International Journal of Arts and Social Science www.ijassjournal.com
ISSN: 2581-7922,
Volume 9 Issue 11, November 2026

On the Symbolist Tradition in Ivan Bunin's Presentation of the Theme of Love

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Abstract: Symbolism was one of the major movements of the Russian Silver Age. Bunin, as an inheritor of Russian classical realism, did not adhere rigidly to convention but drew extensively on the artistic techniques of this movement. This paper conducts research and analysis from three aspects: image construction, narrative strategy, and aesthetic tradition, with a focus on several representative love stories by Bunin. In his treatment of the theme of love, his writing combines the mystique, poetic quality, and suggestiveness of Russian Symbolist love writing while re-grounding the Symbolist "mysterious love" in bodily sensation and lived experience, thereby forming a distinctive tragic "Buninesque poetics of love." Exploring Bunin's transformation and absorption of Symbolism helps to further understand the unique mode of expression in Bunin's writing of love.

Keywords: Ivan Bunin; Symbolism; theme of love

As the first winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in the history of Russian literature, Bunin occupies a highly prominent position in the history of Russian literature. Gorky once commented on Bunin thus: "You have enabled Russians to break through the barriers of a monotonous life, generously allowing them to behold the treasures of world literature and the brilliantly colorful scenes of foreign lands, merging Russian literature with the spiritual wealth of all humanity on Earth." Fiction writing is an indispensable part of Bunin's literary activity, and among it the most successful and outstanding are his love stories. When Bunin first entered the literary world, it was precisely the period of the rise of Russian modernism, especially Symbolism, so his creation was inevitably influenced by Symbolism. In works such as the short stories "Asya," "Dark Avenues," and "The Grammar of Love," Bunin not only inherited and transformed the traditional aesthetics of Symbolism, using it to express the complexity and tragedy of love, but also achieved innovation on this basis, realizing a reconstruction of the Russian Symbolist tradition of love.

Bunin himself was on close personal terms with several Symbolist poets. Although conflicts arose later due to differences in creative principles, the borrowing of Symbolist techniques and elements in his works is

undeniable. Russian Symbolism arose at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1892, Merezhkovsky published "On the Causes of the Decline of Contemporary Russian Literature and Its New Currents," which is regarded as the programmatic document of Symbolism, proposing three elements of this "new current": symbol, mystical content, and the expansion of artistic infectiousness. Symbolist writers opposed the photographic reproduction of reality and advocated the use of symbol, suggestion, metaphor, contrast, and other techniques to express the author's hidden thoughts and abstract life philosophy. Love as depicted by the Symbolists generally has the following characteristics: first, love possesses a mystical quality, transcending real life—it is often connected with eternity, death, the mysterious world, and so on. Second, love possesses spirituality and duality, for example, simultaneously containing such contradictory factors as desire and transcendence. Third, love is often connected with destructive tragedy. Bunin was not a Symbolist writer in the traditional sense, but his works retain the Russian Symbolist traditions of mystification, poeticization, and tragicization of love.

The love depicted by Bunin is often profound and passionate, and most of it ends in tragedy, with the theme of love and death running through the development of the plot. The Symbolist tradition is mainly manifested in Bunin's poetics of love in the following two aspects. First, the poetic construction of the theme of love through imagery and symbol; second, the auxiliary completion of Symbolist narrative through blank space and suggestion. Bunin's transcendence of Symbolism lies precisely in re-grounding "mysterious love" in bodily sensation and lived experience, so that love is simultaneously mysterious, sensory, and tragic.

