

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.3. 2018 (July-Sept)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MYTH AND SYMBOL IN W.B.YEATS'S POETRY

BISHNU PRASAD POKHAREL, *Ph.D.*

Lecturer, Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal

Email:bishnupokhare12345@gmail.com.



ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats popularity mostly rests on the use of myth and symbol. He has abundantly borrowed myth from religion, primitive folklore. Greek Mythology and Irish Mythology. The forces of nature and change of civilization have been raised at the level of supernatural occurrence in his poems. By means of symbol, something concrete – an object, a place, a character, an action—something concrete stands for something abstract, W.B.Yeats has concretized vague, fleeting sensations and experiences in his poems.

**Key Words:** Symbol, myth, civilization, anthropological, supernatural

Myth and Symbol : Meaning and Definition

Myth is a kind of traditional and anonymous story. It is a means to give cultural and social customs of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or imaginative terms. Myth is supposed to be a false or unreliable story. But it is a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding. In most literary contexts, intuitive mode of cosmic understanding prevails because myths are deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity and existence.

M.H. Abrams writes about myth thus:

In classical Greek, "myths" signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology— a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (178)

Myths lack the historical framework of legend and moral teaching of fables. However it does not mean that it is completely fictitious. The only reason is that myths are less historical than legend. Even if people no longer believe in the true existence of mythical situation, myths are related to social rituals as well. Mythical stories are supernatural tales that are deliberately invented by their authors.

Jeremy Hawthorn analytically presents the conceptual meaning of myth," In recent usage, then, the concepts of myth and of ideology are interlinked: myths perform an ideological function while ideologies function by means of myths. (222)".

Hawthorn shows the interrelation of myths and ideologies since both are the belief systems that operate on the basis of shared views. Myths cannot be called only the production of creative imagination rather they are related to the archetypal experiences of the race, birth, mating and death. Michael Bell states the modernist use of myth:

It is necessary to appreciate the combined literary, philosophical, and psychological motives for the Modernist use of myth into which contemporary anthropological conceptions were assimilated. For anthropology was a corroboration of existing beliefs of poets and novelists as much as or cause of their recourse to myth. Above all, the Greek word *mythopoeia*, or myth-making, points to the close relation of myth and poetry within the activity of creation at large. To create a poem is analogous to creating a cultural world. (119)

Bell asserts the notion that myth and anthropological conceptions are assimilated. Myth and poetry are to some extent similar for the reason that both involve in the activity of creation. Writing a poem is in away constructing a chain in the cultural world.

Guerin et al. presents the function of myth critic thus:

Unlike the traditional critic, who relies heavily on history and the biography of the writer, the myth critic is interested more in prehistory and the biographies of the Gods. Unlike the formalistic critic, who concentrates on the shape and symmetry of the work itself, the myth critic probes for the inner spirit which gives that form its vitality and its enduring appeal. (167)

To sum up myth is an anonymous story, rooted in primitive folk beliefs, presenting supernatural episodes to explain natural events and phenomena. Myths attempt to interpret creation, divinity and religion; to explain the meaning of existence and death; to account for natural phenomena; and to chronicle the adventures of racial heroes. They are the product of a racial or tribal group, rather than the creation of an individual.

### **Symbol**

In literary usage, a symbol is a specially evocative kind of image; that is a word or phrase referring to a concrete object, scene, or action which also has some further significance associated with it: roses, mountains, birds, and voyages have all been used as common literary symbols. The literary symbol stands for some idea as if it were just a convenient substitute for a fixed meaning: it is usually a substantial image in its own right around which further significances may gather according to differing interpretations.

M.H.Abrams defines symbol in this way:

In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term "symbol" is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself. (320)

Abrams definition highlights the notion that when the writer wants to say more than what meets the eye, wants to suggest something beyond the expressed meaning. The sense of mystery and expressiveness, the feelings of richness and complexity cannot be communicated in any way other than symbolic use of language.

Symbols are of two types: universal symbols for which we may call conventional symbols, and private symbols. Universal symbols present widely shared associations between an object and a concept. The general association of darkness with evil, setting sun with death, rose with beauty, dove with peace, moon with beauty, spring with birth, summer with youth, autumn with maturity, winter with death, peacock with pride, eagle with heroic endeavour are some of the examples of universal symbols. However private symbols are different from author to author for the reason that poets associate the things with something abstract not in the conventional way. Symbols contain the double order of correlated reference.

