

Myth and Allusion in D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner"

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Abstract— This paper deals with the interpretation of myth and allusion in D. H. Lawrence's short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1926). It has been found that most of the story's imagery was inspired by the Book of Revelation; however, it is represented in a reversed manner. The binary oppositions analyzed in this connection are eyes/heart, whisper/thunder, God/mammon. Much attention is given to the numbers, which play a significant role in the story's symbolism, notably the numbers three and ten.

Keywords— Book of Revelation, Narcissus, Star of David, storm-god.

I. INTRODUCTION

Myth criticism has recently been out of favor "as a form of reductionism that neglects cultural and historical differences as well as the specific properties of literary works" [1]. Indeed, the task of a mythological critic is to "look for underlying, recurrent patterns in literature that reveal universal meaning and basic human experiences for readers regardless of when or where they live" [2]. However, there are a number of literary works whose meaning could be revealed only through a mythological reading, notably due to the peculiarities of their narrative structure. D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner," which combines myth and modernity, is among them:

The first seven words have a fable-like quality reminiscent of any number of fairy princess tales, yet the word advantages locates us in the atmosphere of the modern world; so does the word luck. The same juxtaposition of the mythical and the modern continues through the story; the same combination of the anonymous and the personal is repeated [3].

The mythical aspect is powerfully reinforced by numerous allusions to the Book of Revelation; however, the "Looking-glass" quality the story takes on allows us to say that "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is its parody.

II. EYES V. HEART

Put schematically, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" is a story of a triangle that never turned (cf. "Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 1:12); the verb 'to turn' is repeated four times in the story) or of two triangles that never intersected, in the manner characteristic of the Star of David (cf. Rev. 3:7; 5:5; 22:16). The failed "sacred marriage" was that of the boy Paul, a

Christ-like figure, and Hester, his mother-bride. Paul's triangle is his eyes, Hester's her heart.

The eye (the noun 'eye' and its cognate are repeated twenty times in the story) is traditionally connected with omniscience and the life-giving power of the sun. Apart from pointing to an important mythological truth, the persistent repetition of this image also helps to reflect Paul's emotional and psychological state, for example: "his eyes had a strange glare in them," "he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face," "he only glared down on them in silence," "a blue glare from his big, rather close-set eyes," "his blue eyes still flaring," "his eyes were blue fire," "with eyes blazing," "with big blue eyes, that had an uncanny cold fire in them," "wild-eyed and strange, as if something were going to explode in him," "his big blue eyes blazing with a sort of madness," "his uncanny blue eyes," "his eyes were like blue stones." For comparison purposes, it is essential to stress that in the Book of Revelation the eyes of Jesus Christ are "like a flame of fire" (1:14; 2:18; 19:12).

The heart (the word 'heart' is repeated eight times in the story) is represented by an inverted triangle, symbolizing a passive or female principle and water. The maiden name of Paul's mother is *Cresswell* 'watercress river'. Her first name, Hester, of Persian origin, probably means 'star'; it is often connected with that of the Near Eastern goddess Ishtar, who "as the star of the morning ... personified war" and "as the star of the evening ... , love and sensual pleasure" [4], [5]; in Hebrew *Esther* is supposed to be derived from the root meaning 'concealment' [6].

In many mythologies Dawn's traditional function is to take into the sky the shining horses of the Sun; Sunset's, to take them away for a rest. Compare the names of the horses chosen by Paul: Blush of Dawn, Lively Spark, Singhalese (a derivative of the Sanskrit word *simha* 'lion' [7]). In Russian folklore, as well as in many others, Dawn is a smiling, smartly dressed beauty (the words *vesely* 'cheerful' and *vesna* 'spring' are of the same origin), whereas the dull winter sun is represented by the Princess Who Never Smiled [8]. In the course of the story Hester has not allowed herself but a laugh or two (three, to be precise) and several exclamations, one of them echoing that of her husband. Hester's manner of speaking is also characterized as "bitter" (repeated three times)—apparently, to evoke the image of a great star, named Wormwood, that fell from heaven and poisoned a third of the waters (Rev. 8:10–11). Jesus Christ, on the contrary, is "the bright morning star" (Rev. 2:28; 22:16). In Greek mythology Dawn and the Princess Who Never Smiled

are represented by Persephone and Demeter (see below). The deep lines on the face of the once beautiful Hester show that she is passing through the “winter” period of her life (her birthday is in November):

