sin, and then Yan Yi became the carrier of the sin. Yan Yi did have enough food until he was in the coffin, where laid a lot of steamed bread. What an irony! There is another greater irony. Yan Yi didn’t have a good life but his brother did. But the birth of his brother Liu Chencao was due to a chaotic relationship — Yan Yi’s mother had a sexual relationship with a farm labor.

In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, the desire for food, human beings’ normal distinct to survive was treated as abnormal desire; abnormal sexual relationship was seen as

normal just because a baby was needed to keep the family going on. In *People* seemed to be alienated, which is also true in *Sons and Lovers*. The abnormal love is the best example. So, both the two novels showed a picture of alienated people and an abnormal society through the use of readers.

B. Differences

Lawrence gave many images the symbolic meaning so that the readers could find symbols everywhere. Although one can find the use of symbols in other writers at different stages in different countries, few writers can use so many images to substitute the concrete world and to show the theme. These symbols serve for different purposes. For example, some symbols are used to describe the characters. It should be pointed out that Lawrence used so many symbols mainly for portraying Paul's mental world, which reflects his deep thought and confusion under the enormous material prosperity in modern society. On the other hand, symbolism gives the novel a different style. With the help of the symbols, *Sons and Lovers* is brilliantly energetic, impressionistic and romantic.

However, since Su Tong used opium poppy as the title, opium poppy has become the fundamental symbol. The whole story is guided by opium poppy. Liu Laoxia's first trip to the city, he made his fortune by poppy. So poppy was the lifeblood of the whole family. Liu Laoxia had never thought one day poppy would put his family and his fortune to an end. To be exact, the symbol of opium poppy is the metaphorical symbol, a despairing metaphor for a society in its death throes. In this story, fathers and sons are mutilated, brothers are strangers and love is cheating. The world is in total despair just as opium poppy implied.

VI. CAUSES OF THE USAGE OF SYMBOLS

The *Sons and Lovers* offers a realistic picture of the pinched, hard life of a coal-mining community in the British Midland. The story was based on Lawrence's life experience. His father was an illiterate coal miner, while his mother was an educated and gentle woman. With the time passing by, the relationship between his parents changed a lot and even got worse. Under the influence of his mother, Lawrence began to hate his mother and devoted to his mother. In *Sons and Lovers*, the force of Paul's mother's love and an emotional separation from his father was a true portrayal of Lawrence's life. This is why he skilled at using various images to describe Paul's feelings.

Su Tong did not use so many symbols as Lawrence did. Nevertheless, the images in *The family of Opium Poppy* possess profound meanings which would cause the readers to have a deep thinking. So to give the images richer connotation is one of the functions of the use of symbols.

But the most important point is that both Lawrence and Su Tong would like to seek out the hidden factors behind the story. Just as Neginsky said, "*Symbolist art and literature originated in opposition to the industrialized and materialist society and opposed rationalist and positivist doctrines. Overall, the symbolist sensibility rejects society, is intolerant*

to humanity, revolts against life, has a complex relationship with nature."(Neginsky, 2010:2)

Lawrence deepened the meanings by using symbols in order to reflect the crisis brought by the society. In Lawrence's view, the "gender dislocation" and "castration worship" caused by maternal spoiling are precisely the general crisis of modern industrial civilization and the disastrous consequence of the substitution of spiritual consciousness for physical consciousness in civilized society.

Su Tong also showed his concern about human nature and revealed the abnormal and pathological human relations. Due to different living background, Su Tong depicted another picture for the readers. This despair was not caused by the modern society but the feudalistic ideas. Su Tong conveyed the complex and deeply hateful class relations between landlords and peasants. Su Tong absorbs the western modernist literature's expression technique. In *The Family of Opium Poppy*, the decadence of history and the advance of revolution are completely intertwined. Every weird description has an implied meaning.

VII. CONCLUSION

Both Lawrence and Su Tong described the abnormal sexual relationship and abnormal family relationship. They tried to find out the hidden reasons for the abnormal phenomenon. By using symbols, they wanted to tell the readers what was really abnormal, that is, the social repression and spiritual distortion.

When using symbols, the two writers showed different writing skills and concentrated on different images. Lawrence focused on the complicated inner activities of Paul, who was representative at that time. With the use of symbols, Lawrence has proved himself master of the subtle effect rich with feeling and hidden correspondence of thoughts. The original and brilliant styles of his poetic symbolism have served to illustrate and embody the emotional states of the characters. The use of symbols is a sharp and powerful weapon to criticize society; it is the way to psychological exploration; it is the media of communication between story and the readers; it is the revelation of the author's feelings and emotions; and at last, it is full of mysterious color. Anyway, Lawrence believed there was a way to help the society.

However, Su Tong put emphasis on the revelation of the extension outside by describing the family life. Su Tong gave the images much deeper cultural connotation. The symbolic meanings of these images need the readers' repeated thinking. So *The Family of Opium Poppy* offers the readers more interpretation space and ways. What's more, unlike Lawrence, the symbols written by Su Tong were not romantic but more like a burden which made the readers breathless as if the world were in the darkness.

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