### **Myth in W.B. Yeats's Poetry**

W.B.Yeats employed myths in his early as well as later poetry as symbolic bearers of his emotions. He built up an elaborate mythical system, which he explained in a prose called "A Vision". His early poems present the heroes having no more fear. In his later poems Yeats's desire takes another direction and longs to escape from the world of realities and go into the world of pure ideas. It was W. B. Yeats who made Byzantine myth and worked so as to create the unity of vision. Andrew Sanders says "Reference to mythology and Christianity

to Homer, Dante to Donne, to Byzantine or the Quattro cento stand as points of reference within a new unity of vision which projects emblem of perception and of the perfectibility of the soul" (400).

W.B.Yeats has developed his own system: the rise and fall of civilization. For him every civilization changes in every two thousand years. His vision of civilization and change has been presented by Pramod K. Nayar:

Yeats's vision of civilization and destruction appears in poems like "The Second Coming" while it informs much of his better poems like "Lapis Lazuli", "The Tower" and the two Byzantium poems. Yeats believed that civilization was cyclical, destroying itself every two thousand years then it reached its pinnacle. "The Second Coming" is this vision of Christianity's peak and destruction after 2000 years. (353)

His poem "The Second Coming" is based on the mythical theory:

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.(313)

Every civilization begins with a moment of inspirations or revolution such as the birth of Christ, and its progress is like the unwinding of thread wound on a cone or gyre. At first, the civilization is very narrow and intense, like the apex of a cone; then it gradually loses its impetus, broadens and so dissipates its energies. As the poem advances into the dimension of prophesy, the shape of its revelation is established with vagueness. In the concluding lines, he envisions the birth of a new rough beast in Christ's cradle.

And what rough beast, its hour comes round at last.

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born.(213)

The given lines present a terrifying vision of impending savagery. The diminishing impetus of Christianity is conveyed through idea in the opening lines that Christianity is like falcon that has lost touch with the falconer. During the twenty centuries of the Christian civilization the beast has been sleeping but is not about to make its appearance in the world. This second coming will supersede Christ who was born two thousand years ago at Bethlehem. The new period in human story will be one of monstrous animal power. The poem captures each one ushered in by dramatic religio-mystical of some kind symbolized by an annunciation such as the annunciation of Mary, the mother of Christ and birth of Christ.

"Leda and the Swan" is based on Greek Mythology. The poem begins with a picture of Zeus, disguised as a swan, descending with great force upon the girl Leda and taking hold of her in order to rape her.

A Sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed(317)

The whole action of the poem is sudden, and totally unexpected by Leda. This immediacy of action has been shown through the phrase "A sudden blow". The word "staggering" has been used to express the involuntary reaction of the girl. In spite of her feelings of shock and terror, she is already fielding to sexual pressure which is shown through the phrase "loosening thighs". The following lines weave the myth.

A shudder in the loins engenders there

The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.(317)

Leda experiences a shudder in her uterus and this shudder is a sign of her orgasm. The climax of the swan's sexual intercourse with Leda is the shudder in the loins. At this moment of the climax, Leda conceives a child, and this child will make history. This is an obvious Greek myth according to which Helen was born of Zeus's sexual union with Leda. Then she was married to Menelaus. Soon after her marriage, she ran away with Paris, the prince of Troy that caused ten years war which ended in the Greeks sacking Troy.

The poem "A Prayer for My Daughter" is a personal poem expressing the poet's hopes and fears about the future of his daughter, Anne. This poem shows Yeats's disapproval of the kind of beauty which is self-centered, or which drives a lover crazy. To talk about the stability and equilibrium in life, he has taken the support of myth.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull  
And later had much trouble from a fool,  
While the great queen that rose out of the spray,  
Being fatherless could have her way. (314)

Two mythical characters have been used in the given lines. Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was married to Menelaus but then she ran away with Paris. The poet does not wish his daughter to be extremely beautiful and treat beauty as an end in itself. "The Great Queen" in the poem is Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love. In Myth it is explained that she sprang for the foam of the sea due to which she was fatherless. Commenting about the use of myth and symbol A. Norman Jeffares writes:

One of the striking aspects of his work is his ability to draw upon very desperate material—Homer Jests with the occult Gaelic Myth with English romanticism, his philosophical and historical reading with his own critical attitudes to modern life. But the repeated connections between poem and poem, symbol and symbol, image and image, are there: they interlock; meanings become clarified and expanded the more that readers know the poetry, as indeed Yeats expected them to. (9)

The mythology which Yeats has used in the poems "The Second Coming", "Leda and the Swan", "A Prayer for My Daughter" and many other poems have been borrowed from Greek and woven into Irish mythology. His mythology seems to be fresh and wonderful for the reason that he has handled the myth in his own way. By means of myth, he has inter-mingled the ideal of the artist and religion.