And hurriedly she felt she must *cover up* some fault in herself. Yet what it was that she must *cover up* she never knew. Nevertheless, when her children were present, she always felt the centre of her heart go hard. ... Only she herself knew that at the centre of her heart was a hard little place that could not feel love, no, not for anybody. ... The child looked at her to see if she meant it. But he saw, by the lines of her mouth, that she was only trying to *hide* something from him. ... She had discovered that she had an odd knack of sketching furs and dress materials, so she *worked secretly* in the studio of a friend who was the chief “artist” for the leading drapers. ... As his mother read it, her face hardened and became more expressionless. Then a cold, determined look came on her mouth. She *hid* the letter under the pile of others, and said not a word about it. (Italics added)

The whispering in the house is equated with breathing: “The whisper was everywhere, and therefore no one spoke it. Just as no one ever says: ‘We are breathing!’ in spite of the fact that breath is coming and going all the time.” “The Taoist Master Lu-tzu taught that the heart was the lord of the breath, and this may be explained by the similarity between the rhythm of the cardiac and respiratory cycles, identified as cosmic symbols in their tasks” [9]. The “sun dance” at the end of story is also connected with “the phases of breathing and the heart-beat” [10].

In Islamic tradition the heart has a “twofold aspect of Knowing and Being, for it is at one and the same time the organ of intuition [*al-kashf* = ‘unveiling’ ...] and the point of identification ... with Being ... and it is that intangible point where the created being encounters God.” The rocking-horse is “Paul’s secret of secrets ... which had no name,” “a secret within a secret, something he had not divulged.” It should be added that “in Jewish tradition, the equilateral triangle symbolizes God, whose name may not be uttered” [9]. This brings to mind the unveiling of the phallus, connected with Dionysus (*apocalypse* is derived from the Greek word *apokaluptein* ‘to unveil’). “The phallus symbolized the Orient, the dawn, the mystic East, the abode and origin of life, of heat and of light” [ibid.].

III. EYES V. EYES

The other character whose eyes are carefully described is Bassett, the family’s gardener, a gambler, who helps Paul to wager money on horse racing. Bassett’s attitude to Paul resembles a religious cult: “his face terribly serious, as if he were speaking of religious matters,” “serious as a church,” “said Bassett in a secret, religious voice.” It is noteworthy that Paul’s intimacy with Bassett is divulged by Joan, his elder sister (*Joan* is the feminine form of *John*).

Let us compare the following extracts:

1. The boy gazed at his uncle from those big, hot, blue eyes, set rather close together. The uncle stirred and laughed uneasily.

2. The gardener, a shortish fellow with a little brown moustache and sharp little brown eyes, tiptoed into the room, touched his imaginary cap to Paul’s mother, and stole to the bedside, staring with glittering, smallish eyes at the tossing, dying child.

In both of them commas separate non-homogeneous attributes, making them almost synonymous. This parallelism serves to show that both the protagonist and his foil share something in common—they are pursuing one and the same aim: to make a fortune. Paul, however, is driven by love for his mother; Bassett, as well as the rest of the characters, by self-love.

The concept of self-love is implicitly evoked by the name of a winning horse, Daffodil. The name of Narcissus, a Greek hero, is presumably derived from *narkē* ‘numbness’ [9], which allows us to rank him among dying-and-rising deities, whose annual death and resurrection are connected with the seasonal cycle (“That was as sure as eggs”).

The story ends with Paul’s falling off of the horse—and his death. This shows that he represents the Antichrist, Bassett being his false prophet.

Persephone and Demeter’s worship was also connected with the narcissus. Compare the following:

“Oh no,” said the boy casually. “I won’t think much about them, mother. You needn’t worry. I wouldn’t worry, mother, if I were you.”

“If you were me and I were you,” said his mother, “I wonder what we should do!”

Hence, incidentally, the “drag show”: the author uses the feminine forms of male names (i.e., Joan instead of *John*, *Wilmot*); Paul’s hair is long as that of a woman (cf. Rev. 9:8), and at the end of the story he is named “first-born” (of the dead (Rev. 1:5)?), whereas earlier he is said to have an elder sister.

IV. TETRAKTYS

Numbers play a significant role in the story’s symbolism. One of the most important of them is the number three: the most powerful symbol of the story is the triangle; Paul bets three hundred pounds on Daffodil; Uncle Oscar, Bassett, and Paul attend three races; Paul dies after three days. It should also be noted that “Persephone lived for three parts of the year on Earth and for one season in the Underworld” [9].

