



SYMBOLS IN THE POEMS OF W. B. YEATS: A STUDY

Nazrul Islam, Research Scholar, Dept, of English, B.R.A. Bihar University Muzaffarpur

Received: 20/01/2018

Edited: 29/01/2018

Accepted: 10/02/2018

Abstract: W. B. Yeats is a significant Irish poet and playwright of twentieth century literature. He plays a remarkable role in the Irish Literary. He got Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923. "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "The Second Coming" are poems of Yeats which incorporate symbols. W.B.Yeats is really the master of symbols. The symbols which are used by him in his poems are world famous.

Key words: Yeats, Symbolism, Imagery, Twentieth century.

W. B. Yeats is a significant Irish poet and playwright of twentieth century literature. He plays a remarkable role in the Irish literature. He got Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923. Simply, he is one of the few writers who completed their greatest works after being awarded the Nobel Prize; his works include *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* and other *Poems* (1929). He was a good friend of Indian Bengali poet Tagore. He was one of the most important symbolists of the 20th Century. He was influenced by the French movement of the 19th century. He finds life and art inseparable. His concept of reality as unity and his belief that symbols can evoke that reality evolved from his personal experiences. When he was of 63 the *Tower*, a collection of twenty-one poems, appeared.

The Tower was the volume which secured Yeats' reputation as major poet who addressed in boldly dramatic terms some of the central experiences of the twentieth century, is a testament to the way its author had been strenuously remaking himself as man and writer since at least the date of his marriage.

(Brown 437)

Yeats' earlier collection of poems *The Wild Swans at Coole* has been reviewed by Middleton Murry, a famous English critic.

The personal life and public life of Yeats play an effective role in making *The Tower*, a book in

which myth, history and life experience has been expressed.

The world was experiencing the war when Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees in October 1917. Yeats spent his days since 1914 in London and Sussex. He was moved by a public event and became a rebellion against the British rule in Ireland in April 1916.

In *The Tower* the poems he deals directly with the years of struggle and violence in Ireland and presents real fear and horror.

The poem, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' describes the atrocity which took place in Gort nearby Coole and Ballylee.

Man is in love and loves what vanishes, what more is there to say?

Yeats is sincere that he is living in a world of change. His wife George plays an important role in assembling myth of human personality. *A Vision* expresses the kinds of human personality.

History is read more loosely in 'A Vision' as a manifestation in time of a similar process of thesis and antithesis, which periods succeeding one another in an endless cycle governed by change from primary (solar) to antithetical (lunar) periods.

(Brown 441)

It is obvious that Yeats believed that he was living through just a period of transition in *Dove or Swan*. Simply, *Leda and the Swan* is a fractured sonnet.

The poem expresses the moment of brutal assault and rape. In Greek myth Zeus lusted after the mortal Leda, and in the form of a Swan raped her. The twin Castor and Pollux was the result of the intercourse. The kidnap of Helen was the root cause of the Trojan War. The dramatization of myth is expressed in *Leda and the Swan*. The contemporary experience is vividly presented.

Poem two of 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' makes clear how 'Leda and the Swan' is included in 'The Tower' as a mythic version of the reality. Some poems of 'The Tower' present the personal and historical crises.

(Brown 443)

In *The Tower* for example, philosophy cannot assuage the suffering occasioned by passionate memory of erotic entanglements recalled from the frustration of old age. The poet is driven back in the isolation of his tower on racial pride, denunciatory rage, and faith in creativity. The tone is of mingled heroism and desperation.

Local horror is expressed through the volume *Nineteen hundred and Nineteen.*'

The tones of *The Tower* are authoritative and present the poetic power. We find the rhetorical expression very effective. The image and live experience are expressed with great care.

The sequence poem, accordingly (as in 'The Tower', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' and 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'), with its various parts contributing as fragments to a possible rather than an actual finality of statement, seems the appropriate poetic kind for a poet so aware of dissolution and disintegration at a transitional time in public as in his personal history.

(Brown 444)

It is said that *The Tower* is a brilliant work which expresses the anxiety of the modern world.

Among School Children has been included in *The Tower*. Yeats dramatizes himself as an elderly public man inspecting a school as part of his public senatorial, he remembers his own childhood and his beautiful beloved.

The poem is a work of fluid recall as memory ranges back through time, juxtaposing past and present, as if the mind could transcend time itself. Yet it is also a poem of palpable physicality – of fingers, eyes, cheek, hair, a mother's lap, even 'the bottom of a kind of kings' – as if to remind that the mind cannot escape its entrapment in mutable flesh.

(Brown 446)

His poems exhibits symbols as a means of expressing abstract and mystical ideas. He uses symbols in *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *The Second Coming* very vividly. W. B. Yeats' early poetry presents Irish myth and folklore and his later work depicts contemporary issues. He is the master of traditional forms. He uses allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. He is a symbolic poet. The image of twentieth century is reflected in *The Second Coming*:

*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.*

(SC 1-8)

The poem is an antithesis of the reality of Christianity. The symbol of the gyre is being presented through the image of the falcon, as it spirals above the falconer, getting far away from the centre until eventually the falcon cannot hear the calls of its master. The phrase "Things fall apart" could easily be interpreted as referring and to destruction of the physical world itself, and the use of the verb "loosed" is effective. In this poem there are the symbols gyre, falcon and falconer, lion body, rocking cradle, and Bethlehem, just to make a few. Each of these is an intellectual symbol, and depending on the person's individual knowledge, can be interpreted differently and some are only linked to one thing, such as Bethlehem, which can only be linked to the city of the same name and specific historical or religious meaning. Yeats declares: *It is*

the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world: but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect. If i watch a rusty pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories but if I look

at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people. (Yeats 164)

In short, we can say that W. B. Yeats is one of the key English poets of the twentieth century. He is a trend setter of 20th century English poetry.

Works Cited:

Brown, Terence. W.B. Yeats, *The Tower*, Neil Roberts, (ed.) A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. Print.

Yeats, W. B. "Poems of W. B. Yeats." "The Second Coming." Handout. Dr. J. Whitsitt. September 2006.

Yeats, W. B. "The Symbolism of Poetry." Handout. Dr. J. Whitsitt. September 2006.