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Symbolism in W. B. Yeats Poetry: A Critical Study

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Abstract

William Butler Yeats is regarded as one of the most important representative symbolist of the twentieth century English literature. Yeats is the greatest poetical figure of his age: a transitional age, as it may come to be regarded, between William Morris and Ezra Pound, Swinburne and T. S. Eliot, being himself responsible for much of the ease of the transition. He had his own vision of man and the world and he spoke with distinctive, original authority. He has been regarded as a great symbolic poet. Innumerable are the symbols that Yeats employs, in many cases the same symbol being used for different purposes and in different contexts. Many of his symbols are very obscure and almost unintelligible to the uninitiated reader. They are derived from his occult studies. In his early years, he had been a devoted student of theosophy and magic, and a member of a society of Christian Kabalists. His study of occultism embraced the love of fairies, banishes, the Sidhe, astrology, automatic writing, second-sight and prophetic dreams. From Madame Blavatsky he had learned that the great memory of Nature preserves the legends of all nations. That made him feel that he could get in touch with *Animal Mundi* through symbols drawn from Irish legends—the symbolic characters of Oisín or Aengus, for example, or the hound with one red ear, or the white deer with no horns. He also made use of other arbitrary occult symbols of ‘roe’, ‘cross’, ‘lily’, ‘bird’, ‘tree’, ‘moon’, and ‘sun’ which he found in the Kabalistic, theosophical and other works. The present paper highlights Yeats’ use of symbols and how that has added to meaning and significance to his poetry.

Keywords: Symbolism, Movement, Modernism, Naturalism

W. B. Yeats is a towering and unique figure in the annals of English poetry. He holds a singular position as a symbolist in the history of English literature. It is he who is popular as the chief exponent of the symbolist movement in England. At their best his symbols are highly evocative and suggestive. To analyze and evaluate Yeats’ symbolism it would be better to define symbolism and to mention the brief history of symbolist movement. A

symbol is something that stands for something else. The symbolist movement was started in France as a reaction against naturalism. The representative symbolists were - Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé. In England, these symbolists were admired and imitated by many poets. In this context, W. B. Yeats may be called as the champion. 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.

There are ‘*natural symbols*’ and ‘*cultural symbols*.’ Natural symbols are derived from the unconscious realm of the mind and therefore they represent a number of variations on the essential archetypes, which can be traced back to their archaic roots which we can know from ancient records and primitive societies. W.B. Yeats uses Irish cultural symbols as he is an expert in the knowledge of Celtic myth and Irish folk lore and uses them in all his poetic creations to enhance the subtle yet powerful mode of what these symbols implies contextually, thereby the effect of using these symbols in the message communicated to reach the listeners or the readers. The cultural symbols are those that have been used to express “*eternal truths*”, and that are still used in many religions.

Cultural symbols are vital in the preservation of a community or society. Cultural symbols retain their original awe or can affect individuals in a sensational manner, evoking deep emotional response in them. The ancient history of man is understood and appreciated in a meaningful way through the symbolic images they had. As archaeology exposes the buried past, more than the events and the incidents of history, we treasure the statues, designs, temples and languages that speak of ancient beliefs, rituals and systems. Other symbols are revealed to our understanding through the work of the philologists and religious historians too, who can translate these beliefs and relics and into modern concepts intelligible to us. Cultural anthropologists bring these symbols back to life that we

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can comprehend. Anthropology shows that the symbolic patterns still exist in certain small tribal societies even today.

To modern man symbols are apparently meaningless and irrelevant. Whereas to primitive man, we understand, that symbols seem to be a natural part of everyday life. People were able to consciously interpret and understand symbolic images and what they carry along with what they represent in the immediate context. Symbolism in poetry is often used as a way to convey a deeper meaning than what the words, when taken in their literal form, can do. The reader is able to pick upon the association presented based on his or her experiences. This makes a literary work more meaningful and delightful too, than it would be, by just using basic descriptive prose about one's experience or observation.

