

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE SYMBOLISM & SYMBOLS USED BY W. B. YEATS IN HIS POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

The present research work deals with the development of symbols in the poetry of W. B. Yeats. To comprehend and thereby fully appreciate Yeats's poetry requires some knowledge of the forces working together to form the basis of his philosophy and the symbolic system Yeats's view of the artistic function of the imagination and of the symbol and the development of his personal symbolic system are made clear in this chapter. W. B. Yeats has been regarded as a great symbolic poet. 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". The Symbolist movement began in France. Its high Priest was Stephane Mallaseme. Yeats has already much in common with the symbolists. Both aimed at something elusive and intangible. Both were subjective, alike in method and natural mode of thought. In Yeats own words, "a symbol is the possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame - - - ." In this essay we discussed the various symbols which are used by W. B. Yeats in his poetry



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**INTRODUCTION**

W. B. Yeats is one of the foremost poets in English literature even today. He was considered to be one of the most important symbolists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was totally influenced by the French movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a dreamer and visionary, who was fascinated by folk-lore, ballad and superstitions of the Irish peasantry. Yeats poems are fully conversant with the Irish background, the Irish mythologies etc. Yeats has tried to bring back the "simplicity" and "altogetherness" of the earlier ages and blend it with the modern ideas of good and evil. Almost all his poems deal with ancient Ireland or employ ancient mythology. In the early stage of his poetic career, he believed in the theory of "art for life's sake." But in the nineties, he became the advocate of "art for art's sake." Under the influence of French symbolists and English Aesthetes, he started to write "pure poetry", poetry from which all the exterior decorations had been done away with. In the last stage, Yeats tried to reconcile art with life. He said that, "literature must be flooded with the passion and beliefs of ancient times; otherwise it is a mere chronicle."

Yeats believed that "literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experiences". The keynote of Yeats poetry is the sustained and continuous development of his art and genius. To understand Yeats's poetry one has to be familiar with his interests in magic, occultism, theosophy and the complex symbolism which keeps changing from poem to poem.

**DISCUSSION**

W. B. Yeats (1865 -1939) has been called "the chief representative" of the symbolist movement in English literature. He was a symbolist from the beginning to the end of his career. The term symbol is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something or has a range of reference beyond itself. Symbolism is a coherent system composed of a number of symbolic elements, symbolic use of objects such as the rose, peacock, eagle etc. It is a practice of representing object and ideas by symbols or of giving things a symbolic character and meaning. It is also applied to the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement in literature and art of France, a revolt

against realism. Symbolists of this era tried to suggest life through the use of symbols and images.

Among the leaders of this movement were Bardclaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine who influenced the movements of impressionism and imagism. Symbolism, for the first time became a conscious movement in France. It avoids direct expression and seeks by means of imagery and fancy to endow poetic material with some hidden spiritual or intellectual significance. Under the influence of French symbolists, poets like Yeats and Eliot make extensive use of symbolism to communicate their vision and sensations, often too complex and intricate to be conveyed in any other way. Such use of symbolism often results in ambiguity and obscurity. Yeats was inclined towards symbolism, in the very doctrine of symbolism had a deep influence upon Yeats. But Yeats tried to bring Mallarme's theory of symbolist absolution back to the world of action and event to make the outer world its province. But the same uncompromising theory the world for life's sake, underline its purpose "words alone are certain good", he echoes Mallarme in one of his earliest poems, and the same principle dominated him to the end. The influence of symbolism was strengthened by that of Pater and the English aesthetes. He has sometimes been hailed as the English speaking representative of the French symbolist school. He certainly needed some such escape in the early nineties when he was ill at ease in the sophisticated atmosphere of the London decadents. He felt confirmed in his belief that a symbol should be more than a representations which does not aim at being a reproduction of sounds, fragments of imagery which mean little to the intellect, may mean much to the soul. The symbolism of Yeasts was based upon the poetry of Blake, Shelley and Rossetti. But more than that, his symbolism was based upon his reading of books on the occult. Yeats poetry is replaced with symbols. He has been regarded as one of the greatest symbolists in English literature. In his poetry, the same symbol is often used for different purposes and indifferent contexts, thereby becoming very obscure and almost unintelligible to the uninitiated reader. His symbols are derived from occult studies which undivided a fascination for fairies, astrology automatic writing and prophetic dreams. In Yeats's

own words, "a symbol is the 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 also conjure up a host of associations before the mind's eye. The word "rose" not only denotes a flower but is also evokes images of beauty and love. Thus symbols make the language rich and expressive. Innumerable are the symbols that Yeats employs in many cases. Yet some symbols being used for different purposes and in different contexts. The line, "symbols are not merely denotative, but also connotative and evocative" is clearly reflects the literal meaning, they also conjure up a host of associations before the mind's eye. The main remarkable symbols of Yeats's poems are the rose, the bird, Byzantium, Helen etc.

