



SYMBOLISM – A KEY CONCEPT IN LITERATURE

DR. RAJKUMAR M. LAKHADIVE

Head & Associate Professor,
Department of English,
Mahatma Basweshwar College, Latur
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Symbols are a means of complex communication that often times can have multiple levels of meaning. This separates symbols from signs, as signs have only one meaning. A symbol's meaning may be modified by various factors including popular usage, history and contextual intent. The history of a symbol is one of many factors in determining a particular symbol's apparent meaning. The word 'symbol' has been used to mean anything from a simple mark to complex and arcane images through convoluted stories, and even to philosophic arguments. Unfortunately, most tomes claiming to discuss or collect symbols try to ignore this ambiguity, making any effort to categorize books and other sources a highly subjective, not to mention tremendously intricate task. Further, there are all the similar and related terms: symbolize, symbolism, symbolic, signs, signals, significance, myths, mythology, images. The context of a symbol may change its meaning. Similar five-pointed stars might signify a law enforcement officer or a member of the armed services, depending upon the uniform.

INTRODUCTION

Human cultures use symbols as a means to express their specific ideology, social structures, and to represent characteristics of their specific culture. Thus, symbols carry different meaning depending upon one's cultural background. The meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the symbol itself, but is culturally learned. Heinrich Zimmer gives a concise overview of the nature, and perennial relevance, of symbols:

Concepts and words are symbols, just as visions, rituals, and images are; so too are the manners and customs of daily life. Through all of these, a transcendent reality is mirrored. They are so many metaphors reflecting and implying something which, though thus variously expressed, is ineffable, though thus rendered multiform, remains inscrutable. Symbols hold the mind to truth but are not themselves the truth, hence it is delusory to borrow them. Each civilization, every age, must bring forth its own." [Zimmer, Heinrich. 122]

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1P a g e



Symbolism In Literature:

Symbolism is often used by writers to enhance their writing. Symbolism can give a literary work more richness and colour and can make the meaning of the work deeper. In literature, symbolism can take many forms including:

1. A figure of speech where an object, person, or situation has another meaning other than its literal meaning.
2. The actions of a character, word, action, or event that have a deeper meaning in the context of the whole story.

Many poets used symbolism to deepen the meaning of their poems. Here is an excerpt from William Blake's "Ah Sunflower." In it, William Blake refers to life cycle and uses sunflowers to represent humankind and that they desire everlasting life. "Ah Sunflower, weary of time, Who countest the steps of the sun; Seeking after that sweet golden clime/Where the traveler's journey is done." In another poem of Robert Burns "My love is like a red, red rose...", he expresses his love by using the 'rose' as a token of love or symbol of love.

The symbolic reference leads to a transference of emotion, purpose, and belief, which cannot be justified by an intellectual comparison of the direct information derived from the two schemes and their elements of intersection. The justification, such as it is, must be sought in a pragmatic appeal to the future. In this way, intellectual criticism founded on subsequent experience can enlarge and purify the primitive native symbolic transference.

Time is known to us as the succession of our acts of experience, and thence derivatively as the succession of events objectively perceived in those acts. But this succession is not pure succession. It is the derivation of state from state, with the later state exhibiting conformity to the antecedent. Time, in the concrete, is the conformation of state to state, the later to the earlier. The pure succession is an abstraction from the irreversible relationship of settled past to derivative present. The notion of pure succession is analogous to the notion of colour. There is no mere colour, but always some particular colour such as red or blue. Analogously, there is no pure succession, but always some particular relational ground in respect to which the terms succeed each other. The integers succeed each other in one way, and events succeed each other in another way. When we abstract from these ways of succession, we find that pure succession is an abstraction of the second order, a generic abstraction omitting the temporal character of time and the numerical relation of integers. The past consists of the



community of settled acts which, through their objectifications in the present act, establish the conditions to which that act must conform.