#### **Symbol in W.B. Yeats's Poetry**

W.B. Yeats was inclined towards symbolism, in the very modern sense of the word. He has sometimes been hailed as the English speaking representative of the French Symbolist School. He felt confirmed in his belief that a symbol does not aim at being a reproduction and that rhythms, combination of sounds, and fragments of imagery, which mean little to the intellect, may mean much to the soul. Direct statement would often be too long and at times quite inadequate to express everything that the poet has in mind to say. Therefore he must choose his words not alone for reasons of fitness or harmony, but to stand for more than themselves and arouse a flock of associations, in the mind of the reader. The sense of mystery and expansiveness, the feelings of richness and complexity, cannot be communicated in anyway other than symbolism.

"Sailing to Byzantium" is typical of many of the poems of Yeats's maturity in its treatment of the effects of old age, its attempts to remedy them by contemplation of an idealized Byzantium.

That is no country for old man. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees (316)

The speaker, an old man, seems to be unhappy in the world of senses, he would therefore withdraw to an ideal world where he can be happy in the midst of "monuments of unageing intellect". Byzantium itself symbolises the world of intellect, spirit and art. The golden bird symbolises the idealized vision. Though the poem seems to be escapist, it is only his solutions that an old man should visit Byzantium which is a holy city. An old man should rejoice in a sense of the liberation of his soul from the entanglements of this world. It represents the realm of the spirit. It also symbolizes unity and perfection. The figure of an old man becomes at once ridiculous and frightening:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless.(316)

Yeats laughs at the absurdity of the scare crow body of the old man and yet retains his dignity and seriousness. The laughter is drowned in the noble music which announces the voyage to the holy city of Byzantium. The Byzantium mosaic depicted in the poem has a concrete splendour and represents a timeless world which lives with a life more intense than that of the "dying generation" of the first stanza. Yeats believed that in early Byzantium, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one. Yeats saw in Byzantium culture what he called the unity of being, a state in which art and life interpreted each other. David Daiches says:

The two Byzantium poems "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" distill their meaning into a quintessence, haunting the mind and probing the emotions as no English poet had done since the 17th century. The theme of both poems the attempt to escape from old age and decay by escaping altogether from the world of biological change into the timeless world of art, symbolized by Byzantium. (1131)

He makes up his mind to go to the world of art because art is timeless. The 'country' in the poem symbolizes the world of nature, the fish swarming in the water symbolizes fertility and natural mortality, and holy fire" symbolizes the purgatory stage.

David Daiches further comments about the art of handling the words:

Yeats dealt with words magically, not in any vague romantic sense of the term, but literally; his poetry of ritual and gesture is a poetry in which words are made to act magically, transcending their literal meaning to explore through the most precise symbolism a whole world of reality behind the common world known by sensation. (113)

Daiches highlights the artistic and magic ability of handling words endowing them the connotative meaning behind the outwardly expressed meaning.

W.B. Yeats has brought a large number of symbols from Irish Mythology. The Irish Mythology is almost as rich in great stories and figures as the Greek Mythology, and equally rich is the borderland where myth and history meet. It was upon this vast store that he drew for symbols. The symbols of Yeats's poetry are occult in character. He makes use of the occult symbols of rose, cross, lily, bird, water, tree, moon, sun etc. That's why his symbols are not vague and hazy. They have a well defined form which perceptibly meet. Margert Ferguson in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* says:

Here, in his poems of the 1920s and 1930s, 'winding stairs', 'spinning tops', 'gyres', 'spirals of all kinds', are important symbols, not only are they connected with Yeats's philosophy of history and of personality, but they also serve as a means of resolving some of those contraries that had arrested him from the beginning. (310)

The Rose (1893) was a heading first used by Yeats for a group of shorter poems. The rose has various symbolic meanings; as a title it probably means the "Eternal Rose of Beauty and of peace". In some of his love poems, it has also been used in the ordinary sense. The four leaves of the Rose and the cross make a mystic marriage, the rose feminine, the cross masculine; the rose blooms on the sacrifice of the cross. The Rose in his intellectual beauty, love for the Maud Gonne, with whom he had fallen in love.

