

The Horse as a Life-Symbol in the Prose Works of D. H. Lawrence

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In Lawrence's prose works, animal imagery abounds and one of the most important of these images is the horse, which, however, only assumes a major role in *St. Mawr* (written in 1925). Usually it is introduced briefly but its appearance occurs invariably at key points in the plot and it functions symbolically. An understanding of this symbolic usage throws light on Lawrence's purpose in individual works, and the reactions of the characters to the horse give the reader a deeper grasp of their personalities and of the attitudes of the society in which they live.

The horse that appears briefly in "Love Among the Haystacks" (1912)¹ is used as a symbol of sensuality, and the contact with it leads to Maurice's sexual initiation with Paula, the Polish governess. Unlike Paula, who is intense and full of energy, Maurice is imprisoned in his shyness. The ride on the big, strong mare, suggested by Paula after Maurice has worked a long day in the fields, gives them their first close physical contact. Paula is thrilled at the speed of the mare as it plunges swiftly downhill and, when the mare finally stops, Maurice and Paula, carried away by their feelings, kiss passionately. The life of the horse enters into Maurice as he clings to it with his knees and liberates his strong physical passion which he has been too inhibited to express previously. The running away of the horse suggests the powerful sexual feelings aroused in Paula and Maurice by the excitement of the ride.

Unlike the horse in "Love Among the Haystacks" which liberates the sexuality of Maurice and Paula, the horse in "French Sons of Germany" (1912) is subjugated and destroyed by the bullying and torment it endures at the hands of the soldiers who are amused by its suffering. The living horse is associated with the French people, who are likewise referred to as being warm and alive, but who are subjugated by the cold Germans. Lawrence also criticizes the military. Just as the soldiers try to destroy the sensitive nature of the horse, so the military way of life is destructive of the essential feelings in man, an attitude expressed more emphatically in "The Prussian Officer" (1913) and "The Thorn in the Flesh" (1913). The desire to subjugate a living creature to a ruthless will is, however, also an attitude that Lawrence believes to be typical of society as a whole. The horse thus represents here all living, spontaneous creatures who are imprisoned and tormented by a society which, having lost its own potency, feels threatened by vitality and refuses to tolerate it.

In *Sons and Lovers* (1913), the powerful stallion that Paul sees when walking in the country with Clara and Miriam impresses him with its strength and leads him to understand his own need for sensuality. The reactions of the characters reflect their own personalities and also the way in which they treat Paul. Clara is fascinated by the powerful stallion and strokes it, showing her strong, physical nature. Miriam, however, admires the stallion but stays aloof, refusing to touch it, scared of any physical contact, as is also shown in her relationship with Paul.

¹Although published only in 1930, this story belongs to Lawrence's early period, to the time of *The White Peacock*.

Miss Limb is blind to the potency of the animal, treating it instead like a child, and her treatment is indicative of the way in which Paul is treated by his mother and by Miriam, both of whom are unwilling to recognize his essential masculinity. Paul becomes aware of the physical nature of the stallion and thereby also of himself, and it is this recognition that drives him away from Miriam to Clara. After the episode with the stallion, Paul becomes increasingly more interested in Clara. Lawrence skillfully uses the horse here as a catalyst to mark the decline in the more spiritual bond between Miriam and Paul and the growth in his physical attraction to Clara.

A group of pit ponies clustered together, scarcely moving, appears in "Strike Pay" (1913). Imprisoned for most of their lives, the ponies are unused to the freedom granted them by the strike. At first they are excited about being above ground, but then they feel dazed and lethargic. Even though they are in good condition, they are sluggish and completely lack the force of the stallion in *Sons and Lovers*. These ponies are the victims of industrialized society; their energy is sapped by the life underground, a destruction that is emphasized when the workman and his horse are swallowed up by the mud and killed. In a similar way, the mines swallow up the life of all living beings, reflective of the human destruction caused by the spread of industrialism.²

The horse in "The Prussian Officer" (1913) is, in part, symbolic of the Captain's superior rank; he is a dominant figure on horseback while the orderly is on foot. The officer is an excellent horseman with strong riding muscles but, unlike Maurice, he is not touched into life by the close contact with the animal. He uses his muscles to curb the horse, symbolic of the way in which he controls his own feelings, rather than to receive life from the animal. The suppression of the passionate self leads directly to his sadistic treatment of his orderly who has still retained his strong animal spontaneity. After killing the officer, the orderly rides away on the horse and the two vital beings are free together. Yet the cruelty he has suffered from the officer has broken the orderly and he falls from the saddle, losing his connection with the horse. His physical feelings have been destroyed and he feels empty and numb. At the end of the story he is no longer associated with the horse which represented his previous free nature.

