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SYMBOLISM IN WALT WHITMAN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Walt Whitman the Leaves of Grass was first published in 1855 on the independence day of America. As title itself suggests, the central symbol of The Leaves of Grass is 'grass'. The grass is symbolic of the mystery of the universe and it has multilayers of meanings. The sea and the related symbols of river, lake, brook and ponds emerge only next to the grass. The hermit – thrush lures the poet down to the shores of the water. The bird symbol appeared first in 'Staring from Paumanok'. The beauties of the bird have become symbolic of the beauty of the modern human being. The mocking bird symbolizes love, the hawk democracy and hermit thrush is a symbol of religion. The heavenly bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars have symbolic significance. These symbolize order and balance in the midst of chaos and disorder. The city also carries important symbolic significance. The celestial bodies like earth, sun, moon stars are the poet's symbols of gradual evolution of the celestial sphere pertaining to spiritual world. The star in 'When Lilacs Last' is a profound symbol of the great leader of America – Abraham Lincoln. 'When Lilacs Last' and 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' are two of Whitman's most striking poems, memorable for powerful, beautiful and significant use of symbols. He is a revolutionary poet of symbolism and his poems are full of symbolism in which various types of symbols have been employed by the poet. This poem introduces the three principal symbols. The ferry symbolizes continual movement, backward and forward, a universal motion in space and time. The water symbolizes the soul and the land symbolizes the body and the sea shore the meeting point of the land and the sea symbolizes the antithesis between the body and the soul; The sun refers to the fulfillment of life as it is the source of life and light releasing fundamental energies. In all the above symbols the central poetic metaphor employed is the self. The paper is an attempt to seek these symbols in The Leaves of Grass and other poems.

"Symbols are essentially words which are not merely connotative but also evocative and emotive."¹ Symbolism is an indirect mode of communication and expression suggesting more than is actually described. It enables the writer to convey his readers abstract ideas and metaphysical conceits which are found difficult to express directly by the application of an ordinary language. Symbolism is part of every great poet's repertoire

because the most influential poet is one who suggests the most and leaves the reader plenty to understand on his own. Whitman believed that true work of art is suggestive and his poetry is highly symbolic which requires mental exercise on the part of readers to appreciate it.

The *Leaves of Grass* was first published in 1855 on the independence day of America. Walt Whitman considered himself to be the bard, the seer of America. This seer peeped into the present and sought the significance of a blade of grass. In 1860 Whitman brought forth the third edition where he established his identity as American poet.

As title itself suggests, the central symbol of the *Leaves of Grass* is grass. Grass is a single blade as a democratic person is single and separate and grass in cluster is fused with the paradox of democracy as it is a member of a group. The poet leans and loafs observing a spear of summer grass. "I celebrate myself and sing myself

and
what I assume you shall assume
for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul.
I lean and loafe at my ease ... observing a spear of summer grass"².

Spears of grass rise from the dirt. Man is created of the dust of the earth. He finds some similarities between flora and human beings. The soil begets a multitude of grass; the soil begot human being through a creative act. Whitman relates the life of a blade of grass to a human life. Grass strives to survive daily and eventually meets its end. So does man. This is what spears of grass do each morning – awake and meet the sun. Grass represents all human, collectively and individually and what each faces in life. Life, in its complexities, as well as mundane acts, continues on its survival plan, just like leaves of grass. The grass is symbolic of the mystery of the universe. The poet endeavors to grasp the mystery or the 'grass' which leads him to hold the key to the other mystery: I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars. The grass has multilayers of meanings. It may be considered as the floor of the garden or it is the meditative seat of the poet. The symbols of Whitman behave like character in a play and the plot of this play lies in the achievement of a poetic expression. Ultimately his language becomes symbolic.

The sea and the related images of river, lake, brook, and ponds come only next to the grass. The sea is a dominant symbol and it throws on the shore unwanted things which makes the poet restless. In 'Out of the Cradle' the drift thrown up is the word 'death'. "The explication of the symbolism is the task of the reader. Whitman declared, "The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as mine I have had mine as the mind penetrates nature. This process itself creates a new bond full of new images and symbols."³

The hermit thrush lures the poet. "Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness"⁴ the bird gives 'death's outlet song of life' and the song floats over the rising and sinking waves. The sea and shore are his major themes. In 'As I Ebb'd' Whitman called the sea and the shore his mother and father. So he is called the poet of beaches and harbors. The sea is the great mother presiding over dying and being born. He sings the death of love and the love of death.

"The birds which are often mentioned in Whitman's poems are hawk, mocking-bird and the hermit-thrush standing for uninhibited sexuality and the realization of the transcendent fulfillment of primitive nature, the mocking-bird and the hermit-thrush symbolizing spirituality."⁴ The bird symbol appeared first in 'Starting from Paumnok'. The three birds are the mocking bird, the thrush and the hawk. The poet has emphasized on the song of the mocking bird, the flight of the mountain hawk and the home of the hermit thrush. The beauties of the birds have become symbolic of the beauty of the modern human being. In 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed' the bird plays a significant symbolic role.

The hermit thrush:

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself,
avoiding the settlement,
Sings by himself a song.