The word "Rose" not only denotes a flower but it also evokes images of beauty and love. The rose is a remarkable and important symbol in Yeats's poems. Most of his "rose" poems are to be found in the volume called "The Rose". This appeared in 1893. In "The Role of Peace" the symbol of the rose has been used to mean earthly love. But in "The Role of the World", the symbol of the "Rose" means on one level transient earthly love and beauty, and on another level eternal love and beauty. In "The Rose of Battle", the rose is a refugee from earthly love, and it therefore 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 Rood of Time."

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 meanings for the same symbol, for no symbol tells it's meaning to any man. The symbol, said Yeats gives voice to dumb things and bodies to body less things.

The symbol of the "dance" often appears in Yeats poetry and like the Rose; it is closely connected with Yeats "system". At times he used it to indicate patterned movement, at time to indicate joyous energy. Instead of the private symbols of Mallarme, Yeats uses the images of Celtic mythology

in his symbolic poems. There are at once more precise and richer in associations in his earlier works. Yeats had used the ancient Irish myths simply as stories. In the poems in "The Wind Among the Reeds," he uses them to express his own states of mind. The symbol of dance evokes the concept of unity in "Among School Children."

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

Here the ideal estate of balance and unity is associated with the symbol of dance.

Symbols are of two kinds the traditional symbol and the personal symbol. "The Rose" is a traditional symbol of beauty and it has been used by poets from times immemorial. "The Rose" was the central symbol of this theosophist society.

The "bird" symbol is one of the most important symbols in Yeats's poems. It is striking example of the dynamic nature of the yeastian symbol which trows, changes and acquired greater depth and density in their progression. The Unicorn and "The slouching animal form" in "The Second Coming" are two fabulous creatures which are used as symbols by Yeats in his poems.

Yeats's symbols are all pervasive. There are a number of poems that are organized around certain key symbols and each succeeding poems sheds light on the previous poems and 'illuminates their senses'. In the volume of poems entitled "The Rose", Rose is the key symbol. It symbolizes intellectual beauty, austerity, the beauty of women especially Madonna and Ireland as well. Then there is the symbol of "Helen." She symbolizes destructive beauty and is linked up with Dierdre and Maudhonne, importing to poems like "No second Troy" an unimaginable vastness, complexity and continuous expansiveness. Byzantium represents perfection and unity in Yeats's poems. He felt that Byzantium and its golden age symbolize perfection which the world had never known before or since. 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 an ideal existence

In "Byzantium", Byzantium becomes a purgatory where one is purified in the flame. Geometrical symbols of wheel and cone underline Yeat's "system", which is basic to his views of

individual life and history. His view on the rise and fall of civilization is represented by the two interlocking gyres or cons spinning perpetually. In "The Second Coming", which is the complex poem interpreted with symbols, we get a terrifying picture of the future to come.

In "A Dialogue of self and Soul" two opposing symbols are employed. The winding stair leads to darkness and an afterlife with no return; Sato's sword represents the vital principle symbol of life was love and sex. "The Tower" in his poems is both a traditional and a personal symbol. It is used to suggest loneliness and reclusion, tradition or national heritage or even violence or blood. In "A Prayer for My Daughter"; the "tower" suggests Yeats's vision of the dark future of humanity. It too has a number of fine poetic touches. There is the skilful description of the kind of beauty that is not desirable in a woman beauty that makes a stranger crazy or that make a woman exult at her reflection in the mirror. This poem is an amalgam of symbols; its richness of texture is remarkable. "The Violence of Nature", thunderous innocence of the sea – is symbolic of the violence of man which is calculated and inexorable. Maud Gonne has taken old bellows full of angry wind. "The spreading" laurel tree", which stands for t radiation and customs is mentioned twice in the poem. The intellectual hatred as of Maud Gonne brings its own punishment and the innocence and courtesy can, however serve as a refugee or shelter against energy "Windy Quarter" or "Bellows burst" All these symbols give great significance to the thoughts expressed in the poem. The poem contains "rich stores in a little room." Yeats's another poem, "The Lake Isle of Innerfree", is the symbol of the place where the people would be and where the soul at last shall posses itself peace. Yeats's another poem "Lapis Lazuli" presents a symbolic expression of his thought – the theme of tragic gaiety.

#### Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that W.B. Yeats is really the Master of symbols. Yeats use of symbols is complex and rich. Symbols, indeed, give "dumb things voices and bodiless things bodies" in Yeats's poetry.

The rose, the swan, the tower, the winding stair, and spinning tops – all assume a life to their

own and speak to the reader, often to different things. Symbolism was a help in gibing concreteness to his visions.

Symbolism made it possible for Yeats to express "the richness of man's deeper reality" which is something essentially mystical. 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.

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