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Kalyani G Kamble
 Assistant Professor, Prerna
 College, Nagpur, Maharashtra,
 India

W.B. yeats a symbolist

Kalyani G Kamble

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Abstract

W.B. Yeats was one of the greatest poet of the 20th century and recipient of the Nobel prize. Yeats has been called the chief representative of the symbolist movement in English Literature. Yeats used symbols prominently in his poems. This resulted from William Blake's influence, who had his own elaborate symbolism system and was someone Yeats revered and studied. Yeats is considered to be the finest poet of his time, which may be seen as a transitional period between Swinburne and T. S. Eliot, William Morris and Ezra Pound, and he was largely responsible for the smooth transition. He spoke with a unique, original authority and had his own perspective on man and the world. Yeats was no mere imitator however he used Symbols towards incredibly ambitious ends to reconcile binaries in pursuit of a unity of being. Innumerable are the symbols that Yeats employs, in many cases the same symbols being used for different purposes and in different contexts. This research paper aims to flashlight the symbolism used by W. B. Yeats and beautiful handling of these symbols in his different poems.

Keywords: Symbolism, rose, water, gyre

Introduction

Yeats has been called the chief representative of the symbolist movement in English literature. 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 reason. The reason for the obscurity of these symbols is that they are derived from Yeats occult studies. In his early years, he had been a devoted student of theosophy and magic and a member of a society of kabalists. His study of occultism embraced the love of fairies, banshees, the sidhe, the Astrology, automatic writing, second sight and prophetic dreams. In an essay called "The symbolism of poetry", 1900 Yeats wrote,

"When sound and colour and form are in a musical relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocation & yet is one emotion".

Material reality became for him a chaos of symbols through which a poet could deal indirectly with spiritual orders. He also made use of other arbitrary occult symbols of 'rose', 'crises', 'Lily', 'Birds', 'water', 'Tree', 'Moon', 'sun' which he found in kabalistic, theosophical and other works.

- 1) The Rose, a protean symbol in Yeats poetry:** The rose is a protean symbol in Yeats poems. The most of his rose poems are to be found in the volume called "The Rose" which appeared in 1893. In "*The rose of peace*" the symbol of rose has been used to mean earthly love. But in "*The rose of the world*" the symbol of the rose means earthly love and beauty. But in *The rose of the Battle*, the rose is refuse from earthly love and it symbolizes God's side in the battle of spirit against matter. The Rose represents the power of the creative imagination and occult philosophy, in the poem called *To the Rose upon the Road of time*.
- 2) Stone:** Unlike the rose, the stone symbol does not only unify opposed concepts. The stone's duality comes from the fact that the qualities it represents – solidity, steadiness may be positive or negative. The stone's immovability may indicate strength and stubbornness. As a result, stone often figure in poems in which Yeats grapples with his ambivalence about Ireland's political climate. In "*Easter 1916*" Yeats describes a stone in a rapidly flowing river. In the image, the stone participates in a dualism; while the stone never moves, the water never rests. The stone never bends; the water constantly changes shape to flow around any obstacles.

Corresponding Author:
Kalyani G Kamble
 Assistant Professor, Prerna
 College, Nagpur, Maharashtra,
 India

- 3) **Gyre:** Yeats imagine time not as a line, but as a spiral. In some poems the spiral appears as a winding staircase, but the poet's favorite image was a gyre. Gyres are sewing tools that have inverted conical shapes like that of a tornado. As a symbol, the gyre characterizes history as both progressive and repetitive. Yeats, most famous reference to the gyre occurs in "*The second coming*"

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre.
The falcon cannot hear the falconer"

In this poem, the disintegration of the gyre signals the end of time.

- 4) **Water:** Water's significance differs according to poems. Yeats sometimes uses it to represent another world and devotes his attention to species that are able to move in and out of the water, dolphins which breathe air and swans that both fly and swim. Yeats places this movement between water and air parallel to life and death. In both "*The wild swans at coole*" and "*Byzantium*", the speaker is a tired aged man who is in awe of the immortality of water dwelling creatures. While Coolepark is an actual place, the sea beside Byzantium is imagined by Yeats and the two poems symbols differ accordingly. The swans, gliding on actual water, represent the eternity of nature. The dolphins, swimming in an imagined sea; allude to the roman myth that dolphins carried souls to the afterlife.
- 5) **The richness & Indefiniteness of symbols:** Yeats said that the value of a symbol is its richness or indefiniteness of reference which makes it far more mysterious and powerful than allegory with its single meaning. A hundred men would advance a hundred different meaning for the same symbol, for no symbol tells its meaning to anyman. The symbol, said Yeats, gives voice to dumb things and body to bodiless things.
- 6) **The symbol of dance:** The symbol of dance often appears in Yeats poetry and like the rose, it is closely connected with Yeats "system". At times he uses it to indicate patterned movement, at times to indicate joyous energy. In his poem, upon a dying lady the woman's soul "flies to the predestined dancing-place". The pre-destined dancing place of course, brings to mind all that is traditionally associated with a heavenly afterlife, perfect joy, perfect peace and perfect unity. The concept of unit is again invoked by the symbol of dance in the closing stanza of the poem called "*Among school children*". The first four line of that stanza depict a heavenly or ideal state of balance and unity; the last four lines shift the focus to life itself with the suggestion that one cannot separate the part from the whole, or being from becoming, nor body from spirit. The last two of the eight lines which constitute this stanza.

