A STUDY OF THEMES AND MAJOR SYMBOLS
IN THE LATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

ABSTRACT
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Abstract

The thesis will embark on a study of W.B.Yeats’ poetry in order to explore themes and major symbols in the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. The thesis deals with the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. The Volumes of poetry discussed in this thesis are from *The Wild Swans at Coole* to *The Last Poems*. The thesis also, evaluates the themes in the poems as well as symbols used in the poems from each Volume of poetry. All the eight Volumes of poetry from *The Wild Swans at Coole* to *The Last Poems* are discussed in this thesis. All the Volumes of poetry have been examined at the levels of poetic devices, themes, symbols, thematic concern, style, form, and Content. In 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The poetry of Yeats has been greatly influenced by Spenser, Blake, Shelley and the Pre Raphaelites. His interest in varied subjects makes his poetry interesting and intriguing. The approach that Yeats has to both Science and Religion is unorthodox and gets united at the level of magic. Keeping in mind the development of his poetic style, his works can be divided into four phases. The young Yeats started writing in the tradition of the Pre Raphaelites and consequently his early style is ornate and has a dream like atmosphere. But his style gets altered and the second phase is characterized by his adopting the idiom of common speech. The third phase is marked by the development of private symbols and is inspired by his interest in theosophy, psychical phenomenon and mysticism in general. In the final phase of Yeats’ career his style attains greater austerity and there is remarkable precision in the use of language.

Irish legends, folklore, myths, politics, theosophy, psychical phenomenon, mysticism all provide material for his poetry which is rich in the use of themes and
symbols. The private symbols developed by Yeats give depth to his work. Yeats’ symbolic system displays the principle of conflict in the life of the individual as well as in that of human civilization.

The first chapter begins with an Introduction to the poetry of W.B. Yeats. An attempt has been made to trace the roots of poetry and some autobiographical elements are also, discussed in this chapter. The Introduction traces Yeats’ life from his childhood till his death.

The second chapter entitled The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) and The Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921) discusses and examines themes and symbols in these two Volumes of poetry. Theme of death is discussed in the elegies present in Wild Swans. Poems like In Memory of Major Robert Gregory, An Irish Airman Foresees his Death and Shepherd and Goatherd. The present study further aims at observing points of political concern and theme of War as used in poems Easter 1916, On a Political Prisoner. Theme of Love is shown in the poems, as Solomon to Sheba and Solomon and the Witch. The Title poem of The Wild Swans At Coole the symbol of Swan as symbolised by Maud Gonne is used. Major Robert Gregory symbolises Renaissance man and a man of action with a lonely impulse. Love lyrics such as Solomon and the Witch and Solomon and Sheba is also seen in these Volume where Love is symbolised in various aspects. Second Coming symbolizes Civilization.

The third chapter of the thesis deals with the symbols and themes used by the poet in The Tower Volume of 1928. This is the richest Volume of his poetry. He reached almost the submit of his creative excellence. Yeats saw the tower as a universal symbol. The title poem The Tower discusses it. Symbol of Helen of Troy
which represents Maud Gonne is shown in the poem *Leda and the swan*. Theme of war and death is shown in poems like *Meditations in Time of Civil War* and *Nineteen hundred and Nineteen*. These two poems on War also represent the political themes and themes of destruction. *The Meditation in Time of Civil War* in this poem he transforms violence into a powerful vision that symbolises the blood dimmed tide. The Dance symbol is used in the poem *Among School Children*. *Sailing to Byzantium* discusses other major symbols in this chapter. Unrequited lust and Danger is another theme used in this Volume. Byzantium is used as a symbol. Cathedral gong symbolizes the force and power of the spiritual world. Theme of life or Death in life is discussed in this poem.

The fourth chapter analyses Yeats’ another Volumes of poetry namely *The winding stair and Other Poems* published in 1933. *Words for Music Perhaps* and *A Woman young and Old. Words for Music Perhaps* with its Crazy Jane and Old Tom the Lunatic showed a new aspect of Yeats’ poetry. Theme of death is discussed in the poem *In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz*.and *Death. A Woman Young and Old* which consists of eleven poems is also discussed in this chapter. The heart of the poems of Volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* is Byzantium poem which discusses major symbols like Golden Bird and other symbols. Tower symbol is also used in this Volume. *Blood and the Moon* is another poem in the Volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* which discusses Burke, Swift as the symbols of glorious Ireland. In poem *Veronica’s Napkin* Berenice’s Hair is used as a symbol.

The fifth chapter deals with another two Volumes of poetry namely, *A Full Moon In March* (1935) and *The Last Poems* (1936-39). The last phase shows that
the antinomy between the real and the ideal, between the body and the Soul, between the self and the anti self, between the recluse and the man of action, is not really resolved, but there is an attempt at transcendence with a cold, almost stoic detachment. *The Gyres* is one of the basic symbols in Yeats’ poetry which is discussed in the poem *The Gyres*. Theme of old age and death are used in many poems of these two Volumes. *Parnell’s Funeral* discusses death of Parnell as well as a political scenario of that period is also shown in this poem. *Supernatural Songs* which consists of twelve poems is also included in the Volume *A Full Moon In March*. These Songs are a sequence of twelve poems divided between sexually saturated mystical philosophizing and a more straightforward lyricism. In *The Last Poems, Cuchulian Conformed* Cuchulian symbolizes loneliness, exaltation and defeat. In this same Volume *The Last Poems, Under Ben Bulben* horsemanship as a unifying symbol. The role of the legendary figures with the exception of Cuchulian was handed over to such heroes as Parnell who receives ample treatment in *Parnell’s Funeral* and other two poems of *The Last Poems*, which are dedicated to Parnell are *Parnell* and *Come Gather Round Me Parnellites*.

The sixth chapter assimilates the observations of preceding chapters and binds these into a comprehensive whole in order to arrive at a definite Conclusion about the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. Themes and symbols used by Yeats in the last eight Volumes of poetry.

An extensive volume of research has been carried out on the later poetry of W.B.Yeats. The majority of these works focuses on the themes and major symbols which Yeats’ uses in his later poetry. This thesis explores his concern for sex, love, marriage, war, death, political issues and human relationships all are discussed in his
poems at full length. Yeats’ with his innovative ability to create a fine symbolic system for his poetry. His poetry is very remarkable not only from Socio-political but emotional as well as psychological point of view.

The last phase shows the completion of a pattern into which many different threads have been woven, but prevailing imprecision is not one of harmony and fulfillment. The tone is intensely tragic and defiant gaiety proves a mask worn in disappointment.

This thesis is a humble attempt to add a new dimension to the study of themes and major symbols in the later poetry of W.B. Yeats.