Literary Symbolism: Concept and Function

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Abstract
Symbols are communicative device used by writers to depict concealed reality. It has the capability to express intricate ideas precisely and flat ideas effectively. Words have the power to evoke ideal realities suggestively. Symbols convey the poet’s comprehension of transcendental mystery. For W.B. Yeats, a successful symbol is mysterious and deals with the divine reality. For T.S. Eliot, emotion of art is expressed through correlative. In nineteenth century, the growing interest in psychoanalysis led the writers to probe deep inside human consciousness. The writers turned towards symbolism in order to prepare a ground for the presentation of human mind and soul, which is very abstract. This paper documents different concepts associated with symbolism and sums up the function of symbolism in brief.

Keywords: Correlative, Ideas, Mystical, Psychoanalysis, Revelation, Suggestive

Art grows out of life, it is nourished by life; it re-acts upon life. An artist passes through certain stages of creation before a work of art is composed. It begins with the viewing of the universe, the next is the process of selection of certain aspects of the universe, the third creative process is the visualization by the artist. These three stages go on to create a work of art. But this is not all that an artist wishes to do. There remains the most significant step of the whole creative process and that is the communication of the aesthetic experience. In many cases it is matchless as Shelley has expressed in the idea, “Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds.”

I.A. Richards has also made certain observations regarding the communicative activity in his essay ‘Communication and the Artist’ (1924): “The arts are the supreme form of the communicative activity.”

An artist can demonstrate his skill as a perfect craftsman only through his ability to handle the problem of communication in a consummate manner. His success depends on his capability to perform his duty adequately.

The rendering of the artistic facts is very demanding. In literature a writer seldom uses the words in their literal sense. There is no way in which the happenings of this world can be portrayed through a simple language, as life is complex and has many layered meanings. To bring out the deeper meanings one has to take the help of a language that is suggestive and not always very explicit. A writer uses a method very different from an ordinary one, that is implicit and symbolic. It helps the writer to reveal all that is not apparent. Thus, the symbols become a communicating device very often used in art as the tool by which a writer is able to depict the reality that is concealed behind the apparent or is beyond our physical capabilities. Concepts and ideas, inexpressible because of their very nature, can be conveyed in this manner.
All words, whether written or spoken, are symbols having their several meanings. M.H. Abrams, in his Glossary of Literary Terms, defines a symbol: “A symbol in the broadest sense of the term, is anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols.”

In art, generally, we come across the symbol of rose that represents beauty. It occurs in painting, sculpture, poetry and other literary forms, very often. Rose as a symbol of beauty denotes those distinctive qualities of the flower. The concrete image of rose evokes the abstract idea of beauty. This is how the concretization of idea takes place in poetry. A rose achieves a representative status and it becomes an example of a wider category of things. A symbol, then, is a particular example of a general case. It simply represents or stands for a person, object, group or idea.

We get a description of the word symbol in the Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics:

The word ‘symbol’ derives from the Greek verb symballein, meaning ‘to put together’, and the related noun, symbolon meaning ‘mark’, ‘token’, or ‘sign’, in the sense of the half-coin carried away by each of the two parties of an agreement as a pledge. Hence, it means basically a joining or combination, and consequently something once joined or combined as standing for or representing in itself, when seen alone, the entire complex.

Thus, in literary usage, it represents by virtue of association, something more or something else. When a writer aims at saying more than what meets the sensual perceptions or he wants to suggest something beyond the expressed meanings, he employs symbols to communicate. It has the capability of many intricate ideas but the expression is precise and crisp. Symbols call up or evoke in the mind a host of associations connected with them, conditioned by the experiences of the individuals. To quote once again from the Encyclopedia:

A literary symbol unites an image and an idea or conception which that image suggests or evokes as when, for example, the image of climbing a staircase is used to suggest the idea of ‘raising’ oneself spiritually or becoming purified in T.S. Eliot’s Ash Wednesday.

