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Symbolism & Its Characteristics

W.B.Yeats and Two of His Famous Poems

Symbolism

Symbolism was a late 19th century artistic movement that originated with group of French poets, including Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, who communicated ideas through symbols choosing subject matter based on visions, dreams, and mythology instead of depicting reality directly. It was created as a reaction to art movements that depicted the natural world realistically, such as Impressionism, Realism, and Naturalism. The beginnings of the movement can be traced back to 1886 when Jean Moreas published his famous Symbolist Manifesto. The manifesto attacks the descriptive tendencies of Realist theatre, Naturalistic novels, and Parnassian poetry.

Symbol: It is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something

else". In a poem it is a word which, while signifying some thing specific, also signifies something beyond itself". The symbolist movement was like a link between Realism and modernism.

Much twentieth century poetry relies heavily upon symbols. Yeats used symbols in his poems as a path to an inner vision. Yeats asserted that the power of poetry comes chiefly from symbols, both emotional symbols "that evoke emotions alone" and intellectual symbols "that evoke idea alone or idea mingled with emotions.

Symbols are of two kinds:

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 while, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden used “Private Symbols” in their writings.

The main characteristics of symbolism

- 1-Symbols add levels of meaning, creating depth in a text.
- 2- Symbols lend a universal meaning and greatness to the theme and characters of a literary work.
- 3- Symbols pique the interest of readers as they interact with the text. With the interpretation of symbols, readers formulate the meaning of a literary work.
- 4- Symbols are keys to the writer's mind and intent
- 5- Symbols engage readers as they offer the reader a creative opportunity.
- 6- Symbol introduces unknown to familiar, mysterious to understanding and translates the complex to simple.

7- It stands for both good and bad.

8-It provides models to guide.

William Butler Yeats

He is an Irish poet and he is one of the most prominent 20th century poets. His early poetry was known to be political and it was devoted to the Literary Revival and to Irish Patriotism. His early writing was also focused on love, longing and loss, and Irish myths. His later poetry engages with more modern techniques and topics.

W. B. Yeats is generally considered one of the twentieth century's key English symbolist poets. Being a symbolist poet, he used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. He chose words and assembled them so that the meaning is more significant and resonant. To understand his poetry, it is important to understand the various symbols he uses in his works. His symbols are flexible so that they could have numerous connotations and significations in different works. To know Yeats' symbolism is to know Yeats himself as it is through his symbols that he discovers himself.

The Second Coming

"The Second Coming" is one of W.B. Yeats's most famous poems. Written in 1919 soon after the end of World War I, it describes a deeply mysterious and powerful alternative to the Christian idea of the Second Coming-Jesus's prophesied return to the Earth as a savior announcing the Kingdom of Heaven. The poem's first stanza describes a world of chaos, confusion, and pain. The second, longer stanza imagines the speaker receiving a vision of the future, but this vision replaces Jesus's heroic return with what seems to be the arrival of an ugly beast. With its distinct imagery and vivid description of society's collapse, "The Second Coming" is also one of Yeats's most quoted poems.

● The first stanza

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity

Flying around and around in a widening spiral, , making it clear that something is moving and changing, and the world will never be the same. A falcon can no longer hear the call of its owner. "falcon," which likely represents humanity, has become detached from its "falconer," some sort of controller or holder that once kept it in order. Now the falcon is roaming free. The falcon to have flown so rapidly out of the reach of the falconer this shows us how the delicate balance of the world has been upset.

Lines 3-6 describe collapse and turmoil, dissolution of order and a rising tide of violence and revolution without cause. Innocence and rituals celebrating purity have been destroyed, and a wave of violence is washing over the land, drowning everything in its path. All the rituals of innocence have been swallowed by this tide. Pure destruction and chaos have spread across the world, and so has a tidal wave darkened by blood.

In lines 7-8, the poet mourns that the best people have become silent and resigned to their fate, while villains are the ones in power, speaking the loudest and caring the most about their causes. The best people aren't motivated to act, but the worst people are impassioned and eager.

● **The second stanza**

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man.

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadow of the indignant desert birds

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born

The second stanza beginning with the line "Surely some revelation is at hand," finds the speaker sure that some major shift is happening around him. All this chaos cannot be an accident, certainly. Something vast is coming, some distorted version of the Christian apocalypse is descending upon the land; some ending is approaching. In this stanza, the Biblical imagery takes over the visions of corrupted nature. From the start, Yeats ties his poem to religion by stating 'the Second Coming (of Jesus Christ) is at hand, it must be part of an event of apocalyptic proportions. He sees a desert in his mind's eye, and observes a lion with a man's head, also known as a sphinx, moving slowly around the desert, while angry, fearful birds flutter around, casting shadows on the sand. Then Yeats finds himself suddenly back in his own body and mind, out of this surreal, dreamlike scene. Two thousand years of calm have been disrupted by the shaking of a cradle.

