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## Effects of Symbolism of Birds in British Romantic Poetry

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### Abstract:

*This study attempts to investigate the effects of symbolism of birds in British romantic poetry. As a technique symbolism of birds has been used in romantic poetry to enhance poems and give insight to the reader. Birds are also a source of inspiration to romantic poets in order to relate nature with different aspects like feelings and beliefs. In this study, the researcher used the analytical approach and refers to William Wordsworth. In conclusion, Wordsworth symbolism of birds has been used to refer to innocence, gaiety, purity and boyhood, moreover, the researcher found out that use of birds in romantic poetry produces great effects which is accomplished by attaching additional meanings to the poem as it allows the poet to demonstrate the universal concepts underlying more specific circumstances which helps make the poem more relatable to the audience.*

**Keywords:** Symbolism of birds, British romantic poetry.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Among the various techniques employed in poetry, symbolism is one of the most effective tools that poets use to communicate expressively and concisely. Todorov (1982: 24) stated that poetic symbols serve to illustrate the meaning of a poem beyond what is explicitly stated, to suggest another meaning rooted in the knowledge shared by a particular culture. In the sense to what Todorov states, poetic symbols evoke images to suggest different levels of meaning. However, not only does the use of symbolism enable the poets communicate the intended

message clearly and concisely, but it also permits them let the audience get to know a lot more about the atmosphere and the context of the poems. So, the contribution of poetic symbols in the production of poems and in raising the level of the recognition, enjoyment and appreciation of the audience, raises symbolism to a higher plateau in the province of poetry.

The reader of romantic poetry from 1800 to 1850 observes that symbolism constitutes the most influential device among other poetic devices. Michael (2005: 104) explains that use of symbolism saying “Romantics use the finite for the infinite, the material for the immaterial, the dead standing for the living, space standing for time, words standing for something which is in itself wordless ...”. So, it can be taken that, romantic poets use symbols for what could be expressed only symbolically and could not be expressed literally, and that creates the notion of depth that is essential for all their works.

Among other symbols in romantic poetry, birds are extensively employed. That can partly be, birds are an important part of the nature’s beauty eco which is admired by the romantic poets, besides, birds are a source of inspiration to romantic poets in order to relate with nature in different aspects like feelings and beliefs.

Romantic poets put particular emphasis on birds, the birds traditionally known to sing through the night. The poets saw birds as a natural representation of their condition and inspiration. Romantic poets such as John Keats, Percy Shelly and Edgar Alan Poe were themselves inspired by the idea that the bird sings for its own sake.

However, there are birds in poetry, either identified by name or merely named generically. In both cases, the bird is a functional romantic symbol used as a device for poetic codification. And in this respect, this study attempts to study the effects of symbolism of birds in British romantic poetry and examines the sources of that symbolism. All that, to add positive dimensions that can contribute effectively in the appreciation of romantic poetry.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE STUDY:**

Poetry is loaded with the symbolic use of different birds as poets use their poems to express their feelings, and portray their emotions in away far the direct; and naïve. They were pleading with the things around them to highlight the depths of their feelings; and absorbed the

depth of their emotions, the researcher argues that, symbolism of birds implies different and sometimes opposite interpretations in romantic poetry.

The variations of symbolism of birds, associated with the romantic poets' different backgrounds, ages, cultures, religion beliefs and attitudes, make it difficult to account for conventional symbols of birds under the umbrella of the romantic poetry era which lasts for fifty years and beyond. Accordingly, and with consideration to the varieties of differences and influences, the researcher looks at the effects of symbolism of birds in romantic poetry as a multi-dimensional phenomenon which requires a thorough and keen exploration to arrive at a desirable interpretation.

### **3. QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY:**

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What role does symbolism play in romantic poetry in "To the Cuckoo" by William Wordsworth?
2. To what extent does the employment of bird symbols affected romantic poetry?

### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. Symbolism is a subtle and effective technique in communicating thematic concerns in romantic poetry.
2. To find out the various effects of bird-symbols on romantic poetry.

