

Symbolism in the Poems of Walt Whitman: *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* and *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*

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Abstract

As a transcendentalist poet and a symbolist of the nineteenth century America Walt Whitman's philosophical outlook on life falls directly in the line with Poe, Melville, Thoreau, and Emerson. All of them perceived the objective world as the alter-idem of the Divine Being. Symbolism in 19th century American Poetry is both a philosophy and a technique. They took any object, any situation, any experience as symbol to express not only their notions or visions of the universe but even the turmoil going on within them and feeling their identification with the Supreme Being. The entire philosophy of Whitman is based upon the idea that the cosmic soul is imperishable and immortal. Death comes to one- soul for as many times as it is incarnated in different lives. He believed that true poetry has its birth where the soul, alienating itself from the physical, is able to realise the mystery of life and nature. This he names as self-realisation and this he considers is possible during the moment of love and death. Thus, a word from nature gives him the awareness of the eternity.

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As a transcendentalist poet and a symbolist of the nineteenth century America, Walt Whitman did not belong to any group or school of thought, but his philosophical outlook on life falls directly in the line with Poe, Melville, Thoreau, and Emerson. As transcendentalist, all of them perceived the objective world as the alter-idem of the Divine Being and as such, the literature they wrote, evolved as a via-media to express their religious ideas. They adopted the language of symbols. The literary symbols, as such, have two levels of meaning; one which is literal and the other which is suggested.

Holman writes, "Literary symbols are of two types. The first embodies within itself universal suggestions of meaning, as land and sea suggest timelessness and eternity or as a voyage suggest life. Whitman was a frequent user of symbols with such universal meanings, as in his poem *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* where the land and the sea imagery extends into universal symbols. The other type of symbols gain its suggestive value from the way it is used in a particular work. In Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* the wester fallen star represents Abraham Lincoln in the poem."

Symbolism in 19th century American Poetry is both a philosophy and a technique. The prominent writers like

Emerson, Thoreau, etc. perceived the Divine Being as the over-soul the supreme power omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Thus, discarding the idea of the duality of the physical and the spiritual, to them the universe emerged as a vast unity. Though, there is no novelty or uniqueness in this idea for the philosophies and religions in the east which is replete with this attitude. Their uniqueness lies in the novelty of their symbolist technique that matches with their vision and philosophy. This is a technique by which they do not say but evoke, there is idealism but the images brought in by the writer get so well mingled with the symbolic images that the reader finds himself on a plane where he is experiencing, forgetting the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual, ideal and the real or the objective.

The transcendentalists took any object, any situation, any experience as symbol to express not only their notions or visions of the universe but even the turmoil going on within them and feeling their identification with the Supreme Being. Truly speaking the object that evoked in them any such vision or experience was brought in their writings as an image or a symbol for what is symbolism.

Chadwick defines Symbolism, "as the art of expressing ideas and emotions not by describing them

directly, not by defining them through overt comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols sometimes described as transcendental symbolism, in which concrete images are used as symbols, not of particular thoughts and feelings within the poet, but of a vast and general ideal world of which the real world is merely an imperfect representation."

Coincidentally, to all of them success and fame for which they had so much craved in their life time, was awarded posthumously. There could be two possible reasons for this, first the transcendental vision by which they had been entranced and which was the source of all their literature appeared to the common man of the age like a monster taking its ruinous strides, secondly, which exclusively concerns Poe and Whitman was that both of them had a capricious way of behaving and had such a chequered career that these gave rise to misgivings and made the general public prejudiced and biased against them. Although entirely free from any addictions, Whitman too became the target of the bitter criticism, particularly in his own time, not so much for what he did as for what he avowed in relation to sex, prostitution, and slavery.