The above quotation makes it amply clear that the physical ideas related with the ‘staircase’ is not enough for the poet Eliot. He proposes to concentrate on some deeper ideas like purification and self-upliftment. Similar idea occurs in M.H. Abrams’ definition of the literary symbols in The Glossary of Literary Terms. He goes on to comment that “symbol is applied only to a word or set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else, that is, the words refer to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself.”

Symbols have been divided into two categories: conventional or traditional symbols and personal symbols. The examples of conventional symbol would include the ‘lily’ as the symbol of chastity, ‘rose’ as passion and so on. These are the universally accepted symbols. The personal symbols, on the other hand, are created by the poets for their own purposes to express their own sense of experiences. They are often mystical in nature. These symbols are created in an author’s imagination, conveying any number of meanings in the guiding context. Examples of the private symbols can be seen in Eliot’s and Yeats’ poems. Eliot uses many personal symbols which either requires wide scholastic expertise or special reference, offered by the poet to interpret. The interpretation from the reader’s point of view can differ from what the writer is willing to present. This might lead to some confusion.
Whether private or conventional, symbols help the poets to present effectively an idea which would be otherwise flat, unnecessarily involved or difficult. Regarding the technical aspects of the symbolic presentation, the critics warn:

Symbolic associations of imagery should be made neither too explicit nor too fixed, for implications of this sort are best felt rather than explained, and vary from work to work, depending upon the individual context.³⁷

Here, we get the idea that symbols should be suggestive because an over-elaboration may destroy the effect. One realizes that the symbols differ from work to work as it depends on the writer who uses it and the context in which it is used.

Symbolism, as a movement in art, had its origin in France, in the later half of the nineteenth century. Chiefly, the movement was a revolt against the excessive concretization of expressions and ideas: “It’s subject matter shows a return to the intimate emotional and aesthetic experience of the individual after the more objective stress of the Parnasse.”³⁸ The young poets like Jules Laforgue, Rimbaud, and Stephen Mallarme had initiated experiments with a new form of poetry. Prof. C.M. Bowra, in his book, The Heritage of Symbolism, analyses the objectives of the movement in length. For him, Mallarme was the chief exponent of the movement in French poetry. In fact, as he points out, it was the contribution of the three poets, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarme that went on to make the movement. Mallarme has been regarded “as the saint and sage of the symbolist movement”³⁹, by Cleanth Brooks. Prof. Bowra also goes on to remark that “In his theory and his practice Mallarme was the conclusion and crown of the symbolist movement.”⁴⁰

Keeping these views in mind, we examine Mallarme’s contribution and his ideas regarding the movement. For Mallarme and his followers, every word is a symbol and is not used for its common purpose but for the association which it evokes of a reality beyond senses. The French symbolists, actually, drew inspiration from the mid nineteenth century American poet Edgar Allan Poe. As he was tired of easy and gay American lyrics composed in early nineteenth century, he explored the words from the view point of their suggestive power. Identically, the French symbolist poets used words for their evocative value so that the poet could convey the complex states of his mind, his apprehension of the absolute, or the vague fleeting sensations constantly passing through the mind.

For the symbolists the power of the word goes on far beyond ordinary denotative verbal limits through suggestive developments in syntax and interrelated images and through what may be termed the “phonetic symbol” or musicality and connotative sound relationships.¹¹

Similar are the views of Cleanth Brooks as he tells us that, “words for Mallarme were the much more than signs. Used evocatively and ritualistically, they are the means by which we are inducted to an ideal world.”¹² Thus, the symbolists used words not for their immediate meaning but for the combined effect of phonetics, rituals, musicality of words etc. Commenting on the objective of the movement, Mallarme wrote:

To name the object outright is to destroy the three quarters of the enjoyment of a poem, which depends on gradual process of guessing; to suggest that is the ideal….evoking an object little by little in order to show forth a state of the soul.¹³
As pointed out through this remark, the poets did not depend on object or things for their meaning. They followed Mallarme’s principle by employing a device of suggestion. It is used in such a way that the object unfolds itself gradually just like the opening of the petals of a rose. This process of the revelation of the meaning indicates a state of the soul. Symbol, for Mallarme and his followers, was a kind of comparison between the abstract and the concrete where one of the terms of the comparison is only suggested. Thus, it is implicit and oblique.