### **5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:**

This study contributes to the appreciation of poetry in general and romantic poetry in particular. In terms of being a literary scholarship, this study gives an understanding into the references of birds being made as manifestations of ideal issues, representation of tangible objects and interpretations of human thoughts. Moreover, the study provides grounds for novice readers of poetry in different levels to satisfy their desires when complicated issues as symbolism, are identified, explored and clarified. It also contributes to literary criticism

of poetry in various terms. Finally, the study furnishes for future research in poetry and this enriches the concerned field.

## **6. LIMITS OF THE STUDY:**

The researcher uses the analytical approach and limits the study to the effects of the symbolism of birds in the British romantic poetry in "To the Cuckoo" by William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

## **7. HISTORY OF THE SYMBOLIC MOVEMENT:**

Symbolism was a late nineteenth-century art movement of French and Belgian origin in poetry and other arts. In literature, the movement had its roots in *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*, 1857) by Charles Baudelaire. The works of Edgar Allan Poe, which Baudelaire greatly admired and translated into French, were a significant influence and the source of many stock tropes and images. The aesthetic was developed by Stephan Mallarme and Paul Verlaine during the 1860s and 1870s. In the 1880s, the aesthetic was articulated through a series of manifestoes and attracted different generations of writers. The label "symbolist" itself comes from the critic Jean Moreas, who coined it in order to distinguish the symbolists from the related decadent movement in literature and art. Distinct from, but related to, the movement in literature, symbolism in art represents an outgrowth of the darker, gothic side of Romanticism; but where romanticism was impetuous and rebellious, symbolist art was static and hieratic.

Generally, symbolism may be defined as the representation of a reality on one level of reference by a corresponding reality on another. According to Wilson (1999) symbolism is an attempt by carefully studied means a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors—to communicate unequal personal feeling.

Because of this complexity and depth and power of the symbol, Bowra (1983) regards symbolic poetry as a kind of mystic poetry, a poetry in which the poet tries to convey his sense of the mystery of life. According to Coleridge (1811) a symbol 'is characterized by a translucence of the special (i.e. the species) in the individual.' This suggests that a symbol differs from an allegorical sign in that it has a real existence whereas an allegorical sign is arbitrary.

Abrams (1993) says: “A symbol, in the broadest sense of the term, is anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols.” Symbolism is an important device in literature. It does not only communicate the subtle and hidden ideas of a complex age but also as Meenakshi Raman writes, “expresses and interprets the materialistic realities of life bringing out the mysteries of human existence.” (Meenakshi, 2005, P. 147)

Pathak (1992) argued: “A symbol is something that exists in its own right and yet stands for or suggests something else. In a general sense, the use of imagery so that one objects represents something else. The Cross, for example, is a symbol of Christianity; the lion is a symbol of courage.

Seeds of symbolism may be traced in the allegories of Langland, Spenser and Bunyan, the poetry of the Metaphysical, William Blake and to some extent in the poetry of the romantic poets. But that is a scattered kind of symbolism except that of Blake. Moreover, a symbol is different from an allegory. An allegory is a product of fancy and is inferior to the symbolic technique. The symbol expresses a deep and complex spiritual phenomenon whereas the allegory provides a sense of fun and entertainment. It was Blake who first distinguished between symbol and the allegory. According to Blake a symbol is, indeed, the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp, a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to imagination; the one is revelation, the other amusement. Symbolism is a conscious movement that was born in France as a reaction against Naturalism and precision, and exactitude of the naturalist school represented by Zola. Symbolism, as a school, therefore, was announced in a manifesto in the *Figaro* of 1886, by a group of writers known for twenty years as “Decadents,” to describe a mode of literary expression in which words are used to suggest states of mind rather than for their objective, representational or intellectual content. The French symbolists, led by Mallarmé and Verlaine, condemned mere ‘exteriority,’ and laid great emphasis on the treatment of the sensations or the representation of the Vague, fleeting impressions that constantly pass before the mind’s eye. It meant a virtual withdrawal from life, a concentration on inner experience and its expression through the use of symbols. The term ‘Symbolist’ applied to the first generation of French poets after Baudelaire, and rather more loosely to the first modern poets in other

countries, suggests that the poet can best express the dream and drama of his intuitions, his feelings and uncertainties in the form of a symbolic legend. He uses an old myth or invents a new one as a mean of revealing perception for which he cannot find direct language.

