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Symbolism in Whitman's Poems

Premalatha, M. A., M. Phil., Ph.D. Candidate



Walt Whitman

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman

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Symbolism in Whitman's Poems

A number of influences operated upon Walt Whitman (1819-1892) from childhood which inspired him to become a poet. His father's democratic ideas went a long way towards making him a poet of democratic ideals. He expressed his ideas about democracy, love, sex, mysticism and science in his poems. While expressing his ideas he used symbols from nature, such as grass, plants, birds and heavenly bodies, enabling readers to understand his ideas clearly. "Indirection is an important aspect of the technique of communication of a mystic" (Briggs). In his poems he has made use of indirection and symbolism, as well as sensuous and concrete imagery in a highly sophisticated manner, to convey his perceptions.

Purpose of symbols in his poems

Symbolism is essentially an oblique or indirect mode of expression, which suggests much more than is actually described or asserted. It increases the expressive power and range of a writer, and enables him/her to communicate to his/her readers' highly abstract and metaphysical truths, which cannot be conveyed directly by the use of ordinary language. Whitman's poetry is highly, symbolic for he believed that true art is suggestive, and that it requires much painstaking labour. Moreover, he wanted to communicate to his readers his own perceptions of nature, man, and the world.

1. The essential "oneness".
2. The spiritual reality.
3. The fluidity or liquidity.

The "I" as symbol

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For example “I” in Whiteman’s poetry does not stand for the poet alone. It symbolises the modern American, the modern man, or even everyman. It symbolises the natural propensities in man, and thus it stands for all. As the poet has an overwhelming feeling of the oneness of all, the “I” may even symbolise a soldier on the battlefield, or a comet rushing through the heavens.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun.

I effuse my flesh in eddies, drift in lacy jags.

At other times, the “I” becomes the traveller and explorer, whose object is to know the Universe itself as road, as many roads, as roads for travelling souls.

The road and the journey

The road in Whiteman’s poetry is not merely the physical path on which the poet travels. It also symbolises the path which leads to spirituality, and the journey itself symbolises the process by which the soul achieves its identity with the divine. His journeys are voyages in “the metaphysical sense”. Whitman’s “Perpetual journey” is not analogous to a sight-seeing trip; though his catalogues might give that impression, the mind and the material world into which it ventures, are not ultimately different in kind. Instead what seems at first penetration of nature by the mind, is actually a process through which the known world comes into being. “The child who went forth every day and who now goes and will always go forth everyday” is distinguishable from the world of his experience. “The first object he looked upon, that object he became and that object became part of him”. The true voyage is the endless becoming of reality.

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Allons! To that which is endless as it was beginningless,

To undergo much, tramp of days, rest of nights

To merge all in the travel they tend to and the days and nights they tend to
again to merge them in the start of superior journeys...

Here there is no clear distinction between the traveller, the road and the journey, for the journey is nothing but the progressive unity of the voyager, and the lands he enters; perceptions which unite the seer and the seen.

Though it claims to express the self of the poet, the famous "Song of Myself" makes sense only when it is taken to symbolise "the procreant urge" of the natural world. Indeed, *The Leaves of Grass* as a whole acquires significance and meaning only when we recognise the symbolic view point of the poet.

The grass

In *The Leaves of Grass* certain images that appear again and again in the process, acquire a wealth of suggestion and thus become symbols of major significance. For example, the very title is symbolic. Grass grows not only in single blades but also in clusters or clumps. Thus it becomes a symbol of democracy in which "individuality is in balance with the mass, distinguished singleness in harmony with massive grouping". The grass occupies the central position in the book, and it recurs in strategic sections where it springs up to the fore with renewed life. It symbolises in its simplicity the miracle of the universe, the fact that the mystery of life and nature lies not in the far away and the wonderful, but in the familiar and the common. Therefore, a leaf or blade of grass is an

object of contemplation for the poet, and it launches him into his mystic journey. Indeed, the grass in Whitman's poetry has as many meanings as there are blades or spears.

The calamus plant

In the **Calamus section**, the calamus plant or grass symbolises the intimacy of friendship. It grows not everywhere like common grass, but in "paths untrodden". Anyone familiar with the long, tapering leaves and the cylindrical flower of the calamus plant will recognize the phallic symbolism immediately (Miller). Whitman seemed to acknowledge the ambiguity of the image in "Scented Herbage of My Breast", when he exclaimed "Emblematic and capricious blades I leave you now you serve me not. I will say what I have to say by itself". The outcry is, of course, merely a part of the poem's drama, and its ultimate consequence is to emphasize the spirituality of the "manly attachment" celebrated by the poet as the basis of genuine democracy.

The sea and other water symbols

Another symbolic image of great significance is the sea along with the related water images such as rivers, lakes and ponds. Land symbolises the body, and sea symbolises the soul, while the sea shore signifies the meeting point of the land and the sea, symbolising the anti-thesis between the body and the soul.

In "Out of the Cradle endlessly rocking", there seems to be an enactment of the death scene, with the sea assuming the role of death. The sea is also identified as a Cradle "endlessly rocking" in the opening line of the poem; and the metaphor is repeated at the end, "Old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet garments, bending aside". This vivid figure is inevitably associated with the word whispered out of the sea - death.

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The poet, through the association of images, links birth with death, and death with birth. Because of his realization that the two are closely linked, that death is not an end but a beginning, the poet accepts the word death as the “word of the sweetest song”. The soul begins its eternal life with God, after the death of the body according to Christian belief. We will see again how Christian symbols appear in many of Whitman’s poems.