Special emphasis is laid on the number ten that “possesses a sense of totality, of fulfillment and that of a return to oneness after the evolution of the cycle of the first nine digits” [ibid.]. Paul has been placing bets for about a year. He lost his first five shillings, lent by Bassett, but started winning with the Uncle Oscar’s ten-shilling note; Uncle Oscar puts on Daffodil a “fiver” for himself and a “fiver” for Paul, whose winnings amount to “four five-pound notes, four to one” and twelve hundred. Five thousand is given to Hester as a birthday present. The symbolism of ten as one, unity is reflected in the fact that on the

morning of Paul's fall his parents return home at about one o'clock.

Ten was the Pythagorean number of the tetraktys. The tetraktys, the sum of the first four digits, equaling ten, "contained the knowledge of all things when set out in the shape of a triangle." The single dot at the top represents the Monad; two dots, duplication by pair (male and female, Adam and Eve, phallus and egg, light and darkness, etc.); three dots, the three levels of the world (infernial, terrestrial, and celestial) and of human life (physical, psychic, and spiritual); four dots, Earth, the physical universe (the four elements, the four cardinal points, the four seasons, etc.) [ibid.]. Paul's winnings almost form the tetraktys: the Lincoln brings in "fifteen hundred now; and twenty in reserve; and this twenty" (i.e., $1 + 5 (2 + 3) + 2 + 2 (4)$); the Leger, ten thousand.

In the Book of Revelation the number ten is repeated fourteen times (at the Derby odds were fourteen to one). The great fiery red dragon, that wanted to devour the child of the woman clothed with the sun, had ten horns (12:3); it was cast out of heaven to "reappear" as a beast rising out of the sea (13:1) and the scarlet mount of the harlot of Babylon (17:3). "Its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth" (13:2). A teddy-bear was one Paul's toys; the rocking-horse's mouth is red—one of its names, *Singhalese*, is derived from the Sanskrit word for 'lion' (see above).

In this connection it is important to mention the number three implicitly evoked in Miss Wilcot's phrase, said on the eve of Paul's fall: "He went to bed as right as a trivet." A trivet is a parody of Pythia's tripod, and *Paul* is a near-anagram of *Apollo*, "God of the silver bow," who appeared in the Book of Revelation as "the angel of the bottomless pit," the king of locusts (9:11).

There are two "(very) handsome" men in the story: the nameless father and Uncle Oscar. *Oscar* is derived from the Old English elements *os* 'god' and *gar* 'spear' or from Gaelic *os* 'deer' and *cara* 'friend' [11]. The death of the storm-god (or lightning) is caused by his drowning in the rain sea of clouds; he is usually wounded in the leg—the animals representing storm clouds are often three-legged [8] (Bassett has the same wound). We can say that the triangle formed by Uncle Oscar, Bassett, and Paul (under the daffodil, so to speak) appears to be down-pointing—"it won't go any further." In this connection it seems worth mentioning the Peruvian Supreme Deity (Illapa, 'thunderbolt') consisting of the father, an older son, and a younger son (the lord of the fecundating rain) and the trinity of thunderbolt, thunder, and lightning as "a manifestation of the storm-god at the birth of Amerindian agricultural society." It is also interesting to note that Pythagoras identified the tetraktys with the oracle at Delphi [9]. We can also add that the mortal wound, which one of the beast's heads seemed to have, had, apparently, the shape of an inverted triangle.

According to the Book of Revelation, "issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, [were] three foul spirits like frogs" (16:13). *Pytho*, the original name of Delphi, is derived

from the verb *púthein* 'to rot', "which refers to the sickly sweet smell of the decomposition of the body of the monstrous Python after she was slain by Apollo" [12]. "The voices in the house suddenly went mad, like a chorus of frogs on a spring evening" after Hester "touched" the whole five thousand. Not incidentally, the house gets flooded with odorous flowers:

There were flowers in the winter, and a blossoming of the luxury Paul's mother had been used to. And yet the voices in the house, behind the sprays of mimosa and almond-blossom, and from under the piles of iridescent cushions, simply trilled and screamed in a sort of ecstasy: "There must be more money! Oh-h-h; there must be more money. Oh, now, now-w! — Now-w-w- there must be more money! — more than ever! More than ever!"

Hester's blonde hair and her pale green and crystal dress are mentioned in the immediate context of *trivet*, which probably points to her connection with the locusts of the Revelation (9). Paul's falling off of the horse "with a crash to the ground" and Hester's "tormented motherhood flooding" (cf. Rev. 12:15) evoke the image of a thunderstorm; however, what follows is unlikely to bring about renewal: "his mother sat stonily by his side," "the heart-frozen mother," "her heart had gone, turned actually into a stone," "his eyes were like blue stones."