## **8. FUNCTION OF SYMBOLISM:**

It's hard to find a work of literature that lacks any kind of symbolism hence symbolism is an important literary device for creating complex narratives because it enables writers to convey important information without having to state things directly. In addition, the use of symbolism is widespread because it can:

- Help readers visualize complex concepts and central themes, and track their development.
- Afford writers the opportunity to communicate big ideas efficiently and artfully.
- Invite readers to interpret a text independently, rather than be directly told what the author means.
- Add emotional weight to a text.
- Conceal themes that are too controversial to state openly.
- Imply change or growth in characters or themes through shifts in the way that characters interact with particular symbols, or ways in which the symbols themselves change over time.

## **9. SYMBOLISM IN LITERATURE:**

Symbolism in literature was a mid-19th to early 20th century European literary phenomenon that employed symbols and evocative suggestions in place of direct statements.

Symbolist poets tried to capture sensations and states of mind that lay beyond normal consciousness by disordering their senses, indulging in decadence, occultism, and opposition to sober bourgeois values. They rejected the pastoral tradition, and took their themes and images from city life, emphasizing its bleak, hallucinatory and illicit aspects.

Symbolism is a literary device in which a writer uses one thing usually a physical object or phenomenon to represent something more abstract. A strong symbol usually shares a set of key characteristics with whatever it is meant to symbolize, or is related to it in some other

way. Characters and events can also be symbolic. A famous example of a symbol in literature occurs in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Atticus tells his children Jim and Scout that it's a sin to kill a mockingbird because mockingbirds cause no harm to anyone; they just sing. Because of these traits, mockingbirds in the novel symbolize innocence and beauty, while killing a mockingbird symbolizes an act of senseless cruelty.

## **10. TYPES OF SYMBOLISM:**

The following are the types of symbolism:

- *Symbolism through physical objects*: Most often, physical objects are used to symbolize an idea or concept, as a way of pointing the reader towards some of the basic themes that a work is dealing with. For example, a poet might write a poem about a flower dancing in the wind in order to convey a sense of innocence, harmony with nature, or sheer happiness.

- *Symbolism through characters*: Sometimes, characters themselves can serve as symbols—of a particular virtue or vice, or of a political ideology. For example, in Edmund Spenser's famous allegorical poem, *The Fairies Queen*, the female knight Britomart is a symbol of the values of chastity and restraint, traits which many 16th-century readers held in high esteem.

- *Symbolism through events*: Events can also be symbolic. For example, while a character's long, wild hair might symbolize a period of youth or innocence, a scene in which the character chops off his or her long hair might symbolize a loss of innocence—or the sacrifices people have to make in the process of becoming a mature adult with responsibilities. While the act of cutting off the hair is neither an object nor a character, but it would still be an example of symbolism.

Writers employ a wide variety of symbols to deepen the meaning of their work. Some symbols, though, are much easier to identify than others. It's worth recognizing the ways that some symbols can be obvious, while others might be less so. For example, sea glass might be used as a fairly obvious symbol in one text, and a more subtle symbol in another.

## **11. ROMANTIC POETRY:**

Romantic poetry is the poetry of the romantic era, an artistic, literary, musical and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century. It involved a reaction against prevailing enlightenment ideas of the 18th century, and lasted from 1800 to 1850. In early-19th-century England William Wordsworth (1798) defined poetry by saying "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin in emotion recollected in tranquility as the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind".

It is important to stress the fact that according to romantic poets, nature in general and all its parts have specific features of the human soul. Though it is important to say that such personalization and conception of nature as subordinate to the "world spirit" is very important peculiarity of romantic literature because it reflects the problem of man's relationship to the world.

Subjectivity of nature is a broader concept than the organic view of romantics on nature, as this concept unites a wide range of romantic poets. In English and in German literature subjectivity of nature is expressed more explicitly than other literatures.

Thus, the romanticism is characterized by a sense of unity between man and nature, but this is not always expressed in the pantheistic forms, and may be associated with different ideological positions. Moreover, this unity can act in the forms of dualistic split, when nature embodies peace and harmony, and is opposed to sufferings and disharmony of human relationship.