W. B. Yeats has used different types of symbols in his poetry. They were carefully woven into the pattern of the poem. He uses these symbols to convey his inner sensations, his visions and his mystic experiences. In his early poems his symbols are elementary. They are not complex. Thus they put no obstacles in the way of the meaning. In this phase the poet makes use of traditional symbols. Among these symbols 'the Rose' may be mentioned as the major symbol. Gradually these symbols grow and develop. They become personal, complicated and complex. The symbols used in the Byzantium poems are its fine examples. The major symbols: W. B. Yeats used a number of symbols in his poetry. among these symbols the major symbols are- the rose, the tower, the gyre, the wheel, the sword, the sea, the bird, the tree, the sun, the moon, the gold, the silver, the earth, the water, the air and the fire.

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 dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes..."

Yeats explains about rhythm 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'. 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 looser rhythm.

Rhyme, Yeats explains in his essay, is used best for memory's sake. 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. 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*. Yeats' symbols always convey more than one meaning. '*The Rose*' has been used as a symbol in several poems in different context. It is an emblem of beauty. On the one hand, it is a symbol of earthly love and eternal love on the

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other. Sometimes it stands for life and hope sometimes it becomes a symbol of esotericism.

The number of his symbols is countless and implications inexhaustible. *'The Tower'* is one of them. It is a traditional and personal symbol. It conveys a host of meanings. It symbolizes the ascendancy of the human soul. It stands for mental elevation, noble contemplation, permanence of philosophy and art. It signifies the dark future of humanity also. Like the tower, *'The Gyre'* is also a major symbol. Mainly it represents the cyclic movement of history and subjectivity and objectivity of human soul. They stand for the seal of Solomon used in magic.

In the poetry of W. B. Yeats, we find the presence of *'the sword'*. This may be categorized as a masculine symbol. It stands for life, war, love and sex. *'The moon'* is also a significant symbol. The twenty-eight phases of this moon represents the human personality. The human soul passes through all these twenty-eight phases. The Earth, the Water, the Air and the Fire are symbolic of four phases of an individual as well as four ages of civilization. The tree stands for age, sterility and the reality of life. The bird signifies speed, lightness, freedom, flight and quickness of intellect.

The Byzantium poems are highly symbolic. Here, we get a lot of grave symbols. The utopian Byzantium stands for the world of intellect and spirit. It is the platonic paradise where the soul is purified. The entire poem is evocative and it has become a symbol for monuments of unageing intellect. The gold is a symbol of purgation and the holy fire stands for a mode of purification through suffering. If the golden bird represents pure soul, immortality and art, the golden tree is the tree of life. Thus the Byzantium poems display Yeats' use of complex symbols.

Sailing to Byzantium is another symbolic poem by W.B. Yeats. In this poem, Yeats has used the elemental symbols of earth, air, fire and water. To Yeats Byzantium is a symbol for unity and perfection. Yeats was drawn to Byzantium and its golden age because he felt that they represented a kind of unity and perfection such as the world had never known before or since. In his poem *'Sailing to Byzantium'*, *'Byzantium'* becomes the symbol of a perfect world.

Yeats' poem *"The Second Coming;"* are the symbols are 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. In this poem, the 'ceremony of innocence' represent for Yeats for one of the qualities that made life valuable under the dying aristocratic social tradition. The expression 'falcon and the falconer' have a symbolic meaning. A falcon is a hawk and a hawk is the symbol of the active or intellectual mind and 'the falconer' symbolizes the soul of it.

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:

“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...”

'Byzantium' has three key-symbols in the poem; the Byzantine dome, the golden bird perched on the golden bough and the flames of mosaic on the Emperor's pavement. All three put together stand for the culmination of achievement in art. Being classic works of art they also symbolize immortality and eternity. They are as timeless and beautiful as John Keats's Grecian Urn. T.R. Henn remarks, "Byzantium...has a multiple symbolic value. It stands for the unity of all aspects of life, for perhaps the last time in history. It has inherited the perfection of craftsmanship, and more than craftsmanship, perhaps, the 'mystical mathematics' of perfection of form in all artistic creation".

