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The Element of Symbolism in E.I. Poe's Poetry



D.D. Ghodekar,

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Indira Mahavidyalaya, Kalamb (Dist: Yavatmal).
dipakghodekar47@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In Poe's career he wrote just about fifty poems but he earned position of a known poet. As a poet, Poe left a small body of distinguished and influential work. In his poetry, Poe makes an abundant use of symbols. In fact, his best poems are replete with symbols. It is only if we understand the symbolic significance of those poems that we can appreciate them. If we take up the position that there is no symbolism in his poems, we would have to reject the bulk of

his best poetry as incoherent and meaningless. So, this attempt is to enjoy the beauty of his best poems (Al Aaraaf, To Helen, Israfel, The City in the Sea, Dream Land, and The Raven) with The Element of symbolism in this paper.

KEYWORDS

E.I. Poe, distinguished & influential work, symbols, incoherent & meaningless, element of symbolism.



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RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction:

E.I. Poe was a prolific and a versatile writer. He wrote numerous reviews of contemporary works for publication in magazines and periodicals. In poetry, he has just about fifty poems on his account. In first period, Poe began as a romantic poet, which we found in his early poems' themes, styles, rhythms, and lines. But he rapidly moved on from this early kind of romanticism to new forms of poetry which sprang from deep inside his own personally. His poems were now based on the working or his own sub-conscious mind and on his own dreams. Catching sight of strange visions and hearing strange harmonies in his imagination, he was able to translate them into words and produce astonishing poems. Poe's development as a poet lies in his advance from romanticism to symbolism, impressionism, and even surrealism.

The Symbolism:

The term Symbolism means that, 'There is a deeper significance in a piece of writing than appears on the surface'. An allegory is a story which, on the surface, has a meaning that is much less important than the meaning that lies hidden at the bottom of that piece of writing. If we feel content with the surface meaning of such a piece of writing, it means that we have not understood the deeper or the allegorical or the symbolic significance which the writer wished really to convey to us. This symbolism always implies a depth of meaning and a depth of thinking on the part of the writer. Poe makes an ample use of this symbolic element in his poetry and made them comprehensible and meaningful.

There are many poems of Poe have symbolic significance. But only the best of his writing in these spheres have been illustrated here.



The element of Symbolism in Poem, ‘Al Aaraaf’:

‘*Al Aaraaf*’ is an early poem of Poe with use of symbols, which proved undeniably a symbolic poem. It takes us to a place where the fresh idea of absolute beauty can be known directly instead of through the imperfect shapes of beauty on the earth. It is a hymn to the perfection that lies behind the beautiful objects that we see around us. So it is a symbolic representation of the world of ideal beauty of which Poe was a great worshipper. His theory of poetry demanded the worship of beauty; and, according to him, beauty was the province and the sphere of all true poetry. It is this basic view held by Poe which finds a symbolic expression in *Al Aaraaf*.

‘To Helen’ with symbolic element:

First *To Helen* poem is one of Poe's poetical great achievements. It has received high praise from critics; and our own reading of this poem would also convince us of its being a masterpiece of poetry. Now, there can be no doubt about the symbolic overtones of it. In it, Poe speaks about the ‘Nicean barks of yore’ which carried the weary wanderer to his own native shore, and compares Helen's beauty is to those Nicean barks. The symbolism is clear. The beauty of Helen (or of Mrs. Stannard) offers the same comfort and solace to Poe as the Nicean barks provided to the weary wanderer by taking him back to his native country. Thus the meaning has been very well conveyed, though it has been conveyed by means of a symbol. The actual name ‘*Helen*’ has ‘*To Helen*’ of Troy whose beauty has been celebrated in western literature throughout the ages, since the time of Homer. The name Helen thus acquires a wealth of meaning, and takes us back to the glory that was Greece. At the same time, Mrs. Stannard symbolizes Psyche, the goddess of the soul.

