



Mapping the East Midlands: D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and Place

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.4.224](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.4.224)



Article info

Article Received: 29/11/2024

Article Accepted: 27/12/2024

Published online: 31/12/2024

Abstract

This paper looks at the ways in which Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*, negotiates place, especially the English East Midlands. The construction of the landscape in the novel not only locates it within the actual East Midlands region, but also suggests the novel's concern with the tension between rootedness and the call of the beyond. The places in the novel have to be seen in terms of this dialectic. In this novel, Lawrence begins a practice of creating interiorised spaces representing abstract qualities of place, a practice which he brings to perfection in later novels. The mapping of place in *The Rainbow* is a predominantly subjective mapping, and it is therefore an interiorised version of the East Midlands region that emerges; this makes it a highly metaphorical text. The geographical locations thus become part of the 'deep structure' of the novel.

Keywords: D.H. Lawrence and the East Midlands, *The Rainbow*

Introduction

D. H. Lawrence's creative engagement with place is evident in all his writings, including his fiction which is mostly built around carefully constructed places. This paper looks at the ways in which Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow*, negotiates place, especially the English East Midlands. Not many critics have studied

the writing of place in *The Rainbow*, though as in *Sons and Lovers*, there is a very clear focus on place from the beginning of the novel. Together, these two novels write significant aspects of the experience of the East Midlands in the nineteenth century.¹ The East Midlands that is mapped by these novels is not merely the

¹ The two novels are located in the area of the East Midlands now usually referred to as the Nottinghamshire coalfield, which can be subdivided into two distinct landscape types: the coalfield farmlands and the river meadow lands. The coalfield farmlands are a densely settled and heavily industrialised landscape characterised by urban settlements mixed with pockets of farmland. A large portion of the land area is devoted to agricultural production, but the dominant influence on the character of this landscape is the presence of industry,

especially coal mining. (*Countryside Appraisal: Nottinghamshire Landscape Guidelines*. Nottinghamshire County Council, 1997: 15).

If *The Rainbow* focuses to a great extent on writing the experience of the river meadow land environment, *Sons and Lovers* is largely the fictional writing of the coalfield farmlands. Together the novels write significant conditions of the experience of the area as it was in the nineteenth century.

physical area identified by formal geography.² The two novels map physical features, locations and the general spatial lay-out of the region. What is foregrounded in both novels is however, the subjective experience of the physical, social and communal spaces.

The Rainbow and the East Midlands Region:

The Rainbow (abbreviated in this paper as *R*), like *Sons and Lovers*, engages with the landscape of the East Midlands, though on very different terms. The novel is placed mostly within the East Midlands, with brief shifts to other places in England and the Continent. The first paragraph locates the first cycle of the novel 'in the meadows where the Erewash twisted sluggishly through alder trees, separating Derbyshire from Nottinghamshire' (*R*: 9). The landscape mapped by the first paragraph represents the landscape of the 'river meadow lands', an important component of the regional landscape of the East Midlands. The meadows, the marsh, the meandering channel of the Erewash, the alders - all recreate the actual landscape of this part of the region. The farm at 'Cossethay' is located in an area easily identifiable as Cossall, on the border of the two counties, near Ilkeston in Derbyshire. The nearness to Ilkeston is emphasised, its church-tower mentioned as dominating the horizon. The construction of the landscape introduces the novel's concern with the tension between horizontality and verticality, between rootedness and the call of the beyond.

After the place is mapped with such sureness, the novel passes into a timeless world of myth, thus initiating the heavily symbolic strand of the novel, with its Biblical tone, cadences and imagery. The first section of the first chapter significantly does not mention a definite time, though there is a definite, clearly located place. This section is a psychological re-working of the Genesis myth and does not write

a social history of the agricultural community of the East Midlands. The female Brangwen, the 'Eve' figure, is made desirous of going 'beyond', desirous of knowing the unfamiliar. The men and women in this section represent a permanent (therefore timeless) duality in the human psyche, which is suggested in terms of the male-female polarity. The male aspect of this duality suggests the tendency to remain rooted, a state of 'blood consciousness', of sensual intimacy with nature, while the female aspect suggests the tendency to go beyond, to achieve a higher being, to enter into 'the finer, more vivid circle of life' (*R*: 12). In this section, Lawrence works through ideas of aspiration, rootedness and change. The novel works out this dichotomy in the human personality through an exploration of the lives of three generations of the Brangwen family, focusing especially on the relationships between men and women. For the women, the 'beyond' increasingly comes to mean entry into the workforce, financial independence, mobility and sexual liberation.