Another significant number is seven: the Derby brought in over seventy thousand pounds. Seven, an important number in the Book of Revelation, "conveys the meaning of a fresh start after a cycle has been completed and of positive regeneration." The ceremonies in Apollo's honor "were held on the seventh day of the month . . . If the centre is included, it is also to be seen in the hexagram" (the Star of David). Seven is the sum of the numbers three and four, the former symbolizing Earth, the latter Heaven [9]. However, as we have said above, the "sacred marriage," based on material things, never consummated.

Paul's parents inherited over eighty thousand pounds. "Eight is the number of cosmic balance": "My God, Hester, you're eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad." In Christian tradition eight is also "the number of fulfilment and completion," the Eighth Day of Creation being "the symbol of resurrection and of transfiguration . . . not only Christ's resurrection but that of the human race." The Dogon sacralize eight as "the number of the Genius and of the Ancestor—the oldest ancestor—who offered himself in sacrifice in order to ensure the regeneration of the human race" [ibid.]. In the story the reverse is true: the victim is a young boy.

V. WHISPER V. THUNDER

It has already been mentioned that smiling is connected with the earth's renewal in spring. The first word in the story belonging to this semantic field is the descriptive verb 'to smirk': "The big doll, sitting so pink and smirking in her new pram, could hear it quite plainly, and seemed to be smirking." The doll is a Christmas present. Its appearance is hardly accidental: the image of the child represents the nascent Sun. It would be interesting to mention that among the Bambara in Mali the horse "corresponds to the child and the word" (the baby

lightning, we might say), and the same plant *koro*, “associated with strength and fluency of speech, should be used to strengthen sickly children and to cure barrenness in mares” [9].

The doll is smirking because it hears the whisper (or unspoken words) calling for more money, which probably belongs to Echo. Moreover, much of the story unfolds, as it were, in silence, for example: “the house came to be haunted by the unspoken phrase: There must be more money! There must be more money! The children could hear it all the time though nobody said it aloud,” “he would silently command the snorting steed,” “Between wonder and amusement Uncle Oscar was silent,” “Bassett was obstinately silent, looking at Paul,” “The boy watched him with big blue eyes, that had an uncanny cold fire in them, and he said never a word,” “She hid the letter under the pile of others, and said not a word about it,” “But it was as if the boy couldn’t really hear what his uncle was saying,” “He gazed at her without speaking,” “Two nights before the Derby, she was at a big party in town, when one of her rushes of anxiety about her boy, her first-born, gripped her heart till she could hardly speak,” “It was a soundless noise, yet rushing and powerful. Something huge, in violent, hushed motion.”

Silence reigns at the plot level as well: Bassett refuses to divulge Paul’s secret to Uncle Oscar; Paul, to everyone else, including his mother (saying that, “the boy writhed in an odd way”). Hester’s reticence has been commented on above; the father, whose name was never revealed, keeps silent throughout the story (the only phrase he says is “I don’t know” (cf. “Nobody ever knows why one person is lucky and another unlucky. ... Perhaps God. But He never tells”).

Whisper and echo (“the house whispers, like people laughing at you behind your back”) are opposed to the loud exclamations made in the Book of Revelation, which are compared to “the sound of many waters” and “the sound of thunder” (14:2; 19:6; cf. 17:1).

As is known, Demeter was made to laugh by a dance performed by Iambe, the daughter of Pan and Echo. On the eve of Paul’s fall his parents were also at a big dance party; on coming home, Hester sympathetically, as it were, “slipped off her white fur cloak.” However, that did not save the child: the parents enjoyed themselves despite his disease.

It is noteworthy that, according to the *Aurora consurgens*, the emancipation of the mother-bride is begun by the whitening of her clothes, and “to her husband she will give wings like those of a dove, to fly away with him in the sky” [13] (Hester is wearing a white fur coat; her hair is blonde). The only “bird” we come across in the story is in the proverb with a materialistic meaning: “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, laddie!” It is also interesting to note that Hester is the name Nathaniel Hawthorne used for the protagonist of his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (cf. “It’s between you and me all right, you young Nat Gould,” he said, laughing”). The letter A (which is shaped like a triangle) “is modified from the Egyptian hieroglyph representing the eagle” [14], the eagle being the symbol of St. John.

One of the horses mentioned in the story is Mirza, a word of Persian origin meaning ‘royal prince’. *Hester* is also derived from the Persian language; she is also implicitly portrayed as a horse: “One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar *came in* when he was on one of his furious rides,” “She so wanted *to be first* in something, and she did not succeed, even in making sketches for drapery advertisements” (italics added). Hence we can probably connect her with Buraq, *Boraq* being the Arabized form of Middle Persian **barāg* or **bārag* ‘a riding beast, mount’; it is also derived from the Arabic *barq*, meaning ‘lightning’. In Islamic mythology this winged creature transported the prophets, most notably the Prophet Muhammad, from Mecca to Jerusalem and back during the night journey [15]. Buraq is often represented as a white mare. Hester tries to persuade her son to go to the seaside—*mare* is the Latin word for *sea*.

