How to Become Oneself:

The End of the Epic and the Beginning of a Personal Mythology in *The Rainbow*

D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* is an anti-epic. Contrary to the epic, the essence of which is always universal and seldom specific, each of the three generations of the Brangwen family rejects its inherited Victorian mythology in favor of a mythology of their own creation. The paradigm of creation and destruction is a product of the changing ways in which humans define their personal identities, and the novel enters it fully when Ursula Brangwen asks, "How to become oneself?" (273).[1] Ursula makes this statement near the novel's midpoint, and it effectively divides the novel into halves, the first of which lays the foundations for a Victorian mythology based in marriage, vocation, education, and Christianity that goes on to be rejected and replaced by a new, modern self in the second.

At least three things have been said about the novel: that it synthesizes several different mythologies in order to express a departure from traditional social forms;[2] that it rejects material experiences that inhibit individual self-fulfillment;[3] and, that it employs an extensive and meaningful use of Biblical imagery.[4] If we consider the novel to be a rejection of Victorian ideals, which considering its controversial content seems justifiable, we realize that all of these arguments work within the scope of a larger argument: the novel is a wholesale rejection of Victorian social foundations.

[1] D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002). All citations from *The Rainbow* will appear in in-text parenthesis, following the quotes, and will refer to this edition.

[2] Steinberg, "D.H. Lawrence: Mythographer," 92, 107.

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Engelberg, "Escape from the Circles of Experience," 111-112.

[4] Ford, "The Rainbow and the Bible"; Kinkead-Weekes, "The Marble and the statue"; the cited edition of *The Rainbow* has many endnotes on Biblical passages, that are by Keith Cushman.

The first sentence of the novel establishes a long-standing bond between the Brangwen family and nature: "The Brangwens had lived for generations on the Marsh Farm" (3), and they do not ask "how to become oneself?" Instead, they work and live within the mythology of nature. Like epical Odysseus, who does not question the existence of the Gods when he is struggling to return home to Ithaca,[5] the Brangwen men intuitively acknowledge the forces that govern their lives, and live in accordance with them.

As a rainbow does, the Brangwen mythology connects the earth to the sky: "Whenever one of the Brangwens in the fields lifted his head from his work, he saw the church-tower at Ilkeston in the empty sky" (3). Through the rainbow's trajectory, the images of the sky, the human, and the earth become one line that begins on the earth, runs through the Brangwens themselves, and ends in the heavens. Most prominently, the rainbow derives its symbolic meaning from Judeo-Christian and Nordic mythologies, where it symbolizes a connection between humanity and God. In Judeo-Christian mythology, the rainbow marks the bond that God makes with humanity after the flood.[6] Likewise, in Wagner's opera, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, the gods Donner and Froh create a rainbow in order to bridge the distance between the earth and Walhalla, their new home in the heavens.[7]

In his essay *On Being Religious*, Lawrence defines religion as a connection between God and humanity while mythology is the ever-changing form of the same

connection, “it’s just one way of stating an everlasting truth: or pair of truths. First, there

[5] Homer, *The Odyssey*.
[6] Genesis, 9:9-15.
[7] Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, 90.

is always the Great God. Second, as regards man, He shifts His position in the cosmos.”[8] Similarly, just as the rainbow represents a spectrum of many colors, the range of mythologies that can be developed is endless; however, at all times the rainbow’s symbolic meaning remains fixed: it connects humans with God.

Unlike the many ancient generations of Brangwens, who do not think about their personal identities, for the young Ursula it is a burning issue. Ursula first realizes that she is an individual in the world when her grandmother, Lydia Lensky, tells her stories of her life in Poland and England, and of her two marriages. Ursula adopts these stories as her own mythology, and cleaves to them as a foundation of her personal identity: “Here was peace and security…. That was a great relief, to know the tiny importance of the individual, within the great past” (250). The process of developing self-consciousness begins not with Ursula, but with the first Brangwen women, who oppose the semi-conscious existence of the Brangwen men. Instead of looking down to the earth, as the men do, the women “looked out from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life, to the spoken world beyond” (5), where they see that the vicar, who is physically weaker than the Brangwen men, receives more respect, and they attribute this power to “education and experience” (6). The antagonism of the women toward the semi-conscious existence of the Brangwen men begins the change that pushes the novel forward. This antagonism recalls life before the banishment from the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve are not

aware of their nakedness, before they eat from the tree of knowledge and become

[8] Lawrence, "On Being Religious," 726.

ashamed.[9] The consequence of acquiring knowledge through the "spoken world" is the emergence of self-consciousness.