Both *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* begin with a reading of the changing cultural landscape and the effects of these changes on the lives of people. If *Sons and Lovers* focuses on the ugliness, rootlessness and mechanisation created by industrialisation, *The Rainbow* explores the new consciousness that it creates, the changing roles of women in the new society, and the changes it brings in relationships between men and women. The novel explores how individuals in a particular place respond to a new consciousness created by a new development in social history, the advent of industrial capitalism. Michael Black succinctly expresses what this change means: 'the revolution is industrial, not political, but it alters things more thoroughly over time: it changes the landscape for ever and produces a new race of people' (2001: 56). Stefania Michelucci points

² In academic geography the region called the East Midlands (and made up of five counties) forms one of the eight Standard Regions of England, what is called

a functional region (Frank Molyneux and David Dwelly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 5).

out that it is not by chance that *The Rainbow* opens with a detailed description of the setting and a specific time. The novel, says Michelucci, begins with the physical intervention in the topography of the place, an event that begins a process of transformation which increasingly impinges on the lives of the characters (2002: 65).

Even the first generation Brangwens are aware of the new world, they see it from far through the archway of the canal, they hear its 'sounds' and smell the new chemical odours – all these are faint traces of the new life reaching them. But the new world, the new consciousness is still beyond them, they are still rooted in the old ways. Throughout the novel Cossethay and the Marsh represent an older, unchanging world, while Ilkeston represents the new, the canal forming some sort of boundary between the two. Cossethay is throughout associated with rootedness, changelessness and permanence – all of which are suggested in the first section. The Marsh is 'remote and original, on the old, quiet side of the canal embankment' (R: 13), 'on the safe side of civilisation' (R: 14).

The reference in the early paragraphs of the novel to the slow water winding along between the stiff alders is not only an accurate appraisal of the character of the river – words like 'slow', 'quiet' and 'stiff' help create a landscape that suggests stasis, inertia, horizontality and resistance to change. The river seems to lend its character to its environs. It is an inertia associated with the sensuous richness and abundance of organic life, suggested by phrases such as 'the drowse of blood intimacy' (R: 10) in the early Brangwens, and 'the teeming life of creation' (R: 11) around them. It is not that the Marsh and Cossethay are

unaware of the immense changes going on just on the fringes of their consciousness. As yet they are 'beyond', known only from a distance.

As they worked in the fields, from beyond the now familiar embankment came the rhythmic run of the winding engines, startling at first, but afterwards a narcotic to the brain. Then the shrill whistle of the trains re-echoed through the heart, with fearsome pleasure, announcing the far-off come near and imminent. (R: 14).

Cossall is historically one of the few places in the area where the original pattern of rural settlement has survived.³ Together with some other tiny villages in the area, Cossall retains some of its original character. Lawrence reads this aspect of Cossall's character accurately and it is this character that he gives to Cossethay, the textual version of Cossall. The textual space of Cossethay thus becomes the space of the pre-industrial consciousness, which is still as it was in the beginning – suggested by the word 'original' (R: 13) – with something Eden-like and Paradisal about it. An excellent instance where characters interiorise this character of the place in the novel, is where Ursula and Skrebensky walk along the canal near the Marsh Farm. The contrast between the landscapes on either side is made clear:

On the left was the whole black agitation of colliery and railway and the town which rose on its hill, the church-tower topping all ... That way, Ursula felt, was the way to London, through the grim, alluring seethe of the town. On the other hand was the evening, mellow over the green water-meadows and the

³ Although largely overwhelmed by mining-related development, the original pattern of rural settlement has survived in one or two places, notably at Cossall, Bagthorpe and Stanley. These hamlets retain much of their original character and, together with the remaining brick built farmsteads scattered throughout the area, they provide an impression of the former pattern and style of settlement. The

network of narrow, winding lanes is also a locally distinctive feature which bears witness to the formerly dispersed rural settlement pattern' (*Countryside Appraisal: Nottinghamshire Landscape Guidelines*. Nottinghamshire County Council, 1997: 16).

winding alder trees beside the river, and the pale stretches of stubble beyond. There the evening glowed softly, and even a peewit was flapping in solitude and peace. Ursula and Anton Skrebensky walked along the ridge of the canal between. (R: 287)

Walking along the canal which is a boundary between two landscapes, two worlds, Ursula faces a choice between the world of stasis and rootedness and the world of modern development. From her first meeting with Skrebensky, the latter is spoken of as bringing her a sense of the outer world. The barge-man gives Ursula a sense of the warmth of her own life in the region, while Skrebensky, the outsider, brings with him a sense of the beyond. Lawrence here begins a practice of creating interiorised spaces representing abstract qualities of place, a practice which he brings to perfection in *Women in Love*. Cossethay in *The Rainbow* is the interiorised version of the actual physical space of Cossall.

Ursula's first departure from Cossethay to Ilkeston to start work, is described in terms of moving from one place to another, from one world to another. 'Through the thin rain she saw the town, a black extensive mount. She must enter in upon it . . . Behind her was Cossethay' (R: 342). Ilkeston, which right from the beginning is identified with the 'beyond', now becomes the place where Ursula learns the painful realities of the world of work which she is able to enter only after overcoming stiff resistance from her parents. The contrast between the freedom of her non-working life and her school-life is built up in terms of a contrast between Cossethay and Ilkeston.