A Symbolic Poem ‘Israfel’:

The Poem ‘*Israfel*’ is a wholly symbolic. Israel is the name of an angel who is mentioned in the Muslim Holy Scripture, the ‘Koran’. In Koran this angel has been described as one whose heart-strings are a lute, and who has the sweetest voice of all God's creatures. This poem outwardly glorifies the singing of an angel called Israfel. But actually, the poem is



a symbolic statement of Poe's concept of the ideal poet. The angel Israfael symbolizes the ideal poet whose songs are a celebration of beauty, and also contain the essence of wisdom. The ideal poet, like the angel Israfael, sings about his grief, joy, hate, and his love. The ideal poet is the best bard because he is the wisest; and the sweetness of his songs appeals so strongly to the stars and the moon that they all listen to this singing rapturously. With this respect Poe expected the ideal poet to be a man who had thought over, and meditated upon, human life and human nature deeply and long, and who had become wise in the process. Poe attached great importance to the musical quality of poetry; and he processed what he preached. He thinks, the ideal poet needs a heavenly environment if he is to flourish and to write soul-slipping poems with reference to angle Israfael.

The Symbolic element in ‘The City in the Sea’:

The poem ‘The City in the sea’ one of the high rank poetical works of Poe. It is too a highly symbolic poem. The city described in the poem symbolizes the monarchy of death. It is a city where Death has erected a throne for himself. It is a strange city which is situated in an isolated region. In this city all the dead, including the good people and the bad people, have gone in order to enjoy never ending rest. It is a city where the towers are time-eaten, and where the melancholy waters lie unenthusiastically beneath the sky. It is a city from one of the proud towers of which ‘Death looks gigantically down’. With only right mood, we can admire this poem in which Death is represented as all-powerful, and highest ruler. It is an awe-inspiring poem, a poem which makes reader shake with terror. In this poem the symbolisation of Death with its ultimate realm is highly appreciable.

The Symbolic Element in ‘Dream-Land’:

‘*Dream-Land*’ is another poem with symbolic element. This poem would also puzzle and bewilder us if we miss its symbolic significance. In the poem, the speaker mentioned that he has come to these dream lands newly from an ultimate dim Thule (Thule means the farthest land on earth), from a ‘wild weird clime which lies sublime, somewhere out of space and out of time’. Further narrator says the he has come by a route which was obscure and lonely, and



which was haunted by evil angels only. Poet had to cross dismal lakes, and pools inhabited by ghouls; and he has crossed unholy spots and melancholy nooks where he met 'sheeted memories of the past' and 'shrouded forms'. But now he has at last arrived in a peaceful, soothing region which is an Eldorado a dream land, which must never be investigated or explored. In this way, at this poem the emergence of the poet's soul from a period of utter darkness and sadness into a time which is comparatively comforting and soothing has been symbolised.

The Use of Symbols in 'The Raven'

The famous poem '*The Raven*' is the best example in use of symbols. In this poem the grieving lover receives the same answer to the several questions he asks the raven which has taken shelter in his chamber from the storm blowing outside. Here, the raven is the principal symbol. By common consent, the raven, with its jet-black feathers and harsh croak, symbolizes fate. Poe to represent ill omen, use this bird which he early mentioned in his essay. In the same essay he tells us that his raven is emblematical of mournful and never-ending remembrance. This means that the devastated lover, who was seeking, from his books, some relief of the sorrow which he was experiencing over the death of his beloved Lenore, now finds his sorrow intensified by the presence of the bird which precisely stands for memory, which leads him not to forget Lenore. This symbolism reveals itself in the last stanza in which the lover says that the raven, never flitting, is still sitting on the bust of Pallas, and that his soul from out of the raven's shadow falling on the floor "shall be lifted nevermore". The bust of Pallas is itself a Symbol. Pallas in ancient Greek mythology was the goddess of wisdom. While the bust symbolizes serene wisdom, the raven symbolizes memory as well as fate. The word "Nevermore" is also a symbol. As the Poem progresses, this word sounds more and more like the booming of a gong. The word begins to acquire overtones of universal tragedy, reminding the reader that the tread of death is audible to all of us, and not to just one individual asking questions about one dead woman. With the abundant use of symbols poet made '*The Raven*' a highly significant poem and finest illustration in use of symbolism.



Conclusion:

As it is said that, “E.I Poe was not a poet of great thought or broad humanity.” But he was at his best a magical conjurer of mood and creator of an original music. For Poe “poetry has not been a purpose but a passion”. With the reference of this, in small collection of his poetry, he gave his best. His fine uses of symbols in poetry, did really believe that a narrator, he possesses the fullest consciousness of all the stages of composition.

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