Tom and Lydia are the first to move away from their ancestors' mythologies, and toward one of their own formation. Lydia rejects Christian dogma after the deaths of her children and first husband leave her at the mercy of the church. This morbid atmosphere brings upon her a desire to shut herself away from the world in a "nunnery" (46), and devote her life to a "dark religion" (46). However, at the same time, scenes of nature pull her away from the "darkness," and toward life and consciousness of herself: "Light from the yellow jasmine caught her" (49). The battle between light and darkness is not a moral struggle between good and evil, but a battle between life and death where even Jesus on the cross belongs to "darkness" and death (48). The image of Christ on the cross is sinful to Lawrence. He tells us in the *Study of Thomas Hardy* that, according to the Old Testament, a human being is connected to God during life, "The Old Law bids us live."[10] The New Testament violates this commandment by allowing such a connection to be attained only after death, "…the new Christian preaching of Christ Crucified is indeed against the Law." According to this view, by going to a convent, Lydia would have committed the sin of personal immobility.

When Lydia agrees to marry Tom she incorporates his mythology into hers, so that her personal identity changes in order to contain the new mythology: "'Yes, I want to,' she said, impersonally, looking at him with wide, candid, newly-opened eyes, opened

now with supreme truth" (40). However, it takes Tom two years of marriage to release himself from his forefathers' mythology, which places the burden of morality and

[9] Genesis, 3:8.
[10] Lawrence, "Study of Thomas Hardy," 467.

religion entirely on the woman's shoulders (15), and with the absence of a religious connection with Lydia a new mythology cannot be created.

Tom and Lydia's *hierogamous*[11] marriage is the medium through which this barrier is overcome, and through which they create the mythology of love. Tom's first sexual experience is with a prostitute, which leaves him with a sense of "nothingness" (15); thus, a sexual experience without love can only lead to a barren state. In his essay *Love*, Lawrence states that the mythology of love must arise from both a physical and a metaphysical connection:

> There must be two in one, always two in one—the sweet love of communion and the fierce, proud love of sensual fulfillment, both together in one love.[12]

Love is a mythology that leads to a religious "transfiguration" (90) and enables one to achieve self-realization. Both Tom and Lydia are transfigured when they achieve mythological unison, whilst "the light flooded out from behind on to each of their faces, it was the transfiguration, glorification, the admission" (90). The meaning of the transfiguration connects with that of the rainbow; both symbols are used to express a connection between the earth and the heavens.[13] From now on, it is no longer the church and the priest who mediate between man and God, nor the Nordic Gods; instead, the

home takes the place of the church, and Tom forms an immediate connection with God, via an initial connection with Lydia: "When at last they had joined hands, the house was finished, and the Lord took up his abode. And they were glad" (90). An added meaning is

[11] Hierogamy comes the Greek verbs *hieros* meaning "of, or relating to the gods", and *gamos*, meaning "wedding, marriage." Liddell and Scott, *Greek English Lexicon (abridged)*, 138, 827.

[12] Lawrence, "Love," 154-155.

[13] "In Christian teachings, the Transfiguration is a pivotal moment, and the setting on the mountain is presented as the point where human nature meets God: the meeting place for the temporal and the eternal, with Jesus himself as the connecting point, acting as the bridge between heaven and earth." Lee, *Transfiguration*, 90.

given to the rainbow; it turns into a symbol of the synthesis between Lydia's and Tom's mythologies, and the presence of God in their house makes it a shrine.

Lydia and Tom's new mythology enfolds their lives as well as Lydia's daughter, Anna, who grows up in the "light" of the "transfiguration" (90). However, Anna moves out from under the rainbow and into the shadow of the church when she marries Will Brangwen, her cousin by marriage, and lives with him in "The Yew Cottage" (230). The yew tree is traditionally associated with death and is found near graveyards,[14] so that the proximity of the house to the yew tree and a church symbolizes Will's conventional belief in Christianity, which consists in the death of Christ, and the life after the Resurrection. The antagonism between their mythologies causes a battle of wills between Anna and Will, for Will makes a distinction between divinity and humanity, while Anna's religion is humanistic:

And she was bitter against him, that he let his mind sleep. That which was human, belonged to mankind, he would not exert…. He was no Christian. Above all, Christ had asserted the brotherhood of man (165).

Anna's battle with Will has its roots in Lydia's battle with the "dark religion," and, similarly, Anna struggles against Will, who is her "dark opposite" (162), in order to arrive at a transfiguration in life.