I. Image and Symbol: The Poetic Construction of Bunin's Theme of Love

Traditional symbolic technique usually connects certain things with similar characteristics, such as using pine and cypress to symbolize resilient character, or orchid to symbolize the noble gentleman. But Silver Age Symbolist writers believed that symbol is a poetic means and poetic realm that gives the most complete and equivalent manifestation of the state of existence of the world in its aesthetic essence. [1] That is, for Symbolist writers, this similarity between things is not necessary; symbol sometimes builds bridges influenced by the author's personal preferences, creating novel effects. Various natural images frequently appear in Bunin's love stories; they do not merely serve as environmental description but are closely connected with the protagonists' states of mind and their experiences of love, serving as symbolic carriers of the experience of love. In the short story "In the Evening," it is written that although decades had passed, that familiar bridge was "just as if seen only yesterday: ancient and rugged, slightly arched in the middle, looking as though it were not built of stone at all but had naturally turned to fossil over the ages, imperishable." The summer-night garden, too, became vivid because of sweet, hazy rendezvous in memory. "When I looked to the left, I saw a weed-overgrown path disappearing into the apple orchard. Beyond the apple orchard, over in the neighbor's garden, a green star was slowly rising, twinkling brightly, as if expecting something, as if silently telling something." At this point nature is no longer the background for the development of the plot but an active participant in the events and actions. It exists independently of human will, more like a calm observer. The star here is undoubtedly endowed with a mysterious color; it connects time and space and is the witness of the love between the characters. The image of the star is

often eternal and static, forming a sharp contrast with fleeting love. Bunin once wrote in his own poetry: "Stars, I tirelessly sing your praises! / You are forever so mysterious, so young. / Since childhood I have searched with timid gaze / For the glowing inscriptions of stone in the dark abyss." Between the lines one can glimpse awe toward nature and the desire to explore the vast universe. [2]

In addition, the choice of time images also shows a clear preference in Bunin's works. The love in his writing is often associated with such time senses as "the past," "memory," "dusk," "autumn," and "night." In "Rusya," the author uses descriptions of the estate's scenery to reflect the characters' psychological activity: "Mosquitoes on the face and hands, everything around—the damp hot air, the swaying sunlight, the white cirrus clouds scattering soft light in the sky and on the water surface among clumps of rushes and water lilies—all seemed coated in a warm silver, and everywhere the water was so shallow that the lake bottom covered with water grass could be seen, yet this did not prevent the blue sky with floating white clouds reflected in the water from appearing so deep and distant..." This is the scene of the two rowing on the lake when their first feelings of love were awakening; the protagonist at this moment feels only the sweet happiness of being in love. But in a later rendezvous, a discordant scene suddenly appears:

“ The vegetation on the bank was covered with dew, giving off a strong scent of wild celery. Invisible mosquitoes mysteriously uttered pleading moans. Dreadful sleepless dragonflies darted to and fro above the small boat and a little farther away, over this water glimmering with night light...” [3]

This environmental description foreshadows what follows, presaging the fruitless love between the two. In this passage describing the passage of time, the author fully mobilizes the senses—skin, smell, sound, breath—establishing an ominous, melancholy tone. Sure enough, afterward the male protagonist is driven out, and this hurried love comes to an end. The brief night is like fleeting love, beautiful but unable to stay. But memory gives the vanished love a quality of eternity; "the past" instead becomes the most important form of existence of love.

II. Blank Space and Suggestion: The Symbolist Narrative of Bunin's Love Writing

Verlaine, the most prestigious French Symbolist poet of the nineteenth century, advocated the haziness of poetry in his creation: "What is most precious is poetry that makes one half-drunk, where obscurity and clarity are combined." Bunin likewise excels at using blank space when writing love stories, using symbol and suggestion to leave room for expansive interpretation. For example, the image of the road, common in Bunin's works, is often connected with human destiny, the past and the future, and the unknown at the end of the road—the protagonist's love often likewise fails to reach fulfillment. In the short story "The Grammar of Love," the young nobleman Ivlev, whose family has declined, and the young coachman, two utterly different life trajectories, briefly intersect on the road to the Khvoshchinsky estate. The estate once housed the legendary Lukashka. She was an ordinary-looking servant girl, yet she won the love of the estate's master. After her death the master sank into an abyss of love from which he could not extricate himself, sitting on her bed for twenty years, to the point of wearing through the mattress. For the young coachman, this road is a brief rest; for Ivlev, it is a journey witnessing eternal love. The story tells a legend of love and elevates a philosophy of love: love is "a phenomenon of life, indescribable; neither

