



Myth and Symbol in Yeats and Blake: Traditional to Individual

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Abstract

Man is inseparable from his belief and his efforts to communicate his belief. In fact, our communication-oral, written, literary, and gestural-depends upon our ability to signify, suggest, allude, denote, and create images, concepts, ideas, ideologies, religion, folk beliefs, etc. Beneath all these lie human beliefs about past, present, and the explanation of phenomena. Although myth has become synonymous with fiction, and lies, it can't be ignored in the present age of science and technology. Phenomena would continue to be explained either through so-called science or through narratives to assert and justify their own beliefs and conviction. Myth and symbols have evolved in their nature as part and parcels of narrative cultures across East to West. Certain artists have recreated narratives of myths out of the seemingly chaotic conditions of cultures. Two poets, W.B. Yeats, and William Blake redefined myths and symbols with their own beliefs, ideologies, and spiritual, and religious ideas. An exploration of their texts would show how traditional beliefs are transformed into highly artistic and esoteric manifestations of art and ideas which still remain valid even in the postmodern era of disbelief, and doubt in any mythical, symbolic narrative.

Keywords: *Myth, Symbols, Blake, Yeats, Narrative, Semiology, Unconscious Mind*

Myth and Symbol in Western Literature

'I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.' (Paradise Lost, Book I)(Milton, 2022)

John Milton was no exception in justifying the ways of God to men; in fact, we all want to justify our beliefs; some poets there are who construct their own myth, symbols to do so. In his *Myth and Meaning*, Levi-Strauss claims that there is a conflict between 'the logic of the



concrete and the ‘images and symbols’ while comparing myth and science(Lévi-Strauss, 1978). His orientation is like that of science to find an order’ behind this apparent disorder’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1978); for him ‘Mythical stories are, or seem, arbitrary, meaningless, absurd...’. Yet we find certain endeavours by individuals to construct their own mythical beliefs to find an ordered explanation of human civilization; Yeats and Blake are two of those individuals who constructed their own beliefs based on traditional myths, and symbols.

Myth

In modern usage myth denotes ‘a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon’ (*Definition of MYTH*, n.d.); according to the Cambridge dictionary, myth refers to ‘**an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts**’ (*Myth*, n.d.). Collins dictionary gives a much more comprehensive definition: ‘A **myth** is a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs’ (*Myth Definition and Meaning | Collins English Dictionary*, n.d.). It is commonly agreed that myth, in its simplest form, is a popular story or narrative which explains or reveals something related to the past; it may explain a belief, practice, cultural events, etc.

Etymology

The word *myth* derives from the Greek *mythos*, which had meanings from “word,” “saying” and “story,” “fiction”; the undoubted validity of *mythos* can be compared with *logos*, which means the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. A careful comparison will certainly reveal how human narratives throughout history have shown two distinct orientations; one towards ‘mythos’ and other towards ‘logos’. In fact the conflict between ‘logos’ and ‘mythos’ have dominated Western literature to a large extent. Myth is often termed as symbolic narrative as it utilises many traditional symbols within a particular cultural context.

It is certain that myth should not be considered just a ‘traditional tale’ (Hatab, 1990); myth should not be interpreted from the distant outside but from a phenomenological aspect too, as something lived experience; that is why Hatab distinguishes between ‘interpreting myth’ and ‘living a myth’ (Hatab, 1990) ; he feels, myth ‘ expresses the presence of a sacred meaning



through a narrative which depicts its emergence’ taking cues from Aristotle’s *Poetics* he asserts that ‘mythos’ also meant a really lived, not fictional, plot or imitation of reality (Hatab, 1990).

Symbol

By definition a symbol is ‘a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else’; ‘something that is used to represent a quality or idea’ (*Symbol*, n.d.). Another dictionary defines it as ‘an authoritative summary of faith or doctrine’ (*Definition of SYMBOL*, n.d.). Which object symbolizes what depends on traditions within a culture and also on individual esoteric ideas and beliefs. Etymologically, symbol could well have originated from the Latin ‘symbolum’ (creed, token, or mark) ; this ‘symbolum’ might have been derived from the Greek ‘symbolon’ which was used as a token to distinguish Christians from Pagans (*Symbol / Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Symbol by Etymonline*, n.d.) ; literally symbol means ‘throwing things together’ as ‘syn-’ denotes together and ‘bole’ (from ‘ballein’) denotes ‘to throw’; during Renaissance, this word came to mean ‘something which stands for something else’ (*Symbol | Etymology, Origin and Meaning of Symbol by Etymonline*, n.d.) .Hypothetically personal symbols could gradually transform into traditional symbols. Many philosophers and linguists explored this symbolic process in cultures and tried to develop a Structural order to predict the symbolic meaning in various contexts. Yet many poets applied personal symbols to create, and construct personal myths. Blake and Yeats are important poets in English literature as they explored traditional symbols to reconstruct traditional myths in their own ways.

Semiotics-Semiology

Since homo-sapiens are unique in producing and recreating symbols from audio, visual and even from other sensory perceptions, human civilizations have been enriched with inveterate number of symbols. To study these symbols scientifically a different branch of linguistics – semiology –was founded. Although ‘Semiotic’ as a discipline was proposed to be a scientific study of signs by Charles Sanders Peirce, Swiss linguist Saussure proposed a branch of linguist ‘Semiology’ towards scientific study of signs. The problem is that sign and signifiers are not restricted to only language and literature, it gradually came to be involved with other cultural and scientific communications developed by human beings as the civilizations became more and more sophisticated. Although Semiotics or semiology was founded as a



branch of linguistics by Saussure, it had already been conceived by John Locke in the seventeenth century; C.S. Peirce developed it further by classifying three distinct layers- **icon, index and symbol**. If icon and index are inherent and natural, symbolic relation entirely rests on social tradition. Semiotics is defined as a discipline which studies the functions of signs and symbols in society. It involves conventions, rituals, religions, and other cultural aspects. Since Saussure most of the semioticians developed structural analyses of Semiotics or Semiology in society. Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan –all analysed social, cultural, psychological and even medical phenomena as part of a structured signifying system of meaning or Semiotics.

Symbol and Myth: Collective Unconscious

In any process of signifying system, Myth and symbols are inherently connected with each other. In his *Symbol and Myth* Alexander Altmann explores the relationship between myth and symbol, especially from Romantic and psychological perspectives. He refers to Bachofen's definition of myth as the 'exegesis of the symbol' and claims that 'myth only unfolds what is inherent in the symbol' (Altmann, 1945). He uses the psychological bases of C.G. Jung to claim that myth was created due to the 'natural and unintentional activity of the collective mind' (p.163) as myths 'reveal the innermost nature of a people' (Altmann, 1945); then he goes on to refer to German Romantic Schelling's definition of the symbol as the 'synthesis of type and allegory' ; as it represents 'the general through the particular' and vice versa. J. Gorres upheld and developed the Romantic notion of man's inherent root in nature; Altmann endorses his view that 'cosmic-demonic generations' of myth in the primordial world were due to 'man's intuitive, unconscious insight into Nature' (Altmann, 1945); Altmann also found the views of J.J. Bachofen quite ambiguous; Bachofen did not agree with psychological interpretation since our psychology is 'fundamentally different from that of the past (Altmann, 1945); whereas Jung is quite convinced that 'the same psychological conditions which led to the creations of myths are still prevalent today (Altmann, 1945);Jung believes in the constancy of 'collective unconscious' across history; in fact Altmann finds similarity between the Romantics and Jung in their claim that 'symbol is the expression of the unconscious mind in its original oneness with the universe'(Altmann, 1945). Jung's concept of psychic energy. Taking cue from Jung, Altmann claims, that will alone can't change the collective unconscious energy (Libido) and symbol can transform this psychic energy. He refers to Jung's account of Symbol as the 'psychological machine' which can transform this energy (Altmann, 1945). Further, Altmann



defines 'mythology as the expression of the collective unconscious by way of projected symbolic images'(Altmann, 1945). Jung claims that Symbolic images are produced by the 'collective unconscious' as Archetypes. This collective unconscious 'combines instinct and image, matter and form'(Altmann, 1945).

Collective Archetype to Individual myth

But for philosophers like E. Cassirer , Symbol is formed in conscious mind not in unconscious one; Altmann concludes that the Semitic races like Judaism, Jews showed a separation of mythical elements from the metaphors in Bible through the prophetic messages of ethics, morality (Altmann, 1945). Now, if we consider the Romantic poetry of eighteenth and nineteenth century , the images used the poets could be seen as objective representation of certain 'collective unconscious' ; in a ways the Archetypes used by the poets are 'the enormous spiritual heritage of mankind reborn in the individual brain' (Altmann, 1945); they combine the subjective with the objective, the matter and form, the individual with the universe. The symbols of Tree of Life in Blake, the skylark in Shelley, the Nature in Wordsworth, the Nightingale, and the Grecian Urn in Keats are the Archetypes which combine the instinct and the images. They could have been born in 'collective unconscious' mind but individual artistic consciousness transformed them into different distinct symbols of the archetypes of human mortality and existence. This mysterious transformation of collective Archetypal experience, feelings into highly individual images, symbols are part of the collective human faculty to form myth and re interpret those myths.

Blake and Yeats

European literature, particularly Romantic one, is abundant with myths, whether personal, religious or secular. The esoteric myths employed by both Blake and Yeats utilise certain esoteric symbols; often these esoteric symbols are based on traditional , religious ideologies, visions; in fact , if these symbols derived from paintings, metaphors, descriptions , point towards their own ideologies regarding art, life and civilizations. The images of the lamb, the tiger, the rose, the child, the Los, The Tree of Life and Death, the Tree of Mystery in Blake , and the images of gyre, golden bird, the dancer, the beast , lapis lazuli in Yeats are based on both personal as well as traditional symbols; their symbols and myth derived from a complex



web of intellectual debates on contemporary philosophy and religion; Critics often claim the origin of Blake's visionary mythology in his opposition against Enlightenment rationalism; Li-Hui Tsai refers to 'visionary materialism' by Green to point towards a synthesis of religion, social satire and philosophy (Tsai, 2018) ; this synthesis exists in Blake's works ; in fact, it is claimed that Enlightenment philosophy possibly shared 'mysticism, magic, mythical speculation', alluding to the claims made by scholars like Edelstaein (Tsai, 2018). Blake was more a social visionary than a 'mystic who retreats and withdraws into the glory of ecstatic contemplation' as claimed by White (White, 1966); his symbols might be 'intricate and mystifying' but they try to unravel his vision which , according to White, is 'the power to abstract universal meaning from experience' (White, 1966).

The intimacy between Blake and Yeats could also be found in Yeats' own academic research with Edwin John Ellis entitled *The Works of William Blake, Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical*. According to Arianna Antonielli this endeavour gave Yeats 'unity to his *Weltanschauung* and his poetry'(Antonielli, 2008); both Ellis and Yeats were interested with Blake's 'ability to translate each aspect of the human existence into Christian and mystical symbols, deriving them from an arcane pantheon of magic beliefs, mythological traditions and occult visions.' (Antonielli, 2008).

Blake's Symbols and Society

In many of his lyrics of *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, Blake uses symbols drawn from religions and other social institutions to both satirize society and also to recreate a myth of his own belief. For him church is the symbol of oppression, inhumanity, corruption of original myth of human progression. In Chimney Sweepers Blake represents an angel, a representative of the church, who makes an appearance in dream of a chimney sweeper and promises freedom and love if he follows the instruction of the religion; here the church becomes a symbol of illusion of love and compassion, which in turn makes the deprived of the society believe that love and liberty are imminent reality.

'And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,

He'd have God for his father & never want joy. '(The Chimney Sweeper, William Blake)



The black coffin also symbolises a social oppression, injustice, malaise, cruelty, and other possible evils which confine the innocent chimney sweepers. Significantly the key of the coffin belongs to the Angel, who only in dream, sets them free:

‘And by came an Angel who had a bright key,

And he opened the coffins & set them all free;’ (‘The Chimney Sweeper’, William Blake)

In another text entitled *The Garden of Love*, Blake directly condemns the church as some symbol which restrict the pleasure and love.

‘And the gates of this Chapel were shut,

And 'Thou shalt not' writ over the door;’ (‘The Garden of Love’, Blake)

The Biblical commands are seen to inhibit the freedom of the individual human beings.

‘And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,

And binding with briars, my joys & desires.’ (‘The Garden of Love’, Blake)

In **The Divine Image** and **A Divine Image**, Blake shows the perversion of human mercy, pity, peace, and love into human cruelty, jealousy, terror and secrecy; in Blake’s myth this is a Fall of Man ; he tries to analyse this fall in terms of his own Myth of Urizen. In his *Human Abstract*, which was previously entitled *The Human Image*, Blake tries to explain it through an image graphically represented with the text of the poem, etched on a plate. In *Blake’s Human Root: Symbol, Myth, and Design* Edward J. Rose, a prominent critic of Blake’s poetry, explores the symbolism of ‘man-as-a-root’ used in his poems like ‘The Human Abstract’, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’....; he chiefly ‘ great mythopoeic energy’ in his ‘pictorial iconography and literary symbolism’(Rose, 1980); he further points out how Blake inspired Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Edward Young.



Yeats' Art and Symbolism

Like Blake, Yeats too is known for his fond of esoteric symbols and myths. Many of Yeats' poems exemplify how ancient, traditional symbols could form modern myths for modern civilization. In these famous and well-acclaimed poems, Yeats seems to glorify the spiritual journey from the material, and sensual to artistic excellence through the complexity of human civilizations; dolphins and cocks in ancient Roman society symbolized a transit from material to the spiritual world, and rebirth respectively; as anthropologists found images of cocks engraved on tombstones; study corroborates that cocks considered to be a symbol of rebirth:

'For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;

Can like the cocks of Hades crow' (**Byzantium**, William Butler Yeats)

Here traditional and primitive myths are combined with Yeats's own symbol of gyre: cocks of Hades are connected with the bobbin, mummy and gyre; bobbin could be that of the Fate who winds life-thread in Greko-Roman myth; winding and unwinding create the movement in a gyres which, according to his own myth, stand for civilizations, developing and disintegrating. Similarly the sea, the dolphins are not merely presented as in European myths; mummy could also symbolize the futile efforts of civilizations to achieve immortality.

Besides, poets in Postmodern era also glorified 'mythos' and past which still remain unfathomable. In **Passage to India**, Whitman, the nineteenth century American poet creates a dichotomy between logos and mythos in appreciating both modern wonders and the 'antique ponderous' wonders of the world. He glorifies the past as 'unfathom'd retrospect'.

'The Past— the dark unfathomed retrospect!

The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!'



The present achievement of modern science is nothing but a growth out of the past knowledge. Modern science developed chiefly out of logos, the divine rationale in Christian sense which has been the basis of modern science. It can't ignore the development of mythos i.e. the narrative or utterance of beliefs, values, culture like myth, legends, folktales, epics etc.

'Not you alone proud truths of the world!

Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,

But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,

The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams!

The deep diving bibles and legends,

The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;'

Whitman acknowledges the importance of myths, fables against the 'proud truths of the world'; 'facts of modern science' should acknowledge the past which is being narrated, carried to us by mythos. Whitman still believes that mythos eludes the 'hold of the known', the knowledge gathered by modern science.

Blake's myth of the Fall of Man from Innocence to Experience parallels the Biblical Fall of Man, caused by Satanic doubt and self-doubt. Blake believed that Man or Albion must reawaken its consciousness through Los (Creative Imagination) to restore his faith in Four Zoas; mythos, not logos, will be the key to such integration; the disintegration of Zoas (Greek 'zwa', meaning life) into Four aspects- Los (Urthona), Urizen (Reason), Luvah, and Thamas had been set in by materialistic, consumer culture based on science or Logos. Art can expedite the process of reintegration in Zoa. In his poetry too, Yeats emphasized the need to teach the soul how to sing and study the monuments of magnificence created by Art.

'Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;'



(Sailing to Byzantium, Yeats)

In fact, Art vs Life had become an important theme for both Yeats and Blake during the industrial development, and flourishing of modern consumer cultures across the world.

‘But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.’

In Yeats, we find numerous instances where the persona asserts the Blakean view of Los and an age ‘caught in sensual music’ (Thamas), ‘mire and fury of human life’ (Urizen, Luvah); the Grecian goldsmith who creates the golden artifice of bird on a ‘golden bough’ with his hammer could well be Los in Blakean myth; it is Los who must ‘keep a drowsy Emperor awake’ through his art; this Emperor could be Albion or Universal man who is drowsy’ or suffering from doubt created by Urizen (Your Reason). Although both Yeats and Blake used Christian symbols and imagery, they deviated significantly from Christian myth of the Fall of Man and its original, inevitable Original Sin. Man’s journey from Innocence to Experience, may be termed as a Fall but is ‘essential for spiritual or mystical advancement to Higher Innocence’ (Sengupta & Cama, 2004).

Postmodernism and Myth

Both Blake and Yeats created a dichotomy between symbols of materiality and spirituality in a society which is torn between ‘mythos’ and ‘logos’, between beliefs and logical proofs. This theme of science (logos) vs narrative (mythos) could also be found in Postmodern thinking also; Lyotard differentiates between the ‘pragmatics of narrative knowledge’ and that of scientific. He claims, ‘Knowledge (savoir) in general cannot be reduced to science’ since knowledge is not just a set of denotive statements’ which goes beyond the ‘criteria of truth’



and it includes the ‘criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and /or happiness (ethical wisdom) of the beauty of a sound or colour (auditory and visual sensibility), etc.’ (Lyotard, 1984); this criteria obviously depends on cultural consensus; he goes on to claim the ‘pre-eminence of the narrative form in the formulation of traditional knowledge’ (Lyotard, 1984); certainly his analysis of narrative knowledge tries to compare between so-called science and narrative on the bases of the widest spectrum of narratology, linguistic, philosophy; metanarratives along with myths of progress, scientific development have now been defied in Post Modern suspicions; the more narratives will be challenged the more artists will feel the need to recreate own artistic myths and symbols which will continue to balance mere scientific statements with whatever human beliefs are left. Yeats and Blake, in their own way, showed rare perfection in enriching the society with a blend of traditional and highly personal myths, symbols.

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