Aristotle conceived “matter” as being pure potentiality awaiting the incoming of form in order to become actual. Hence employing Aristotelian notions, we may say that the limitation of pure potentiality, established by “objectifications” of the settled past, expresses that “natural potentiality”—or, potentiality in nature—which is “matter” with that basis of initial, realized form presupposed as the first phase in the self-creation of the present occasion. The notion of “pure potentiality” here takes the place of Aristotle’s “matter.” The “natural potentiality” is “matter” with that given imposition of form from which each actual thing arises. All components which are given for experience are to be found in the analysis of natural potentiality. Thus the immediate present has to conform to what the past is for it. The mere lapse of time is an abstraction from the more concrete relatedness of “conformation.” The “substantial” character of actual things is not primarily concerned with the predication of qualities. It expresses the stubborn fact that whatever is settled and actual must in due measure be conformed to by the self-creative activity. The phrase “stubborn fact” exactly expresses the popular apprehension of this characteristic. Its primary phase, from which each actual thing arises, is the stubborn fact which underlies its existence. According to Hume, there are no stubborn facts. Hume’s doctrine may be good philosophy. But it is certainly not common sense. In other words, it fails before the final test of obvious verification.

Symbolism is also the name given to an important movement in late 19th century and early 20th century. It is used to describe any mode of expression, which instead of referring to something directly refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else. In discussing literature, the term ‘symbol’ is applied to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event. Objects like flags and crosses also function symbolically.

Symbols are of two kinds. They are:

1. Conventional or public symbols.
2. Private and personal symbols.

Poets like William Blake, John Donne and William Shakespeare used ‘Conventional Symbols’ in their writings and Dylan Thomas, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden used “Private Symbols” in their writings. Take an example of the word ‘rose’ which in its literal use signifies a kind of flower. In Robert Burns’ Poem “A Red, Red Rose” in the line ‘O my love’s like a red, red rose’. The word ‘rose’ is used as a simile. Then in William Blake’s poem, “The Sick Rose”, the ‘rose’ is not the vehicle for a simile because it lacks the paired subject “My love”. Blake’s rose is a personal symbol and not like the symbolic rose in other



poems. The important feature of Romanticism and succeeding phases of Western Literature was a much more pronounced reliance upon enigmatic symbolism in prose fiction and poetry. It involves obscure private codes of meaning as in the poetry of William Blake and W. B. Yeats. William Blake exceeded all his romantic contemporaries in his course to a sustained symbolism.

In 19th century America, a symbolist procedure was prominent in the prose of Emerson and Thoreau and in the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Melville has used symbolic methods in his novels like *Mardi* (1849), *Moby Dick* (1851), *Billy Budd*, (1924), *The Confidence Man* (1851). Indeed every object and character in the books become a focus for many different suggested meanings. Melville's extravagant symbolism was encouraged partly by the importance which 'American Transcendentalism give to symbolic interpretation of the world'. Symbolism can, then be finally said, as it is an attempt to penetrate beyond reality to a world of ideas within the poet or ideas in the Platonic sense. In order to get behind the surface of reality, there is often a fusion of images for giving third dimension. In this way, symbolism has been shaping an identity for itself.

Metaphors As Symbolism:

A metaphor is a figure of speech that uses symbolism.

1. It compares two things that are not similar and shows that they actually do have something in common.
2. In a metaphor, there is an additional meaning to a word. This makes it an example of symbolism.

Examples of symbolism that take the form of metaphors include:

1. Time is money: This is symbolic because it warns us that when we spend our time, we are giving up the opportunity to be doing something else with that time (just as when we spend our money, we give up our chance to do something else with the money). Further, like money, time is not infinite.
2. Life is a roller-coaster: This is symbolic because it indicates that there will be ups and downs in life that we have to weather.
3. He is a rock: This is symbolic because it signifies that he is strong and dependable.
4. Love is a jewel: This is symbolic because it suggests that love is rare and pressure.



Allegory As Symbolism:

Sometimes symbolism takes the form of a literary tool called an allegory. Allegory is an extended use of symbolism and metaphors. A story, a poem, or even a whole book can be an allegory and the symbolism will permeate throughout. One example of an allegory is the monologue from Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. "All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts." This is symbolic of the fact that people are putting on a show and that they play many roles over the course of their lives.

Symbolism in Everyday Life:

Our language contains an immense number of symbols whose intended meaning or significance is well-known and accepted by the majority. Of course, many of these do wind up in books, magazines, stories, and other written works. Symbolism plays a dominant part in the way in which all higher organisms conduct their lives. It is the cause of progress, and the cause of error. The higher animals have gained a faculty of great power, by means of which they can define with some accuracy those distant features in the immediate world by which their future lives are to be determined. But this faculty is not infallible. The risks are commensurate with its importance.

