

# Symbolism

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# Symbolism

- Symbol is a literary device that uses words, objects, abstract ideas, or any other symbol to represent something beyond the literal meaning of the expression. For example, rose has typically been used to symbolize love.
- A symbol may be a word, an object or an action that signifies meaning beyond the literal sense of the expression.
- Symbolism is a coherent and sustained system which includes a number of symbolic elements and devices to achieve the desired effect. It involves a complex system of symbols.

# Types

- Religious Symbolism
- Romantic Symbolism
- Emotional Symbolism

- English poet William Blake is believed to be a prominent literary figure who composed his poems using persistent and sustained symbolism.
- American prose writers who used symbolism:
  - Nathaniel Hawthorne
  - Edgar Allan Poe
  - Herman Melville
  - Ralph Waldo Emerson
  - Henry Thoreau

# Symbolist Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

- Symbolism, as an artistic movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed as a reaction against realism and naturalism.
- It seeks to represent absolute truths symbolically with the help of metaphorical images and language.
- It attempted to replace the pictures of gritty and unpleasant reality represented by realism and naturalism with spirituality and imagination.
- According to Jean Moreas, symbolism was against "plain meanings, declamations, false sentimentality and matter-of-fact description." He further adds that "in this art movement, representations of nature, human activities and all real life events don't stand on their own; they are rather veiled reflections of the senses pointing to archetypal meanings through their esoteric connections" ("Symbolist Manifesto", 1886)
- Symbolist poets put greater emphasis on evoking the effect that an object or idea produces instead of describing the object or idea itself.
- They attempted to explore the symbolic value of these objects or ideas.

# Influence of the Theory of Correspondences

- The Symbolist movement was deeply influenced by the theory of correspondences proposed by the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772).
- The theory of correspondences believes in the existence of inherent and systematic analogies between human mind and external realities, and between the physical/material and spiritual world.
- The theory is exploited to compose poetic works which are highly suggestive in nature. These correspondences are utilized to evoke the intended effect.
- Baudelaire puts it thus: “As Baudelaire put this doctrine: “Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the spiritual as in the natural world, is significative, reciprocal, converse, correspondent.”

# “Correspondences” by Charles Baudelaire

There are smells that are fresh like children's skin,  
calm like oboes, green like meadows

– And others, rotten, heady, and triumphant,

having the expansiveness of infinite things,  
like amber, musk, benzoin, and incense,  
which sing of the raptures of the soul and senses.

# Origins of the Symbolist Movement

- The aesthetics of the movement were developed by the French poets Stephane Mallarme and Paul Verlaine during the decades of the 1860s and 1870s.
- In literature, the movement gained momentum with the publication of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857.
- Greek poet Jean Moreas wrote and published the "Symbolist Manifesto" in 1886 and named the French poets Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme and Paul Verlaine as the leading poets of the symbolist movement. Arthur Rimbaud is another prominent symbolist poet.
- These poets exploited a complex set of private symbols to write poems which are suggestive. These poems lack absolute significations.



# Effect

- The symbolist movement had a tremendous impact on the poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modernist poetry was deeply inspired and influenced by the French symbolists.
- Poets like T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens were influenced by it.
- Other genres of literature were also influenced.