Anna finally rejects Christianity during their visit at Lincoln Cathedral, and she realizes that for Will the building itself, the "pillared gloom" (192), is a shrine that excludes a great part of the world. For Anna, the top of the shrine is the sky itself where a rainbow appears, and she rejects the Gothic arch, which is rigid, and unchanging:

[14] Ferber, ed. *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 245.

She remembered that the open sky was no blue vault, no dark dome hung with many twinkling lamps, but a space where stars were wheeling in freedom, with freedom above them always higher (194).

Like Lydia and Tom, who build a shrine out of their love for each other, Anna cannot accept the stone building as the limits of her world; it is "unnatural," and she turns her back on death and the metaphysical world. Childbearing becomes her religion, and her body the shrine. Symbolically, Anna also returns to the first house that she and Will had built together, before their marriage, where she discovers Greek mythology. The material of the "pent house" (115) is sheaves of corn, and just as corn symbolizes Demeter, the Greek goddess of fertility,[15] Anna creates life with her body, and fulfills her humanist mythology, through which she defines her personal identity as the bearer of children.

Anna and Will finally find an equilibrium when Will submits to Anna and replaces the cathedral as an object of veneration with Anna's body, and the pointed Gothic arch with her natural curves (227-8). This admittance allows Will to shift his urge to be a part of something that is greater than himself, away from the empty cathedral and toward the living, social world, where he finds his vocation in education (228).

Tom Brangwen's death in the flood marks the end of the epic. The first half of the chapter *The Marsh and the Flood* (chap. IX) describes Tom's death, and in the second half, Lydia transfers her mythology to Ursula. Unlike the Biblical flood, which killed the sinners, and saved the righteous, Tom's death signifies the end of the Brangwens' long mythology, and a new way of constructing a personal mythology. Ursula must create a mythology that suits her personal identity; she cannot receive it from past generations.

[15] Hammond and Schullard, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 2nd ed.*, 324.

Ursula intuitively rejects her mother's Greek mythology because Anna makes the material divine, while Ursula, like her father, locates the divine in Christian teaching, and the life after the Resurrection: "For herself, she was no Grecian woman" (266). Nonetheless, Ursula tries to find expressions of divinity in the material world, but she cannot even locate religious meaning in the holiday that celebrates the birth of the son of God, because it has become a mundane ritual, when her family thinks only about food and presents: "Alas, that Christmas was only a domestic feast…. Why did not the grown-ups also change their everyday hearts, and give way to ecstasy? Where was the ecstasy?" (269).

Ursula's struggle to reconcile the metaphysical with the material fails when she

realizes that the material pervades every part of her life, and since Ursula has no doubt that the material world exists, she transfers religious meaning from the metaphysical world to the material world: “And the girl had come to the point where she held that that which one cannot experience in daily life is not true for oneself” (273). It is at this point that Ursula asks herself: “How to become oneself?” She has rejected the metaphysical part of the mythologies that were passed down to her and have been like “an Odyssey” and “mystic symbols” (258). Here, at this narrative midpoint, Ursula joins the social world and begins to experience all that it has to offer, in the hope that the material world will become her religious world.

Ursula’s first failed experience occurs at the grammar school, where she learns that society expects her to conform to its norms. She regards education as a possible form of religion, and perceives it as “the hill of learning” (295) that lies on a higher ground than the “smoke and confusion and the manufacturing…of the town” (259). However, Ursula does not know of her grandfather’s experiences at school, which is a precursor to her own experiences. As a young boy, Tom’s mother insists that he go to school, but he is unsuccessful in the formal setting of education, where his “physical inability to study” (11) makes him a failure. Tom thinks through his “feelings” (12), and not in a fully logical manner. His inability to attain formal knowledge is only a failure in the sense that the Brangwen women think that knowledge is a means to power, and that kind of knowledge is logical. However, Lawrence tells us that there is more than one kind of knowledge; Tom can know the poetic beauty of “Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ or Shelley’s ‘Ode to the Wind’” (12), just as the Brangwen men can know the beauty of their fields. On the other hand, there is the “mechanical stupidity” (12) of the other students who know how