It is the song of joy and the poet is aware of the joy of death. These are the symbols of the poet's personal experiences. It proves Whitman's great attachment to the bird. "The nation America is visualized as a strong bird. It sets free the hidden resources of mystic development and America is the Uncaught Bird."⁵ The mocking bird is a symbol of love, the mountain – hawk symbolism of democracy, and hermit-thrush represents religion. The three birds seem to provide symbolically a new approach to the interpretation of the *Leave of Grass*.

The celestial bodies include the earth, sun, moon and stars. These are the symbols or images of the poet's ideas or reality. The gradual evolution of the celestial sphere proves the reality of the spiritual world. This sphere includes nobody what we see around but the earth on which we survive. When the poet looks at it, he sees not grass as a typical symbol, but finds the earth too to be a perfect symbol. Here earth becomes a plaything and observer is superior to it. The earth speaks to us in a language and these are imagined by the poet.

The star in 'When Lilacs Last' is a profound symbol of a great man. Sometimes the dark cloud hides the bright star. These are 'ravens clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses spreading'. Sometimes they conceal stars 'only in apparition'. The 'great cloud masses' that roll mournfully slowly and smelling and mixing silently symbolize the rebirth which is nothing but death. 'When Lilacs Last' and 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' are two of Whitman's most striking poems, memorable for powerful, beautiful and significant use of symbols. He is a revolutionary poet of symbolism and his poems are full of symbolism in which various types of symbols have been employed by the poet. This poem introduces the three principal symbols. 'The drooping star' symbolizes president Lincoln who was killed by an assassination. The poet argues he will mourn with the return of every spring, because even though nature is reborn (as the lilac symbolizes), he suffers from grief over the loss of the man whom he loves. We also find "o powerful western fallen star" and "o great star disappear" which are related to Lincoln and "the black mark that hides the star" and "the cloud" symbolizes death. The stanza describes the poet's intense grief for the dead through symbols.

The lilac bush is a symbol of life, love and affection and its heart shaped leaves symbolizes love. The purple colour of the lilac indicates the passion of crucifixion which is suggestive of violence of Lincoln's death. Bird symbolizes the reconciliation with death and its song is the souls voice. The continuous re-occurrence of the spring season symbolizes the cycle of life and death and rebirth. The hermit thrush represents spiritual life. The hermit thrush's song is "Death's outlet song of life" – a song celebrating death as a rebirth into the spiritual life. The journey of Lincoln's coffin through the natural setting is symbolic of a journey through life; the passage through the mourning cities suggests a journey through death. In the last stanza all the symbols – the lilac, the star and the bird twine together to symbolize the true significance of death as deliverers into immortality.

In the poem, 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' we have the 'Sun there half an hour high'. The sun's reflection presents the fine centrifugal spokes of a halo. The ferry symbolizes continual movement, backward and forward, a universal motion in space and time. The water symbolizes the soul and the land symbolizes the body and the sea shore the meeting point of the land and the sea symbolizes the antithesis between the body and the soul; it means only through the body that a person can attain spirituality. The ferry symbolizes the spatial and temporal movement. It is also concerned with the group of men and women who ride it, who have ridden it and who will ride it. The coming together of these men and women symbolizes the spiritual unity of men in this world. The heavenly bodies, the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars have symbolic significance. These symbolize order and balance in the midst of chaos and disorder. The city also carries important symbolic significance. In Whitman's scheme the city symbolizes companionship, friendship or the pavement in a city suggests man in movement, energetic and creative men, traveling the open endless roads. In many of his poems the sun refers to a fruitful fulfillment of life. It is suggesting a fulfillment. It is also symbolic of the primal sanities of nature. We find it is a symbol of creatively.

Shine! Shine! Shine!
Power down your warmth,

Great sun!

The Sun has become the source of life and light releasing the essential energies.

The moon enables Whitman to be reconciled to the tragic death. The thematic relation of death to the moon is very ancient in literature. Whitman is not depressed as he looks at the moon. The moon softens and soothes him with its 'silvery face'. There is a short poem called 'Look down fair Moon' where he prays to the Moon to 'bathe this scene'. He appeals.

Pour down your unstinted nimbus
sacred moon.

Incapable of analysis he expressed himself only in and through symbol all that he experienced. Such symbols suggest his inner meanings.

The earth is waiting for her lovers, the poet. These are also 'brood muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounge in my winding paths. These passages make the tree symbolic of the process of procreation. It becomes later a symbol of a spiritual love. It is also a symbol of wilderness. The tree faces 'white snows and wild wind.

Conclusion

Whitman felt that all his distinguished poetic ideas and images emerged from the surface of his mind, 'A great deal of which indeed was below consciousness.' The experiences stored in this mind over a year suddenly burst forth in the guise of images and symbols. Throughout Whitman's poetry plant life symbolizes growth and multiplicity. Regular growth of plant stands for regular expansion of the population of the United States. Multiple leaves of grass symbolize democracy. Whitman's interest in the self lies into his praise of the individual. He links the self to the concept of poetry throughout his work, envisioning the self as the birthplace of poetry. In all them above the central poetic metaphor employed is the self. The other parts are made up of the other selves-society or nature. If we ignore this, we miss the relevance and significance of all the images and symbols employed by Walt Whitman throughout the Leaves of Grass and his other poems.

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