
Symbolism and Mysticism in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

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Abstract

Most of Yeats's themes, his views on the relation between art and the artist, education, and the concept of the unity of being find a complex and synthetic expression remarkable for its thematic, textual art, and symbolic richness. The actual sense and the personal emotions awaken, and the general speculations have been interwoven and made to play upon each other at the same time that they are kept separate and distinct. A complex subject has been treated in the most concentrated form, and yet without confusion. Perceptions, fancies, feelings, and thoughts all have their place in the poet's record. It is a moment of human life, masterfully seized and made permanent in all its nobility, mastery, actuality, direct personal contact, and abstraction. According to Yeats, a symbol is the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame.... Symbols are not merely denotative but also connotative and evocative. In addition to the literal meaning, they conjure up various associations before the mind's eye.

Keywords: Symbol, fancies, rose, bird, beast, austerity, beauty, dance, world.

INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats was the eldest son of John Butler Yeats, whose family probably came to Ireland from Yorkshire at the end of the seventeenth century. It was intended that John Butler Yeats should follow his father's and grandfather's example and enter the Church of Ireland, but when an un-graduate, he turned skeptic and, after trying the law, became an artist. He moved his household several times between Dublin and London, and as money was often scarce, his children spent a good deal. He began to write poetry in his late teens with his father's enthusiastic encouragement.

Arthur Symons dedicated his book 'The Symbolist Movement in Literature' (1919) to W.B. Yeats and called him the chief representative of that movement in our country. However, Yeats was doing a different thing in Ireland than Baudelaire and Mallarme did or

had done in France. His conception of the end and object of the symbolic technique was fundamentally different from that of his French compeers and counterparts.

According to Arthur Symons, "for the Symbolist poet Mallarme, to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create." But Yeats was trained at the School of Art in Dublin, and he fully agreed with Blake's emphasis on 'hard and wiry of rectitude and certainty.' Yeats said, "The indefiniteness of symbol and image was not in its inherent obscurity, its fundamental shadowiness, or its personal associative power's indefiniteness was, like the multitude, the expansiveness of symbol and image." For Yeats, the concrete and the visual, the starting points, were often remembered. Your views on art and outlook on life continued to alter, up to the very last, under the stress of circumstances. He could have been more explicit. The collected works were to be what T.S. Eliot would call an objective co-relative for the entirety of Yeat's life. They thought of a kind of literary equivalent for the total experience of a man, a total experience shaped through art, a form free from accident. Yeats gathered images from which to construct his soul. However, Yeats tried hard to make himself enough of a nationalist to satisfy the thirst for revolution.

During the eighties and nineties, heterodox religious movements claimed much of Yeats' interest in his search for a system he could believe in. His father's rationalism and the aftermath of Darwinian controversy had proclaimed him. He said afterward, from accepting orthodox Christianity, he explored instead Theosophy, Rosicruianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, the writings of Swedenborg and Boehme, and above all, Blake, whose works were edited with Edwin Ellis during 1891-93. He took an increasingly active interest in nationalist politics, initially under the influence of John O'Leary, an old Fenian leader who had spent many years in exile in Paris and later in Maud Gonne. She was the daughter of an English colonel and had become a revolutionary. She was a superbly beautiful woman with whom Yeats fell in love when he first met her at the age of twenty-three. He realized his literary aims at activities were not likely to impress Maud Gonne, who favored violent action. He, therefore, became deeply engaged during 1897 and 1898 in a political movement intended to unite different nationalist elements in Ireland. He even joined the secret extremist revolutionary Irish Republication Brotherhood for a time. His poems are simple, even fatty prosaic at times, for Yeats was preoccupied with theatre business management of men. He had become disillusioned with Irish politics and politicians primarily as a result of his experiences with the 98 Association and the IRB, and he had turned to a long-held ambition of creating an Irish widow of an Anglo-Irish land owner. He first met her at Coole Park, her house in country Galway, in 1896, and the following year, he spent the first of many summers there. It was an ideal place to recover his health from the incessant emotional and financial strains of previous years, and Lady Gregory provided him with an ideal ambiance. He helped her collect folklore, live a regular life, and develop a belief in the virtues of both aristocratic and pleasant life. Moreover, with Lady Gregory's practical determination to aid him, he brought national theatre into being. He republicated all the Centric Twilight's embroideries

out of old mythologies in 'A Coat'; he recorded his disillusionment with the realities of Ireland in 'The Fisherman'; and he inveighed against her ingratitude for her benefactors in 'To a Shade.' Behind all this sounds the ground swell of his frustrated love for Maud Gonne.