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The presence of the moon in the poem signifies a lot. First of all, the moon is a symbol of rhythm and cycle of time. It also represents the different phases in man's life. It denotes the centre ground between the earth and heaven, the light of the sun and night. It typifies the centre point between the conscious and the unconscious. This mood is unmistakably present in 'Byzantium'. John Unterecker writes about Yeats' use of symbols:

"Yeats draws his from nature, that same natural world glorified by the romantics. Because Yeats thinks of himself as the 'Last of the Romantics' a man born out of his time, he assigns his symbols other values than the romantics did. Made 'strange' by those values, his 'masked' romantic images jolt us into recognition of their symbolical function."

The dome that soars high towards the sky symbolizes the kindred meeting point of heaven and earth. Obviously, it stands in direct contrast with 'the fury and mire of human veins'. The very fact that the golden bird and the golden bough are made of gold, says it all. Gold is a precious metal, it never rusts. The rays of the Sun are also golden and symbolize knowledge and permanence. Byzantium is symbolic of a place that may resolve the eternal struggle between the limitations of the physical world and the aspirations of the immortal spirit.

The golden bird is a timeless artifact like the poem 'Byzantium' itself. The repeated use of the term 'complexities' by the poet, signifies that there is no easy solution to the enigma of life and death, mortality and immortality and the question of salvation or redemption. 'Mire' in the poem refers to the cycle of birth and death and man's inherent relationship with dust and clay. It also reminds one of the famous Biblical lines, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." The 'mummy cloth' clearly signifies that what it holds inside is beyond the question of life and death. Hence, the poet seems to liken death in 'Byzantium' and sees end to human problems with the end of physical bond with the earth. The word 'superhuman' is significant as it has been used by the poet for a ghostly figure. It means, the likelihood of gaining super- stature is possible only after death and not in one's lifetime.

The description of events in poems like 'Byzantium' is cosmological. When asked about the basis of such depiction, Yeats says that they are, 'purely symbolical Have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice'. He explains his theory further at another place in 'A Vision', 'The whole system is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolized by the sphere, falls in human consciousness... into a series of antinomies'. Such contradictions do confront the readers while trying to understand the complex structure of obscure symbols used by Yeats in the poem.

The flames of the Emperor's pavement are fuelled by deep spiritual realization. Thus, these flames are flames of divine purgatorial fire. The spirits brought to Byzantium by Dolphins through the sea of time are covered with 'mire and blood'; here blood signifies impurity or spurious state.

This means, the impure spirits must pass through an intensely trying spiritual fire, they must consign themselves to this fire to emerge like a phoenix. This agonizing dance of fire, flames and faggots would eventually turn these spirits into something pure or 'superhuman'. Yeats deliberately stirs up a poetic passion while describing his symbols to achieve a desired poetical effect. B. Chatterjee's comment about the use of symbols in Byzantium is significant,

"The image after image is evoked-bird..... and these lead the reader's mind through a crescendo of horror, through the torture and terror of hell. But is it Hell or Purgatory? Yeats' attitude is ambivalent".

Thus *Easter 1916* is remarkable for the depth and intensity of symbols which have three characteristic features: directness of expression illuminated by unexpected symbols, a tone of tragic solemnity and a professional quality. In the first stanza of the poem, the 'close of day' conveys the image of an evening sky. In this poem, the word 'stream' symbolizes change and 'stone' symbolizes immobility and petrification.

A prayer for My Daughter is another symbolic poem of Yeats. In this poem, the word 'tower' suggests

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Yeats' vision of the dark future of humanity. It is used to suggest loneliness and seclusion tradition or national heritage. Again, 'linnet' symbolizes innocent and cheerful thoughts and 'leaf' symbolizes the soul of a person.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree is another important symbolic poem by Yeats. In this poem, Yeats says us his homesickness. The poet has become weary of London life and so he desires to return at once to the Lake Isle in his own country Ireland. He knows that in Ireland he can enjoy a peaceful life. The Lake Isle of Innisfree is the symbol of a peaceful place.

