

W.B. Yeats: Pioneer of Modern Symbolic Poetry

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Symbols, what are they? One does not pay attention to them though uses knowingly or unknowingly in the form of body language and signs and pictures. Symbols are understood not only by human but also by animals. One does not know when the use of symbols started but we have proof that in Stone Age people used to draw symbols in caves to express themselves. So it can be said that symbols were in use before the origin of letters. Later on tattoos took a prominent place to show the culture and society.

As literature is also a medium to express the feelings of a writer and he uses symbols in the form of simile and metaphor. But In 17th century it was felt that simile and metaphor were not appealing the readers so a new term was introduced into literature i.e. 'Metaphysical conceit' popularized by John Donne particularly in English Literature.

In the last decade of 19th century a new form of writing came into existence particularly in that affected the world literature of 19th and 20th century. France in the work of Baudelaire and Stephen Mallarme which was a reaction in favor of spirituality, imagination and dreams.

The term 'Symbolism' is derived from a Greek verb 'symbollein' and the related noun 'Symbolon' meaning 'mark', 'token' or 'sign' that means 'to put together' which means representation of things by symbols. It is the practice or art of using of an object or word to represent an abstract idea that the author uses when he wants to convey a certain mood or emotion rather plainly or directly saying it. Symbolist believed that a piece of work should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. Thus they wrote in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images and objects with symbolic meaning.

Symbolist poems were endeavors to evoke the emotions instead of primarily to depict the expression. Symbolist poets sought to express very personal, irrational and dream-like state of consciousness relying richly on metaphorical language to approximate or symbolize an eternal essence of being that they believed was abstracted from the scope of five senses. These literary ideas developed as a reaction against the dominance of positivism, which emphasized rational thoughts, objectivity and scientific method. Among the English speaking artists, the closest counterpart to symbolism was aestheticism. The Pre-Raphaelites were contemporaries of the earlier symbolists and have much common in them that makes them members of the movement and this movement may be regarded as a later development, a second wave, Symbolist Movement. In English the use of symbols is one of the most striking features of Blake's poetry which hugely inspired Yeats.

In Modern English Literature Yeats is considered as the founder of symbolic school of poetry and has been called the chief representative of the symbolist movement in English Literature. He was a symbolist from the beginning of the career to the end. He said, "I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made amid the dreams of youth." He felt metaphors are not enough to be appealing so he expressed a desire for an electric symbolic system which would at once be a source of literary symbolism and which would be derived from the symbolism of imaginative Irish Literature. Yeats believed that the value of a symbol is the richness or indefiniteness of reference which makes it far more mysterious and powerful than an allegory .A hundred men would advance a hundred different meanings for the same symbol, for no symbol tells all it's meaning to any man. Symbol gives voice to dumb things and bodies to bodiless things. His symbols are derived from his extensive studies which included a fascination for fairies, astrology, automatic writing and prophetic dreams. Though Yeats exercised countless symbols throughout his approximate fifty years of poetic career out of which some prominent are 'Rose', Swan' 'Coat', 'Irish figures, 'Tower', 'Byzantium', Dance, Gyre, 'Bird' etc.

The early period of Yeats's poetry 'The Celtic Twilight period' and the mythology that he used extensively in his early poems was the great body of Gallic heroic legend.

Rose is the most complex symbol of Yeats that he used as an emblem of beauty, as representation of transcendental love of mystic rapture, of inner reality and of divinity. It is the symbol in many of his poems – 'Red Rose', 'Proud Rose', and 'The Rose of Peace' where the symbol means earthly love but in his later poem 'The Rose of World' this symbol is more complicated. On one level it is earthly love and beauty and on other level eternal love and beauty. 'The Rose of Battle' symbolizes God's side in the battle of spirit against matter. In his later poem 'The Secret of Rose' it is intended to be a symbol of esotericism and it evokes the poet's muse guardian of ideal forms and in that respect the figure of sacrifice and adoration when he says "*Far off, most secret and inviolate Rose, Enfold me in my hour of hours....*" . 'Rose' among his many symbol that he considered as suffering with man and hints that it was rather a vision of his neglected soul.

Irish figures and Irish themes supply bulk of symbols to Yeats. His symbolic system became more elaborate and tied up more definitely with the specific figures in Irish mythology and Irish heroic history. In 'Happy Town Land' Yeats used popular Irish myth of a fairy land of ideal happiness where men are free from the cares of material existence. It is a symbol of perfect world of imagination, infinitely utopian. Lane and O' Leary are also used as a symbol of Hero in his poems like 'To a Shade' and September 1913. He makes O' Leary a symbol of all that was the best in the nationalist traditions and pictured the contemporary Ireland. He says in the poem 'To A Shade' *'A man of your own passion...working in their veins.'*

Coat is also a poetic symbol for Yeats which he decided to discard as romantic material. Rejecting the Coat covered with embroideries out of old mythologies he decided to walk naked. He used it the poems 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'A Coat' where he says *'I made my song a coat out of old mythologies...for there is more enterprise in walking naked'*.

