

Poems of W.B.Yeats: Symbols with myths

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Abstract: The research paper is dealt with the use of symbolism in poetry. The paper covers origin of symbolism and its influence on poetry. The main purpose behind the research provides information students to get ideas of symbolism for their study.

Keywords: Symbol, Symbolism, Symbolic movement

I. Introduction

The literary movement known as Symbolism began in France in the mid-19th century and lasted until, roughly, the dawn of the 20th century. It is generally regarded as a bridge between Romanticism and Modernism/Surrealism.

II. The Origin of Symbolism

In Paris, in 1857, Charles Baudelaire, a poet heavily influenced by the writings of Edgar Allen Poe, published a collection of work titled *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil). His book was so famous in those days so it sold immediately. Baudelaire and several poets close to him were accused of “dandyism” by the press and labelled “decadent” due to their insistence on portraying subjects as lesbianism, Satanism death and drug addiction. Objection to these charges, the poets began calling themselves “symbolists”. By the time Arthur Symons produced *The Symbolist movement in Literature in England* in 1899, introducing many of these poets to an English speaking audience for the first time. Many symbolist poets-including Paul Valery and Stephan Mallarme-expressed their admiration for Parnassians, the Romantic literary movement that preceded symbolism, and Theophile Gautier called “Art for Art Sake”.

III. Symbolism in context

Symbolism grew out of it an opposition to Naturalism and Realism in arts of the mid- 19th century. This was the age of Darwin- the industrial revolution was still gaining force and Positivist philosophy of come to held sway in intellectual circles. that is, what you see is what you get and only if you can hold it or touch it is real, while the metaphysical and spiritual as idle speculation. Finally, even contemporary are movements, such as the paintings of the Impressionists, come to be seen as rooted in the finite world the artists observed.

IV. The Symbolist Methodology

Browning from its romantic roots, Symbolism favoured over reason, but was more intellectual in its conception. The poets themselves seem to have drawn upon a variety of forms and structures for their works- everything from the formal lyrical poems of Verlaine to the hallucinatory cadences of Rimbaud and the verlibre found in Mallarme. A free association of ideas and themes and a fondness for the darker side of human nature was something they all shared. Symbolist writing, whether it is poetry prose, is notoriously difficult. The poems seek to evoke a mood rather than tell or describe anything. They are deliberately filled with hidden meaning and imagery. Ambiguity is favoured over direct presentation- abstraction, mysticism, the stuff of dreams. “Suggestion that is the dream”, wrote Mallarme. And it was he who penned what is perhaps one of the most difficult and obscure poems to be found in world literature: “The Afternoon of a Faun”.

Intuition and syntheses were frequently drawn upon- the mingling of ideas in the senses: scent or sound and colour, with perception itself. Rimbaud drew upon the colours of the letters of the alphabet for one memorable poem. All of this was meant to be grandly illogical. Symbols in the physical and “real” world were incorporated into the emotional and dream world of personal experience elusive and almost supernatural- for anyone who chooses to follow where symbolist poetry, aka “symbolism”, leads.

V. Influence of Symbolism

Symbolism, even in its infancy, had a great effect in Europe. It was seen as a liberating influence in many countries- Belgium, Germany, and Russia, for instance and taken up immediately and carried into other arts, including painting music. In Britain, it was a different story. English poetry in the 1890s- long before Symons published his critiques- drew on the symbolist movement for some of its effect. Minor poets all- Symons

himself, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Jhonson, Jhon Gray, and Oscar Wild- they each translated the French poetry and tried to bring it over into their own language. Whether or not they succeeded is another argument. Perhaps it was too continental – the tenants of symbolism seem even to have really penetrated the English psyche.

America too, for a long time, remained isolated from the symbolism movement. In the first decades of the 20th century. T.S. Eliot discovered his own voice in the ironic detachment of two early symbolist poets, Tristan Corbiere (1845-1875) Jules Lafourge (1860-1887). Under their influence he wrote “Prufrock” and “The Wasteland”. The rhythms of these poets- particularly Lafourge are found in much of Eliots other works as well. Ezra Pound was familiar with symbolist experiments in free verse when she formulated her criteria for imagism. And two other American who borrowed heavily from the movement were Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane .One reads Crane’s poem “The Broken tower” (1932) with the knowledge that somewhere behind it lies a great French-symbolist poem. But surprisingly enough, it is “The Road Not Taken” by the traditionalist Robert Frost that is sometimes pointed to as the greatest success of this kind of poem in the English Language. Its deliberately ambiguous nature, its message of something missed, something lost- a thing not quite found seems to capture the essence of symbolism in poetry.

