

Investigating the Nature of Symbolism in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats

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ABSTRACT

The influence of the French Symbolist Movement on Yeats has often been commented upon by the scholars. He is usually clubbed with the other symbolists like Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound and others. However, not many have delved upon the difference between the symbolism of Yeats and that of other contemporary modern poets. For writers like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, symbols were a part of their avant-garde project which sought to look for newer ways to express themselves. But for Yeats, there was no difference between his thought process and the system of symbols he built throughout his life. This paper explores the unique and intimate preoccupation of Yeats with the coherent system of symbols used in his poetry. It also seeks to trace the development of Yeats' symbolism, the various influences which shaped his thought process and some of the most commonly used symbols in his poetry.

Key words: Symbolism, Yeats, Modern Poetry, Symbolist Movement.

I. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats is considered as one of the important figures of the Symbolist Movement. Primarily a French Movement, it propagated the doctrine that there exists an analogy between the human mind and the outside world and that a writer ought to seek these analogies and use them in his poetry in the form of certain symbols from the world outside. Due to the increasing alienation between individuals and the society they lived in, these writers tried to bridge the gap between the two using their symbolism. They searched for symbols which could convey multiple meanings. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), one of the greatest symbolists composed many of his works using symbolism. According to him:

This life is a hospital, where each patient is possessed by the desire to change beds; One would like to suffer in front of the stove, and another believes that he would recover his health beside the window (Symons) Another great symbolist was Stéphane Mallarmé who believed that a poet's task was to purify the language with the use of symbols and not express directly what he wanted to. Yeats, however, should not be seen as imitating these poets because for him, symbols were the only way he could express anything. He himself remarked:

I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made

Amid the dreams of youth (W. B. Yeats, Among School Children 133)

II. DISCUSSION

Yeats' quest for symbols can be seen even in his early poetry. He turned to Irish folklore and legend in order to find his symbols. Other influences which greatly shaped Yeats' system of symbols were the Theosophical Society, The Golden Dawn, Pre-Raphaelites, The Rosicrucian Society and the great poet William Blake. Theosophical Society insisted on parallels between the nature and one's state of mind which is also reflected in Yeats' works. The more important role was played by The Golden Dawn, an occult society. This society believed in the "two pillars", one, symbolizing water which in turn stood for peace, night, silence and the other, fire, meaning passion, energy and day. Here, Yeats practiced the method of going into a trance in order to seek visions while hallucinating. These visions became intimately connected with his poetry. Although he was influenced by the Symbolists and the various societies he joined, he formulated his own system of symbols through which he investigated his life and the world around him.

His early poetry was dreamy and escapist. But the symbols he used in them found their way in his later poetry though in a more sophisticated form. The symbols like "rose" "cross" and the "four elements" can be seen as the foundation of his symbolism. Though these symbols were not new to the western mind, their

signification for Yeats and subsequently to his readers were entirely different from what the symbols had earlier signified. Rose became an important symbol in his early poetry and can be found in several of his poems like "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time", "The Secret Rose", "The Rose Tree" and "The Rose of the World". It usually holds the connotations of passion or sensuality but to Yeats, it symbolized complete harmony. It was an ultimate symbol of beauty and temporality which was often identified with a woman, a combination of physical and spiritual beauty. Similar function was performed by another symbol, that of "tree". However, tree represented various other attributes too. In "A Man Young and Old", it presents an image of decay in the form of "the old thorn tree" but in "Among School Children", the "chestnut tree, the great-rooted blossomer" emerges as a symbol of unity, the wholeness of being, similar to that of rose (W. B. Yeats 183). While the rose symbolized harmony, the cross was seen as a symbol of conflict, opposites and struggle. Cross, a religious symbol to the Christian mind was secularized by Yeats. Yeats, like Blake, believed that it was harmony could only be achieved after conflict. "A Song of the Rosy Cross" delves into this progression from conflict to harmony.

The relevance of the four elements, namely, Air, Water, Earth and Fire too needs to be highlighted. Water reinforced the poet's anxieties and aspirations while fire stood for passion, higher virtues and heroism. In the poem "No Second Troy", he compares Maud Gonne's "nobleness" to fire. Fire also carried the connotations of the purgatory fire which would purify one's soul. One had to pass through it in order to regain one's purity which was lost in his corrupt world. In "Sailing to Byzantium", he talks about "holy fire" which would purge one which was an essential step towards gaining immortality. Yeats' theory of the four elements was similar to that of Blake who attributed similar functions to the four elements. Blake's philosophy of the four symbolic personages or "Zoas", namely, Urizen, Luvah, Urthona and Urthona had an immense impact upon Yeats who connected them to reason, emotion, sensation and energy respectively. Richard Ellman points out, "The Harmony of the Zoas, Blake's 'Jerusalem, finds an appropriate parallel in Yeats' Unity of Being." (Ellman 27)

While the symbols used in the poetry by Yeats permeated all of his writings there seems a transition from the symbols used in his early poetry to the ones used in the later works. Yeats was acutely aware of his mental growth over the years and his poetry too seems to grow with him. While he grew older, his poetry became more mature and his symbols, more dynamic and profound. The rose changed into Unity of Being, symbolized by a "sphere"; the cross turned into a gyre and the four elements into four faculties. Balachandra Rajan believes that Yeats' poetic growth was like "physical transformation from the blossoming plant to the dry bare tree... If something is lost, something is also gained. The dawn maybe wanton and ignorant but it is the twilight that brings its decrepit, poverty-stricken wisdom" (Rajan)