By the end of the poem, the speaker is sure that something even worse is coming. Some nightmare—some "rough beast"—is rising, approaching the earth at a rapid pace. He doesn't know what this creature is, but he can sense its approach—and it is the ominous core of "The Second Coming," that mysterious tide of evil and

mystery approaching the world in the form of a modernity full of violence, war, and the loss of traditional meaning and values. The speaker asks: what beast, whose time has finally come, is dragging itself towards Bethlehem, where it will be born.

Main Themes

Violence

"The Second Coming" is a response to a world wracked by violence. Yeats wrote the poem 1919, right after the end of World War I, in which 16 million people were killed in a horrifying display of the power of modern technological war and of the continuing conflicts that wracked the supposedly modern, civilized world. The poem voices a sense of shock, dismay, and pessimism about the future that many felt after the war.

Prophecy

"The Second Coming" is a deeply ominous poem, full of foreshadowing. It is full of dramatic premonitions that do not necessarily make the future much clearer: all it is sure of is that something is going to happen, and the world will never be the same.

Christianity

In this poem, Yeats uses Christianity as a stand-in for all order, ethics, and tradition. He borrows this poem's title from the Book of Revelations, which describes Christ's return to earth after the end times as a "second coming". In the Bible, Christ's return always occurs after a death—of himself, or of the world, in the case of the Book of Revelations. The world is spinning towards a kind of death, Yeats predicts in this poem, but what rises out of the ashes will not be Christ—it will be a mysterious "rough beast."

Meaninglessness

"The Second Coming" is about loss, about change, and about traditional meanings and values coming apart at the seams. The line "the center cannot hold" basically fixated on the idea that much of life is meaningless, hollow, without defined order and certainly without the comforting linearity and order that religion and tradition provide. The center cannot hold—there is no more core meaning or logic to be found, and only time will tell what will rise out of the ashes.

The main symbols

The widening gyre

The gyre in "The Second Coming" symbolizes the growing world. It is one of the most iconic images of twentieth-century poetry. A gyre is a conical spiral motion or form, often referring to an oceanic surface current. The gyre in Yeats's poem represents the increasing chaos and instability of the human world as history progresses. Rather than the world being a stable structure, it is perpetually in motion and growing outward.

The falcon

Yeats places the falcon at the center which represents humanity's control over the world. The fact that the falcon "cannot hear" its master thus symbolizes a loss of that control. The falcon, separated from the falconer, is lost: without reason, without ruler. It is a symbol for a lost humanity, at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. The falcon, in short, is all of us, wandering around the earth, trying to find meaning.

The falconer

The falconer represents God or the traditional values, ethical responsibility and order that was once controlled the falcon.

The Beast

In "The Second Coming." the great beast emerges from the Spiritus Mundi, or soul of the universe, to function as the primary image of destruction in the poem. The speaker predicts the arrival of the Second Coming, and this prediction summons a "vast image" of a frightening monster pulled from the collective consciousness of the world. The speaker has a vision of a beast. The beast has a "lion body" and the "head of a man." This makes it similar to a sphinx which was a mythical creatures said to be greedy towards humans. With its animal body and human head, perhaps this beast says something about the "nightmare" to come. Though humans have tried to civilize themselves and improve their world, perhaps their more beastly animal nature has only been hidden not defeated. The beast might symbolize that civilization itself is a kind of illusion. The human head has a "gaze" that lacks empathy, suggesting that the beast is ready to kill. This strange image seems to gesture towards humankind's ever-improving capacity for self-destruction.

SAILING_TO_BYZANTIUM

“Sailing into Byzantium” is one of Yeats’s most inspired works, and one of the greatest poems of the 20th century. It was written in 1926. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” describes the metaphorical Journey of a man pursuing his own vision of eternal life as well as his Conception of paradise. It is A poem concerned with mortality and the frailty of the human body as we age.