She came to school in the morning seeing the hawthorn flowers wet, the little, rosy grains swimming in a bowl of dew. The larks quivered their song up into the new sunshine, and the country was so glad. It was a violation to plunge into the dust and greyness of the town .

. . She was struggling between two worlds, her own world of young summer and flowers, and this other world of work. (R: 379)

The removal from Cossethay to Beldover is again significant – it is not only a removal from a physical space, it is also a removal from the confinement of rootedness to the beyond, a widening of the circle. Ursula is 'growing to something beyond what Cossethay would allow or understand . . . So Cossethay hampered her now and she wanted to go away, be free' (R: 388-389). The move to Beldover represents a move up in the social ladder, a move into a world where they would be the elite and the representatives of culture. Beldover gives the entire family a sense of space, liberation and light. Wiggiston is in many ways the antithesis of Cossethay. If Cossethay is the space of a pre-industrial consciousness in which human life is in perfect interconnectedness with nature, Wiggiston is the space of the fully developed individual consciousness. Wiggiston is described as located in Yorkshire – it is in fact a textual representation of the soulless, homogenous, standardized, dreary industrial town, lacking any sense of community, social space, or organic formation.

A major indicator of the East Midlands region in this novel is the built environment. In an age when the institutions or doctrinal teachings of religion are no longer able to satisfy the religious impulse, the architecture of the church and its music are seen to have an unusual mystical significance for Will Brangwen. Cossethay church though a small village church, is a significant building in the novel. It is on this church that Will lavishes all his sense of sacredness and mysticism which does not find a release in church doctrine. It is the building of the church – its stone and wood work, its music and ritual – that captures Will's attention, though in an age of growing religious disbelief, the church as a religious institution no longer holds any meaning.

Will's visit to Lincoln Cathedral with Anna is a consummation of several recurrent motifs of the novel. One of the tallest buildings in the East Midlands, the cathedral, 'brooding over the town', 'lifted watchful in the sky', with its soaring towers, emphasises as nowhere else in the novel the theme of horizontality versus verticality, a theme inaugurated right at the beginning where the Brangwens are described as sensing the church tower at Ilkeston above and beyond them as they work in the fields (R: 9). The metaphors of the arch and of the rainbow are also significant in this chapter, which celebrates the idea of a spiritual consummation, of fertility, of multiplicity within a monistic absolute whole. The 'Cathedral' chapter not only underlines some of the most prominent motifs in the novel, it also depicts the confusion of an artistically and mystically oriented man who feels the power and beauty of the cultural tradition that the church represents, while having to increasingly accept its obsolete quality and irrelevance in an age of disbelief. Lincoln cathedral thus becomes a psychic location as well as a geographical location.

The novel enacts Lawrence's view of history as dialectical conflict between two basic impulses, a view that is succinctly explained by Kinkead-Weekes, who argues that history or character for Lawrence could not be understood without a deep structural sense of the forces at work in the universe and within the human being (1986: 33). Kinkead-Weekes elaborates this idea further in another essay.

History, for Lawrence is only to be finally understood in terms of the timeless deep-structure within personal stories, those basic and opposite impulses within all people and relationships: the impulse to be at-one with all created nature through the body and the senses; the opposite impulse to become individual, to know, and act upon the 'other' in separateness and differentiation. In one, we are

aware of ourselves only in togetherness with nature and fellow man or woman; the other defines the self against the not-self, a process of individuation, self-conscious thought and utterance. One is stable; the other holds in change both threat and promise. (1989: 131)

History, continues Kinkead-Weekes cannot be understood merely in terms of industrialisation, economic or political issues, but also in terms of this deep structure, the creative opposites (1989: 131).

Conclusion

If history, as Kinkead-Weekes points out, is embedded in the deep structure of *The Rainbow*, so is its geography. The places in the novel also have to be seen in terms of the male-female dialectic in the beginning. Thus Cossethay is the space of rootedness, permanence and a pre-industrial consciousness, while Ilkeston, and ultimately Wiggiston, are the spaces of the beyond, of the mechanical, of the industrial consciousness. The geography of the East Midlands, has to be read backwards from the subjective, interiorised mappings embedded in the text. It is this quality in Lawrence that prompts Gutierrez to remark that Lawrence's phrase 'spirit of place' suggests an 'acute metaphoric formulation of the ethos of an area, of its most powerful human and historical qualities regarded as one with the physical terrain' (Gutierrez 1994: 24). W. E. Mallory also notes how abstracting the region is a dominant quality of this novel (1981: 58-59).

The novel maps the interior landscape of the East Midlands of the nineteenth century, through the personal lives of the Brangwens. The social and historical contexts have to be read through the personal histories and the relationships of three generations of Brangwens. The mapping of place in *The Rainbow* is a predominantly subjective mapping, and it is therefore an interiorised version of the region that emerges; this makes it a highly metaphorical text. *The Rainbow* is a novel whose

full meaning cannot be read without understanding the significance of interiorised spaces in it. Between them, *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* write some of the key aspects of the East Midlands experience in the nineteenth century.

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