The Easter Rising of 1916 took Yeats's beauty by surprise. The revolutionaries he had come to despise attained heroic stature, and it seemed to him that a terrible beauty was born. Mad Gonne's husband was one of the sixteen leaders executed, and Yeats went to France and proposed to her again, but as in the past, she refused him. Then, he asked her permission to propose to her adopted daughter Iseult, whom he had written several poems in the preceding years. Iseult refused him, and in October 1917, he married Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he had known for some years. His marriage made his life 'serene and full of order,' it also provided the starting point for an altogether unexpected conjunction of his romantic and realistic strains of poetry.

The Nobel Prize for Poetry awarded public recognition for his work. He had bought ThoorBallylee, a Norman Tower in Galway, where he lived for part of the year. It was a visible symbol of the Anglo-Irish tradition, which he began to explore excitedly. He read Swift, Goldsmith, Berkeley, and Burke and saw himself as an inheritor of their traditions, where plain speech and clarity were the basis of rhetoric. Yeats's life was secure, for his daughter's birth was followed by a son's. With this flowering of his life, when the opposites seemed co-joined poet and Nobel Prize winner, man of action, and senator came the maturity of his style. He was a symbol, a direct speech that records the richness of his life and its bitterness. A symbol is the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame. In addition to the literal meaning, they conjure up a host of associations before the mind's eye.

DESCRIPTION

Yeats elevates private grief into a general sorrow and exposes the intensity of personal emotion without vulgarity. Yeats was gifted with a rich myth-making imagination. His poetry reflects his deadly conviction that man's life is governed by a system incorporating cyclic progress through phrases. Man is incomplete; he is, in turn, in conflict but tries to be complete. Yeats himself, a shy, solitary dreamer by nature, is delivered to be a man of action to fulfill his nationalistic ambition. Thus, his theory of the mask was born. He desired to expand his personality until it merged with the more prominent personality of the common humanity, resulting in his emotions and experiences assuming the form of those sentiments familiar to the people. His passion was to mold multiplicity into the unity of being.

Yeats has been the chief representative of the Symbolist Movement in English literature. He uses innumerable symbols, sometimes the same symbol, for different purposes. The symbols are derived from Yeats' study of the occult, which made them difficult for the

reader to understand. Most of his symbols, such as the rose, cross, bird, tree, moon, and sun, are derived from Kabalistic and theosophical study.

The rose in Yeats' poems is generally used to mean earthly love. However, in 'The Rose of the World,' it also symbolizes eternal love and beauty. In most of his poems, the rose is the central symbol. In 'The Rose' or 'Peace,' the symbol of 'the rose' describes earthly love, but in 'The Rose of the World,' this symbol means, on the one hand, transient earthly love and beauty and, on the other hand, eternal love and beauty. The shift in the meaning of the same symbol in different poems of Yeats, at times, baffles the readers. In 'The Rose of Battle,' 'the rose' is a refuge from spirit against the matter. But this very symbol stands for the power of the creative imagination and occult philosophy in the poem.

The symbol of dance is closely related to Yeats' 'system' and is often employed in his poetry. According to him, the value of a symbol is in its richness or indefiniteness of reference. It could mean patterned movement, joyous energy, or, at times, a sort of immovable trance or a kind of unity. The symbol of dance evokes the concept of unity in 'Among School Children.' Byzantium represents perfection and unity in Yeats' poems. He felt that Byzantium and its golden age symbolized perfection, which the world had never known before or since.

The 'bird' symbol is the most important symbol in Yeats' poems. It is a striking example of the dynamic nature of the Yeatsian symbol which grows, changes and acquires greater depth and density in their progression. A similar process may be traced in the 'beast imagery.' The unicorn and the slouching animal form in 'The Second Coming' are two fabulous creatures that Yeats uses as symbols in his poems.

The theories of symbolism that Yeats derived from the translations of the French Symbolists by Arthur Symons are clearly seen in the poems in the volume 'The Wind Among the Reeds.' Though symbols used in the poems of the volume 'The Wind Among the Reeds,' where he still uses Irish legend and mythology, become personal, more suggestive, and therefore more complex. Aedh, Hanrahan, Robartes, etc., are used as symbols. They symbolize the poet's own love, pain, suffering, and ecstasy. The Pairies, Aengus, the Celtic gods, and the shadowy horses all have traditional mythological significance, but in Yeats's poetry, they are all infused with personal meaning and significance.