dream nor waking, between great wisdom and madness." Similarly, the short story "Rusya" begins with a man and his wife jesting during a journey; because the husband is moved by the scenery, the two begin a conversation, and the wife jokingly says he must have met a villa girl he was smitten with—and indeed this is so. The man recalls a youthful, unconsummated romance from twenty years earlier. In the hearts of adolescent boys and girls hides a spark; once suitable conditions arise, they burn recklessly and thoroughly, burning fiercely. At the end, the man's words in Latin—"True love comes only once"—are precisely an affirmation of this unforgettable memory. The two protagonists never meet again from beginning to end; the beginning and the end exist only in one person's memory. The journey and life continue, but the fruitless love does not quietly vanish into silence.

The complexity of the experience of love cannot always be fully expressed in language; blank space allows the work to retain the openness of emotion, just as the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov once said: "A symbol is a true symbol only when it has infinite meaning." [4] The short story "Dark Avenues" begins with a messy, dirty road, drizzly weather, and a mud-stained carriage, foreshadowing that this will not be a pleasant or satisfactory meeting. The protagonist Nikolai Alexeyevich, stopping at a post station during his journey, meets Nadezhda, the lover of his youth. They have not seen each other for thirty years, and he does not recognize at first sight this stout but still charming hostess; rather, it is Nadezhda who recognizes him first and brings up the regrettable past. When Nikolai Alexeyevich feels ashamed for having abandoned her back then and tries to obtain forgiveness, Nadezhda unexpectedly refuses. "Everything passes, my friend," he murmurs. "Love, youth—everything, everything. It's just an ordinary sordid affair. Everything passes with the years." "Youth passes, but love is another matter." The two finally part ways, and Nikolai Alexeyevich recalls the poem by Ogaryov that the two read during their rendezvous in former days, "Dark Avenues": "The rose blooms red as fire, the dark avenue of lindens shades everywhere." He cannot help imagining another possibility—that he had not abandoned Nadezhda and the two had formed a family. Of course, these are only fantasies. The girl who once drowned in love many years ago is now entirely another person—shrewd, experienced, independent, clear-headed, and highly opinionated—leaving readers to wonder what befell this woman in the decades after their separation. It is worth noting that the poem about the avenue in the text leaves readers a beautiful space for reverie. In Russian estates, the trees commonly planted along avenues are linden and spruce, easily evoking romantic trysts and half-light, half-dark illumination, creating a classical sense of harmony. The relationship between concrete content (the avenue) and abstract meaning (the outcome of love) has a similarity: the mingled joy and sorrow of love and its tragic destiny seem to have been arranged long ago, not changing according to human wishes, just as the extending direction of the avenue has long since become fixed.

III. Inheritance and Transcendence: Bunin's Reconstruction of the Russian Symbolist Tradition of Love

In the works of Symbolist poets, "love" often carries a mysterious and holy atmosphere, and the environment possesses a solemn, harmonious religious quality. Blok, a representative poet of Silver Age Symbolism, once wrote: "But it is May in the cell, I live alone, unseen by anyone, amid flowers, awaiting another spring. Go away—

