
UNIT 1 SYMBOLS

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1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit discusses the use of symbols in literature, especially poetry. After going **through** this Unit you will **understand** why and how **symbols** are used. You will **learn** that:

- the symbol helps ~~the poet~~ to express complex, mixed or intense feelings—half-revealing and **half-concealing** its meaning (the 'cleverer' the concealment ~~the~~ richer the meaning);
- the **symbol** becomes meaningful not only by drawing on the conventions of the language but also by its power of suggestion;
- a symbol is the poet's conscious or unconscious transference of his personal (subjective) meaning on to a concrete object or image,
- this process of transference is called the 'symbolic mode'. It makes use of such **'devices'** as language convention, pressure of context, and suggestive or reinforced **urgency** of the poet's images,.
- the poet's desire and attempt to bring poetry as close as **possible** to the condition of music is referred to as 'symbolism' and the poets concerned as '**symbolists**';
- the danger that symbolists face is that they try to escape from reality into a self-created world—that **of** subjective aestheticism;
- the **symbolist** poets may draw their symbols from the **Jungian** Collective Unconscious or Yeatsian **Anima Mundi** (Great Memory);
- some symbolists turn to esoteric systems, myths, or private mythology to escape decadence or aestheticism;
- modern **symbolists** like Eliot strive to create a contemporary or urban mythology; and
- **poetry** continues to be profoundly symbolic, trying to satisfy the irrational **hungers** of **man** by giving him **satisfying symbols** of 'Beauty', although '**Rasa**' rather than Beauty with its suggestion ~~of~~ a strong visual context seems preferable.

At the **end** of this Unit **you will** be able to Identify symbols and symbolism in **poems** you read. By extension, you **will** be able to lend greater depth to your **own poetry** by the effective use of symbols.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The term, 'symbol', is derived from the Greek word, 'symbolon' meaning mark, token or sign. It is an animate or inanimate object signifying or standing for some other thing. It is different from an allegorical sign in that whereas a symbol exists, an allegorical sign is only arbitrary. For instance, the lion symbolizes strength and courage, and a dove peace. Likewise, even actions and features such as a clenched fist, and arms raised above the head symbolize aggressiveness and surrender. Poets make use of both universal and private symbols such as 'a journey into the underworld' (Dante's *Divine Comedy*) and a winding stair (W.B. Yeats's poetry) respectively. In prose also, symbols are used (the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick*; the spire of a church in William Golding's *The Spire*). The point is that, in literature, a concrete image is employed to express an abstract idea or an emotion.

1.2 LANGUAGE OF EMOTIONS

Poetry, like music, conveys 'feeling'. We all experience half-expressed feelings — intense jubilation, deep despair, hair-pulling frustration, vaulting ambition, dark depression, high exaltation in our own lives. But if we are asked to express our feelings, most of us will just mumble. We find language too inadequate to express, to the exact degree, our feelings. But poets somehow manage to find words to express their feelings. They use various devices to catch the intensity — soft rhythms for soft feeling, jagged rhythms for intellectualised feeling, exalted rhythms for higher exaltation, lilting and cooing for courtship, etc., etc. Naturally, the reader will miss a good deal if he does not keep pace with the suggestive rhythm of the verse. But some feelings are lawless. They are too complex to keep to the rhythm. The following verse from the *Rigveda* deals with such mixed complex emotional situations:

(Puru) Kutsa was King of Ayodhya. He was captured by enemies and thrown into prison for about 20 years. His people did not know if he was alive. Rishis persuaded his Queen to obtain a successor to the throne by Niyoga. Prince Trasadasyu was born thus. The imprisoned King learnt of this. What should be his feelings? Disgust for his wife's unfaithfulness? Rage that he was walled in? Intense desire to see the baby that would continue this lineage? Desire to kill the child of sin? Relief that his ancestors need not fear fall from their heavenly abode? He felt joy and sorrow of various kinds and intensities. Then he was turned sober by his cultural beliefs. His inherited wisdom had to quell his baser instinctive disgust. The King was in an intense mental state. This mixed intense state cannot be expressed in any simple straight-forward terms:

Suparna ~~Et~~ Aasate Madhya Aarodhane Divah
To sedhanti Patho Vrakam tarantem yahva teeravo
Vittam me asya Rodasee

'Lovely-winged birds are floating in high mid-air region. They halt the progress of the WOLF swimming to this Bank (of the river). Gods, know my agony.'

