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## A Mystical Reading of D. H. Lawrence's "Shadows"

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### Abstract

Though D. H. Lawrence was not a mystic or a mystical poet, his poem "Shadows" is a mystical poem *par excellence*. However, this aspect has never been given its due of study. Due to the depth of the inexpressible mystical experience, mystical poets resort to symbolic language to render their experiences. This paper aims at exploring the poet's mystical experience in this poem and it is divided into two sections. The first section is introductory; it attempts to shed light on mysticism, its meaning and nature to reach at an acceptable definition of "mysticism". The second is devoted to a detailed analysis of the mystical experience and the main mystical symbols in the poem such as water, autumn, darkness, dry tree, blossoms, and the phoenix. The paper also shows the diversity of the poet's sources of this experience by relating it to Christian and even Islamic mystical thought or even to Indian mysticism. It also attempts to point out the major influences on Lawrence, namely those of the Spanish mystic John of the Cross, Islamic mysticism and Indian Mysticism. The last part of the poem is the conclusion which sums up the results of the study.

**Keywords:** Lawrence, mysticism, shadow , mystical experience, symbols

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## قراءة صوفية لقصيدة د. هـ. لورنس: "ظلال"

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### الملخص:

لم يكن د. هـ. لورني متصوفاً ولم يكن شاعراً صوفياً، ولكن قصيدته "ظلال" قصيدة صوفية بكل معنى الكلمة ولكن هذا الجانب من القصيدة لم يحصل على ما يستحق من الدراسة. ونظراً لعمق التجربة الصوفية واستحالة التعبير عنه في اللغة الإعتيادية، بلجأ الشعراء الصوفيون إلى اللغة الرمزية للتعبير عن تجاربهم.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة تجربة الشاعر الصوفية في هذه القصيدة بالذات، وينقسم على ثلاثة مباحث. المبحث الأول تمهيدي، يحاول تسلسل بعض الضوء على الصوفية، معناها وطبيعتها ومحاولة الوصول إلى تعريف شامل لها. أما المبحث الثاني فيكرس لتحليل التجربة الصوفية والرموز الصوفية الرئيسية في هذه القصيدة كالماء والخريف والظلام والشجرة اليابسة والأزهار وطائر العنقاء. كما يبين البحث تنوع مصادر الشاعر في هذه التجربة الصوفية وذلك بتتبع جذورها في التصوف المسيحي والإسلامي والهندي. كما يحاول أن يبين أهم من أثروا على كالتصوف الأسباني يوحنا الصليبي والمتصوفين المسلمين والهنود. وينتهي البحث بخاتمة تلخص ما توصل إليه من نتائج.

الكلمات الدالة: لورنس، التصوف، ظلال، التجربة الصوفية، الرموز.

### 1. Mysticism

Though mysticism is an ancient practice of human beings throughout history, it is still controversial and almost difficult to define. It is sometimes associated with telepathy; sometimes with clairvoyance and magic and definitions of mysticism include a bewildering variety. Reynold Nicholson, the outstanding Orientalist and translator of Islamic mystical poetry, "in his efforts to come out with a comprehensive definition of the term collected more than two hundred definitions of the term and after arranging them chronologically he admits the impossibility of finding a comprehensive definition (Al-Douri 1). According to Ahmad Razuq Al-Fasi, mysticism "has been defined and interpreted in about two thousand references" (qtd. in 'Isa 10). However, religiously speaking, mysticism is strongly related to the esoteric or inward side of all the great religions of the world. Therefore, since the concern of this paper is with mysticism as a religious experience, it is proper to refer to W. R. Inge's *Mysticism in Religion* in which he quotes a variety of definitions of

this term; among them is Otto Pflieger's definition which is the most plausible. He says that mysticism "is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God" (Qtd. in Inge 25).

In his "Preface" to William Kingsland's *An Anthology of Mysticism and Mystical Philosophy* [see *The Divine Dark* pp. 64-67] I. W. Ryde argues that "there are two main aspects of Mysticism, the philosophical or rational, and the emotional or devotional" (1927: VII). However, this paper is mainly concerned with emotional or devotional rather than the philosophical or rational.

The ultimate goal of all mystics is mystical union with the Divine. Union with God means the assimilation of the Divine attributes. According to Muhyiddin Ibnu Arabi (1165-1240), union is a "mutual interpenetration of Divinity and man.... God is mysteriously present in man and man is obliterated in God" (Burckhardt 93). In Islamic Sufism, Al-Hallaj manipulates the doctrine of union to its extreme so that he was accused of believing in *hulul* (incarnation). In one of his ecstatic utterances, as a result of great rapturous joy and intensive feeling of Union with the Divine, he says "I am God" which was one of the reasons behind his condemnation to death in 992 (Al-Attar 266).

In Christian mystical literature, mystical union is often symbolically expressed as a "spiritual marriage" between the Bridegroom (Jesus Christ) and the Bride (the soul). This spiritual marriage is an allegory of the union of the soul with God. St. Bernard uses this allegory, "when the beloved shall have been perfected", says he, "the Bridegroom will make with her a spiritual marriage and they shall be two not in one flesh but in one spirit" ("Butler 160-61).

In order to achieve this union, the seventeenth-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross (1542–1591), believes that the soul must pass through the "Dark Night" which means that the soul must undergoes a series of purifications. (St. John of the Cross, 1958: 22). This darkness is one of the major symbols in D. H. Lawrence's poem.

Due to the extreme and intensity of mystical experience, mystics found it inexpressible in normal language or even in prose. Unsurprisingly, most mystics resort to poetry to express their intensive mystical experience because poetry is more capable to contain the powerful mystical emotions than prose. Inge argues that "poetry is a representation of the invisible under visible forms" (86) and he quotes a stanza of William Watson which is expressive of this idea:

Forget not, brother singer, that though prose  
Can never be too truthful nor too wise  
Song is not truth, nor Wisdom, but the rise  
Upon Truth's lips, the light in Wisdom's eyes. (86)

Due to this incapability of prose to contain the joy and the extreme ecstasy of mystical experience, mystics burst into rapturous song. Even poetry stands powerless unless it is highly symbolic and defamiliarised due to this unfamiliar experience. Needless to mention the major mystics of the world who found in poetry the suitable means to express their powerful feelings, such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Fariduddin Attar, Mansour Al-Hallaj, St. John of the Cross and many others.

## **II. D. H. Lawrence's "*Shadows*"**

David Herbert Lawrence (1885-1930) is one of the most influential and controversial English novelists and poets of the twentieth century. He wrote more than forty books in which he exalted his vision of the natural, whole human being, against the artificiality of modern industrial society with its dehumanization of life and man. He was misunderstood both as a novelist and poet, attacked and some of his works, such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were banned during his life. Lawrence's most original poetry was published in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* (1923). He also published *Love Poems and Others* (1913) and *Look! We Have Come Through* (1917).

Though most of the outstanding mystics were poets, many great mystical poems were composed by poets who were not known as mystics; furthermore, some of them were either irreligious or pagan. For instance, the modern American poet Anne Sexton (1928—1970) wrote one of the splendid and magnificent volumes of mystical poetry: *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, posthumously published in 1975 though she was irreligious. No wonder that D. H. Lawrence, who has never been known as religious, wrote some magnificent mystical poems a short time before his death in 1930 such as "The Ship of Death", "Song of Death" and "Shadows".

"Shadows" was composed when he was sick of tuberculosis a short time before his death in 1930 (<https://www.studymode.com/essays/Shadows-d-h-Lawrence-65084674.html>). In his essay on Pascal, recalling that he was ill when he composed part of *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot maintains that Pascal received his mystical illumination when he was extremely ill, adding that "some forms of illness are extremely favourable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition" (Eliot 405). In sickness or with the approach of death one may have sudden knowledge or mystical illumination.

Lawrence's "Shadows" opens abruptly in the middle with "and" which suggests that something is deleted. From the beginning of the poem one feels the influence of St. John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul* and the influence of Christian, Islamic and Indian mystical writings. In the darkness of the night the speaker's soul finds peace because the physical senses of the body are almost dead.

And if to-night my soul may find her peace  
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion, (1-2)

In this darkness of the night the soul becomes closer to God because it is not hindered by the animal desires. The speaker, therefore, feels as if he is dipped in God.

And in the morning wake like a new-opened flower  
then I have been dipped again in God, and new-created. (ll. 3-4)

This recalls to mind many Islamic mystical writings that say that we live in God as fish live in water. The Persian mystic poet Aziz bin Mohammad An-Nasafi, for instance, compares the proximity of God and man to water and fish. After journeying to an old, wise and learned fish and asking about water, the fish are told that their life and being are from water but they have never seen water, though they have been living by it and in it:

O ye who seek to solve the knot  
Ye live in God, yet know him not  
Ye sit upon the river's brink'  
Yet crave in vain a drop to drink,

Ye dwell beside a countless store'  
Yet perish hungry at the door.  
(An-Nasafy 49)

The word "again" suggests that this is not the first time that the speaker achieves proximity to and oneness with God because the soul, originally, is the breath of God.

In the second passage, night is still pervading the speaker and in this darkness his soul goes out. In this "dark night of the soul" (to use St. John of the Cross's terms), he feels close to God; he is walking with God as long as it is dark:

And if, as weeks go round, in the dark of the moon  
my spirit darkens and goes out and soft strange gloom  
pervades my movements and my thoughts and words  
then I shall know that I am walking still  
with God, we are close together now the moon's in shadow  
(ll. 5-9)

The darkness in this part of the poem is exactly the same darkness of the soul which St. John of the Cross applauds and which means mortification of animal desires, renunciation of the earthly world and 'emptiness' of the senses. "This night", John of the Cross argues, which we say, is contemplation, produces in spiritual persons two kinds of darkness or purgation, corresponding to the two parts of man's nature – namely, the sensual and the spiritual' (*Dark Night* 29). Even in *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, he says that...in order to achieve Union with the Divine,

the soul must pass through the Dark Night –that is to say through a series of purifications, during which it is walking, as it were through a tunnel of impenetrable obscurity and from which it emerges to bask in the sunshine of grace and to enjoy the divine intensity. (*The Ascent*: 2)

Unsurprisingly, this mystical "darkness of the soul" was used --with the same implications-- by many great Christian mystics such as Dionysus the Areopagite in the fifth century after Christianity who calls this darkness Divine Darkness: "For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness" (Dionysus 50). This darkness, according to him is a darkness that shines and "illuminates with splendours of inconceivable beauty the soul" (208). Being the binary opposite of light, this darkness enables the mystic to see the Eternal Divine light.

The outstanding Flemish mystic Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) has the same mystical experience of darkness: "In this abyss of darkness where love lights the fire of death, I see the dawn of eternal life and the manifestation of God" (Hello 45). In this dark night "of the soul", adds Ruysbroeck, an inconceivable light is born which shines forth and illuminates the eternal life. This light shines in the pure essence of the soul (ibid.). These are just few examples from Christian mysticism a long time before Lawrence's use of "darkness" in his poem.

After this state of darkness in which physical senses are annihilated; a state which the Islamic mystics call *fana'* (death to self), the Buddhists call "nirvana" and the

Christians "annihilation", the poet identifies himself with autumn and with the fall of the dry tree leaves. Like trees in autumn he undergoes a state of mortification and after this mortification or death of the bodily faculties, he enjoys a state of blessedness. He feels deep and sweet shadows folding round his soul like the sweetness of a low sad song. It is a state of mystical ecstatic joy, regeneration, renewal and rebirth. The poet then uses "shadows" which may be considered synonymous with "darkness". The speaker is now enjoying a state of bliss and ecstasy; a state of "oblivion" which symbolizes renunciation of the mundane life and 'emptiness' of the senses. Deep shadows are folding round him; he feels as if he is listening to a sweet sad song which is also described as "darker than the nightingale" –the nightingale is chosen because it sings at night-- suggesting that the speaker is still in the dark night of the soul, i.e. enjoying mystical joy:

And if, as autumn deepens and darkens  
I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stems that break in storms  
and trouble and dissolution and distress  
and then the softness of deep shadows folding, folding  
around my soul and spirit, around my lips  
so sweet, like a swoon, or more like the drowse of a low, sad song  
singing darker than the nightingale, on, on to the solstice  
and the silence of short days, the silence of the year, the shadow,  
(ll.10-18)

Both Christian and Muslim (and even Indian) mystics believe that mortification of the senses and animal desires is the foremost requisite in the mystical path. The heart, is the seat of the animal desires and therefore, according to St John of the Cross, it must be burnt with the fire of love (of God) in order to be cleansed of sin, to be pure and to be suitable as the seat of the Divine (*Ascent* 25-27). Self-mortification recurs also in the Bible; Jesus emphasizes self-mortification in this life in order to gain the eternal life (St. John xii: 25; St. Mark viii: 24-35). The poet, therefore, uses the symbol of the dry tree to emphasize the process of mortification and annihilation of his physical faculties culminating in the "dead heart" which is the peak of the annihilation. He feels sick with broken wrists and dead heart. However, strange flowers blossom on the withered branches of the dead tree symbolizing the spiritual rebirth:

And if, in the changing phases of man's life  
I fall in sickness and in misery  
my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead  
and strength is gone, and my life  
is only the leavings of a life:  
and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion, and snatches  
of renewal  
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new, strange  
flowers  
such as my life has not brought forth before, new blossoms of me.  
(ll. 20-31)

Amid this darkness, mortification and annihilation, he feels proximity (to use the mystical term) to God: "then I must know that still/ I am in the hands of the unknown God" (ll. 32-33). God is breaking him down physically for the sake of spiritual union.

The sixth passage consists of two questions addressed either to the speaker himself or to the reader. Are you willing to be annihilated i. e. change into nothing? The answer should be "Yes" because without this annihilation of the physical desires and senses it is impossible to achieve spiritual communication, union with the Divine, spiritual regeneration and rebirth.

The poet elaborates and elucidates this in the last passage by using the symbol of the mythological immortal bird, the phoenix. In mythology, the phoenix is a sexless bird and therefore in order to regenerate it burns itself to death and then a new bird is born from its ashes:

The phoenix renews her youth  
only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down  
to hot and flocculent ash. (ll. 41-43)

This symbol sums up the meaning of the whole poem. Unless one undergoes spiritual exercise, i.e. mortification of animal desires, "dying to self" and annihilation like the phoenix, one can never achieve spiritual rebirth or mystical union with the Divine.

### **III. Conclusion**

Making use of a long tradition of mystical poetry, D. H. Lawrence succeeds in employing mystical symbols to render his extensive experience of sickness and physical deterioration in terms of mystical union with the Divine. The main theme of this poem is the mystical union with God which dominates the first passages of the poem. This union is to be achieved through annihilation. The poet uses several mystical symbols such as water, darkness, oblivion, shadows, dry tree and the phoenix to suggest this state of annihilation which is the first requirement for mystical union with God symbolized by dipping into water (God) and walking with God. The second theme, which is strongly related to the first, is the spiritual rebirth and regeneration which also cannot be achieved without the mortification of the body. The poem is written in free verse (unrhymed lines of variable length) and in passages of variable length because this is more suitable for meditation.

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