Symbolism is found in Colours:

1. Black is used to represent death or evil.
2. White stands for life and purity.
3. Red can symbolize blood, passion, danger, or immoral character.
4. Purple is a royal colour.
5. Yellow stands for violence or decay.
6. Blue represents peacefulness and calm.

Objects are often used to symbolize something else:

1. A chain can symbolize the coming together of two things.
2. A ladder can represent the relationship between heaven and earth or ascension.
3. A mirror can denote the sun but when it is broken, it can represent an unhappy union or a separation.

Even flowers can have a symbolism:



1. Roses stand for romance.
2. Violets represent shyness.
3. Lilies stand for beauty and temptation.
4. Chrysanthemums represent perfection.

Symbolic Expression:

Symbolism can be found almost anywhere. Any time there is something that represents more than its literal meaning, this can be an example of symbolism. In order to appreciate the necessary function of symbolism in the life of any society of human beings, we must form some estimate of the binding and disruptive forces at work. There are many varieties of human society, each requiring its own particular investigation so far as details are concerned. Thus, geographical unity is at once presupposed. Communities with geographical unity constitute the primary type of communities which we find in the world. Indeed the lower we go in the scale of being, the more necessary is geographical unity for that close interaction of individuals which constitutes society.

Societies of the higher animals, of insects, of molecules, all possess geographical unity. A rock is nothing else than a society of molecules, indulging in every species of activity open to molecules. The attention can be drawn to this lowly form of society in order to dispel the notion that social life is a peculiarity of the higher organisms. The contrary is the case. So far as survival value is concerned, a piece of rock, with its past history of some eight hundred millions of years, far outstrips the short span attained by any nation. The emergence of life is better conceived as a bid for freedom on the part of organisms, a bid for a certain independence of individuality with self-interests and activities not to be construed purely in terms of environmental obligations. The immediate effect of this emergence of sensitive individuality has been to reduce the term of life for societies from hundreds of millions of years to hundreds of years, or even to scores of years.

The emergence of living beings cannot be ascribed to the superior survival value either of the individuals, or of their societies. National life has to face the disruptive elements introduced by these extreme claims for individual idiosyncrasies. Symbolic expression first preserves society by adding emotion to instinct. Secondly, it affords a foothold for reason by its delineation of the particular instinct which it expresses. This doctrine of the disruptive tendency due to novelties, even those involving a rise to finer levels, is illustrated by the effect of Christianity on the stability of the Roman Empire. It is also illustrated by the three revolutions which secured liberty and equality for the world—namely the English revolutionary period of the 17th century, the American Revolution, and the French



Revolution. England barely escaped a disruption of its social system. America was never in any such danger. France, where the entrance of novelty was most intense, did for a time experience this collapse.

Edmund Burke, the Whig statesman of the 18th century, was the philosopher who was the approving prophet of the two earlier revolutions, and the denunciatory prophet of the French Revolution.

The slightest survey of different epochs of civilization discloses great differences in their attitude towards symbolism. For example, during the medieval period in Europe symbolism seemed to dominate men's imaginations. Architecture was symbolical, ceremonial was symbolical, heraldry was symbolical. With the Reformation, a reaction set in. Men tried to dispense with symbols as "fond things, vainly invented," and concentrated on their direct apprehension of the ultimate facts. But such symbolism is on the fringe of life. It has an unessential element in its constitution. The very fact that it can be acquired in one epoch and discarded in another epoch testifies to its superficial nature.

There are deeper types of symbolism, in a sense artificial, and yet such that we could not get on without them. Language, written or spoken, is such a symbolism. The mere sound of a word, or its shape on paper, is indifferent. The word is a symbol. Its meaning is constituted by the ideas, images, and emotions, which it raises in the mind of the hearer. There is also another sort of language, purely a written language, which is constituted by the mathematical symbols of the science of algebra. In some ways, these symbols are different to those of ordinary language, because the manipulation of the algebraical symbols does our reasoning for us, provided that we keep to the algebraic rules. This is not the case with ordinary language. We can never forget the meaning of language, and trust to mere syntax to help us out. In any case, language and algebra seem to exemplify more fundamental types of symbolism.

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