Obviously, in this turmoil of feelings, the King gets the ugliest thought of all — a desire to kill the new-born baby through whom he can save his ancestors from fall. Of course, he cannot escape from the prison. But his mind conjures up that ugly thought; the next moment, he has positive thoughts (mid-air birds with beautiful wings) stopping the ugly wolfish thought of killing the child.

The fact that he cannot escape prison does not prevent the King from having ugly thoughts and feelings. But the thoughts are so disgusting that he equates them, symbolically, with an approaching 'wolf'. But he gains equanimity with the rival vision of pretty-winged birds in mid-air which prevent the wolf from coming nearer. Both are imaginary. Both fight an imagined battle. The King is ultimately restored to his normal good nature. What is remarkable is that the King needs an evil symbol to express his evil thoughts and is revived by imagining a good symbol; both are mental constructs. So, intense mental constructs need symbols.

That **brings** us to the **basic** need for symbols: intense feelings need **symbols** to express their intensity. They cannot remain mere mental constructs. They cannot **be simple statements**. They have a **natural** rhythm, but the rhythm is not enough to express **them**. The intensity of the ugly thought is so disgusting to the King himself, that he cannot face it. He half-expresses himself, but actually hides behind the symbol of the wolf. The wolf is a killer. The meaning is clear. But it is ugly and puts the King in fear **of** the thought. So he wears a mask and hides himself behind it.

In other words, when agony is intense, the symbol helps the speaker to half-express **and** half-conceal his intensity. **Both** the expression and concealment have reached a high voltage point.

Symbols, thus, **float** between a very concrete image at one extreme end and a very intense feeling at the other. A symbol half-reveals and half-conceals its **meaning**. It **employs** a concrete image only to hide an intensity of meaning which **has become** too hurtful to state explicitly. It draws on the conventions of language. For instance, (refer to the Vedichymn just **quoted**) a **'wolf'** is conventionally believed to be a killer; unlike a fox who is believed to be a slinker, though he could also kill. In other words, a symbol employs 'association', not direct meanings, to carry out its double function **of** **half-revealing** and **half-concealing** its meaning. **A** good symbol enriches the **meaning** by concealment. The cleverer the concealment, the richer the meaning.

1.3 SYMBOL AND IMAGE

In the above instance, the symbol became meaningful, not only with the aid of convention, but also with the **support** of the whole 'context'. Only in that context, the **'wolf'** could have meant an evil. It also employed a language convention. **But, look at these lines:**

The paper is whiter
For these black lines.
(Wallace Stevens)

This is an image without **specific** meaning; nevertheless, it has a sufficient meaning complete in itself.

I shall **show** you fear in a **handful** of dust.
(T.S. Eliot)

Such **self-sufficiency** of **meaning** is a mark of the highest creative genius. How a concrete image becomes meaningful is hard to explain; but we can vaguely **explain** the **process** as **'suggestion'**—**what** our Poetics has described through terms like **'Dhwani'** or **'Vjyanjana'**. **Most** poets are aware of a faculty which can see meaning in inanimate **objects, e.g. 'stone' for hard, cold, dead unresponsiveness.** **They** employ these meanings by strengthening the **force** of the context. But not **always!**

O **Rose**, thou art sick.
The invisible **worm** ...
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy, ...
(Blake)

There is here no contextual support. Yet, this poem seems to sum up the sickness of the world. The **word, 'rose'**, is an image of health, freshness and hope, sufficient in meaning. It is an 'image', **yet acts** as a symbol.