Swan is one of the most effectively used symbol by Yeats through which he revealed the problem

of exhaustion of his imaginative power coming with old age. He painfully finds that a gap is becoming between him and timeless nature. He showed fear that the swan symbolizing his creative relationship with nature will have gone leaving him desolate. He depicted his nostalgia in many poems as 'The Wild Swan at Coole Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen etc. He says- *'Delighted men's eyes when I awake some day, to find they have flown away'*. Swan occurs again and again that symbolizes as life force, union of the time with the timeless, of the individual soul with the universal supreme soul. Later it represents exulting in passionate experience- the lust of flash, of eyes and pride of life and lastly it stand for the solitary soul performing its lonely journey through life.

Yeats took Byzantium; a holy city; which is a symbol of peace and happiness and represented it as the world of intellect, spirit and age. Rejecting the mortal world full of sensuous music made by the mortal birds his soul wants to sail to the holy city of Byzantium and to become a Byzantium bird of hammered gold and gold enameling and to sing for the Byzantium lord and ladies. Byzantium sailing means an escape from impurity, corruption and ugliness of contemporary world when he says in the opening line *'That is no country for old men. The young in one another's arms, birds in the trees, -Those dying generations- at their song.'* where Yeats takes himself as an old man and wants to withdraw to an ideal world of *'monuments of unageing intellect.'* Another poem with this symbol is 'Byzantium' in which it is used as a purgatory. Here Byzantium becomes the symbol of the state in which man attains a unity that is the antithesis of the natural life. To Yeats it is the heaven of man's mind where the mind and soul dwell in eternal happiness.

Tower is also a powerful symbol which reflects the conflict of self and the vision of the world; used by Yeats in some of his famous poems like 'A Prayer for My Daughter', 'To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee' and 'The Black Tower' that he wrote a week before leaving the world. Thoor Ballylee that he purchased and stayed over a decade time symbolized his hope for stability with his wife when he says "Now we are almost settled in our house." 'A Prayer for My Daughter' wrote shortly after his daughter's birth he and his wife planned to live at the tower and this poem reflects their hope for permanent love and peaceful happy married life. Tower is a place for retreat from the tumult where the father is worried about her daughter's safety in rough world. He says *'I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour And heard the sea- wind scream upon the tower... Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.'* Viewing the world from the tower as full of danger and cruelty Tower is also a symbol as a protector In the poem 'The Tower' it symbolizes age which is something ridiculous tied to a "dog's tail." It is a symbolic place to store "images and memories" of ancient time. His last poem 'The Black Tower' was written when Yeats was seriously ill so this time Tower is 'black' as it begins with an invisible conflict between death and the man when the poet says *'SAY that the men of the old black tower, ... They shake when the winds roar, Old bones upon the mountain shake.'*

'Bird' is also an efficient symbol in Yeats's poems. He took it as 'Swan', 'Falcon', and 'Bird' which is represented sometimes carefree and immortal in 'Sailing To Byzantium' where on one hand birds are the symbol of the world of birth, reproduction and death and on the other hand the immortal world where *'birds of gold hammered and gold enameling'*, sometimes constant and

unchanging in 'The Wild Swan at Coole' where swan seems to defy time and sometimes as evil animals in 'Leda and the Swan' when Zeus rapes Leda taking the form of a swan which symbolizes degradation in moral values. In 'The Second Coming' Falcon is symbolized when Yeats says '*The falcon does not hear the falconer*', 'desert birds' and 'vulture' which also symbolize death, destruction and declination.

One of the most prominent symbols used by Yeats is 'Dance' closely associated with his "system" which symbolizes joyous energy and ideal state of balance and unity in his poem 'Among School Children'. In "The Double Vision of Michael Roberts" dancer symbolizes a fusion of intellect and heart, spirit and body which also means unity and balance where he closed the poem with these lines '*O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?*'. Louie Fuller's dance in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' who could whirl people off their feet in the similar way as dragon seems to control men and yet they are not free stepping men but dancers.

Thus it can be said without any dubious that Yeats was a major symbolist writer of his age and his use and depth of symbolic writing deepened as he grew older. The doctrine of symbolism had a deep influence upon him, but he tried to bring Mallarme's Theory of symbolism back to the world of action and event. He explored his unconscious in search of symbols as he by nature inclined to walking dreams and in which he saw wonderful things. He wore many masks but was never satisfied with any of them. The symbols that he used are not only clusters of varied associations but grow, enhance and change when employed in poem after poem and serve as weapon of integration in one poem and as body of the whole work. He used countless symbols and sometimes the same symbol for different purpose as Rose, Swan, and Dance. After the death of Yeats in the year 1939 Symbolist movement could hold its root till 1980's and only a few writers could be said symbolist after Yeats out of which some are Wallace Stevens, Edith Sitwell, T.S. Eliot and Conrad Aiken who tried to convey the philosophy of Yeats posthumously.

Yeats wrote with intellectual proficiency taking theme from every sphere of life and held a high standard of performance throughout. In his own words "a symbol is indeed, the possible expression of some invisible essence..." His employment of symbols was to convey "pure sensation" or his apprehension of transcendental mystery. So in the end it can be said that Yeats was a pioneer of Modern Symbolist poetry.

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