Horses play a crucial role in the "death" and "rebirth" of Ursula in *The Rainbow* (1915), after her affair with Skrebensky has ended. Horses have been associated with the Brangwens from the very beginning. The early Brangwens "mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees."³ To Ursula also the earth is conceived of in terms of horses: "It seemed to stir its powerful flank beneath her as she stood" (p. 322), expressing her contact with nature. When Ursula realizes that she is pregnant, she is tempted to marry Skrebensky, thereby being untrue to herself and her quest for identity. Her restlessness rises almost to madness within her and, escaping from the house, she walks in the rain. The horses she sees looming up in the mist are the expression of her own inner turmoil. She does not want to know that they are there, but feels them getting closer to her, feels the thud of their heavy hoofs on the ground, and she cannot escape.

A passage in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) throws light on these violent and threatening horses. Lawrence talks about a man who has a persistent

²Lawrence has a very negative attitude towards industrialism, blaming it for the destruction of feeling and spontaneity in life. All characters in Lawrence's works who are associated with industry, as for example Mr. Crich in *Women in Love* and Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, are portrayed negatively.

³D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1964), p. 2. Future quotations are given in the text.

fear-dream of horses: "He suddenly finds himself among great, physical horses, which may suddenly go wild. Their great bodies surge madly round him, they rear above him, threatening to destroy him."⁴ According to Lawrence, the horses in the dream represent the suppressed sensual self. This sensuality is viewed as a menace, hence the threatening nature of the horses, but the living spontaneous self is secretly yearning for fulfillment of its sensual nature.

This applies directly to Ursula's experience in *The Rainbow*. In fact, the whole episode which takes place in the mist has a dreamlike quality about it. On the one hand, Ursula is afraid of the potency of the horses and tries to deny their presence, but on the other hand she continues to draw closer to them, aware of their powerful haunches: "The darkness and wetness of rain could not put out the hard, urgent, massive fire that was locked within these flanks" (p. 487). She recognizes that her relationship with Skrebensky has lacked this potency which she needs in order to live truly. She feels that she has no resistance left: "That concentrated, knitted flank of the horse-group had conquered" (p. 488). Her fall from the oak tree where she has fled to escape from the horses signifies the death of her old life, yet like an acorn she strives to take root, to be reborn.

One of the horse episodes in *Women in Love* (finished in 1916 but not published until 1920) is important for an understanding of the four main characters. Gudrun and Ursula see Gerald on a red Arab mare which is terrified by an approaching locomotive. Although the horse is rocking with terror, Gerald forces her to stay until the train has passed, digging his spurs into her sides until they bleed. The mare "could not get out of the grasp of his will, nor escape from the mad clamor of terror that resounded through her."⁵ Like the soldiers in "French Sons of Germany," Gerald's face is shining with amusement at his tormenting of the horse. Ursula, whose vivid life-quality is emphasized throughout the novel, is indignant at the treatment of the mare: "It's a living thing, why should he bully it and torture it?" (p. 127). Gudrun is, however, attracted to Gerald's domineering will, seeing only the sexual imagery of the "strong, indomitable thighs of the blond man clenching the palpitating body of the mare into pure control" (p. 128). Ursula and Birkin criticize Gerald's treatment of the horse, but Gerald justifies himself by saying that the horse is there for his use, a utilitarian view which is reflected also in his attitude toward people. He sees the horse only as an object while Ursula and Birkin recognize its life-quality.

Birkin later comments that the horse is like a woman who wants to be subjugated, but who also wants "to bolt, and pitch her rider to perdition" (p. 159). This applies especially to Gudrun who is attracted to the domineering Gerald, but who also at the end pitches him to perdition. The reactions to the horse point to the negative quality of Gerald's and Gudrun's relationship, a relationship that is associated with a bullying, fixed will, and with death, in contrast to Ursula's and Birkin's which is built up on life and the concept of a partnership of two separate but equal beings.⁶ Here it is clearly seen that Ursula and Birkin are against bullying and for the rights of the living creature.

⁴D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 199.

⁵D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 125. Future quotations are given in the text.

⁶The first sexual encounters of the two couples point to the differences in their relationships. Gerald comes to Gudrun with the mud of the churchyard on his boots and their lovemaking is destructive. Birkin and Ursula make love for the first time in Sherwood Forest, and their love is seen to be part of nature and its growth cycle.

The statue of the horse carved by Loerke, which appears at the end of *Women in Love*, allows us to gauge the growing insensitivity of Gudrun.⁷ It is a magnificent stallion but has none of the sensitivity of the living horse. Ursula criticizes it for being stiff and brutal, for lacking all life-quality. Gudrun, however, admires it since she has become increasingly blind to real life, as is shown also in her relationship with Loerke where they both *play* at living rather than really living.⁸ This episode also gives the reader a chance to compare Gudrun's two lovers. Gerald and Loerke are linked by many epithets in the novel, they have many traits of character in common,⁹ but Loerke is a more negative version of Gerald. Gerald at least had contact with a living horse, even though he bullied it, while Loerke has no contact whatever with passionate life and in his art he delights in distorting life and making it grotesque.

In *The Lost Girl* (1920), Ciccio is associated with horses and performs feats of horsemanship whenever the Natcha-Kee-Tawara group comes to a new town. On horseback, Ciccio is extraordinarily velvety and alive. When Alvina sees him with horses, she is aware of him physically, yet is rather afraid of the sensuality he represents. Ciccio tells Alvina that in England "horses live a long time, because they *don't* live—never alive—see? In England railway-engines are alive, and horses go on wheels."¹⁰ As in "Strike Pay" this again points to the destruction of real life by industrialization. It also applies to Alvina's state of being; she too is not really alive. In contrast to the deadening surroundings of Woodhouse, Ciccio, even though rather vulgar, is very much alive and full of vitality, like the horses with which he is connected, and seeing him makes Alvina recognize the sterility and emptiness of her own life and this helps to liberate her.

In "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" (1922), horses are only mentioned once as they go out for exercise, but their influence pervades the whole story. They are great draught horses with large, rounded haunches and massive slumberous strength and a stupidity that holds them in bondage. Through their contact with the horses, the members of the family have taken on certain characteristics of the animals. Joe feels that the horses are like his own body to him. Now that the business has declined, he will marry and go into harness, become a subject animal. Fred Henry feels himself to be an animal, but one that controls, although like the rest of the family, he is also dominated by a sullen animal pride and an inability to master life, like the harnessed horses. Similarly, Mabel endures from day to day and has some of their slumberous strength and hidden sensuality. Her work in the house has kept her in harness, but the hidden sensuality is aroused in her finally after her attempted suicide.

Horses play a decisive role in Jack's development to manhood in *The Boy in the Bush* (1924). When he arrives in Australia, his horsemanship is not very good, but it is challenged when Easu gives him the red stallion, Stampede, to ride, a challenge that Jack is determined to accept. The horse rears and bucks and Jack, holding tightly with his thighs, is conscious of "a body of live muscle and

⁷Loerke's art is reminiscent of Futurist art of which Lawrence was critical since he thought it was too mechanical and that it lacked feeling.

⁸Gudrun and Loerke play with the past, reconstructing the worlds of Goethe and Schiller, but making the great men into marionettes. This is an indication of how removed they are from real living.

⁹Gerald and Loerke are linked together by their association with water, snow, the cold north, and with death. Both are referred to as water rats.

¹⁰D. H. Lawrence, *The Lost Girl* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 159.

palpitating fire between his legs."¹¹ He finds a sensual exertion in "gripping that hot wild body in the power of his own legs" (p. 74), revealing the strong connection between the wild, free horse and Jack.

Later he again rides Stampede and this time feels the real joy of horsemanship, showing a further stage in his development to manhood. Like Gerald in *Women in Love*, Easu in *The Boy in the Bush* tries to overpower his horse; he controls with brute force. Jack, however, is sensitive to the horse: "It was a live creature, to be mastered, but not to be overborne" (p. 133). Thus, in their attitudes to the horse, the basic differences between Easu and Jack are succinctly expressed. Jack senses the "strange, powerful life beneath him and between his thighs, heaving and breaking like some enormous alive wave" (p. 134). The horse exhilarates Jack with its exultance in the power of life, the recognition of which draws Jack close to Monica and her strange power.

When Easu is later killed, he is riding a black horse, symbolic of his death, but also symbolic of the destruction of his sexual potency by his nagging wife. Jack prefers red horses, symbolic of the intense life within him. He only feels comfortable with horses; only they, to him, are open and honest with no lies or complications. The horse is the only creature with which he has a close connection and, like a centaur, he seems to harmonize with it, to become one with it. His stallion also does not like human company but is free and wild. Both Jack and his horse delight in their singleness of being and derive strength from it. The potency of the stallion is emphasized at the end when it has sexual relations with the mare. The novel ends with the scene of Jack on horseback riding alone into the bush, an image of his constant search for self, for growth and for intensity, a quest with which the horse is closely associated.

In "The Woman Who Rode Away" (1925) and "The Princess" (1925), the horse again is used on a journey to symbolize the quest for the self. The woman in the first story leaves home where she feels inwardly dead to search for meaning in life. The strong roan horse, symbolic of the passions suppressed within her, leads her on since she has no will of her own left. When the Indians appear, the first test of her submission takes place as the Indian hits her horse to urge it on, frightening it so that it jerks her. He takes no notice of her indignation and leads the horse on. She submits and, from this episode, recognizes that her will is useless with these people. The horse leads her to her death, but, before she dies, she experiences for a short time a more vivid and intense way of life than the life she had been forced to lead at home.

The Horse in "The Princess" is also used symbolically. Dollie rides a sorrel mare with a powerful neck and hollow back, betokening a swift runner, a mare, however, that tends, like Dollie herself, to be hysterical. Romero's black horse symbolizes his dark passions, but also points to his approaching death and the destruction of his sensuality. Dollie cannot submit to her innermost desires, preferring to destroy Romero, and when she is taken back to the ranch, she says that her horse has been shot from under her; her physical self, symbolized by the horse, has therefore been totally suppressed.

In a letter than Lawrence wrote to Willard Johnson in 1924, he talks about Pan and directly associates Pan with the horse: "It would be a terrible thing if the horse in us died for ever, as it seems to have died in Europe."¹² This theme

¹¹D. H. Lawrence and M. L. Skinner, *The Boy in the Bush* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), p. 74. Future quotations are given in the text.

¹²D. H. Lawrence, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Harry T. Moore (New York: Viking, 1962), II, 769. Willard Johnson was editor of the magazine *The Laughing Horse*.

is taken up in *St. Mawr* (1925). Before Lou meets St. Mawr she has led an unsatisfying life in society. The bright red-gold horse from the Welsh borders, from the old Celtic underworld of potency, changes her; she is fascinated by the invisible fire in him, for it is "slippery with vivid, hot life."¹³ The horse's demonic look confronts her with the question of whether she is really alive, and it makes her aware of the emptiness of her own life with its lack of feelings. Since Lou has seen St. Mawr "looming fiery and terrible in an outer darkness" (p. 35), her world loses all meaning for her; it seems to be no longer real. To Lou, the stallion is a far greater mystery than man, since it is burning with life while most men are inwardly dead. Lou and her mother both recognize Pan, the hidden mystery as Lawrence calls him, in *St. Mawr*; St. Mawr belongs to an older, more potent world.

Rico is not, however, moved by St. Mawr, seeing in it only a subject for one of his fashionable paintings and failing to recognize the life within it. St. Mawr also dislikes Rico, sensing his sterility. On the ride to Devil's Chair, St. Mawr rears at the sight of a dead adder and Rico, in fury, pulls the horse back on top of himself and is injured. Lou, alone, recognizes that it is not St. Mawr's fault since he is unhappy: "The grief of the generous creature which sees all ends turning to the morass of ignoble living" (p. 83). Lou and her mother save the horse from being shot and also from being castrated. Society cannot tolerate the strong vitality in St. Mawr; it is too much of a threat to its own weakness. In Texas, St. Mawr has wide open spaces which should give him his freedom. Pan, however, leaves St. Mawr here and goes into the landscape of the ranch. St. Mawr loses his Pan feelings and follows slavishly at the heels of a long-legged mare; he, too, has been subjugated. The contact with St. Mawr has, however, liberated Lou from the emptiness of her former life, and, living alone among the mountains, she finds fulfillment.¹⁴

The first horses that appear in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) are those at the bullfight. They are feeble and old and have been brought to the ring to be killed. The first horse is gored in the stomach by the bull and walks weakly out of the ring with its entrails hanging out, to the applause of the crowd. The shock almost overpowers Kate; she is made aware of human beastliness and sadism. The second horse is likewise gored in the stomach. It awaits its fate like a milk horse that waits patiently between the shafts while its master delivers the milk, an ironical image since milk brings life, yet the horse is waiting for death. As the attendant leads the wounded horse out of the ring, the bull charges again from the rear and upends the horse. The bull's horns are between the horse's hind legs and deep in his insides, working vigorously up and down—a grotesque and horrible coition. Kate has to leave as she is nauseated by the sight. The treatment of the horses shows the decadence and corruption of society with its love of cruelty and blood.