What wondrous life is **this** I lead!
Ripe **apples** drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine, the curious peach,
into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling **on** melons, as I pass,
Ensnared with **flowers**, I fall **on** grass.
(Andrew Marvell)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

1.4 SYMBOLIC MODE AND SYMBOLISM

Before we proceed, let us recapitulate what we have so far discussed. A symbol is a poet's conscious or unconscious transference of his personal (subjective) meaning on to a concrete object or image. This transference process is described as the 'symbolic mode'. In completing this process, the poet derives his strength from one or more of the following devices: (a) language convention; (b) pressure of context; (c) suggestive and reinforced detail; (d) urgency of his images; and (e) his desire to express himself. The symbol half-expresses and half-conceals their meaning for his safe and 'sane' self-expression. (We have seen how the Vedic King guarded himself from facing or admitting a thought so ugly that he was afraid of expressing it explicitly — a rare case. He half-hid and half-revealed his meaning.) When Bendre, a Kannada Poet, wanted to write a poem of his nonage experience of 'following' a village girl returning from the tank late in the evening, he wrote, 'Like a lascivious cat, the road wound around her feet and often stayed back'. The description is of the road, but the suggestion is of the poet's own adventure. Why, one may ask, did the poet write at all if he did not want to confess? Concealment enriches experience. Impulse to conceal, forces a poet to stray into devious paths, which are crudely described as Tropes/Alankaras.

Let us return to the fundamental question: 'Is a symbol necessary for the mind at all?'

While a clear meaning of words depends upon clear, rational thinking, there are states of mind in which poets are tired of clear meaning. The meaning of words is after all an outline, a prison. Vague passion in an irrational burst could explode those clear outlines. In particular ages of poetry, we see that poets get tired of rationality itself. They too require words for self-expression; but they prefer to use a haze, a mist, a musical cloud of meaning, not clearly outlined words for poetry. They use sounds, colours, suggestions, flow of meaning rather than clearly outlined, imprisoned, words. They desire to bring poetry more and more close to the function of music — vague longings, inexplicable disturbances in their psyche which turn their attention inward. Even here, the poet has to choose his images and symbols. but the aim is to achieve in poetry, not a rational statement, but a 'vaguely felt' longing approximating to the state of music.

Where particular objects are involved, the symbolism tends to be personal or private. Symbolism can also be of another kind, viz., transcendental symbolism in which concrete images function as symbols representing a universal ideal world to which the real world is related as its shadow. In this kind of symbolism the attainment of the vision of the essential idea is made possible by deliberate blurring conveyed by the fusion of images and by the musical quality of the verse (e.g. by a form of pure poetry).

1.5 SYMBOLISTS: SEARCH FOR SYMBOLS

What was wrong with the symbolists? They were just bored with the comforts civilization offered them — no more, no less. They wrote fine poetry. nevertheless.

Leisure, **glut** of pleasure, industrial affluence and ugliness of environment — factors like these had led the more **sensitive** poets to **high** subjectivism which inevitably lead to aestheticism.

But the subjective aesthete, **in** search of his own mental sensations, loses touch with the world outside him and **creates** a world of his own, like a spider weaving a web of its own accretion. It is a **complete** world whose only defect is that it is too subjective, **i.e.**, self-created.

Symbols derive their power **from** 'passion' — in the special idiom of Yeats — by which he meant the passion of the **meditator** and the **passion of ancestors** whose passions are stored in the Collective **Memory** — **Anima** Muudi, shaped as a concrete **symbol**. Great Memory is thus a **storehouse** of symbols **evocable** by the meditation of the individual **poet**.

On the other hand, the **danger** of personal **mythology** (that is, mythology created by a **poet** out of his personal experience) is its **lack** of communicativeness and meaning for the average reader. But it does create a **twilight** of significance, a dark, **living** penumbra. The **reader is forced** to grope for meaning. Groping for meaning is also meaning though not very clear. We **do not seek** meaning in a poem. It itself is a **meaning** complex — symbolic action. As long as the poem creates an intensity of perception it is a poem. To **step** into its **electrified**, intense twilight itself is its meaning, 'Poetry is best enjoyed **when** only partly **understood**'.