It is important to note that for romantic poets nature was an expression of spiritual life, where they saw the mirror reflection of either their own soul, or the ideal life that constituted the object of their dreams. Therefore, in their works nature is endowed with more deep meaning, than the meaning of words.

Therefore, we can see that the romantic poets often showed the nature as free, powerful and beautiful world that is different from human. Especially romantic poets liked to portray the sea in this sense, its boundless scope and majestic power, the wind, which has unlimited power and freedom, and the mountains with their grandeur and



sublime beauty. In this case, the freedom and the power of natural elements have a figurative meaning, associated with free and powerful human spirit.

## **12. PREVIOUS RELATED STUDIES:**

Abdulrazak (1989) studied "Keats, Shelley and Byron in Nazik al-Malaikah's Poetry"

The main purpose of this study was to trace the impact of the English romantic poets, especially Keats, Shelley and Byron, on Arab/Iraqi romantic poetry and thought, in particular that of Nazik al-Mala'ikah. The study also shows the natural elements common to the poetry of Keats and Nazik: the birds, the river, the wind, the sun and the moon.

Walid (2018) investigated "Romanticism in Context: Shelley's and Keats's Verse and Prose: Keats's Letters and Ode to a Nightingale, Shelley's Defense of Poetry and Skylark".

This paper argued that it is probably unavoidable perceiving the works of Shelley and Keats without putting these works in the context of the age and romanticism. On the whole the selected pieces of prose and verse of the poets represent their postulations in an era which witnessed great revolutions, political and industrial bringing about new trends in literature and in society. From the personal perspective of the two poets, the birds in the poems represent ideals reflecting the treatment of imagination, nature and ideology of their time and their individual experience and knowledge of the world and of prosody.

The study has arrived at the following results:

1. Romanticism in context has been a criterion to interpret the poetry of the romantics as a whole and the visual images in Keats's Ode to a Nightingale and Shelley's Skylark in particular.

2. The imagery employed in their poems will not be perceived without Keats's tents or poetic principles discussed in odes and Shelley's Defense of Poetry and poems.

3. Their poetic devices such as metaphors and personification of the birds in their poems have been employed to represent their inspiration and their theories of reflecting on the reality of their age at large and on their individual lives as poet in particular.

Janina (2006) studied "The Symbolic Life of Birds in Anglo-Saxon England"

This study exposes the ways in which bird symbols were understood and interpreted during the period from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Furthermore, it demonstrates what can be learned by using similar interpretative techniques to understand both literary and art historical representations, also illustrating the syncretism that took place between pre-Christian, vernacular and patristic traditions.

The term ‘symbolic life’ is employed throughout the work to underline the fact that the meanings assigned to birds are part of a dynamic and evolving system of correspondences, rather than a static code. By examining each example of a bird symbol individually, and in combination with those images, signs, symbols or descriptions that may accompany it, the symbolic life of each species is delineated. This study presents a number of original discoveries, uncovering new sources for significant works of Anglo-Latin and old English literature, and documenting previously unrecorded examples of bird symbolism within Anglo-Saxon art. It starts from the recognition that there was a cultural propensity for riddling and ambiguity, which drew on the natural world for its inspiration, and that birds provided strong visual and literary symbols for exploring significant themes, such as the responsibilities of a Christian, and the flight of the soul.

### **13. DATA OF THE STUDY:**

Data of this study are the effects of symbolic portrayal of birds in British romantic poetry in “To the Cuckoo” by William Wordsworth (1770-1850). The researcher tried to classify and describe the data based on the following study questions.

1. What role does symbolism play in romantic poetry in “To the Cuckoo” by William Wordsworth?

2. To what extent does the employments of bird-symbols affected romantic poetry?

In “To the Cuckoo” by William Wordsworth symbolism is used to produce an impact which is accomplished by attaching additional meaning to the poem as it allows the poet to demonstrate the universal concepts underlying more specific circumstances which helps make the poem more relatable to the audience.

