



Symbolism in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

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Abstract: *The symbolist movement which had its origin in France believes that poetry is more effective when it suggests. At times suggestive words or phrases used in poetry speak more than direct language. The poet uses a particular word, phrase or a sentence in a specific context to arouse not only a particular meaning but a host of meanings and associations and thus adds beauty, brevity and harmony to it. The symbolist movement has influenced many great modern poets like Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarme who felt that modern utilitarianism and scientific temperament were not suitable for the traditions of art and sought to create a verse which could lead to ecstasy. The chief characteristic features of the symbolist poetry were intensity, concentrated richness, musical suggestiveness and evocativeness. According to them any image or figure of speech; literary, mythological or historical allusion could be symbolic and take us towards a mystical realization.*

Key words-symbolist movement, effective, suggestive words.

Though W.B. Yeats is the chief representative of symbolist movement in English literature, his symbolism belongs to a general European movement. He had composed many symbolic poems before 1890 when he learnt about French symbolists. His knowledge of French was so meager that he could gather only second hand knowledge of French symbolist Mallarme's theories. Despite all this Yeats's indebtedness to French symbolism is reflected in his acceptance of Mallarme's concept of "pure" poetry. Unlike Mallarme, who revels in private symbols, Yeats uses the images of Celtic mythology in his symbolic poems. He brought many of his symbols from his native Ireland which is quite rich in mythology and created a "phantasmagoria" from which he alone could express his convictions about the world. He joined the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society under the influence of Madame Blavatsky and learned that Anima Mundi, a reservoir of all that has touched mankind, can be evoked by symbols. He also joined the Order of the Golden Dawn in London which was a Rosicrucian and Kabalistical society and learnt about the doctrines of correspondences, signatures and magical incantations and symbols which have power

over spiritual and material reality. All this made Yeats a visionary and a "magus" or a master of magic who could reach the deepest realities through trance and poetic symbols.

Yeats drew his inspiration from the great English poets like William Blake and P.B. Shelley; his symbolism also owes to his wide reading of the occult literature. If Blake taught him the use of magical symbols in poetry, the poems of Shelley confirmed his symbolic system. The early poetry of Yeats is deeply influenced by the occult. Since he learnt from Madame Blavatsky that the great memory of nature preserves the legends of all nations, he felt that he could be in touch with Anima Mundi through the symbols from Irish legends; the symbolic characters of Oisín or Aengus; the hound with one red ear or the white deer with no horns or the island in the sea. The arbitrary symbols of rose, cross, lily, bird, tree, sun, moon and water which he drew from The Kabalistic, Theosophical and other profound works are also occult. The most complex symbol of rose appears in the poems published in the volume *The Rose* (1893). The rose symbolizes earthly love in *The Rose of Peace* but stands for both earthly and eternal love and beauty in *The Rose of the World*. If the rose symbolizes the power of the creative imagination and the occult in *To the Rose upon the Rood of Time*, the same rose provides refuge from earthly love in *The Rose of Battle*. The rose and the cross become symbols of the body and the soul; life and death; sleep and waking in the dramatic poem *The Shadowy Waters*. In these examples we see that certain echoes come from the different contexts in which rose is used to enrich the symbol as it in turn enriches its context. According to Yeats the value of a symbol lies in its richness and indefiniteness of reference which makes it more mysterious and powerful than an allegory with its single meaning. The beauty of a symbol lies in the fact that different meanings or interpretations are attached to the same symbol by different people.

The symbol of dance is also closely

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associated with Yeats's 'system' and indicates joyous energy or immovable trance or the state of the soul. The woman's soul in Upon a Dying Lady which flies to the predestined dancing place is associated with heavenly afterlife of perfect joy, peace and unity. The idea of unity is elaborately discussed in Among School Children where the poet suggests that one cannot separate the part from the whole and the body from the soul.