Yeats' symbols are all pervasive. There are a number of poems that are organized around certain key symbols. In the volume of poems entitled "*The Rose*", Rose is the key symbol. It symbolizes intellectual beauty, austerity, the beauty of women specially that of Maud Gonne and Ireland as well. Yeats makes frequent use of bird imagery in his poems. "*The Swan*" in *The Wild Swan Coole* is an ever recurring symbol. The swans stood for beauty and love, reminding the reader of Spenser's "*Prothalamion*." The bird cry in Yeats poems stands for desire physical or spiritual.

Beast imagery also carries note worthy significance in Yeats poetry. The unicorn and the slouching animal form in "*The second coming*" are two fabulous creatures which are used as symbols by Yeats in his poems. The unicorn has traditionally been taken as an emblem of the soul. The slouching beast or the monster in "*The second coming*" is symbolic of the appearance of a new civilization antithetical to the present Christian civilization:

"Turning and turning in the
widening gyre. The falcon can't
hear the falconer; Things fall apart;
the centre can't hold Mere anarchy
is loosed upon the world."

The falcon here is a symbol of intellect and the falconer is a symbol of soul. Byzantium is used by Yeats as a symbol of the dance often appears in Yeats poetry and it is also closely related with Yeats system. Yeats generally uses this symbol to intricate either patterned movement or joyous energy.

"Helen being chosen found life flat and dull and later had much trouble from a fool."

The above mentioned line from "*A Prayer for My Daughter*" is highly symbolic. Here Helen symbolizes destructive beauty and is linked with Maud Gonne. In the same poem, the Horn of Plenty and the laurel tree are symbols of place, prosperity and happiness: "Ceremony's name for the rich horn and custom for the spreading laurel tree."

Yeats often uses his personal possessions buildings (The Tower etc.) in a symbolic manner Yeats use of symbols from Irish Mythology and the occult also play an important role. In *A Dialogue of self and soul* we get it opposing symbols. Sato's sword and the winding stairs. The winding stairs lead to darkness but Sato's sword symbolizes the path of escape.

Thus, Yeats was a great symbolist right from the beginning of his career to the very end. However, Yeats symbolic technique differs radically from that of the French symbolists. Yeats symbols are not vague, undifferentiated and emotional. They are haste and wiry in the tradition of those in the poetry of William Blake.

The gyre, a circular or conical shape, appears frequently in Yeats's poems and was developed as part of the philosophical system outlined in his book *A Vision*. At first, Yeats used the phases of the moon to articulate his belief that history was structured in terms of ages, but he later settled upon the gyre as a more useful model. He chose the image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical spirals—to symbolize his philosophical belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul (or the civilization, the age, and so on) would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. Although this is a difficult concept to grasp abstractly, the image makes sense when applied to the waxing and waning of a particular historical age or the evolution of a human life from youth to adulthood to old age. The symbol of the interlocking gyres reveals Yeats' belief in fate and historical determinism as well as his spiritual attitudes toward the development of the soul, since creatures and events must evolve according to the conical shape. With the image of the gyre, Yeats created a shorthand reference in his poetry that stood for his entire philosophy of history and spirituality.

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CONCLUSION

Yeats is one of the greatest symbolists in English literature. Being a symbolist poet, he used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. He chose words and assembled them so that the meaning is more significant and resonant. To understand his poetry, it is important to understand the various symbols he uses in his works. He takes the commonest of things and fills them with significant connotations. Unlike other poets, he does not discard his symbols after their use. He retains and develops them. His symbols are flexible so that they could have numerous connotations and significations in different works. To know Yeats' symbolism is to know Yeats himself as it is through his symbols that he discovers himself.

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