Now, the next question — can there be a City Mythology? Can asphalt roads, **skyscrapers**, the world of **fashion** (and **despair**) **make** their own mythology? **That** brings us to T.S. Eliot's 'Unreal City' where the **macabre**, nightmarish city is recreated in vignettes, **each** a powerful synecdoche. Nor is he describing just London — every city in history which was **once** healthy, is now in ruins of death and disease.

What Eliot has done is no **less than** creating a totally urban mythology, a mental state of **metropolitan existence** — **not** life, but living **death**. **London** is for him not a city, but a state of mind. In other **words**, it is a dry, flat, **all inclusive** symbol. Snatches of urban, uncultured **or oversophisticated conversation**, evocative or nostalgic place names, persistence of images of **spiritual** thirst, together create a symbol of spiritual death.

This is what all **symbolists were** striving **for** — **elevating** poetry to a state of music. Dry, unsentimental, **non-exclusive**, all inclusive orchestration of meanings, symbols, sounds, all pushing towards a single objective — creation of an urban myth, a contemporary **mythology**.

In fact, any plain description, a metaphor, a simile, an allegory, can serve a symbolic function, **provided it** is loaded with meanings or significances which do not strictly belong to it. The excess **meaning** is derived from transference or overflow of context. Therefore, a symbolic function is served wherever **we perceive** excess meaning carrying forward the total function of the poem. Wherever we perceive excess meaning or force, we **may describe** the **symbolic function** of **those** words and call them symbols.

1.6 'SYMBOLISM AND IMAGISM'

In the early years of the **twentieth** century a school of poets, much **influenced** by Japanese and Chinese poetry, **popularised** Imagist poetry. The basic belief here was that language with its **syntax** is insufficient for expression; that concrete images themselves **are** better used **in** poetry, not ideas. This was a reaction against pure abstractions inverse. This **new** concept of **poetry influenced** many poets. But few poets are **committedly** imagistic **these days**.

1.8 SUMMING UP

Since a poem is essentially a **symbolic** mode of expression, it is through symbols alone that a poet articulates his **feelings**. Symbols should **however**, be used judiciously, because their excessive use can also **harm** a poem, dissipate its impact on the reader's mind.

- Whenever words carry 'extra' meaning or force, they become symbols, the excess meaning being derived from transference or overflow of context.
- The poet's attempt to **bring poetry** as close as **possible** to music is referred to as symbolism and the poet concerned as a symbolist.
- The use of symbols helps in transferring an abstract meaning or feeling on to a concrete image or object. **This** transference is the symbolic mode.
- To achieve the **symbolic mode**, the poet draws on the conventions of language, pressure of context, suggestive or reinforced detail and urgency of his images.
- Other modes of **transference** of meaning are simile, metaphor, allegory and fable.
- The examples of Eliot and Yeats show that the act of writing a poem is itself symbolic, **i.e.**, that the poet enacts a **symbolic** action in writing a poem.
- In his search for symbols, the poet may draw on the collective unconscious or Yeatsian **Anima Mundi** (Great Memory) and may go to some ancient systems to derive power for symbols.
- If the poet, like Eliot, wants to create a contemporary or an urban mythology, he needs a set of beliefs to which the reader is referred. Poetry being profoundly irrational, continues to be symbolic to this day and satisfies the irrational hunger of man by giving him satisfying symbols of Beauty.
- The risk that a **symbolist** faces is that he may escape from reality into a work of subjective **aestheticism**.
- Poets, however, do not **aim at** only 'visual' beauty but at the creation of a 'state'.

1.9 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

-Activity 1

- a) Refer to Section 1.2
- b) Refer to Section 1.3

A simile, a metaphor, or an allegory can serve the symbolic function provided that it is invested with meanings or significances which do not strictly pertain to it, or are not associated with it. It is through transference of meaning or overflow of context (**i.e.**, the force of context) that makes for the realization of excess meaning.

Activity 2

Hints

- a) The symbols are of the child (the human soul lost in the world) lost without his father's guidance (God the father). The 'wand'ring light' could be sporadic guidance received from different sources. On the soul's cry for help, God appears.
- b) The symbolism arises because the metaphor is sustained throughout the poem. Now discuss how the metaphor is sustained. Incorporate (a) above in your answer.