The FOX: a wild animal or something else?

“The Fox “is one of the most famous D. H. Laurence’s short stories. But the title tricks the reader into thinking the plot will entirely focus on the animal. Instead, the protagonist of the story is not the fox, but two “young ladies”, who have partially to face with the wild beast during the management of their farm.

However, if you gather the elements of the denotative analysis of the fox, you will find out that they are useful to understand further and consistent layers of meaning. The fox will not appear to you simply as a wild animal, coherently with the common perception, but he will shift on a metaphorical level.

Now I will gather some definitions I found on some English dictionaries, in order to better build up which is the common perception of the fox and which are his chief features, both on the physical level and on the behavioural one. Then, I will recognize the elements choosed and expanded by D.H. Laurence in order to characterize the fox. Finally, I will try to make hypotheses about such choices and the narrator’s aim.

The Cambridge dictionary defines the fox as “a ​[wild](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wild) ​[mammal](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/mammal) ​[belonging](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/belong) to the ​[dog](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dog) ​[family](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/family) that has a ​[pointed](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pointed) ​[face](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/face) and ​[ears](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ear), a ​[wide](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/wide) ​[tail](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tail) ​[covered](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cover) in ​[fur](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fur), and often reddish-brown ​[fur](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fur)” while the Collins teaches us he is “any canine mammal of the genus *Vulpes* and related genera. They are mostly predators that do not hunt in packs and typically have large pointed ears, a pointed muzzle, and a bushy tail.”

I choosed such definitions because they efficiently provide us the typical image people has thinking about foxes, which is not a defined idea. This aspect is coherent with the mysteriousness, which accompanies the character of the fox during the whole plot of the story. It follows that D.H. Laurence selects some elements of the animal, rather than others, which may be useful to returns the reader a peculiar image of the fox, who is not a common one, but a specific fox, who stands for something else.

For example, Laurence selects the information referring to the fox’s colours, appearance, abilities and behaviour.

Therefore, in the story the fox is perceived having a “brush smooth like a feather”, which represents an unusual juxtaposition in order to describe a wild animal, no less than his leaving, compared to the wind soft blowing. He also has “white buttocks twinkle”, a “white belly”. It is interesting to notice the language and the rhetorical choices the narrator adopts describing such features of the fox: he uses a metaphorical register. “Feather”, which reminds to the red colour of the fox’s brush may stand for blood, for violence but, at the same time, it may hint at passion, love and lust. Therefore, it is obvious that the semantic choices are not neutral: they are helpful to reach the novelist’s aim that is awarding different and many connotative levels of interpretation of the fox.

What is completely different from the definitions quoted above is the demoniac side of the animal, highlighted by the narrator with the following statements: “One evil there was greater than any other” and the more explicit “the fox was a demon”, which are useful to convey a negative image of the fox. He is dangerous for the protagonists.

It is also highlighted his distinctive slyness and promptness in hunting his preys, indeed “The fox was too quick for them”. This last statement underlines the two women’s difficulties in shooting the fox, which represents a necessity in order to maintain their livelihood and not going on merely “living on their losses”. These are comprehensible reasons that explain the statement: “The fox really exasperated them both”.

The characterization of the fox is better built up in the description of the meeting between March and the animal. First of all, it is relevant to remember it is an unexpected appearance for March, who is stunned by the fox gaze towards her. Furthermore, she reacts in an unexpected way. The reader finds out about her thoughts and feelings, learning “she knew he knew her”. Then, even if still confused, she finally gets closer with his physical appearance, shocked by his gaze. She would like to kill the fox, but she is fascinated by him and she is unable to reach him. The reader may understand that the fox is very intelligent and sly. He wins against the women, he fools them therefore he is conscious of his superiority. At this point of the novel can be built up the analogy fox-man. The fox so stands for the male gender; he is stronger than the women, he is able to manipulate them for his interests. He has control against hence as well as against the ladies, who are unable to escape the animal and his power. It is interesting to notice that such power breaks out from the eyes, from the fox look. Sight is so the vehicle of the fox and so the man vigour, impetus and intensity. Such impetus is expressed both through the fox’s nature of a predator and hinting at the male gender, so as a man capable of buffing the ladies. Women wind up being subjugated to him: they are inert in front of the farm slow decline and against their quite submission. Indeed the fox does not play his destructive and deleterious role just temporary, but uninterruptedly, as it is perfectly understandable in the following sentence: “So another year passed, and another, and they were living on their losses”. The women so are scared, almost frightened by the fox. Again, such connotation is coherent with the initially image of the fox as an evil, a demon since the war, which now starts to be more and more comprehensible and seems to represent a kind of container for other meanings and interpretations.

Going on gathering the denotative elements through the fox characterization is made up you will discover a lot of meanings. Now I will focus on March’s attraction towards the fox. It is not only amazement, but it also hints at sexual desire. March lives only with her friend Bandford, in an isolated farm, set in a small district, so she is not used to approach with the male gender. It follows that she does not know how to communicate with Henry or with anyone or anything else could in a way or another being related with the male gender. The antithetic couples drawn in the novel attraction-repulsion, promptness-reticence, desire and fear are so coherent with the women’s incapability and inexperience towards affairs dealing with men.

The fox is so the element which upsets the two ladies’ balance and stability. He instils confusion and turmoil in their minds, but almost in their hearts. Henry will kill him, as I quoted, but on March’s point of view, they are the same person, the same predator, the same dangerous presence in her life.

As a consequence, even if the fox is not the real protagonist of the story, he is always and perpetually present in the women’s thoughts and feelings. As a conclusion, the fox represents the incentive which will make the entire story evolve in a specific way. He is the antagonist, he is the cause of the main issues of the story, the focal plane in which each element of the plot is led back. It is possible because he is at the same time a wild beast, a predator, a hunter, a man, a cunning figure, a killer and an emblem of power, yearning, violence, passion, temptation and last but not least, survival.