Symbolism

The Symbolist Movement

Symbolism in literature was a complex movement that deliberately extended the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. The open-ended symbols created by Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) brought the invisible into being through the visible, and linked the invisible through other sensory perceptions, notably smell and sound. Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), the high priest of the French movement, theorised that symbols were of two types. One was created by the projection of inner feelings onto the world outside. The other existed as nascent words that which slowly permeated the consciousness and expressed a state of mind initially unknown to their originator.

None of this came about without cultivation, and indeed dedication. Poets focused on the inner life. They explored strange cults and countries. They wrote in allusive, enigmatic, musical and ambiguous styles. Rimbaud deranged his senses and declared "Je est un autre". Von Hofmannstahl created his own language. Valéry retired from the world as a private secretary, before returning to a mastery of traditional French verse. Rilke renounced wife and human society to be attentive to the message when it came.

Not all were great theoreticians or technicians, but the two interests tended to go together, in Mallarmé most of all. He painstakingly developed his art of suggestion, what he called his "fictions". Rare words were introduced, syntactical intricacies, private associations and baffling images. Metonymy replaced metaphor as symbol, and was in turn replaced by single words which opened in imagination to multiple levels of signification. Time was suspended, and the usual supports of plot and narrative removed. Even the implied poet faded away, and there were then only objects, enigmatically introduced but somehow made right and necessary by verse skill. Music indeed was the condition to which poetry aspired, and Verlaine, Jimenez and Valéry were among many who concentrated efforts to that end.

So appeared a dichotomy between the inner and outer lives. In actuality, poets led humdrum existences, but what they described was rich and often illicit: the festering beauties of courtesans

and dance-hall entertainers; far away countries and their native peoples; a world-weariness that came with drugs, isolation, alcohol and bought sex. Much was mixed up in this movement — decadence, aestheticism, romanticism, and the occult — but its isms had a rational purpose, which is still pertinent. In what way are these poets different from our own sixties generation? Or from the young today: clubbing, experimenting with relationships and drugs, backpacking to distant parts? And was the mixing of sensory perceptions so very novel or irrational? Synaesthesia was used by the Greek poets, and indeed has a properly documented basis in brain physiology.

What of the intellectual bases, which are not commonly presented as matters that should engage the contemporary mind, still less the writing poet? Symbolism was built on nebulous and somewhat dubious notions: it inspired beautiful and historically important work: it is now dead: that might be the blunt summary. But Symbolist poetry was not empty of content, indeed expressed matters of great interest to continental philosophers, then and now. The contents of consciousness were the concern of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and he developed a terminology later employed by Heidegger (1889-1976), the Existentialists and hemeneutics. Current theories on metaphor and brain functioning extend these concepts, and offer a rapprochement between impersonal science and irrational literary theory.

So why has the Symbolism legacy dwindled into its current narrow concepts? Denied influence in the everyday world, poets turned inward, to private thoughts, associations and the unconscious. Like good Marxist intellectuals they policed the area they arrogated to themselves, and sought to correct and purify the language that would evoke its powers. Syntax was rearranged by Mallarmé. Rhythm, rhyme and stanza patterning were loosened or rejected. Words were purged of past associations (Modernism), of non-visual associations (Imagism), of histories of usage (Futurism), of social restraint (Dadaism) and of practical purpose (Surrealism). By a sort of belated Romanticism, poetry was returned to the exploration of the inner lands of the irrational. Even Postmodernism, with its bric-a-brac of received media images and current vulgarisms, ensures that gaps are left for the emerging unconscious to engage our interest.

Symbolism in Literature

by Karen Bernardo

Just as characterization and dialogue and plot work on the surface to move the story along, symbolism works under the surface to tie the story's external action to the theme. Early in the development of the fictional narrative, symbolism was often produced through allegory, giving the literal event and its allegorical counterpart a one-to-one correspondence.

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, everything and everyone stands for something else. The protagonist Christian, to no one's surprise, stands for every Christian reader; his goal, the Celestial City, stands for Heaven; the places through which he passes on his way -- Lucre Hill, Vanity Fair, and the like -- stand for the temptations Bunyan felt that Christian readers were likely to encounter on their journey to salvation. Even the names of Christian's fellow travelers -- Mr. Feeble-mind, Great-heart, and the like -- represent not individual characters but states of being.

Allegory is undoubtedly the simplest way of fleshing out a theme, but it is also the least emotionally satisfying because it makes things a little too easy on the reader. We feel that we are being lectured to; it's almost as if the author is stopping every sentence or two to say, "Now pay special attention to this, because if you don't remember it, you won't get the point." Essentially, allegory insults our intelligence.

Allegory also, however, limits our perceptions. The best works of literature are those in which an element of mystery remains -- those which lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. Strict allegory seldom does this, which is why religious allegory is generally less satisfying than the scriptural story on which it was based.

To take allegory to the next higher level, we arrive at something that for want of a better term can be called symbolism. At this level, there is still a form of correspondence, and yet it is not so one-to-one, and certainly not so blatant. Whereas allegory operates very consciously, symbolism operates on the level of the unconscious. This does not mean that the author himself is unconscious of the process of creating symbolism -- merely that we, as readers, accept its input without really understanding how it works.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, we discover that Hamlet is fascinated with actors and acting. Upon reflection, an astute reader realizes that this is because Hamlet's whole life has become unreal; he is being haunted by the ghost of his father, his father turns out to have been murdered by his uncle, his mother has married his father's murderer. The motif of the actors is a symbol for the unreality of Hamlet's life.

Similarly, near the beginning of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, there is the famous scene of the Valley of Ashes where Tom Buchanan's mistress Myrtle lives. Although Fitzgerald never says so, it is clear that the Valley of Ashes represents the real state of Tom's soul; although to the outside world his residence is in a mansion on the beautiful bay at East Egg, where everything is opulent and expensive and tasteful, the inwardly rotten, spiritually desiccated Tom really "lives" where his "heart" does, in a grim ashen valley presided over by a billboard decorated with a huge pair of bespectacled eyes. The eyes represent God, who sees Tom's actions and knows the interior of his heart, but ominously seems powerless to intervene.

Other famous symbols are Melville's great white whale in *Moby Dick*; Dante's journey into the underworld in *The Inferno*; and Coleridge's albatross in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." All these concrete objects or places carry within them a wide range of associations that stand for something so ineffable it would spoil the magic to explain it. Symbolism, therefore, is an integral component of fiction, because it enriches the narrative by pulling its message down to the level of our unconscious and anchoring it there