

30 Symbolism

SYMBOLISM

ROUGHLY SPEAKING, anything that "stands for" something else is a symbol, but the process operates in many different ways. A cross may symbolize Christianity in one context, by association with the Crucifixion, and a road intersection in another, by diagrammatic resemblance. Literary symbolism is less easily decoded than these examples, because it tries to be original and tends towards a rich plurality, even ambiguity, of meaning (all qualities that would be undesirable in traffic signs and religious icons, especially the former). If a metaphor or simile consists of likening A to B, a literary symbol is a B that *suggests* an A, or a number of As. The poetic style known as Symbolism, which started in France in the late nineteenth century in the work of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, and exerted considerable influence on English writing in the twentieth, was characterized by a shimmering surface of suggested meanings without a denotative core.

Somebody once said, however, that the novelist should make his spade a spade before he makes it a symbol, and this would seem to be good advice for a writer who is aiming to create anything like the "illusion of life". If the spade is introduced all too obviously just for the sake of its symbolic meaning, it will tend to undermine the credibility of the narrative as human action. D. H. Lawrence was often prepared to take that risk to express a visionary insight — as when, in another episode of *Women in Love*, he has his hero rolling naked in the grass and throwing stones at the reflection of the moon. But in the passage quoted here he has kept a nice balance between realistic description and symbolic suggestion.

The "spade" in this case is a complex action: a man controlling a horse frightened by a colliery train passing at a level crossing, while being watched by two women. The man is Gerald Critch, the son of the local colliery owner, who manages the business and will eventually inherit it. The setting is the Nottinghamshire landscape in which Lawrence, a coalminer's son, was brought up: a pleasant countryside scarred and blackened in places by the pits and their railways. One might say that the train "symbolizes" the mining industry, which is a product of culture in the anthropological sense, and that the horse, a creature of Nature, symbolizes the countryside. Industry has been imposed on the countryside by

"The fool!" cried Ursula loudly. "Why doesn't he ride away till it's gone by?"

Gudrun was looking at him with black-dilated, spellbound eyes. But he sat glistening and obstinate, forcing the wheeling mare, which spun and swerved like a wind, and yet could not get out of the grasp of his will, nor escape from the mad clamour of terror that resounded through her, as the trucks thumped slowly, heavily, horrifying, one after the other, one pursuing the other, over the rails of the crossing.

The locomotive, as if wanting to see what could be done, put on the brakes, and back came the trucks rebounding on the iron buffers, striking like horrible cymbals, clashing nearer and nearer in frightful strident concussions. The mare opened her mouth and rose slowly, as if lifted up on a wind of terror. Then suddenly her fore-feet struck out, as she convulsed herself utterly away from the horror. Back she went, and the two girls clung to each other, feeling she must fall backwards on top of him. But he leaned forward, his face shining with fixed amusement, and at last he brought her down, sank her down, and was bearing her back to the mark. But as strong as the pressure of his compulsion was the repulsion of her utter terror, throwing her back away from the railway, so that she spun round and round on two legs, as if she were in the centre of some whirlwind. It made Gudrun faint with poignant dizziness, which seemed to penetrate to her heart.

D. H. LAWRENCE *Women in Love* (1921)

the masculine power and will of capitalism, a process Gerald symbolically re-enacts by the way he dominates his mare, forcing the animal to accept the hideous mechanical noise of the train.

The two women in the scene are sisters, Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen, the former a teacher, the latter an artist. They are out on a country walk when they witness the scene at the level crossing. Both identify sympathetically with the terrified horse. Ursula is outraged by Gerald's behaviour, and speaks her mind. But the scene is described from Gudrun's point of view, and her response is more complex and ambivalent. There is sexual symbolism in the way Gerald controls his mount – "at last he brought her down, sank her down, and was bearing her back to the mark" – and there is certainly an element of macho exhibitionism in his display of strength in front of the two women. Whereas Ursula is simply disgusted by the spectacle, Gudrun is sexually aroused by it, almost in spite of herself. The mare "spun round and round on two legs, as if she were in the centre of some whirlwind. It made Gudrun faint with poignant dizziness, which seemed to penetrate to her heart." "Poignant" is a transferred epithet, which logically belongs to the suffering of the horse; its rather odd application to "dizziness" expresses the turmoil of Gudrun's emotions, and calls attention to the root meaning of *poignant* – pricking, piercing – which, with "penetrate" in the next clause, gives a powerfully phallic emphasis to the whole description. A couple of pages later, Gudrun is described as "numbed in her mind by the sense of indomitable soft weight of the man bearing down into the living body of the horse: the strong, indomitable thighs of the blond man clenching the palpitating body of the mare into pure control." The whole scene is indeed prophetic of the passionate but mutually destructive sexual relationship that will develop later in the story between Gudrun and Gerald.

This rich brew of symbolic suggestion would, however, be much less effective if Lawrence did not at the same time allow us to picture the scene in vivid, sensuous detail. The ugly noise and motion of trucks as the train brakes is rendered in onomatopoeic syntax and diction ("clashing nearer and nearer in frightful strident concussions"), followed by an eloquent image of the horse, graceful

even in panic: "The mare opened her mouth and rose slowly, as if lifted up on a wind of terror." Whatever you think of Lawrence's men and women, he was always brilliant when describing animals.

It is worth noting that symbolism is generated in two different ways in this passage. The Nature/Culture symbolism is modelled on the rhetorical figures of speech known as metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymy substitutes cause for effect or vice versa (the locomotive stands for Industry because it is an effect of the Industrial Revolution) and synecdoche substitutes part for whole or vice versa (the horse stands for Nature because it is part of Nature). The sexual symbolism, on the other hand, is modelled on metaphor and simile, in which one thing is equated with another on the basis of some similarity between them: Gerald's domination of his mare is described in such a way as to suggest a human sexual act. This distinction, originally formulated by the Russian structuralist Roman Jakobson, operates on every level of a literary text, and indeed outside literature too, as my heroine Robyn Penrose demonstrated to a sceptical Vic Wilcox in *Nice Work*, by analysing cigarette advertisements. For more examples of how it operates in fictional symbolism, see the passage by Graham Greene, discussed under the heading of "The Exotic" in Section 35.