

The Mystical Distance in Lawrence's Short Stories

"There's more things than we're aware of happening to us!" (GG)

Besides crudely realistic pictures of miners' lives, Lawrence often portrays a versatile and multifaceted world with far-reaching insights, appropriating also the sphere of the mystical, the quality of his shorter fiction briefly discussed in this position paper.

Lawrence as the mystical preacher is the subject, of which scholars have good awareness. Thus, to intensify the sense of a mystical unity between humans and nature, Lawrence's characters, especially in novels and short novels, preach pantheistic philosophies (we can think of Lou in "St Mawr", or "the Woman Who Rode Away"); in short stories, however, with little space to do so, mysticism is evoked through plot techniques, very peculiar imagery and symbolism and original Lawrencian psychologism.

I would like to refer to the 2001 article "Lawrence the Mystic" by Stephen Taylor (published in the *Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society*, 2001, pp. 62-74). He explored the notion of the "mystic", rightly pointing out that it refers to "irrational phenomena which lie beyond the boundaries of modern science" (Taylor, 62). The critic also offers the definition of the mystic applying the original meaning of the term, that is "a state of consciousness which is more intense or higher, than the normal state of consciousness which most people live in" (Taylor, 63). This very concept is further elaborated in the article, showing that Lawrence can rightfully be associated with mystics. His view of the world and self, rooted in some ancient cults and religions, helps his characters to be mysteriously drawn and get infatuated with each other, for better or for worse, as it happens ubiquitously ("The Princess", "The Horse-Dealer's Daughter", "Love among the Haystacks" and numerous other texts).

I would like to take a more "literary" approach, however, using also the genre-defining category of the "mystic(al) prose/fiction". One common application of the notion is to the medieval texts, "testifying" of some highly religious experience, visions and revelations. But looking at authors like Edith Wharton, for example, Lawrence's contemporary, we can work out another definition: it is a kind of prose fiction which describes mysterious happenings, often involving inexplicable coincidences of mystical character, interactions with the supernatural that are close to Gothicism, but do not contain other "classically gothic" elements. The encounters with the strange and irrational are presented as "facts" of life in no need of further explanation, they are to be taken for granted. Mystical instances may involve almost impossible coincidences, good/bad luck, deeds of presumable spirits, which are not

revealed to the reader's view. The most salient cases of the macabre / ghost stories by Lawrence were collected in a volume *The Collected Supernatural and Weird Fiction of D. H. Lawrence* (LEONAU, 2009): "Glad Ghosts", "Smile", "The Last Laugh", "The Lovely Lady", "The Man who Died", "The Border Line", "Sun", "The Woman who Rode Away" and "The Rocking Horse Winner".

By the "mystical distance", I have in mind a sort of gap between what can appear to be present and what is materially tangible and can be seen, felt or touched. Thus, Lawrence the mystic and the mystical quality in his shorter fiction need to be set apart in this sense, and I shall consider this "mystical distance" in some short stories as revealed in the plot, imagery or represented consciousness.

I shall not mention stories where the "false" mystical is explained away – like "The Lovely Lady"; and I also single out at least three varieties of a mystical distance in Lawrence. **First**, it is the kind of distance C.G. Jung termed "synchronicity"; the distance in time and space between two phenomena meeting through some "acausal connecting (togetherness) principle," "acausal parallelism" or "meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than the probability of chance is involved" (Jung, *Collected works*, volume 8); (in the final volume 14 dedicated to the mystical, he refers to that previous research).

Lawrence's stories, such as "Shadow in the Rose Garden" (1914), for example, reveal that "meaningful coincidence". In it, a young woman, who has not been married long, comes across her former lover, a military man, who is a lunatic now, and who therefore fails even to recognize her: "She sat and heard him talking. But it was not he. Yet those were the hands she had kissed, there were the glistening, strange black eyes that she had loved. Yet it was not he" (SRG). The scene that describes this mystical coincidence while keeping a distance between the past and the present, takes place in a rose garden, which is a kind of portal into the past, a symbol of love. This coincidental encounter is mystical in a sense it is portrayed as something synchronic and meaningful, quite likely, but also of little probability.

The **second** type where someone's good or bad luck is attributed to supernatural forces is best represented in "Glad Ghosts" (1926) and "The Rocking Horse Winner" (1926). Characters speaking of ghosts as if they were flesh-and-blood presences, "a more intense or higher" state of consciousness, and an enlightening, albeit edifying outcome – are peculiar features of this type of mystical stories.