Edgar Allan Poe and Whitman, though not a member of the transcendentalist group of which Emerson was a leader, yet by their philosophy and technique they are very much one with him and Whitman differed from them mainly in three ways: first, though he adopted the technique of using symbols, his poetic style was quite different from that of others; second, for when we read Emerson, we find that the poet is celebrating a presence and the object getting identified with his vision of the divine in that object for instance, in his poem 'Rhodora' he describes an isolated scene where the beauty of the simple flower brings to him a divine experience and in his poem 'Brahma' he ideally offers the vision of the all pervasiveness of the divine. On the contrary, when Whitman starts explaining, he feels himself identified with every object within and without, and his poem turns out to be a universe itself for he starts naming without any reservations, every object, every situation as an image in his poem for example, take his poems, 'When Lilac Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' his

journey through the churchyard is a journey of soul experiencing its identification. Third, though both, Emerson and Whitman's, believed in the oneness of the body and soul, yet Whitman concentrated upon the spiritual both, in man and nature, and Emerson celebrated both.

Therefore, for Emerson symbolism was only a technique, whereas, for Whitman, as any other of his contemporaries was both, a philosophy and a technique. As any other transcendentalist of his age the core of Whitman's philosophy lies in his concept of God, In his poem *Song of Myself* he avows:

I hear and behold God in every object,
I see something of God, each hour of the twenty four
and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God,
And in my own face in the glass,
I find letters dropt in the street,
And everyone is signed by God's name.

Thus, dismissing the idea of the dichotomy of the spiritual and the material, something which Emerson could not overlook fully Whitman grants to the former the sanctity of being the source and essence of every entity-living or non-living. By this belief Whitman too comes very close to Hinduism. A quotation from *Glimpses of World Religion* will illustrate this:

"They (Upanishad) recognize only one God, who is defined as eternal, self-existent, incomprehensible and omniscient. He alone creates, preserves, and destroys. He is the light, Lord and the light of the world without any second and He is the sole object of adoration and worship. 'How many Gods are there really, Yagnavalkaya? 'One' he said. 'Now answer another question,' some do meditate on Agni, Brahma, Rudra, Shiva, Vishnu. Say which of these is best for us?' He said, 'unto them these are but the chief manifestations of the highest, the immortal, the incorporeal Brahma...The nature of this Brahma is given as' this whole world is Brahma...He who consists of mind, whose body is life, whose form is light, whose conception of truth, whose soul is space, containing all works, containing all desires, containing all odours...encompassing the whole world, the unspeaking and unconcerned."

The statement is almost an explication of Whitman's own metaphysical concepts. It brings to us one significant

idea which is the core of his philosophy, that things externally may seem to be diverse but internally they are one and the same. This he names as 'identity' of all beings. The spiritual, he says has expressed itself in two forms—the physical and the abstract, and the ultimate purpose of each object is to achieve its identity which, he says, "is possible only when these opposites merge into each other. The rejuvenation or rebirth or new life is taken as a proof of the affirmative and ascending nature of God's world and humanity himself."

Drawing an analogy between what Whitman tries to represent through his symbol and what Vishnupuran, has to say about creation, as emerging from the same source is God. O.K.Nambiar observes that, "both have seen the power as four-fold, and their descriptions of the four-forms in which the Deity manifests himself are also similar, but the only idea that separates Whitman from Vishnupuran is that whereas, the latter sees these powers in God as co-existent, Whitman shows them in historical progression. Whitman sees creation as the currents emanating from the same Being."

Thus, the entire philosophy of Whitman is based upon the idea that the cosmic soul is imperishable and immortal. Death comes to one- soul for as many times as it is incarnated in different lives. Death as such for him is a phenomenon and a phase of change by which the soul enters in a new life which may be in this world or the other. The third idea he develops is that death is a moment when soul through its alienation from the physical merge with the spiritual, emerge into enlightenment. These ideas have been hinted explicitly through beautiful symbols in these poems.

Whitman by habit was not a narrative poet. Hence, for symbolization what he used to do was, first to take a situation and then write using this principal situation as a symbol. He would attach a number of other symbolic images to lend flourish to his ideas. In the poem, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* the situation he took is the death of Abraham Lincoln and the journey of the coffin to the grave. Without lingering upon the emotional reactions to the Presidents' death, he concerns himself with the death- what it means as a fact of life and as a concept in philosophy. The objects he takes as symbolic

images are the lilacs, the drooping star, and the song of the thrush—a trinity brought to him every year by the spring.

