



SYMBOLISM IN THE POEMS OF W. B. YEATS

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ABSTRACT

William Butler Yeats, (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature. A pillar of both the Irish and British literary establishments, in his later years he served as an Irish Senator for two terms. Yeats was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival and, along with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and others, founded the Abbey Theatre, where he served as its chief during its early years. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature as the first Irishman so honoured the Nobel Committee described as ‘inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.’ Yeats is generally considered one of the few writers who completed their greatest works after being awarded the Nobel Prize; such works include The Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1929). Yeats was a very good friend of Indian Bengali poet Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

INTRODUCTION

Yeats was born and educated in Dublin, but spent his childhood in County Sligo. He studied poetry in his youth and from an early age was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. Those topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. His earliest volume of verse was published in 1889 and those slow-paced and lyrical poems display debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the Pre-Raphaelite poets. From 1900, Yeats’ poetry grew more physical and realistic. He largely renounced the transcendental beliefs of his youth, though he remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks, as well as with cyclical theories of life.

Yeats found erotic adventure conducive to his creative energy, and, despite age and ill-health, he remained a prolific writer. In a letter of 1935, Yeats noted: “I find my present weakness made worse by the strange second puberty the operation has given me, the ferment that has

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come upon my imagination. If I write poetry it will be unlike anything I have done. In 1936, he undertook editorship of the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935. He died at the Hotel Ideal Sejour, in Menton, France, on 28 January 1939. He was buried after a discreet and private funeral at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin.

Yeats' Symbolism

Yeats is generally considered one of the twentieth century's key English language poets. He was a Symbolist poet, in that he used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. Yeats chose words and assembled them so that, in addition to a particular meaning, they suggest other abstract thoughts that may seem more significant and resonant. His use of symbols is usually something physical that is both itself and a suggestion of other, perhaps immaterial, timeless qualities. Yeats explains symbols as follows: "All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions." Poetry, like art, has its origin in these lofty emotions even as it has an emotional effect upon its reader. He writes,

"poets are continually making and unmaking mankind"

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, 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,' 'Byzantium' and 'No Second Troy' 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 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. 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. 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. He says,

*“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..."

Application of Symbolism

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 colors 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 Keat'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".

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 center ground between the earth and heaven, the light of the sun and night. It typifies the



center 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".

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. So J. W. Beach says "the finest of the British poets of the modern age."

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