Every poem in yet another volume called The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) symbolizes an unstated idea or mood. Yeats used to have waking dreams and trances where he saw wonderful things which provided material for his poetry. Yeats experienced deeper and more effective trances through the use of ritual and hypnotic symbols and attained the wealth of the unconscious for his poems. If The Wanderings of the Oisín (1899) is based on Yeats's vision, the images of queen, garment, hair, cap, bells, door and window are recorded exactly as he dreamt in The Cap and Bells (1889). If the images of stream, berry and fire are from man's sleeping consciousness, the change of fish into a girl is dream material and sun, moon and apple are conscious occult symbols meaning intellect, imagination and the tree of good and evil. Irish significance is given to the poem by introducing Aengus. The poetry of Yeats turned plainer and more classical after 1900, but he returned to even more obscure symbolic poetry with an occult system of his own as announced in his essay A Vision after 1917. Consequently his later poems like The Double Vision of Michael Robartes, Byzantium, Sailing to Byzantium, Leda and the Swan cannot be understood without a reference to occult system introduced by him. In Sailing to Byzantium the old man faces the problem of old age, death and regeneration and moves out of life into the kingdom of image which is called Byzantium. Forced by old age to reject the life of sensual music and procreation, the old man seeks the golden bird singing in Byzantium upon its golden branch. The bird is a poet's soul which sings to lords and ladies. The first two stanzas present art as inanimate with the images of 'monuments' and the last two as animate with images of God and sages. Instead of the flesh and blood bird of the initial stanzas, the poet longs to be like the golden bird which is artificial, precious and timeless. He wishes to be surrounded not by young lovers of sexual cycle but by an elegant and abstract audience. The central symbol of the poem is to view life in terms of music. In the sonnet, Leda and the Swan, the poet has employed Freudian imagery: the white rush, the broken wall, the burning roof and tower, etc. The 'terrified... fingers' of Leda are visually vague because they are buried in the swan's feathers and emotionally vague because her thighs are loosening to the feathered glory of the swan. In the octave the poet builds the imagery of the event in its sheer

physicality but the sestet provides its moral equivalent. Byzantium which is a sequel to Sailing to Byzantium is composed from the point of view of the initiated individual who watches the uninitiated, unpurged spirits arriving from beyond the "gong-tormented sea" which separates Byzantium's reality from the flesh and blood reality of the twentieth century world. The Saint and the Hunchback implies three attitudes towards life symbolized by the saint, the hunchback and Alcibiades. The tower is a very strong symbol of intellectual or spiritual asceticism and intellectual retreat. The swan is the symbol of solitary soul in Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen. In The Second Coming the falcon and the falconer are symbolic and form a bold new image. We also come across images of the centripetal force of the world turning to centrifugal; of anarchy being loosened upon the world and of the blood-dimmed tide which appears to have an occult meaning. The falcon is a hawk and the hawk is symbolic of the active or intellectual mind; the falconer is perhaps the soul itself or its uniting principle. The second part of the poem develops an image of Spiritus Mundi. The horror vision of the destruction of the world hints at the end of all while prophesying the reversal of the world's gyre and the birth of the new, violent and bestial civilization in the destruction of the two thousand year Christian cycle:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance

How can we know the dancer from the dance? Dance is equated with trance in Byzantium which frees human beings from the conflicts and complexities of earthly life:

Dying into a dance, an agony of trance, Agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. The two opposing symbols in A Dialogue of Self and Soul are Sato's sword and the winding stair. The soul's contemplation of the winding stair symbolizes the path of escape but the Self prefers Sato's sword. The sword which is a masculine symbol of life, war, love



and sex, is covered with a lady's court dress. In Lapis Lazuli while surveying the past civilizations, Yeats finds a constant pattern of construction and destruction. A Chinese carving in the poem shows two Chinamen and their servant looking at the ruin that surrounds them. Time has damaged the inessential features of the carving. What has survived is the tragic wisdom that one has to accept rise and fall with joy.

Some of the important symbols in Yeats's later poetry like spinning tops, gyres, tyres of all types and winding stairs are connected with his philosophy of history and personality. To sum up we can say that Yeats's poems are rarely transcendental and mostly personal and worldly. Through his symbols he has always tried to reconcile world and spirit and to integrate himself with them. He achieves unity of being through the triple reference of his symbols to self, world and spirit which is almost impossible to achieve in real life.

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