In the **Autumn Rivulets** section the “mystic ocean” is the realm of the spirit, and the sea-shore symbolises the marriage of body and soul, of the material and the spiritual, of life and death. In **Passage to India**, the voyage across the sea symbolises the journey of the soul to God (“Passage indeed, O soul, to primal thought!”).

Throughout the **Leaves**, water is associated with death; but in Whitman’s view death is birth, a rebirth, an entry into the spiritual world comparable to the previous entry into the physical world. In “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking”, the identification of the sea with the old crone rocking the cradle appears to associate the ocean as the evolutionary source of all life. With birth and life came also/as the old crone of the sea whispers (“hissing melodious” like the snake of the Garden of Eden) – “death, death, death, death, death”. We see that it is suggested here, the cyclic paradox.

The sea (as in “Out of Cradle Endlessly Rocking”) may be not only the realm of spirituality, but also the embodiment of eternity, where all time goes. Rivers, streams, rivulets (as in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “Autumn Rivulets”) are time passing; and when they have finally run into the sea, they have become eternity. Lakes and ponds (as in “By Blue Ontario’s shore” and “Calamus”) are time arrested or time present; as the ocean is associated with spiritual achievement after death, the bodies of inland waters

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represent spiritual achievements in life; if the ocean bestows insight into death, the inland waters bestow insight into life. Whitman utilizes the water-image as fertility symbol in the “pent-up” river figure in “children of Adam”.

The Birds: Thrush, Hawk and the Mocking Bird

The mocking bird, the thrush, and the hawk are the three birds which appear again and again in the Leaves. They make their first appearance in the early poem, starting from Paumanok and this poem makes it clear that the mocking bird symbolises love, the hawk symbolises democracy, and religion is symbolised by the hermit-thrush.

In the Birds of Passage cluster, the bird symbolism has been variously used to symbolise the presence of future perfection within the imperfect, or the flight of the soul from the temporary and the worldly to the spiritual and the eternal. In Song of the Universal, America herself becomes a hovering, “uncaught bird”, flying high. The poet’s bird symbols are remarkable for their vividness and complexity.

The Heavenly Bodies

The earth, sun, moon and stars appear frequently in groups, or separately in a number of poems in *The Leaves*. The Heavenly bodies revolving in their orbits symbolise order and balance in the midst of chaos and disorder. This brings out the poet’s faith in the divine governance of the Universe. In song of the Rolling Earth, the earth is reduced to the size of a toy and the poet is enlarged and becomes a celestial being surveying the earth as it floats through space. The star temporarily obscured by a passing cloud is the most frequently recurring celestial image in *The Leaves*.

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In the opening of the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”, the poet grieves,

O Powerful Western fallen star!

O shades of night- O moody, tearful night;

O great star disappear'd – O the black murk that hides the star;

Later in the poem, this “harsh surrounding cloud” is identified directly with the long funeral procession bearing the president’s body from the east to+ the west;

Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with the rest.

Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail...

This recurring image receives climactic treatment in one of the key poems in the later part of Leaves of Grass – whispers of heavenly death.

I see, just see skyward, great cloud masses,

mournfully slowly they roll, silently swelling and mixing

with at times a half-dismiss'd sadden'd far off star,

appearing and disappearing.

It is clear that this simple but vivid celestial image signified for the poet the fact of rebirth inherent in death – could it be the Christian rebirth into eternal life? – death is only the beginning of a new life with God for the Christian. Walt Whitman would have known that from childhood. By their very nature – the stars in their fixedness – except the one “half-dismiss'd” star that was far away, and seemed to appear and disappear, symbolizing the forgotten star of Bethlehem - and the cloud in its transience – these heavenly objects symbolise the triumph of eternal life, and the illusory nature of death.

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The Sun

The sun figures in a number of poems. In *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, and in the *Drum – Tap*, poems, the sun symbolizes fertility of a fruitful, fulfilled life. In “Give me the splendid silent sun”, the sun is also a symbol of the “Primal sanities” of solitude and nature.

The Moon

The moon also figures in a number of poems, and it seems to reconcile the poet to death and tragedy. “In *Look Down*” fair moon, transfigures death and diminishes its horror. In one of his most celebrated poems, “*Out of the cradle endlessly rocking*”, he associates the moon (the yellow half-moon) which enlarges, sagging down, drooping, and the face of the sea almost touching it, with death.

The City

Unlike the English Romantics, Whitman did not dislike the city and he does not glorify the village. Rather, he was proud of the fact that he was an American, both of the city and the village. He could evoke the turbulent chaotic city in a few vivid words.

For him the city symbolises companionship, friendship, comradeship or the possibilities of such relationships existing in the masses of people living in the city.

Symbols are essentially words which are merely connotative, but also evocative and emotive. In addition to their meaning, they also call up or evoke images before the mind’s eye. For example, the word “lily” merely connotes a “flower”, but it also evokes images of beauty and innocence. It also carries with it the emotional overtone of compassion, since ‘the Lily of the Valley’ is a reference to Jesus in the Bible and He was

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forever speaking of love and caring for suffering men, women and children, speaking and healing them when He walked on earth. He spoke against all tyranny and oppression. We can see that unintentionally the Christian symbols appear often in Whitman's poems. In this manner, through symbols a writer can express much more than by the user of ordinary words; symbols make the language rich and expressive. Thus a symbol can be used to convey "pure sensations" or the poet's apprehension of transcendental mystery.

Whitman's verse, diction, and nature's influence on him, are well suited to create the effects he aimed at, and to convey his message. He is a highly original and revolutionary poet, whose technique has exercised tremendous influence on the technique of 20th century poetry, both in England and in America. In order to convey his perception of transcendent reality he had to be "indirect" or not "direct" or "descriptive". This is the reason why he makes extensive use of symbols in his works.

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