VI. GOD V. MAMMON

In the dialogue with his mother Paul refers to God’s words about his luck. However, he seems to confuse God and mammon, in the manner of the false prophet, thus identifying himself with Bassett, his “dying” aspect.

Bassett’s connection with the underworld is corroborated by his lameness, a rather low social position, and, not least, by his fascination with horse racing—he is known as “a perfect blade of the ‘turf’.” His name is paronymic with the *Basset Hound*, derived from the French word *bas*, meaning ‘low’. It is noteworthy that a “foolish puppy,” along with the rocking-horse, was among the Christmas presents mentioned at the start of the story. This allows us to suppose that Bassett is a parody of St. Christopher (‘Christ-bearer’), sometimes portrayed with the head of a dog (cf. “The foolish puppy, too, that took the place of the teddy-bear”). In this connection it should also be noted that Paul’s mystical journey is, in fact, a voyage: “Wildly the horse careened,” “she heard and saw something plunging to and fro,” “she ... saw her son ... madly surging on the rocking-horse.”

Both Paul (from the Roman family name *Paulus* ‘small, humble’ [16]) and Bassett fail to grow up, whereas the income of Paul’s parents, which was small at the start of the story (“The mother had a small income, and the father had a small income”), by the end of it gets enormous (“you’re eighty-odd thousand to the good, and a poor devil of a son to the bad”). Let us have a look at the highlights of its “odyssey.”

Everything at the start of the story seems to hinder the manifestation of the sun: we are told that Paul’s parents have no car; in the dialogue about luck (the complication of the story) the mother speaks “slowly and bitterly,” paying “no attention to his assertion” (it should be pointed out that at the end of the story she does not remember this conversation, which “kills” her son). Starting “with a sort of stealth” Paul accelerates into a full-tilt sprint. As a result, so to speak, he grows, his legs getting sturdy and long, his manner of looking aggressive (cf. “his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace” (Rev. 1:14–15)).

However, Paul's growth is illusionary; it occurs only on the material plane (i.e., in the downward direction): "The car sped on into the country, going down to Uncle Oscar's place in Hampshire" (*Hampshire* is also "a pig of a black breed with a white saddle and erect ears" (OED)); at the Lincoln Paul's mouth is "pursed tight." When the sun reaches its zenith ("Uncle Oscar took both Bassett and Paul in Richmond Park for an afternoon"), we find out about the "heavenly" origin of Paul's gift and that Bassett (who earlier refused to "give away" the boy to Uncle Oscar) keeps his money "safe locked up." Ironically, the boy's fall occurs in his bedroom at the top of the house (at this moment his father is downstairs). The mother's heart and the son's, a failed apostle's, eyes turn to stone. At the end of the story Bassett "stole" to Paul's bedside. The wheel has come full circle ($1 + 0 = 1$) (cf. Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

The material quality of Paul's growth appears to be corroborated by the names of the horses. The first of the winning horses is Sansovino, a big bay horse owned by Lord Derby, which was named after the Italian architect Jacopo Sansovino [17]. He adopted his name from Andrea Sansovino, his teacher, who was born at Monte San Savino, a town near Arezzo. Saint Sabino of Spoleto was famous for curing eye diseases. The last of the winning horses is named *Malabar*, which originates from the Malayalam *mala-baram*, *mala* meaning 'mountain', *varam* 'slope, side of a hill' [18]; the French word *mal* means 'bad'. We should also note that the Basset Hound probably descended from St. Hubert's Hound. St. Hubert's conversion is connected with his vision of a solar stag with a crucifix standing between its antlers.

VII. CONCLUSION THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

Much in this story takes on a "Looking-glass" quality. Ideally, the upper and the lower, the spiritual and the material should reflect one another, as is the case with Christ's divine and human natures or the principles embodied in the Star of David [9] and proclaimed by the Revelation. Here, as we have seen, the material takes precedence over the spiritual. This has disastrous consequences: the death of a child. However, through the allusions to the Book of Revelation, D. H. Lawrence takes this tragedy beyond a single family circle to show its universality. A universally acknowledged but not fully comprehended truth about the fatality of relations based on heartless egotism and unrestrained pursuit of profit is as urgent today as never before.

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