The symbol of the Gyre became recurrent and crucial in Yeats' later poetry. An evolution of the Cross, it was a symbol of conflict and opposition but was more dynamic and inclusive in nature. Yeats claimed that his gyre provided "a classification of every possible movement of thought and life." (ed. Catherine E. Paul). According to him each era began with the union of the human and the divine and lasted for two thousand years. Its progression, however, was not linear but in the form of a whirling cone or gyre. At the end of one gyre, another gyre in the direction opposite to that of the first one began. Each gyre was attributed its own distinct qualities. The primary gyre was dogmatic, passive, feminine, objective etc while the antithetical gyre stood for masculinity, harshness and subjectivity. The Christian era was primary while that of Greco-Roman was secondary. In his poem "The Second Coming", he imagines that the end of the Christian era was nearing as twenty centuries of Christianity were over. What would follow would be another era which had already begun showing its qualities.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold (W. B. Yeats 158)

The next civilization, according to Yeats would not be a union of divine and human but that of a male lion and a human being, a sphinx. In his words, "A shape with lion body and the head of a man" (Yeats 187)

Yeats reflected that within the gyre revolved the four faculties namely, Will, Mask, Creative mind and Body of fate. Will was the active force within oneself, Mask what one desired to become, Creative Mind was the required creativity to change one's self and Body of Fate referred to the context to which one belonged. Will, along with Creative Mind was always stirring to create a Mask. Therefore, there was a conflict since one was trying to change one's self. So there is always a struggle to become someone else. Every thousand years, the peak of a civilization was called Unity of Being which was symbolized by a full moon. This was the most prosperous time in every civilization. In the Christian era, this Unity of Being was achieved in the Byzantine period for Yeats. It is at this time that "religious, aesthetic and practical lives were one." (Yeats 27) He admired Byzantium for its art and architecture. In fact, his love for Byzantium is expressed thus:

I think if I could be given a month of antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium... I think that in early Byzantium... architect and artificers... spoke to the multitude and the few alike. (W. Yeats 279)

In "Sailing to Byzantium", he imagined "the gold mosaic of a wall", "the artifice of eternity", and the

“Grecian goldsmiths” of Byzantium. It was a transcendental world, a world of art which stood outside the realm of nature and temporality and was a balance between art and eternity. Even though Byzantium is a sacred and historical city of Eastern Christendom, Yeats transformed it into a secular world of poetic imagination, a place perhaps for the old people as it is devoid of the sensuality of the natural world. (W. B. Yeats 24-25)

The Tower was another of Yeats’ later symbols which symbolized the aspiring power of an artist. He also published a volume of works called *The Tower*. In a letter to Sturge Moore, he described it “as a permanent symbol of my [Yeats’] work.” In the poem, “Blood and the Moon”, the poet talks about a tower which has a ruined top. According to Richard Ellmann, this symbolizes “decay of modern nations and modern man” (Ellmann) while in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, the tower signifies a kind of spirituality which spurns the earth at night.

Yeats’ symbols were inspired by his own life of which Maud Gonne became an inseparable part. She hovers in his poetry and sometimes haunts him as the Helen of Troy and at other times as Leda or Countess Cathleen. In “No Second Troy”, he described her personality as full of courage and nobleness. However, he believed that Ireland was no Troy which would fight for her. He ends it with a rhetorical question, “Was there another Troy for her to burn?” (W. B. Yeats 73) In another poem, Yeats drew a parallel between Maud Gonne and Helen:

For she had fiery blood When I was young
And trod so sweetly proud (W. B. Yeats, Among School Children 71)

In “Among School Children”, he referred to her having a “Ledaean body” and as a “daughter of the swan”. (W.

B. Yeats, Among School Children 183) Hence Yeats connected Maud to Helen not just because of her beauty or grace but also because she was destructive and brought about the end of Troy. The image of Helen suited Yeats’ purpose as it was a flexible symbol which carried with itself both positive and negative connotations.

Another symbol which dominated Yeats’ later poetry is that of the dance. Dance had been used by Yeats in his earlier poetry as well but it was in his later poetry that the symbol evolved. Dance, according to Arthur Symons, symbolized, “possession and abandonment, the very pattern and symbol of earthly love”. (Hayes 4) In “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes”, a girl is pictured dancing between a Sphinx and the Buddha which represented wisdom and love. In “Among School Children”, the dance symbolized a fusion of art and artist, a kind of perfection. It represented the perfect combination of body, mind and spirit in such a way that nobody can distinguish “the dancer from the dance”. (W. B. Yeats 183)

As Yeats grew older, he became extremely aware of old age and the treatment of an old man in the society. He believed that the society he lived in was not meant for old people and thus desired to go to Byzantium. He acknowledged that old age brought wisdom but he could not ignore the bodily problems that come up with age. So he often referred to himself as a “scarecrow”. In “Among School Children”, there is a direct identification of the poet with a scarecrow. As he came in contact with young school children, the contrast between him and the children became even dearer. There is another similar reference:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick (W. B. Yeats, Among School Children 183)

III. CONCLUSION

Therefore, one can safely argue that symbols were the way Yeats looked at the world and expressed him. They evolved as he evolved and were perfected by their frequent use in his poetry. Yeats remarked:

I must leave my myths and symbols to explain themselves as the years go by and one poem lights up another (Henn 126)

In order 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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