they should talk about the poem but do not understand its mythological meaning. Some forty years later, Ursula arrives at a similar situation, only her critical mind is more developed than Tom's, and she succeeds in her academic career. Still, the social setting of the school imposes its rules of conduct on her actions, and when she tries to assert her own individuality and claim autonomy on her own will, she feels the "grudging power of the mob lying in wait for her, who was the exception" (261), and she must hide "her undiscovered self," from "the average self" (261). Formal knowledge does not necessarily give power to the individual, as the Brangwen women think; it can also be used to destroy individuality. Like Tom, Ursula realizes that she cannot think in the same manner that her fellow students think, but unlike Tom, she has no mythology to return to. Despite her experience at the grammar school, Ursula does not give up on education and hopes to find her vocation as a teacher. She envisions that in work she would be improving the lives of her students and regards her position as a teacher at Willey Green as that of a missionary: "Here she would realize her dream of being the beloved teacher bringing light and joy to her children!" (361). Yet, for the children she is "nonexistent" (364) as an individual; she is only the machine, whose main function is to "reduce sixty children to one state of mind or being" (370). Disillusionment comes when Ursula whips one of the boys, who repeatedly defies her, and reduces him from a human to a "beaten beast" (386). Unlike the first Brangwen men, who find fulfillment in working the field, and her father who finds his vocation in teaching woodwork, Ursula must move on from education, which she realizes is a system that creates machines, not individuals.

The last Victorian ideal that Ursula rejects is marriage. When she rejects the metaphysical world, she transfers the passion of Jesus to the material world and begins to yearn for a physical love that is also religious (275). From her days at the grammar school until the close of the novel, Ursula develops and destroys her love for Anton Skrebensky. Ursula and Anton first disagree when Anton tells her about a soldier who makes love to a woman in a cathedral. Anton finds this incident "profane" while Ursula thinks it completely natural: "I don't think it a profanity—I think it's right, to make love in a cathedral" (286). Ursula and Anton are speaking about two different kinds of love, which stem from two different mythologies. Ursula still yearns for the kind of love that her grandparents had while for Anton love is wholly sensual. When Ursula kisses Anton for the first time, she discovers the same mythology that her grandparents had created, and, like them, she finds a religious experience in the physical: "Oh, it was her transfiguration, she was beyond herself" (294). But unlike her grandparents, she cannot sustain this transformation because Anton has already separated the mythological from the material.

Ursula eventually rejects Anton because he prefers to live as a pawn of society and not as an individual. Anton's first priority is to the nation, and he equates "the highest good" with the utilitarian "common good," so that the importance of the multitude surpasses that of the individual: "His soul lay in the tomb. His life lay in the established order of things" (316). After Anton returns from South Africa, where he fights in the Boer War, Ursula finds him even more fixed in his materiality. Anton, like the system of

education, tries to reduce Ursula to a machine. His need to marry is not rooted in love, but in a status signifier where the wife is but a "material symbol" (438).

Ursula must return to her parents' house and their mythologies in order to create her own mythology. She begins to reconsider her feelings toward Anton and her rejection of her mother's mythology. However, Ursula's reconsideration breaks when she is forced to face her family's mythologies. These mythologies return to haunt her in the form of a pack of horses that surround and rush at her like crushing waves, and she is forced to climb up a tree in order to save herself:

The thunder of horses galloping down the path behind her shook her, the weight came down upon her, down, to the moment of extinction. She could not look round, so the horses thundered upon her (474).

The horses, like the flood that God sends to cleanse the earth from sin, purify Ursula of her sinful thoughts. And like Noah and his family, who float on the water, Ursula relinquishes her thoughts of going back to Anton and her mother's mythology, and comes closer to a new mythology when she climbs up the tree. This is the beginning of Ursula's catharsis, which continues through her physical and mental illness. Her recovery is accompanied by the acknowledgement that the material cannot be separated from the metaphysical: "In everything she saw she grasped and groped to find the creation of the living God, instead of the old, hard barren form of bygone living" (480). Like Noah, Ursula gazes on a newly washed world, and beneath a rainbow she sees a vision of the world to come:

She saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of

houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven (481).

By the novel's end, Ursula has rejected the Victorian ideals of religion, vocation, and marriage as a way for her to define her personal identity, and has replaced them with a new, modern self. Ursula does not know what form her mythology will take, except that the metaphysical and the material must be in mutual harmony within it. She rejects past mythologies, but she cannot form a new one without first laying a foundation on which to build it; even the new rainbow is accompanied by its Greek name, "iris" (480), who is the messenger of the Greek gods, and whose job it was to connect humanity to the heavens.[16] Although Ursula's new mythology will have a different form than that of the Brangwen men and women, the source of her mythology is still signified by the rainbow, which tells us that all mythologies share the same source. The constant rejection of mythologies is an indication that the long period of the epic has come to an end, and a new period of individual mythologies has begun.

[16] Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 2nd ed., 97.

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