

Symbols in Virginia Woolf's Novels



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Symbolism in literature is a complex phenomenon based on the extension of the evocative power of words to express the feelings, sensations and states of mind that lie beyond everyday awareness. The word symbol is used to designate the linguistic sign.¹ Linguistic signs are tangible and it is possible to reduce them to conventional written symbols. The sign is not the thing but a meaning derived from the thing through a process that is not simply generative. A single item becomes a symbol only when its potentially symbolic meaning is confirmed by something else in the story, just as a point needs a second point to define a line.

The author's voice and vision create in us certain expectations - of action, structure, characterization, worldview and language. Hence, every writer has his own language to create. The most highly emphasized element of the writer's style is the use of symbolic images. We need to plunge into the depths of his philosophy in order to grasp the images he pictures. The symbol is one of the chief devices for bridging the gap between the writer's and the reader's vision. It is commonly defined as something that stands for something else. Symbols are generally figurative, i.e. they compare or put together two different things. Symbols express what our mind cannot formulate accurately or perhaps, even accept as rational. The use of symbols mirrors the individual style of the writer and shows his ability to make the best use of language means, displaying the uniqueness and originality of his style.

Virginia Woolf has an original style of writing - to say an eccentric manner which distinguishes her writings from those by other authors of her time. Her handling of themes, characterization and composition are considered unique and inimitable. Another characteristic feature of Woolf's writing is her abundant use of symbolic images which are central to the meaning that she intends to convey.

Thus, symbolism in Woolf's works can be generalized into the following categories.

- 1) **Objects** – they are the most commonly used type of symbols in literature. When interpreted adequately, they can convey profound meanings. Woolf intentionally uses nouns, verbs, small descriptions that are very typical Freudian symbols. Such symbols as *rooms*, *windows*, *lighthouses*, *flowers*, *trees* and *animals* play a special role in her fiction.

Woolf uses the symbol of room as an objectification of an individual's personality to suggest the ultimate isolation of the ego enclosed with walls. The writer is aware of the fact that while privacy and solitude are important, they can lead to insensitivity, loneliness, and despair. Her novels are abundant in scenes where the

central character, usually after some contact with the crowded and busy city streets and the bustle of urban life, returns to his room seeking refuge in solitude. Such are, for example, Rachel Vinrance's room on board the ship, Jacob's room, Clarissa Dalloway's room upstairs. We should also remember, however, that Septimus Smith (in "Mrs. Dalloway") leaps through a window to die, and that Mrs. Ramsay (in "To the Lighthouse") also has a momentary desire to die as she looks at the lighthouse outside her window: here the wish to forsake the ego is pictured as a suicidal "embrace" of the world, which is actually a retreat from active life.

Trees and flowers are objects that change or die, but in Woolf's works they symbolize endurance. The symbol of *flower* appears very frequently in "Mrs. Dalloway": in fact the story begins with Mrs. Dalloway buying flowers for herself. Flowers mean much to Clarissa, no wonder that after so many years Richard wants to come to her with flowers in his hands. Here flowers may be regarded as a symbol of love. In particular, the *Rose* represents perfection, being the flower of Venus (The Roman Goddess of Love). It also stands for joy and peace. It also suggests the feminine and sometimes represents the female sexuality. *A red rose* represents life, spring, passion and blood. *A white rose* - purity and virginity.

Swallows in Woolf's writings are particularly associated with female revenge. *Fish* frequently symbolize faith.

The *Lighthouse* in Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" stands as a potent symbol of inaccessibility and the light from it as that of stability and permanence, which Mrs. Ramsay tries to achieve.

The fruit basket on Mrs. Ramsay's dinner table is a symbol of unity. As one who is concerned with creating a warm and domestic atmosphere, Mrs. Ramsay attempts to create unity among the family as well as among her guests visiting her summer house. She wants to create lasting and beautiful moments among her guests having gathered around the dinner table.

Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her (To the Lighthouse, p. 46)

Mrs. Ramsay's goal is finally achieved: Augustus Carmichael and she unite, they look together at the basket of fruit on the table. Thus Mrs. Ramsay's vision of unity seems fulfilled.

The clearest symbol of death and decay of time is the *skull*. The skull represents the inevitable end of life.

- 2) **Colours** – In everyday life, colours convey various messages (i.e. red – stop, green – go, black – grieve). They also suggest certain meanings² in literature.

One of the expressions of perfection in Woolf's language is the use of colours which help her to create her images. The colours, that she uses, do not symbolize good or evil, but are representative of human spirit, spiritual values, serenity, etc. The use of colours by Woolf is concrete and descriptive, and it makes her language rich. Thus *red* and *brown* are associated with individuality and egotism, while *blue* and *green* are the colours of impersonality, and *purple* is placed in an intermediary

position between the extremes.

- 3) **Nature** – Forces of nature have the power of evoking emotions in people, as emotions are always out of our control. The author uses nature to set the tone of a scene and very often further character development is based on the reaction of the characters to the forces of nature. Whenever the author tries to describe a natural event, some underlying symbolism is most likely to be found.