Mallarme had a mystical faith. He had the knowledge of the aesthetic joy which was outside and beyond intellectual activity, therefore, beyond significant words. Prof. Bowra says, “Symbolism then was a mystical form of Aestheticism.”

Poetry, for Mallarme, as Brooks views it, was:

The expression by means of human language restored to its essential rhythm of the mysterious sense of the aspects of existence: it endows our sojourn with authenticity and constitutes the sole spiritual task.

Mallarme hoped so to purify poetry that it would produce absolute joy which transcends the limitations upon words and seem to belong to an ideal world. Symbols were used to convey the poet’s comprehension of transcendental mystery. Prof. Bowra remarks: “The essence of symbolism is its insistence on a world of ideal Beauty and its conviction that this is realized through art.”

Mallarme’s theory, thus put briefly, is that poetry should not inform but suggest and evoke, not name things but create atmosphere. Ideas in Mallarme’s poems are meant to be apprehended indirectly, symbolically, and not directly by the intellect. Prof. Bowra explains Baudelaire’s views regarding the movement in these words:

For Baudelaire the visible and sensible world was full of symbols which fill man’s heart with joy and sorrow and convey him through scent, colour, and sound to raptures of the spirit.

As mentioned above, the things perceived by us, the sounds and smells that we experience, are all symbols and they provide us with the most effective symbols for transmitting the sensory experiences. Nature, for Baudelaire, is symbolic of another reality. In his poem Correspondences (1857), he viewed nature as forest of symbols, “implying correspondences among sensations in the phenomenal world and between that world and an ideal one.” Baudelaire viewed all nature as a temple “whose living pillars are the trees.” As the wind blows through these “‘ forests of symbols’, confused words are now and then breathed forth. The poet, because of his special endowment, is able to apprehend these words, for in all things there is a symbolic sense and every object in nature has its special connection with a spiritual reality.” Brooks quotes from Marcel Raymond’s From Baudelaire to Surrealism, to elaborate this idea:

…from the world of the senses the poet takes the material in which to forge a symbolic vision of himself or of his dream; what he asks of the world of the senses is that it gives him the means of expressing his soul.

Baudelaire created the image of the poet as a kind of seer, who could see beyond the real world, i.e. the ideal world and his task was to suggest this outer world through symbols. Poet is the one who could transform reality into a greater and more permanent reality.
The symbolists aimed to liberate poetry from its expository function and formalized oratory in order to describe the immediate sensations of man’s inner life and experience. They realized the need of metaphors and images in order to express the human consciousness for which plain and direct statement is not only impossible but inadequate. They correlated the emotions with symbols to unveil the most intimate and evanescent tones of the mysterious experience and expressed them, poetically, through suggestions. Symbols, thus, became a medium for the expression of what is termed as “sense of ineffable”. The symbolist doctrine that the world transmitted by the senses was a reflection of the spiritual universe, led the poet to discover analogies between himself and his surroundings. These subjective analogies were unsuited to logical explanation and lent a mysterious and secret touch to the poem.

This poetic spirit, as noticed so far, laid more stress on the role of subconscious in our life and an interest in mysticism. The poets turned to the music of words to plumb the death of the unconscious. As Cuddon illustrates it:

The attainment in transcendental symbolism of the visions
of the essential idea…could be best conveyed by the fusion
of images and by the musical quality of the verse; by in short,
a form of so called ‘pure poetry’. The music of words provided
the requisite element of suggestiveness.

Mallarme and others resolved to exploit to the full the musical potentialities of the words – the use of sonorous words, they thought, were capable of creating, apart from their meaning, states of mind similar to those produced by listening to music. Brooks has defined the symbolist movement “as the effort to bring poetry to the condition of music.” He cites Poe’s observation, “It is in music that the soul most nearly attains…the creation of supernal Beauty.”

The movement reached England by the end of the nineteenth century. Arthur Symon’s book The Symbolist Movement in Literature(1899), was the proclamation of the ideals of symbolism among the English poets. He regarded W.B. Yeats as “The chief representative of the movement.” In his essay The Symbolism in Poetry(1900), Yeats appreciated this movement in these words:

With this change of substance, this return to imagination,
this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden
laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would
come a change of style and we should caste out of serious
poetry, these energetic rhythms, as of a man running which
are the invention of the will with its eyes on always something
to be done or undone; and we would seek out those organic
rhythms which are the embodiment of imagination.

It appears that Yeats understands this movement as a new style of writing poetry which depended on ‘organic rhythms’ and not on ‘energetic rhythms’ to bind imagination. The movement of thought in this direction allowed the poets to raise their own spirituality through their most individual symbols.

In England, then, the problem was both, to rid poetry of its prosaic elements and to give it a greater buoyancy and a feel of truth. Yeats willingly accepted the significance of symbols in the design of poetry by commenting that “All art that is not mere story-telling or mere portraiture is symbolic.” For Yeats, poetry is incomplete with its own ritual only and its own meaning; it is a part of a larger experience; it is a means of
communication with the spiritual world which lies beyond or behind the visible. He viewed the poet as a medium, an interpreter of the many layered unseen, who conducts the passage from one order to another and finds words for these mysterious messages implicit in the unseen.

Yeats distinguished between two kinds of symbolism, the symbolism of sounds and the symbolism of ideas. The first class contains emotional symbols:

All sounds, all colors, all forms either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions…and when sound, and color and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one color, one form and evoke one emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and is yet one emotion.  

Here, Yeats limits the use of symbols to the expression of emotions and isolates them as a special field for symbols. What is noticeable here is that though the emotions are indefinable yet they are precise. Yeats’ symbolism is more emotional than intellectual.

The second class of symbols, according to Yeats, is that of the ideas where “symbols evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions.” It stands for an idea and plays a corresponding role in poetry. These symbols are also intellectual. Yeats’ normal method is to take some figure or creature of a legend and through it express some state of mind of his own. This symbolism creates an impression of mystery, of remoteness, or kinship to ancient and strange forces. For Yeats, a symbol to be successful, has to be mysterious and indefinable.

Elsewhere, Yeats goes on to distinguish between symbol and allegory. In an allegory, according to him, the allegorical figure stands directly for something else. The symbol, in contrast, cannot be pinned down to a simple meaning. It expresses a deep and complex spiritual phenomenon. Symbolism deepens the philosophy and enables the artist to deal with the divine reality. Yeats assumes “the indissoluble marriage of all great arts with symbols.” He observes, “A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame.” Yeats speaks of a symbol as the “great memory or … some mysterious tide in the depth of our being.” In his essay “Magic”, Yeats states about his three famous beliefs: ‘the great mind’ and ‘great memory’ that “can be evoked by symbols.” The purpose of his own poetry was to evoke this ‘great memory’ and ‘great mind’. This approach of Yeats was similar to that of the psycho-analysts.

Yeats had tried to make distinctions between ‘inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols’, i.e. the symbols arising out of a received tradition, which are conventional in nature and seemingly invented arbitrarily by the poet, that is subjective. The distinction, he said, came “to mean little or nothing” because ultimately what the poet did with his symbols determined their power. For Yeats, a symbol surfaced from the deepest recesses of the collective unconscious. He declared that the “symbols are still the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by … the poet, the musician and the artist.”

The preceding detailed discussion surely would enable us to document the different concepts associated with symbolism. Its function could be summed up by saying that the symbolists sought not to specify or catalogue, but to ‘evoke’ or ‘suggest’ images. Since the poet’s sensibility is prized as a unique vision of experience, he must device a special language to express it; a language developed through
symbols, images and associations. The effort was to create a blurred vision of what was described; the purpose was to mingle the imaginary with the real. The Encyclopedia has defined symbolist poetry as “a poetry of indirection …. Ideas may be important but are characteristically presented obliquely through a variety of symbols and must be apprehended largely by intuition and feeling.”

The impact of this movement was quite considerable up to the first half of the twentieth century. T.S. Eliot ignored the principles of this movement. There is no specific commentary on this particular creed in Eliot’s criticism yet in his poetry there is a remarkable use of it. The fusion of sound and color to achieve or express a certain inner experience is very common in his poetry. Also, we come across, in his essay ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ something quite similar to the symbolist ideals. He found Hamlet as an artistic failure because Shakespeare had not succeeded in finding an adequate formula of the emotion of disgust he was trying to express in the play. Critics may not agree with his view regarding Hamlet but one can not overlook his arguments in favor of objectivity. Then the question arises, how does a poet achieve objectivity in expression? If feelings and emotions are not to be expressed directly, how are they to be presented? An answer to these questions are given to us in these words by Eliot:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative, in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience are given the emotion is immediately evoked.

It is clear from the above statement that Eliot was opposed to the very idea of direct expression of emotions in poetry or any other literary work. A direct expression of emotions, he thought, was highly dangerous for good poetry. Howsoever, a strong, a personal emotion may be, it fails to leave behind an enduring impression, if it does not speak through suitable objects. In order to be the emotion of art, it needed correlative.

The term was originally used by Washington Allston in his Lectures on Art (1850) to describe how the external world produced pleasurable emotions on the part of the viewer. A similar view occurred in George Santayana’s Sense of Beauty (1896), where he had observed that beauty is an objectified pleasure. Others, especially Eliot, had used the term to indicate a specific emotion evoked in a reader through a series of details, actions or situations which are objectively presented.

Although Eliot nowhere mentioned any kind of similarity between his theory of objective correlative and that of the symbolism, yet, it is quite evident. A close analysis of Eliot’s theory leads us to discover several similar points that we have come across while dealing with the ideals of the symbolist poets. The first and the foremost is that both stressed the need for an expression of emotions in the work of art and for them the function of art is the expression of communication of emotions. To this notion of expression is added the idea of evocation. The poet evokes that feeling by inventing correlative, which in fact is his medium. The symbolists and the objective correlativists tried to blend the internal and the external world in their emotion and to communicate it in a highly stylized manner. The last point of similarity in both the views is that they laid greater stress on the suggestiveness and the evocative power of the symbols or an objective correlative. To sum up, in both the approaches, the poet must draw the outer world down to himself and steep it in his own emotions. Such indirect method of inculcating his ideas gave to the poet the immense advantage of translating the abstract ideas into concrete forms. But there was a need of an absolute
sincerity of emotions and expression. Symbols also helped in maintaining the brevity and condensation in the expression of single mood or feeling. Prof. Bowra describes it as a method that “allows the poet to deal with the subjects which ordinary speech must leave vague.”

In this paper the particular characteristics of the symbolist movement as delineated by various symbolist poets has been dealt. The impact of this movement was felt by other English writers and many of them began to practice it very effectively. It would be improper to suggest that the use of symbols became popular in English literature only after the symbolist movement because it was widely used by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Donne and others. However, the writers of the earlier period show comparatively less conscious use of symbols. It could be said that the writers employed symbols in their design naturally and conventionally. Thus, it was erroneously assumed that the symbolist’s technique was untouched by the writers till the impact of the movement reached England. Of course, symbolist movement had a marked influence on the writers of the later nineteenth century. Being the dominant genre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fiction encouraged the writers to try their hands on the new possibilities of writing a novel.

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