The Tower symbol partakes of both traditional and personal character. It was a tower of real physical existence where the poet lived for some time, and at the same time it is used as a symbol of loneliness and isolation, a secluded place of retreat for the poet. At other times, the tower becomes a symbol of tradition, of national heritage and at still other times of violence. In "A Prayer for My Daughter", the tower hints at the poet's vision of the dark and dismal future of humanity.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour

And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower, (314)

The poem opens with the poet's new born child sleeping in a cradle. A storm is raging with great fury outside his residence called the Tower. The phrase "sea-wind scream" symbolizes destruction. The storm raging outside is symbolic of a more violent storm inside the poet "The great gloom" in his mind, and also the dangers of life awaiting his new-born daughter. In the 6<sup>th</sup> stanza, the poet says,

"May she become a flourishing hidden tree". Here "flourishing hidden tree" symbolizes growth and harmony, the image of the spreading laurel tree reinforced by the image of the singing linnnet. Yeats's daughter

should combine in herself the qualities of harmonious growth and unalloyed happiness. "Dance" in this poem symbolizes cosmic dance that unites all opposites and creates a sense of harmony and perfection. The tower sometimes represents the heaven-aspirations of the solitary intellect, but these tend to merge with the different heaven-aspirations of the soul. The intellect articulates, dealing abstract things; but the soul aims directly at the mystic, one which swallows up and cancels speech and thought itself.

The poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is an autobiographical expression of a conflict between the soul of the poet and his intelligence of mind. The outcome of it is the poet's whole-hearted acceptance of the earthly life with all its evils and miseries.

The soul calls upon the poet's self to ascend the winding stair of the tower, a symbol of retreat and spiritual asceticism and on reaching the top to fix his thoughts upon the star that marks the hidden pole. It means that the poet should make efforts to seek wisdom, knowledge and truth. The path leading to this goal is beset with hardships but they should be overcome with resolute will. The soul commands the poet for the final attainment of the eternal. However, the poet's self opposes the advice of the soul by pointing Sato's sword that he has upon his knees. "The sword" in the poem has been used as a masculine symbol for life, war, love and sex. It is approximately covered with 'a Japanese lady's court dress' which though almost as tattered as the scare-crow bodies of old man and woman can "still protect" and though faded can still "adorn". The sword represents the untarnished vital principle which the Japanese lady's dress can still guard. The dress is a symbol of the body and, though battered by time, can still protect or guard. It means the worn out piece of embroidered cloth which protects the sword is symbolic of the aged human body protecting the vital principle of life.

The poems like "Leda and the Swan" and "Among School Children" use Helen having symbolic significance. She symbolizes destructive beauty and the linking up of Helen with Maud Gonne sometimes symbolizes narcissistic view.

W.B. Yeats has been justified as a symbolist from the very outset of his poetic career up to the last, even before and after the brief influence of French Symbolism. As his symbolic power attains maturity, the symbols as well gain intricacy, association, evocative quality and richness. Symbolism seems to have enabled him to make his vision and traces concrete and substantial. The pictorial presentations of vague, fleeting sensations and experiences have been possible only through symbol. It has helped him to express deeper reality something mystical in essence.

Thus the symbol in Yeats's poetry is more often its own starting point, not the end but the beginning of the process. Yeats used the symbol to evoke the world; and his interest ultimately was less in the symbol than in the things evoked. The symbol in his hand became a true metaphor which evoked the world in terms of itself. Yeats wanted to reconcile world and spirit and to integrate himself with world and spirit. The symbols create unity of being which is impossible in the physical phenomenon world.

## Conclusion

W.B. Yeats's monkish hatred for science and mounting ugliness and barrenness of an industrial civilization, his consciousness of the conflict and tensions of human life, the awareness of the passing away of beauty and his love for Maud Gonne made him the lover of myth and symbol. The poems "The Second Coming", "Leda and the Swan" and "A Prayer for My Daughter" illustrate the myth-making habit of the poet. His mythopoetic imagination modifies and transforms old myths. Further, his Symbolism is fully and firmly grounded in Greek Mythology and Irish Mythology. This imparts precision, a definition, a clear lucidity and pictorial quality in his poetry. The symbols of Yeats are all-pervasive. There are certain symbols like Byzantium, rose, tower, swan, the sword and so on round which a number of poems are arranged, and each poem that follows in succeeding order throws light on foregoing ones and illuminates their sense.

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