This scene is contrasted starkly to a later one where Cipriano is riding a sensitive black stallion. The black color is again significant, since one of Cipriano's colors in the new religion is black which associates him with the dark gods and with dark potency; black points to his function as the avenging god, seen in his execution of the traitors outside the church. Cipriano also loves red horses; he is master of fire. When he rides, his male pride reveals itself and,

¹³D. H. Lawrence, *St. Mawr* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967), p. 21. Future quotations are given in the text.

¹⁴The farm where Lou lives is called *Las Chivas*, the goats, reminding us of the presence of Pan in the mountains.

sitting on the horse, he seems to be fused with it. As in *The Boy in the Bush*, the image of the centaur is again stressed; the potent man and the potent horse are seen as one.

The horse in "The Rocking Horse Winner" (1926) is similar to Loerke's statue in *Women in Love* since both are caricatures of the living creature. The horse is fixed and rigid, with a red mouth, slightly open, and big, glassy eyes. The fixed wooden horse is representative of the people in the house who are essentially dead with no warm feelings of love. For them, money is all important, especially for the mother, and her constant search for material wealth corrupts her son Paul. He sits on the rocking horse, with a cold fire in his eyes, rocking madly in a frenzy, riding it furiously. He slashes it with his whip and forces it into a *mechanical* gallop and does not stop until he learns the winner of the race. The wooden horse is not only symbolic of the lack of life and vitality within the family, but also of the lack of growth potential in society at large. Society is materialistic and mechanical; even the horses that run in the races have mechanical names such as Lucky Spark.

In *Etruscan Places* (1927-28), Lawrence clearly equates the horse with potency: "A man riding on a red horse . . . was a suave-skinned creature, with death or life in its face, surging along on a surge of animal power that burned with travel, with the passionate movement of the blood."¹⁵ The horse is the symbol of the strong animal life in man: "Sometimes he rises, a sea-horse, from the ocean: and sometimes he is a land creature, and half-man. And so he occurs on the tombs, as the passion in man returning into the sea, the soul retreating into the death-world at the depths of the waters" (p. 176). The horse is associated with the journey of man through life to death, seen especially in "The Woman who Rode Away" and in "The Virgin and the Gipsy" in which the gipsy's horse and cart symbolize his wandering nature and his soul's quest.

It is no coincidence that Lawrence uses the horse as a symbol in many of his major works. To him, it represents the ancient potency which Europe has now lost. In *Apocalypse* (1929), Lawrence writes that in the last fifty years man has lost the horse and, as a result, man is now lost to life and power. This is seen especially in the figures of Rico, Loerke, Gerald, and the Prussian Officer. Those who still manage to retain their potency have not lost their contact with the horse, such as Cipriano, Jack, and Mellors in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), whose former profession as a blacksmith associated him with horses.

The most frequent color that Lawrence uses for his horses is red, which symbolizes for him, as he states in *Apocalypse*, the natural fieriness and passion of man. In the same work also he associates red with Mars, the god of war, and this throws light on Cipriano's love of red horses. In *Etruscan Places* Lawrence writes about the color red: "Vermilion is the color of [man's] sacred or potent or god body" (p. 72). The black horse is associated with the dark gods of sensuality in the case of Romero and Cipriano. For Romero and Easu, the black horse also means death, for Cipriano, the bringer of death.

There are also various types of horses used. Some are subjugated like those in *Women in Love* and in "French Sons of Germany." In "Strike Pay" and *The Plumed Serpent* they reveal the decadence and the destructive nature of society. Some are separate and free like Jack's horse; an image of the freedom of their

¹⁵D. H. Lawrence, *Etruscan Places* (New York: Viking, 1957), p. 113. Future quotations are given in the text.

owners. Others are menacing and dangerous like those in *The Rainbow*, showing the dangerous results of suppressing sensuality. Some also represent the quest for the soul, as in "The Princess."

Their function in the plot also varies. Sometimes they throw light on the characters as in *Women in Love*, and sometimes on society as in *St. Mawr*. In "Love Among the Haystacks" the horse with its vitality encourages Maurice in his sexual initiation, and in *Sons and Lovers* it marks the beginning of a new relationship for Paul. Whatever the various types of horses are and whatever their function in the plot is, they are all associated with potency and virility, even if that potency is destroyed or suppressed. In his later works Lawrence is more explicit in his descriptions of the horse's potency. A passage in *Apocalypse* succinctly states Lawrence's final assessment of the horse: "He is a dominant symbol: he gives us lordship: he links us, the first palpable and throbbing link with the ruddy-glowing Almighty of potence: he is the beginning even of our godhead in the flesh. And as a symbol he roams the dark underworld meadows of the soul."⁶

⁶D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 97.