"O body swayed to music, o brightening glance
How can we know the dancer from the dance"

In the fourth stanza of Byzantium equates the dance with the trance which releases human beings from the conflicts and complexities of earthly life, promoting the from the

terrestrial condition to the condition of fire "Dying into a dance, an agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve".

- 7) **Byzantium a symbol for unity & perfection:-** Byzantium is used by Yeats as a symbol for unity and perfection. Yeats was drawn to Byzantium and its golden age because of its unity and perfection such as the world had never known before or since. Yeats saw in Byzantium culture what he called the unity of being, a state in which art and life interpenetrated each other. The poem, "*sailing to Byzantium*", reflects his interest in byzantine art and culture. Byzantium here becomes a symbol of a perfect world. Rejecting this world of birth, generation and death, the poet determines to sail to Byzantium where, he thinks, he can defeat time, because he will go to the world of art and art is timeless. He discards the sensual music made by the birds in favor of the ethereal music made by the Byzantine birds of hammered gold and gold enameling. He turns from the country of the fleshly life to Byzantium which is the symbol of the ideal, aesthetic existence he longs for. Byzantium is Byzantium suggests a far-off unfamiliar civilization whose art is non-representational and whose religion has taken an exotic form because of the merging of western and eastern churches and religious traditions. The poem called Byzantium regards Byzantium as a purgatory. On the one side are the golden bird, the starlit or moonlit doom, the purgatorial flame, the smithies where soul are wrought into images, the dancing floor, they dance out their dance of expiation and on the other side are the "fury and the mire of human veins", the "drunken soldiery" and "bold-begotten spirits". The poem begins in the historical Byzantium which yet contains in it the antithesis that characterize the visionary Byzantium represented by the "unpurged images of day". In the second stanza, the poet achieves the visionary state, unwinding nature and unwinding flesh, with the aid of his communication with an elemental spirit, a demon that is itself stripped of all windings and is the bare untrammelled "thing itself". In his vision the poet hails the sacred city of Byzantium or its principal symbol, the golden bird "miracle" antithesis of nature. The third and the fourth stanzas describe the purgatorial process. This process includes the arrival of the "blood-begotten spirits" on the backs of dolphins, carriers of the dead in classical mythology and sculpture and their participation in a rite of purgation that is primarily a dance.
- 8) **The falcon and the falconer among the symbols:** "*The second coming*" is another famous poem illustrating Yeats use of symbols. The expression "falcon and the falconer" have both a symbolic and a doctrinal reference. A falcon is a hawk and hawk is symbolic of the active or intellectual mind. The falconer is a hawk and a hawk is symbolic of the active or intellectual mind; the falconer is perhaps the soul itself or its uniting principle. The idea is that the forces of Christian faith are almost spent and that a new brutal forces is about to take over.
- 9) **Sato's sword and the winding stair as symbols:** "In a dialogue of self and soul", we get two opposing symbols - Sato's sword, on one hand and the winding

stair that leads to darkness, an after-life with no return, on the other. The soul urges the contemplation of the winding stair which symbolizes the path of escape. But the self prefers a different object of contemplation, namely Sato's sword. The sword is now used as a masculine symbol for life, love and sex. It is appropriately covered with a lady's court dress. The sword is here seen as the untarnished vital principle which the lady's dress can still guard. The dress is a symbol of the body and though worn-out-by time, can still protect or guard. The self, in the affirmative second section of the poem, re-asserts its right to live life again and to suffer as man. The self represents the totality of living; the soul represents withdrawal from life and stands for abstraction.

10) A symbolic Expression of Yeats thought: One word about "*Lapis Lazuli*" this poem deals with theme of tragic gaiety. Surveying past civilization, Yeats finds a constant pattern of construction and destruction. A symbolic expression of Yeats thought here is to be found in the concluding stanza. A Chinese carving in lapis Lazuli shows two chinamen and their servant looking at the ruin that surrounds them. When the carving was first made, these persons were surrounded by a more pleasant scene, but time has damaged the inessential features of the carving. What has survived, however, is the attitude they represent, the tragic wisdom that can accept rise and fall with joy. Their many wrinkles indicate that their gaiety of casualness or irresponsibility of outlook, but the gaiety of tragic insight.

11) Spinning Tops and spirals as symbols: Winding stairs, spinning tops, spirals of all kinds are important symbols in Yeats later poetry. Not only are they connected with his philosophy of history and personality but they also serve as a means of resolving some of these dichotomies that had arrested him from the beginning.

Conclusion

Yeats is one of greatest symbolist of the Twentieth century. Being a symbolist he used many more symbols in his poetry. In order to understand Yeats it is necessary to study the symbols of Yeats first. His symbols are flexible so that they have different meaning and significance according to the context. Above study proves that W.B. Yeats was one of the great symbolist who has used symbols in a very beautiful and meaningful way.

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