

W.B. Yeats – The Master Craftsman of the Art of Symbolism

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W.B. Yeats was an important figure of the modernist movement of the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. Born in Dublin and raised in Ireland and London and the memorable days of his childhood spent in the scenic surroundings of County Sligo bred in him a deep love and admiration of his country's traditions and Celtic Myth that made him refer to his homeland as, 'the land of heart's desire'. As an innate literary artist, he not adopted the ancient Greek myth but also the Celtic legends into works to rekindle the Irish tradition which he felt was decreasing over the years. Yeats was regarded as one of the best symbolist poet that Arthur Simmons dedicated his work, *Symbolism in Literature* to the poet. It is to be noted that throughout his life mysticism and nationality brought infinite inspiration to the poet, realizing his poetry with beauty and strength with the use of symbols. Symbols add a special vitality and life to his works that even serious nationalistic poems like Easter 1916 which is powerfully ambivalent and antithetical becomes a beautiful creation of colourful artistry through the use of symbols.

The famous psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung has analysed in detail about signs, symbols and images in his last piece of work, *Man and His Symbols*, and has also given specific definition, and explanation, on the difference between signs, symbols and their importance and the role they play in human culture and society. The significance of eternal symbols, myths, dream analysis, its influence over human psycho and the role of psychology in understanding and unraveling the deep-seated mysteries of human mind, Jung has presented in a non-technical style with clarity to the general common public.

Carl Jung opines, that man uses the spoken or written word to express the meaning of what he wants to convey. Man's language is full of symbols, but he also employs signs and images that are not strictly descriptive in that sense. Signs are also familiar trademarks, the names of patent medicines, badges or insignia which are commonly used and these things are not symbols, they are signs. They do no more than denote the objects to which they are attached.

Jung continues saying as what we call a symbol, is a term, a name or even a picture that maybe familiar in daily life, yet that which possesses specific connotations in addition to conventional and obvious meaning. Jung goes on to explain through a humorous example of how an Indian who after a visit to England, told his friends at home that the English worship animals because he had found eagles, lions and oxen images or symbols in old churches. He was unaware of the fact that these animals are symbols taken from the vision of prophet Ezekiel and they represent the first gospel writers and pioneer evangelists. This is how we may not know the symbolic implications of a symbol even though we may know the object that represents the symbol.

Therefore, a symbol may carry a particular meaning connected to a specific context or situation which we may not know or understand. Thus, a word or imagery symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning, according to Jung.

So as Jung puts it, “As the mind explores a symbol, it leads to ideas that lay in the grasp of reason”. As there are innumerable things which are beyond the range of human understanding, we use symbolic terms and images to represent contexts and explain ideas and truths that one cannot completely define or even make it comprehensible to others verbally. This is also one of the reasons why religions employ symbolic language and images.

According to Jung, the difference between a ‘sign’ and a ‘symbol’ is; “The sign is always less than the concept it represents while a symbol always stands for something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. Symbols are also natural and spontaneous products. No one will sit down and invent a symbol with deliberate intention and then name it and give it a symbolic form. A deliberately formulated invented idea with a conscious effort and thought will always remain a sign however one tries to colour it or adorn it with fantastic trappings because it is only a sign, for a symbol has to occur spontaneously. A symbol manifests profusely symbolic thoughts and feelings which may not be connected to the image but to imply or point towards some intense thought or idea in the context, and for which symbolism is employed.

The Role of Symbols

There are ‘natural symbols’ and ‘cultural symbols.’ Natural symbols are derived from the unconscious realm of the mind and therefore they represent a number of variations on the essential archetypes, which can be traced back to their archaic roots which we can know from ancient records and primitive societies. W.B. Yeats uses Irish cultural symbols as he is an expert in the knowledge of Celtic myth and Irish folk lore and uses them in all his poetic creations to enhance the subtle yet powerful mode of what these symbols implies contextually, thereby the effect of using these symbols in the message communicated to reach the listeners or the readers. The cultural symbols are those that have been used to express “eternal truths”, and that are still

used in many religions. These have gone through many transformations says Carl Jung and even a long process of conscious development has happened making them as collective images accepted by civilized society.

Cultural symbols are vital in the preservation of a community or society. Cultural symbols retain their original awe or can affect individuals in a sensational manner, evoking deep emotional response in them.