The various forces of nature constantly occurring in Woolf's works may express the characters' hidden thoughts, desires, and reflect their mood. For example, Mr. Ramsay's mood is depicted through the analogy of wind, which seems to be the symbol of destruction and emptiness. A **storm** at sea is a symbol of chaos, confusion, fear, wildness, destruction and change.

E.g. But outside a great storm was raging and blowing so hard that he could scarcely keep his feet. (To the Lighthouse, p. 67)

The correlation between the natural scene and individual subjectivity is the dominant thematic symbolism in Woolf's fiction.

- 4) **Characters** – The author integrates a character into the plot of the story to convey some hidden meaning or add to the theme of the work.

In Woolf's best fiction, plot is generated by the inner lives of the characters and hence psychological effects are achieved which are due to the use of symbols. Woolf's fiction being largely drawn from her own experience, nearly all her characters are members of her own affluent intellectual upper middle class.

Through "Mrs. Dalloway", for example, Woolf explores how superficial the society is, how dramatically it lacks depth in human relationships. To describe different aspects of this society Woolf uses certain characters symbolically. Hugh Whitbread, for instance, represents what is most detestable in English middle-class life:

E.g. He is man who has read nothing, thought nothing, and is a "great snob. This admirable Hugh..." (Mrs. Dalloway, p. 35)

Hugh Whitbread becomes the symbol of mental servility to plumed authority and of unnatural loyalty.

Woolf uses the images of the Queen, Prince and Prime Minister as symbols of the state. These powerful figures in English society may become symbols of distorted values which lead to unnatural loyalty.

Thus, uncovering the symbolism within a literary piece may reveal more about the writer's individual style, the plot and the theme of the work.

Notes and References:

1. See, Солнцев В.Н. Языковой знак и его свойства. // Вопросы языкознания. М., 1977, № 2; Bailey R.W. et al (eds.). The Sign: Semiotics Around the World. Ann Arbor, 1978; Sebeok Th. (ed.) Sight, Sound and Sense. London, 1978; Лосев А.Ф.

Знак, символ, миф. // Труды по языкознанию. М., 1982; Моррис Ч. Основания теории знаков. // Семиотика. М., 1983; Назарова Т.Б. Филология и семиотика. М., 2003.

2. In literature symbols can be expressed by colours:

red – associated with the sun and gods of war, anger, blood, fire. It can also mean love, passion health;

orange – mostly a symbol of fertility but it is also associated with fire flames and luxury;

yellow – often stands for light, the rays of the sun, intellect, faith and goodness. With insects it can indicate poison or danger;

green – green is a dualistic colour. It can represent envy and evil, also symbolize growth and life;

blue – commonly associated with issues of spirit and intellect, represents tender love and wisdom.

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Գեղարվեստական տեքստի ուսումնասիրությունը ճանաչողական գիտությունների զարգացման հետ ձեռք է բերում ավելի լայն նպատակներ, քան միայն բանասիրականն է: Տեքստի ավանդական բանասիրական մեկնաբանության միջոցով այն կապված է անհատական ճանաչողական մոդելների բացահայտման հետ: Գեղարվեստական տեքստի մեկնաբանության հիմքը մի կողմից, այսպես կոչված աշխարհի պատկերն է, որը հեղինակը ստեղծում է իր խոսքի, ոճի, պատմամշակութային իրականության իր իմացության, գնահատականների և պատկերների միջոցով: Մյուս կողմից, ներգրավված են ընկալողի գիտակցության, ճանաչողական, էթիկական, գեղագիտական մոդելները, որոնք ընթերցողը կիրառում է ընկալվող դիսկուրսի նկատմամբ, այդպիսով ապահովելով մեկնաբանվող տեքստի ըմբռնումը:

Ուսումնասիրության կոնկրետ առարկան ընտրվել է խորհրդանիշը Վիրջինիա Վուլֆի ստեղծագործություններում: Գրեթե անհնար է գեղարվեստական ստեղծագործությունը պատկերացնել առանց խորհրդանշական միավորների, քանի որ միայն խորհրդանշորեն վերահիմաստավորված պատկերներն են, որ գեղարվեստական ստեղծագործությունը վերածում են բարձրարժեք արվեստի գործ: Խորհրդանիշը ամբողջացնելով և ընդհանրացնելով օբյեկտիվ իրականության երևույթները, իր մեջ կենտրոնացնում է գաղափարային հսկայական ներուժ: Այս կամ այն տիպի խորհրդանիշների գործածումը սերտորեն կապված է հեղինակի գեղագիտական հայացքների, կենսափորձի, ինքնատիպ մտածելակերպի, աշխարհայացքի, հոգեբանական առանձնահատկությունների, ներկայացրած գրական ուղղության դարաշրջանի հետ:

Այսպիսով, խորհրդանիշը բառարվեստի ստեղծագործության հանգուցային տարր է: