

## Symbolism in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

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### ABSTRACT

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was a renowned Irish poet. He was the last great poet in the English romantic tradition. He is regarded as one of the most powerful modern poets of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He evolved a personal and individual mythology even while dealing with contemporary issues of his times. He alongwith T.S. Eliot, was a leading symbolist poet. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. His major poems include “No Second Troy”, “The Second Coming”, “Sailing to Byzantium”, “A Prayer for my Daughter”, “When you are old”, ‘Stolen Child”, “The lake of Innisfree”, “The Tower” etc.

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Yeats poetry is replete with symbols and images. He has been regarded as one of the greatest symbolists in English Literature. Aurther Symons dedicated his book “The symbolist movement in literature (1991)” to W.B. Yeats and called him “The chief representative of that movement in our country”, A symbol is basically a suggestive invocation. In yeats’s own words “a symbol is the possible expression of some visible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame.

Yeats made use of complex system of symbol in his poems. In Jungian psychology it is stated that great symbols well up from the depth of the racial memory. Yeats describes this racial memory as “Anima Mundi’ or ‘Spiritual Mundi.’ He draws his symbols liberally from Irish folk-lore, mythology, alchemy, magic occult, philosophy, metaphysics, paintings, drawings etc. His symbols and images belong to a very wide range of areas nature, animals, birds, religion, personal possessions, historical events and phenomenon, mystic processes etc. Symbols are of two types the traditional and personal yeats use of them ranges from the conventional to the most personal and unexpected. Some of the important symbols used in his poetry are birds, beasts, mythical creatures, the tower, the rose, Helen etc. Besides these there are other semi-mystical and philosophical symbols like gyres and cones.

Yeats’s symbols are all pervasive. There are a number of poems that are organized around certain key symbols. In the volume of poems entitled “The Rose”, Rose is the key symbol. It symbolizes intellectual beauty, austerity, the beauty of women specially that of Mand Gonne and Ireland as well. Yeats makes frequent use of bird imagery in his poems. The ‘Swan’ in ‘The Wild Swan Coole’ is an ever recurring symbol. The swans stood

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for beauty and love, reminding the reader of spenser's "Prothalmion." The bird cry in Yeats poems stands for desire physical or spiritual.

Beast imagery also carries note worthy significance in Yeats poetry. 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. The unicorn has traditionally been taken as an emblem of the soul. The slouching beast or the monster in "The second coming" is symbolic of the appear an of a new civilization antithetical to the present Christian civilization :

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon can't hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre can't hold Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The falcon here is a symbol of intellect and the falconer is a symbol of soul. Byzantium is used by Yeats as a symbol of the 'dance' often appears in Yeats poetry and it is also closely related with Yeats 'system'. Yeats generally uses this symbol to intricate either patterned movement or joyous energy.

"Helen being chosen found life flat and dull and later had much trouble from a fool."

The above mentioned lines from "A Prayer for My Daughter" are highly symbolic. Here Helen symbolizes destructive beauty and is linked with Maud Gonne. In the same poem, the Horn of Plenty and 'the laurel tree' are symbols of place, prosperity and happiness :

"Ceremony's name for the rich horn and custom for the spreading lourel tree."

Yeats often uses his personal possessions buildings (The Tower etc.) in a symbolic manner Yeats use of symbols from Irish Mythology and the occult also play an important role. In "A Dialogue of self and soul" we get it opposing symbols. Sato's sword and the winding stairs. The winding stairs lead to darkness but Sato's sword symbolizes the path of escape.

Thus Yeats was a great symbolist right from the beginning of his career to the very end. However Yeats symbolic technique differs radically from that of the French symbolists Yeats symbols are not vague, undifferentiated and emotional. They are haste and wiry in the tradition of those in the poetry of William Blake. According to Tynadall :

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