Some poetry critics and most readers who are a bit confused by W. B. Yeats' poems would call him the "master of symbolism." He uses the mechanisms of poetry-rhythm, rhyme, and meter- along with the use of both emotional and intellectual symbols to express emotion and higher meaning in a usually short and concise length of words. His theories on rhythm and use of symbols are evident in his work, especially in such pieces as "The Second Coming," "The Valley of the Black Pig," and "No Second Troy," and Yeats' feelings toward emotion and the symbols and words that invoke them make both he and his work unique.

In Yeats' essay "The Symbolism of Poetry," he explains his theory of how rhythm, rhyme, and meter should be properly applied in poetry. Of rhythm, he says that it should be musical, not stilted in any way by a strict form, and the same goes for meter. Throughout his poetry there is an underlying rhythm and meter; he uses it in a way that makes its presence come secondary to the ease of reading the poem naturally. He does this with "The Second Coming" and "The Valley of the Black Pig." In places, through variation in rhythm, it is obvious that he is more worried about the content of the poem than any particular meter. Lines such as..

"Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out..."and "The dew drops slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears / Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes..." (Poems of W.B. Yeats1).

Show examples of this. Yeats explains in his own words, "The purpose of rhythm...is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety..." What Yeats means is that rhythm lulls us into a trance, as he says later, "...to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind, liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols" ("The Symbolism of Poetry" 159). So Yeats believes that a natural, musical rhythm, through this state of trance that it induces, helps the mind reach a dreamlike state in which everything is expressed and understood in symbols and understood more purely than if the logical side of the mind were to "pick" at the poem. Thus, his use of symbols is justified in one way through his preference of a looserrhythm.

Rhyme, Yeats explains in his essay, is used best for memory's sake. In this way it is believed he means for rhyme to be recursive and to draw a connection between one line or lines and another. The rhyming words cause the brain to inadvertently recall the line or lines before it that rhymed with the last line they have read. The motion of this recursive rhyming theory can be seen as a needle sews in a loop, two stitches forward and one stitch back, weaving a story fragment and an emotion into the mind of the reader ("The Symbolism of Poetry" 153-159).

Also in the same essay, Yeats describes symbolism in many different ways: as the "language" of dreams, as emotional or intellectual, and as an ever-changing level of meaning that differs from person to person and time period to time period. He believes that these images evoked by symbols are what the essence of poetry should be, that a poem should not merely have one meaning, but many meanings to many people of different times. Throughout almost all of his poetry there are symbols to be felt or interpreted. One type of symbol he writes about in his essay is an emotional symbol. An example of an emotional symbol is the use of the word purple to describe hills or clouds; it gives a serene feeling but also perhaps a sad feeling, though for no particular, logical reason. The second type of symbol Yeats writes about is an intellectual symbol; this is a symbol that stands for something and its meaning is learned, such as, the cross standing for forgiveness or Jesus, or a white lily standing for purity. Yeats says that intellectual symbols are the most effective because they convey depths of meaning rather than just a general feeling or nostalgia. Hesays,

"It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect...If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories...but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient

names and meanings, I move among divine people..." ("The Symbolism of Poetry"161).

For example, Yeats' poem "The Second Coming;" in this poem there are the symbols gyre, falcon and falconer, lion body, rocking cradle, and Bethlehem, just to name a few. Each of these is an intellectual symbol, and, depending on the person's individual knowledge, can be interpreted differently and some are only linked to one thing, such as Bethlehem, which can only be linked to the city of the same name and specific historical or religious meaning.

Yeats' poetry is very dreamlike in its symbols and allusions and in the emotional colours that those symbols paint in the reader's mind. This creates deep levels of meaning to his poems. If a poem, such as "No Second Troy," is read lightly it gives off a simple emotion from its wording and subject matter. But with deeper study into the history of both Yeats and the poem, one learns who the woman is that he speaks of and why he says such things of her as

"[She has] taught to ignorant men most violent ways, Or hurled the little streets upon the great..." and "With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind / That is not natural in an age like this,..." ("Poems of W. B. Yeats 1). However, on another level, one could see a comparison and contrast of the woman in the poem and Helen of Troy. A whole discussion could be drawn up from this.

Certainly Yeats knows his theories on symbolism in poetry and how to apply them. He shows these qualities in his own work through mechanics and content. The ideas of his essay clearly define and influence his poetry and his perspective of it. Clearly he is a master of symbolism even among his peers. Perhaps one of the effects of his knowledge of symbols is that the moon may be more than just a moon, and a flower more than a flower.

References

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