William Wordsworth’s cuckoo in “To the cuckoo” is a complex symbol. The bird is depicted as a symbolic maker for nature but “To the

Cuckoo “also makes clear that its physical presence is not its important quality; he uses the physical bird as a doorway into symbolic worlds. In romantic poetry symbolism is considered as a sort of literary shorthand that is used to convey deeper meanings than the words themselves would do otherwise. The metrical verse of poetry is chosen specifically because of the larger context and connections they can convey to the reader. Wordsworth attempts to evoke unique and strong feelings in the reader through the symbol of birds, instead of direct statements that would limit its scope and diverse reactions it could have on various audiences.

A primary reason for poetry’s ability to stimulate reactions in the reader is due to its use of symbolism, using far fewer words than prose, this traits led symbolism movement to become popular during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In “To the Cuckoo” the cuckoo represents a symbol of beauty , innocence and childhood for the poet, the sight of the cuckoo reminds the poet of his childhood , the cuckoo was in those days a symbol of ‘hope’ to the young Wordsworth , and seeing the cuckoo now helps the poet to return again to the “golden day” of his youth.

The cuckoo seems to stimulate those powerful feelings once evoked in him by nature where once the cuckoo seemed to make the earth feels “faery world”, when the cuckoo returns like spring , this reminds the poet of how free and filled with joy he once felt when faced simple beauty.

To the Cuckoo by William Wordsworth nature seems to be a prevalent theme as the poet loves nature and talks about pastoral views such as hills, flowers, sunshine and woods. In William Wordsworth’s eyes, nature is a teacher whose wisdom we can learn, and without which any human life is vain, thus nature here represents the educator of human beings.

Another dominant theme in the poem is nostalgia as the poet walks down the memory lane and the cuckoo’s voice leads him to the remembrance of the past, the poet refers to his childhood as the ‘golden time’ and ‘visionary hours’ which cannot get back as he became an adult.

The poet also uses the bird as a symbol of love and is referring to the bird as a longing because he has never seen it, this indicates that the poet has undeterred hope that he will find his love someday.

The use of symbolism by the poet is used to convey a specific meaning to the audience as a mean of artistic expression.

Symbolism of birds in romantic poetry has many effects such as allowing poets to add multiple layers of meaning to their work, making themes more universal and engaging the readers' interest.

Symbolism is an effective tool when used consciously, to summarize a lot of information very quickly and to evoke powerful emotional responses.

Symbolism of birds also helps the poet to convey the hidden meaning to the reader or listener, it tells us about artistic expressions and represents abstract ideas as it helps in creating meanings and emotions in writing.

Birds have predominantly positive connotation throughout human history, birds have occupied a significant ubiquity in our physical and psychological existence.

Birds are also a source of inspiration to poets in the romantic period, poets used birds in order to understand and relate nature to different aspects like feelings, signs, beliefs and messages. The poet has directly addressed this poem to the cuckoo and expresses his love, devotion and yearning to visually glimpse the cuckoo throughout the poem, the cuckoo bird is an arranged image of innocence, gaiety, purity and boyhood.

The birds represents an organic creature and parts of the world of observed reality, part of that "nature" which for the romantic poet had essential value and meaning, thus when the singing bird appeared in romantic poetry it represented an instance and a voice of the natural world.

#### **14. CONCLUSION:**

There is a notable presence of birds in romantic poetry.

The birds are presented in "To the Cuckoo" by Wordsworth as a symbol of innocence, gaiety, purity and boyhood.

Birds are used as functional and organic symbols.

The use of birds deepens the timeless universality of poetically encoded messages.

The use of birds in romantic poetry produces great effects which is accomplished by attaching additional meaning to the poem as it allows the poet to demonstrate the universal concepts underlying more

specific circumstances which helps make the poem more relatable to the audience.

Symbolism of birds has many effects such as allowing poets to add multiple layers of meaning to their work, making themes more universal and engaging the readers' interest.

Birds are important part of the nature's beauty eco which is admired by the romantic poets, besides, birds are a source of inspiration to romantic poets in order to relate with nature in different aspects like feelings and beliefs.

Symbolism invites readers to interpret the poem independently, rather than be directly told what the author means.

Symbolism adds emotional weight to the poem.

Symbolism adds positive dimensions that can contribute effectively in the appreciation of romantic poetry.

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