In "Glad Ghosts", the untypical first-person narrator happens to act as a sort of medium who, through a very ambiguous "encounter" with a family ghost restores "good luck" and brings rebirth to the dead relationships to two families. This short story is Lawrencian only in the sense that it blends into the mystical plot the overt sexual connotation. Two married couples – Luke and Carlotta Lathkill, and Colonel Hale and his meek and impersonal shadow of a wife – are unhappy. Tolstoy's first lines from *Anna Karenina* are to the point here: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". Mr Lathkill's dynastic curse is always

at his heels, and their three children die. The Colonel, from the other couple, is forced to obey the ghost of his deceased wife, Lucy, poor neglected type of a devoted spouse, which keeps haunting Mr Hale “forbidding” to even touch his new Mrs Hale. However, both couples apparently share the same disease – not being good to each other in their bodies. Bad luck, as Mr Morier preaches to them, is somewhere deep inside us, not hovering above in the ghost shape. Luke begins to understand it, too: ““Do you know,” he said, “I suddenly thought at dinner-time, what corpses we all were, sitting eating our dinners. I thought it when I saw you look at those little Jerusalem artichoke things in a white sauce. Suddenly it struck me, you were alive and twinkling, and we were all bodily dead. Bodily dead, if you understand. Quite alive in other directions, but bodily dead. And whether we ate vegetarian or meat made no difference. We were bodily dead” (GG).

The mystical distance that the story creates is between that very “heightened state of consciousness” that Mr Morier, the narrator, achieves sleeping in the special “ghost-room” and his initial skepticism: “And I must have gone far, far down the intricate galleries of sleep, to the very heart of the world. For I know I passed on beyond the strata of images and words, beyond the iron veins of memory, and even the jewels of rest, to sink in the final dark like a fish, dumb, soundless, and imageless, yet alive and swimming. And at the very core of the deep night the ghost came to me, at the heart of the ocean of oblivion, which is also the heart of life. Beyond hearing, or even knowledge of contact, I met her and knew her. How I know it I don’t know. Yet I know it with eyeless, wingless knowledge” (GG). It resonates strangely with some later 20th-century European studies of the mystical state of consciousness, namely, in Colin Wilson’s book *Superconsciousness* (2009). Wilson identifies eight levels of consciousness, the highest one, the 8th, being “the mystical consciousness”, “which seems to contain a series of paradoxes, such as ‘I am nothing and everything’, etc. (Wilson, 206), which for Mr Morier is “beyond hearing, or even knowledge of contact, I met her and knew her. How I know it I don’t know”.

While “Glad Ghosts” ends in comedy – the picture of two happy families now, one of which is engaged in raising pigs (!), “The Rocking Horse Winner” is essentially tragic. The mystical distance in the story’s space lies between the material side of good luck and the dark, strange, intangible “knowing”.

And, **finally**, the mystical quality enters a number of short stories (and novellas) through an object which is also a symbol (a doll, a fox, a horse, a thimble, a rooster...). The novellas collected by Penguin into a single volume in 1982, are marked by a touch of the mystical. As J. Hawthorn notes, there is “the use of magic; and the visionary ending...” (Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001; p. 116). There is always a character who strives for self-assertion by means of power, and this strife induces him into the higher state of consciousness. The symbolic object acquires the mystical role of a conductor into that state. Considering the pair of texts where such an object performs this role, the short story “The Thimble” (1917) and the novella “The Ladybird” (1923), the novella appears

as more rounded, it has a stronger mystical aura. But the short story offers a more focused perception of the mystical distance between what appears (utter separation of souls after the mutilation by war) and what is immediately seen (the inanimate reality that speaks no language but bears tangible vibrations): “Her right hand came to the end of the sofa and pressed a little into the crack, the meeting between the arm and the sofa bed. Her long white fingers pressed into the fissure, fissure, pressed and entered rhythmically, pressed and pressed further and further into the tight depths of the fissure, between the silken, firm upholstery of the old sofa, whilst her mind was in a trance of suspense, and the firelight flickered on the yellow chrysanthemums that stood in a jar in the window. ... It was a thimble set with brilliants...” (Th).

To conclude, the tentative research outlined in this position paper, points to several artistic techniques in exploring the mystical quality (mystical distance) in shorter fiction: synchronicity, actions of the supernatural forces and the powers of a symbolic object. Lawrence the mystic and master of the short story in reunion results in an inimitable art of captivation by narrative.

Note:

GG – “Glad Ghosts”

SRG – “Shadow in the Rose Garden”

Th – “The Thimble”