I sense the six-winged seraphim; your earthly dreams here have nothing to do with me." Here "earthly dreams" means the real, present world. At that time, when Western rationalism and positivism had collapsed, symbol became the path by which intellectuals fled to the eternal kingdom of heaven; one of the reasons for the prevalence of Symbolist poetry was people's complex, hazy expectation and fearful anxiety about the new century. But Bunin, when telling of love, was not trapped in "mysterious love" but placed love back into human lived experience. [5] Dark Avenues is Bunin's collection on the theme of love, in which works such as "Lyrical Narrative," "Antigone," "The Calling Card," "The Godparent," and "The Boarding House" do not avoid depictions of desire, the body, and sex; here the color of carnal desire occupies a dominant position. In "The Godparent," the author depicts the male protagonist's covetous desire for his friend's wife; one night, while the friend remains in Moscow attending a banquet, he confesses to the woman, and that same night the two have relations—the desire in their hearts had long been repressed. This feeling, which the male protagonist calls a "grave illness," was born in such a moment, when "it was precisely you and I who were mysteriously called to be godparents";

"Do you remember what a blizzard was blowing that day, how you arrived all wrapped in snow, how the galloping carriage and the blizzard made you nervous and excited, how I helped you off with your sable coat, and how you walked into the hall in an ordinary white silk dress, a pearl cross on your slightly bared breast, then holding the child with your rolled-up sleeves, standing with me before the baptismal font, looking at me with a certain shy, faint smile...looking at me...

At that very moment something mysterious began between us, a certain sinful ambiguity; we seemed to have some kind of kinship, and from this began a certain special desire." [6]

In this story, physical intimacy does not bring souls closer but instantly kills fragile romantic fantasy. Because of the unabashed depiction of desire, these works were criticized from many quarters. But it is undeniable that the body is not the opposite of love but a way of reaching the depths of life. Through creating various beautiful, distinctive female images, Bunin displays the "mutual attraction" between lovers—an "involuntary attraction arising from a secret, omnipotent magnetic force." This distinguishes Bunin from purely aestheticist or spiritualized love writing.

It is not difficult to see that "The Godparent" carries a very obvious religious coloring. The religious thought Bunin accepted came not only from native Russian Christianity (Orthodoxy) and polytheism; after later travels in the East, he also drew certain doctrinal ideas from local Eastern religious cultures. In the story the author reveals the ineffable mysterious relationship between lust and religion, and his idea coincides with that of the Mexican writer Octavio Paz—"Lust, that is, sexual desire transformed by human imagination, does not disappear: it changes, is constantly deformed, but never departs from its essential nature, namely a sexual impulse." Precisely because of this, the body in Bunin's writing is not a "vulgar factor" opposed to spirit but a legitimate instinct.

Moreover, the theme of love and death appears repeatedly in Bunin's love stories, forming his distinctive thematic pattern. In the autobiographical novel The Life of Arseniev, the protagonist's bittersweet emotional entanglement with Lika is an unforgettable memory of his youth; ultimately Lika dies, and their love ends in tragedy. In "Mitya's Love," the rural student Mitya and the drama school student Katya love each other, yet because

of mutual wavering and betrayal they move toward the tragedy of death. In "Three Rubles," the heroine has lost both parents, her father recently deceased; she comes to seek refuge with relatives but is insulted. The protagonist initially thinks this is merely an ordinary "going out to work," but in conversation sees her youthfulness and despair. Later she and the male protagonist Boris fall deeply in love, and just before a beautiful life is about to begin, the poor heroine dies young. Bunin prefers to choose death as the ending in his love stories precisely to highlight the theme "love is eternal." Love transcends the boundary between life and death; when true love cannot exist in this world, death is also a release and a destination.

After entering the literary world, Bunin devoted his entire life to exploring the themes of man and nature, life and death, spirit and body. He inherited the humanistic spirit of realism, depicting characters with delicate truthfulness and reflecting their inner wishes and contradictions. At the same time, he did not evade or beautify "unhappiness"—the more beautiful love is, the more painful its vanishing and unpossessability. In expressing the experience of life, desire, and death, he skillfully absorbed the superiority of Symbolism in narrative, language, and aesthetics, thereby forming a distinctive "Buninesque poetics of love." His idea can be summarized by the poet Tyutchev's poem "Twins": "Who, in a moment of abundant emotion, / When the blood both congeals and boils, / Has not felt your temptation? / Twin siblings—suicide and love."

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