William Butler Yeats wrote this poem when he was 62 and beginning to grapple with the realities of mortality. He comes to realize that Youth and sensual life are no longer an option for him. Therefore he commences his journey from the Sensual to the spiritual world. One of the striking features of this poem is its symbolic title that indicates a journey of a speaker from the sensual to the spiritual world. It is a sort of search for spirituality, peace and hope required in the Old age. The poem is written in a simple but symbolic language.

“Sailing to Byzantium” tells the story of a man who is travelling to a new country. Byzantium was an ancient Greek colony later named Constantinople, which is situated where Istanbul, Turkey, now stands. It is important to note that the poem is not Autobiographical; Yeats did not travel to Byzantium. But he did argue that it offered the ideal environment for the artist. The poem is about an imaginative journey, not an actual one.

First stanza:-

**THAT is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.**

The poem begins with a declarative sentence in the first line, "That is no country for old men" from this line the reader immediately senses the importance of Yeats's diction, instead of using "this" to refer to the country in which the speaker is currently in, the speaker instead says "that," which gives the reader the sense that the speaker is looking at his former country from a distance. Perhaps he has already started his journey to Byzantium as the poem opens.

Yeats opens the first stanza of the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' with a world in which there is no place for the elderly and this country is not suitable for old people to live there. Old men are shut out from that kind of life that is available here because life there is all for physical and sensual and the speaker himself is one of elderly. In this stanza we see images of young people "in one another's arms", how they hugging each other and birds in the trees, and see other animals (fish, flesh, or fowl) going through the summer blissfully and joyfully unaware of their mortality. In the last three lines of the stanza, the speaker states that all things that are born and then die, and none of these young creatures take time to explore the things that keep the soul lively. Therefore he is sailing to the city of Byzantium where intellectual life is awaiting him.

Second Stanza:-

**An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,**

**Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.**

In this stanza, the speaker says that an old man in this world is useless, worthless and inferior thing just like a torn coat hanging on a stick unless he keeps his soul alive within its old, worn-out body. It does not mean he has an old soul, for the soul of the old man is clapping and singing loudly. He means that the more worn out his bodily dress, the louder the soul sings. It is rather done by studying the magnificence of the person's own soul. There is only a study of materialism, of things that are subject to decay and death. The speaker then says that this is the reason why he has travelled through the seas in order to reach the holy city of Byzantium.

Third stanza:-

**O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.**

The speaker addresses the good and wise men that are standing in the holy fire of God and refers to them as Sages, just like the tiles in the walls of Byzantium churches. The speaker asks the sages to come out of the fire, whirling in spirals like the bobbin of a spinning wheel. He wants them to become the singing masters of his soul. He asks them to take away his fleshly heart which is connected to his old and failing body and it knows not its mortality. The speaker wants the sages to take him to the everlasting world of eternity and permanence

Fourth Stanza:-

Once out of nature I shall never take

**My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.**

The speaker says that once his soul has left his body behind, he will never acquire his bodily form again. Instead, he will acquire the form of a beautiful golden art just like those made by goldsmiths in ancient Greece in order to hang in the emperor's bedroom. Or he will become a golden bird placed on the branch of a golden tree. And he will sing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium in order to educate them about the past, present, or the future.

Themes

- **The theme of spirituality:** spirituality in this poem is strongly linked to The body; there's constant struggle to know exactly where the Heart belongs to whether spiritual world or material world.
- **The theme of transformation:** life gives way to death. Youth turns Into age. Change, it seems, always in the air. Frustrated by the cruelty Of natural cycles, the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" tries to Initiate a new dynamic by leaving his homeland in search of spiritual Rebirth.
- **The theme of old age:** growing old just isn't all that it's cracked up to Be. "Sailing to Byzantium" begins as a meditation on the things which age leave behind such as ; bodily pleasure, sex, and regeneration.
- **The theme of man and natural world:** in Yeats's poem, no matter who Or what you are, if you have a body, you're going to start decaying Pretty quickly.

Symbols:-

The most important symbols in "Sailing to Byzantium" include the **city of Byzantium, birds, scarecrow, gyre and gold mosaic.**

Byzantium symbolizes a world of artistic magnificence and permanence. For him, Byzantium represented a paradise of perfection, unspoiled by history of civilization.

Gyre is used to represent the swirling, turning landscape of life itself. He uses it to represent the systems that make up life, the push-pulls between freedom and control that spin together to create existence.

Gold mosaic is a conventional symbol of purity and permanence.

Scarecrow represents the decrepitude of old age

Birds, fish and **young lovers** symbolize transience and mortality.

Holy fire symbolizes the cleansing and purifying nature in traditional Christian imagery.