The Eternal Symbols

The ancient history of man is understood and appreciated in a meaningful way through the symbolic images they had. As archeology exposes the buried past, more than the events and the incidents of history, we treasure the statues, designs, temples and languages that speak of ancient beliefs, rituals and systems. Other symbols are revealed to our understanding through the work of the philologists and religious historians too, who can translate these beliefs and relics and into modern concepts intelligible to us. Cultural anthropologists bring these symbols back to life that we can comprehend. Anthropology shows that the symbolic patterns still exist in certain small tribal societies even today.

To modern man symbols are apparently meaningless and irrelevant. Whereas to primitive man, we understand, that symbols seem to be a natural part of everyday life. People were able to consciously interpret and understand symbolic images and what they carry along with what they represent in the immediate context. Symbolism in poetry is often used as a way to convey a deeper meaning than what the words, when taken in their literal form, can do. The reader is able to pick upon the association presented based on his or her experiences. This makes a literary work more meaningful and delightful too, than it would be, by just using basic descriptive prose about one's experience or observation.

The Origins

The origin of symbolism can be traced back to the Haiko poetry of Japan and by the French poets alike. Haiko poetry is a poem of three lines where one image is given, and it is not interrupted by interpretation but left to the reader to understand and interpret. It becomes a symbol for a mood or a philosophical thought. Interestingly Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Japan was impressed by the Haiko poetry of Japan, and compiled a collection of Haiko and sent it to W.B Yeats who in his turn was equally fascinated by the Japanese literary work, and took up from it and developed the literary device of symbolism in his poetic creations which is to have an arresting, permanent impact on English poetry ever since.

Yeats and the Art of Symbolism

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W.B. Yeats' influential essay on, *The Symbolism of Poetry* may help one understand what a master craftsman the poet is in his use of this tool of symbolism to fashion and chisel out his artistic creations.

Yeats begins by quoting Mr. Arthur Simmons, "Symbolism, as seen in the writers of our day, would have no value if it was not seen also, under one disguise or another, in every great imaginative writer". Many profound writers have in the last few years sought for a philosophy of poetry in the doctrine of symbolism and new writers are following them in their search.

Goethe has said, "A poet needs all philosophy, but he must keep it out of his work," though that is not always necessary. All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, as they have been deliberate artists, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect because the divine life wars upon our outer life and inspiration has come to them in beautiful startling shapes. The movement brought with it a literature, which was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds, in opinion, in declamation, in picturesque writing, in word painting, or in what Mr. Symons has called an attempt "to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book"; and now writers have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call, the symbolism in great writers.

In the second section Yeats tries to describe the element of symbolism that is in pictures and sculpture, describes a little symbolism in poetry, but did not describe all the continuous indefinable symbolism, which is the substance of all style. To substantiate this, he gives a few examples. "There are no lines with more melancholic beauty than these by Burns –

"The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O!"

And these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty and we call it symbolical writing because symbols are profound and most perfect enough to be moving. If one begins a reverie, with any beautiful lines that one can remember, one finds they are all like those by Burns. Begin with this line by Blake - "The gay fishes on the wave when the moon sucks up the dew;"

Or these lines by Thomas Nash –

“Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen’s eye;”

Or these lines by William Shakespeare –

“Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
Who once a day with his embossed froth
The turbulent surge shall cover;”

Take some line that gets its beauty from its place in a story and see how it flickers with the light of the many symbols that have given the story its beauty, as a sword blade may flicker with the light of burning towers.

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as Yeats prefers, to call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful 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 evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, the more various and numerous the elements have flowed into its perfection, then more powerful will be the emotion and the power of it. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these, evoke the same emotion. Poets and painters and musicians, and in a lesser degree, even day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind. A little lyric evokes an emotion; and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making by some great epic; and at last, needful of an always less delicate body, or symbol, as the emotion grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the trunk of an old tree.

This maybe what Arthur O’Shaughnessy meant when he made his poets say they had built Nineveh with their sighing.

Yeats doubts that if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation; or that love itself would be more than an animal hunger, but for the poet and his shadow the priest. Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as Yeats suggests the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and un-make mankind, and even the world itself.

“Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man’s Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.”

In the third section Yeats encapsulates how rhythm pattern and symbols help experience the work of art far beyond in the realm of consciousness. Meditation leads to a trance like experience that evolves into inspiration. The purpose of rhythm, in symbolism has always seemed to Yeats, as something that prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, 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. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must listen, one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening.

Yeats shares his own personal experience here, as, “I was writing once at a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick up, I remembered some fantastic adventure that yet did not seem fantastic, and then another similar adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before, and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so, that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become trance, for I would have been like one who does not know that he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway”. So Yeats says, that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory.

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