Yeats made use of a complex system of symbols in his poems. He had come to believe that symbols were given, not deliberately chosen or invented. In Jungian psychology, it is stated that great symbols well up from the depth of 'the collective unconscious' or the racial memory. Yeats' remark concerning the symbols appropriate to poetry and the best ways to make the most effective is worth noting: "It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the depth and abundance of Nature."

Yeats' poetry is replete with symbols. He has been regarded as one of the greatest symbolists in English literature. In his poetry, the same symbols are often used for different purposes. His symbols are all-pervasive. There are a number of poems that are organized around certain key symbols, and each succeeding poem sheds light on the previous poems and 'illuminates their sense.' It has been presumed by many that the 'French Symbolist Movement' had a great impact on Yeats. It is true that Yeats had come across Mallarme, Villiers, and other French Symbolists in several ways. His symbolism is different from that of French symbolism as it is mixed up and modified by his belief in magic and nationalism. In his use of symbols, his theories of magic have a great part to play. Often, his symbols are both poetic and magical, and for a full understanding of them, reference to his theory of magic becomes essential. Moreover, his symbolism emanates also from Irish mythology and legend. Yeats, in transplanting his symbolism to Ireland, gave it a strange and national quality. His early poems have a lot to do with Irish mythology and are led by symbolic meanings. In his poems, he also talks about the rise and fall of civilizations. He believed that the nature of civilization changes after almost every two thousand years. In considering Yeats's achievements as a poet, one has to keep in mind the treatment of history and mythology in his poems. His choice of Irish mythology and folklore as subjects for his poetry was a conscious choice. Yeats made Irish mythology and folklore a source of inspiration for his poetry.

Yeats' symbolic system displays the principle of conflict in the life of the individual and that of human civilization. Basic to this symbolic system are the Great Wheel and the interpenetrating 'gyres' or cones. Yeats' view of history involves the symbols of the wheel and 'gyres.' The movement of history, in Yeats' system, is symbolized by two interlocking gyres whirling continually. History, like an individual, passes through the 26 phases along the Great Wheel. Each phase covers a period of 2000 years. Each phase covers a rise, growth, and decline of strength. Simultaneously, its antithetical 'gyre' is born, which lives on its death.

Yeats saw all our 'scientific, democratic fact-accumulation heterogeneous civilization' as belonging to the outward gyre. It is preparing, not the continuance of the civilization, but the 'revelation in a lightning flash' of the civilization that must slowly take its place. His system is formulated in his philosophical work, 'A Vision.'

'The Second Coming,' we may say, is the climax of Yeats' views of historical change. The poem communicates the awful terror of the antithetical civilization that is to come. Yeats was convinced that the Christian civilization was nearing the end of its allotted period of time. 'The Second Coming' illustrates Yeats' theory of the rise and fall of civilization. At first, a civilization is very narrow and intense. Gradually, this intensity is lost, and the civilization broadens and dissipates its energy. The progress is like the unwinding of a thread wound around a cone. Inspiration simultaneously gains strength and ultimately takes over to begin a new civilization. Yeats' beliefs that Christian forces had spent themselves out arose out of his observation of the scene around him in Europe after the war and in the political

upheaval in Ireland. The intellectual center has broken down, the mind has disintegrated, and the mind and soul are divided, resulting in universal chaos. The good have lost their faith; what is worse is that the bad are not only gaining power but are possessed of certain ideas, which they cling to with frightening intensity. All these ideas are not conveyed in literal terms but through the use of myth, symbols, and powerful images. The phrase 'second coming' at once evokes in the poet's mind a terrifying image. It rises out of a sandy desert, a monstrous shape with a man's head and a lion's body. All about the monster are whirling 'red shadows of angry, screaming birds' symbolic of the violent horror. This beast is crawling towards Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, who was the sponsor of the old civilization. The diminishing impetus of Christianity is conveyed through the image of the falcon, which has lost touch with the falconer and thus is lost without direction. The pattern of the two interpenetrating gyres is woven into the poem.