As the poem begins, we know about the lilacs which are blooming at the dooryard. They are flowers 'tall growing with heart shaped leaves'. 'With many pointed blossoms rising delicate with the perfume'. Two images here are symbolical —'the heart shaped leaves' represent the idea of love and the 'perfume' which stands for 'spirituality' or the essence of all beings. The flowers consequently are taken by Whitman to signify both 'love' and 'life'. Next comes the image of the 'western star' which after shining for a while has now been enveloped by the 'dark shadow of night...tearful night'. The action of the star becomes symbolical of the activity of the rise and the fall of the soul in the form of life and death. The last image is that of the solitary thrush singing 'death's outlet song'. Here, it is not the bird but her song which acts as a symbol to suggest the idea that the soul which dies in one body has its emergence with greater glory and refulgence. When all the three images are taken together, the idea moves in further circle, indicating that in the progression of the soul, life and death act as alternate processes.

The second point of the poem is the description of the journey of the coffin to the grave. Here, once again what is significant is not the journey that the coffin makes but the natural surrounding through which it has to pass and the action of the poet. Here, as the coffin passes through 'yellow spread wheat' and 'the white and pink apples growing amid endless bed of tall grass', the poet presents it with a 'spring of flowers'. Evidently, through the images of 'grass' which in Whitman's literature represents immortality and 'sprigs of lilacs' representing spirituality, a higher life after death. The song the bird sings at this moment is in keeping with the whole idea and makes the symbolism still richer. It sings:

Approach strong deliveress

When it is so, when thou hast taken I joyously sing the death,

Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,

Loved in the flood of thy bliss O death.

(When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd)

Similarly, we may analyse another poem by Whitman, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* for the use of

symbolism. Here, the symbolic importance of the poem is two-fold. Besides representing the idea of death the poet takes his experience given in the process of the poem, as the moment of the birth of poetry in him. Secondly, here 'sea' occurs as a new symbol for eternity and it is because of this idea that it has been seen as the 'cradle endlessly rocking'.

The poem is written in the form of a reminiscence. The poet recalls that when he was a child two Alabama birds came and nestled near the sea. One day, the child found that the he-bird was alone and was singing a plaintive song. But soon his tone changed and the child found him warbling with patience 'for somewhere I believe I heard mate responding to me'. He obviously could not scan the meaning in this statement. But soon the sea "whispered...the delicious word death" and the whole meaning dawned upon him. It was the moment of enlightenment for him and in joy he exclaimed:

Whereto answering, the sea...
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death...
Which I do not forget,
But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,
That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's
gray beach,
With the thousand responsive songs at random,
My own songs awaked from that hour,
And with them the key, the word up from the waves.
(Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking)

The idea contained here is clear, that Whitman believed from that true poetry has its birth where the soul,

alienating itself from the physical, is able to realise the mystery of life and nature. This he names as self-realisation and this he considers is possible during the moment of love and death. The poet as such, includes both these facts in the poem which helps to make his meaning explicit. The he-bird is in deep love with the mate but when his mate dies, it is the fact and the moment of death which brings to him the knowledge of the mystery of life, makes his songs sweeter and more meaningful.

At first, on seeing the sorrow of the he-bird the child's heart was filled with love and sympathy for him. But when the sea, whispered the word 'death', enlightenment dawned upon him and this was the moment of the awakening of poetry in him. The word 'death' is shown to have been whispered by 'sea' and not by any other object in nature. Obviously the poet has adopted 'sea' as the agent, because it is the symbol of eternity for him. Thus, a word from nature gives him the awareness of the eternity. Symbolism, therefore, in Whitman's poetry acts both as a philosophy and a technique. His contribution in this sphere is the greatest among the American poets.

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