The falcon flies beyond the call of its master- symbolizing the failure of man's spiritual ability to control intellect. We see the 'anti' image of the screaming desert birds circling around the monstrous shape – the image of anti-Christ. A careful selection of images and words marks the poem. The repetition of 'turning' gives an impression of the inexorably moving wheel of history. Every phrase and rhythm conveys the vision forcefully. 'The Second Coming' is at once a representation of Yeats's cyclic theory of history, the primary antithetical oscillation, and of his heartbroken and outraged sense of the failure and dissolution of life in his time.

'Sailing to Byzantium' is an empathetic reminder of Yeats' keen interest in that historic city of the Eastern Empire and the significance he attached to its art and culture. Byzantium to Yeats stood for that moment in history where religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one – something never achieved before or since in recorded history. In Yeats' concept of the cycle of history, the Christian civilization achieved the point of the fullest synthesis. Byzantium became a symbol of 'the artifice of eternity' where the human soul may realize its possibilities in this life. Byzantium climaxes at the end of the first Christian millennium when the architects and artificers spoke to the multitude and the few alike, where there was no fragmentation and where there was perfect unity of being. After that moment, the disintegration of the Christian civilization set in, and in the present twentieth century, there is complete immersion in one aspect of life at the cost of another. 'Sailing to Byzantium' presents the voyage to the land of the mind. The song of the golden bird will be beyond time even as it sings of the main phases of the past, present, and future. Yeats saw Byzantium culture as the ideal state in which art and life were united. In 'Sailing to Byzantium', Byzantium becomes the symbol of perfection, free of the cycle of birth, generation, and death, free of time, for it is a world of art and the ideal of existence. The poem is interwoven with several symbols: one side has the golden bird, the starlit dance or moonlit dome, the flame, and the dancing floor where the dance of expiration takes place; the other side has the "blood-begotten spirits."

'Sailing to Byzantium' can be interpreted as a journey from the sensual to the spiritual world. It symbolizes psychological change from a mentality that values the pleasures of sexuality and the flesh to one that values things of the mind, the spirit, and the soul. Yeats' belief is that in order to get immortality through art, it is necessary to move away from the songs of the senses to songs celebrating 'monuments of nagging intellect.' These lines also tell us that the best way to counterbalance physical decay is to go on for spiritual things.

Yeats' biography is closely interwoven with his poems. To have a full comprehension of his poems, an intimate knowledge of his life is essential. The poems 'Among School Children,' 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited,' and even 'Easter 1916' bring in quite a few personal touches. Then there are poems like 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and 'Sailing to Byzantium,' which try to tackle personal problems on a universal level. 'A Prayer to My Daughter' is a very personal poem. It expresses Yeats' hopes and fears about the future of his daughter Anne. But this poem is of universal significance as well. The poet disapproves of the kind of beauty that is self-centered or that drives a lover to despair. The poet's paternal solicitude and his desire for stability and equilibrium in life are also reflected in this poem. 'Sailing to Byzantium' is also a personal poem; the problem of old age always haunted Yeats, which is presented very effectively in Byzantium's poem. The problem of old age is of relevance not only to Yeats but to all men of all ages.

ARGUMENT

After conducting a survey, I want to conclude that Yeats was a great symbolist right from the beginning of his career to the very end. As his powers matured, his symbols became more intricate and gained evocative power and associative richness. Symbolism was a help in giving concreteness to his visions. In recapitulating and amplifying old things and recollections, Yeats does not spare himself. As a man of conscience, he reviews his life and asks himself directly.

CONCLUSION

Like any great poet, Yeats elevates private grief into a general sorrow and exposes the intensity of personal emotion without vulgarity. However, the statement fails to take into cognizance the rich symbolism and complex ideas interwoven into the poetry. Yeats was, indeed, gifted with a rich, myth-making imagination. Man is incomplete: he is torn in conflict but tries to be complete, for life itself consists of conflict- between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, flesh and mind, body and soul. Yeats was one of the poets who enlarged the range of symbolism by covering various subjects, from politics to love and mythology. Yeats' success in turning his personal emotions and likes and dislikes into great poetry was really remarkable. Very few modern poets succeeded in turning the powers of poetry into the impersonality of poetry, which Yeats believed as much as T.S. Eliot did. In Yeats' own words, "A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a

transparent lamp about a spiritual flame." Symbols are not merely denotative but also connotative and evocative. Symbols make the language rich and expressive.

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