

Significance of Symbols in Poetry Titles: A Study on A. E. Houseman's "Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree."

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Abstract – This research study explores the significance of using symbols in poetry titles. Taking A. E. Houseman's poem "Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree," the study explores the geographical and social background that is created using symbolism in the title. This study also analyses the contribution these symbolic elements of the title make towards the better understanding of the poem. Though there is a plethora of studies conducted on the significance of symbolism in poetry, very few have focused on the typical usage of symbolism in the poetry titles. Moreover, this selected text remains unexplored in terms of the understanding of the title. By using textual analysis method, and by the application of the understanding of symbolism, the study is taken forward with an approach to explore further. The analysis understands, that symbolism used in title influences readers' understanding of the poem in terms of the background, and that is, the Barn as the symbol of home, stack as the workplace and tree, the social space.

Index terms – Symbolism, Poetry, Titles, Geographical, Social.

I. INTRODUCTION

Symbolism in poetry is a technique of using linguistic symbols to represent ideas and objects. Symbolism is also the practice or art of making use of an object or a word to be representational of an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning in terms of suggesting an idea which is not directly mentioned. In a differing perspective it is understood as something in the world of the senses, including an action, that reveals or is a sign for something else, often abstract or otherworldly. A rose, for example, has long been considered a symbol of love and affection. Every word denotes, refers to, or labels something in the world, but a symbol (to which a word, of course, may point) has a concreteness not shared by language, and can point to something that transcends ordinary experience (*Symbol | Poetry Foundation*). Looking back at the origins of symbolism in literature, especially poetry, the following is understood. It is understood that the art and the study of

symbolism originated in the revolt of certain French poets against the hard and static conventions governing both technique and theme profoundly found in literary movements and traditional French poetry, as evidenced in the precise description of Parnassian poetry. The Symbolists wished to liberate poetry from its expository functions and its formalized oratory in order to describe the fleeting, immediate sensations of man's inner life and experience instead. The attempt that the symbolists made to evoke the ineffable intuitions and the sense impressions of the inner life of man and to communicate the easy-not observable mystery of existence through a free and highly personal use of metaphors and images that, though lacking in precise meaning, is understood as not conveying the state of the poet's mind and hint at the "dark and confused unity" of an inexpressible reality." (*Symbolism | Literary and Artistic Movement | Britannica.Com*) The struggle to liberate poetry from the common descriptions of everyday life, and to have it as an art form to bring out the inner struggles and feeling of man is evident in these notations. The art of using symbols to convey has also been a point of discussion over the ages. Through the development of this literary technique, it was not only possible to explore the inner self of man, but also to find similarities between different aesthetic forms. The inter-disciplinary approach between various art forms has seen the synchronisation of the expression of aesthetics to be paralleled.

Commenting on a comparative analysis of symbolism in painting and poetry, W. B. Yeats comments as follows: "William Blake has written, 'Vision or imagination' - meaning symbolism by these words - "is a representation of what actually exists, in real or unchangeable." The daughters of Memory form fable or Allegory.' Continuing the comment he says that the German insisted with many determined and suitable gestures, that Symbolism pronounced things which could not be said so perfectly in any other possible way, and needed but a right instinct for the understanding; while allegory said things needed a right knowledge for its understanding. On one side the symbols gave the dumb things a voice, and bodiless things a body; while the other read a meaning - which had never lacked its voice or its body - into something heard or seen, and loved less for the meaning than for its own sake. The only symbol that he had cared for were the shapes and the motions of the body; the ears

hidden by the hair, to make one think of a mind being busy with inner voices; as in Blake's 'Vision of Bloodthirstiness,' Yeats mentions, is to call up an emotion of bodily strength; and that he would not put a lily, or rose, or poppy into a picture to express the sense of purity, or love, or sleep, because he thought such emblems were allegorical in essence, and had their meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right." (*W. B. Yeats, 'Symbolism in Painting' & 'Symbolism of Poetry', in Ideas of Good and Evil (1903)*)

William van O'Connor in his study published as *Symbolism and the Study of Poetry* comments that man uses signs, sometimes in the way animals use them. Connor mentions, it is used in a way that is unique to him: man uses signs not only as a way to indicate things, but also as an avenue to represent them in the possible art form. The animal mind directly transmits messages to the motor-centers. The understanding is that many words are not signals of something about, likely, to happen. They remind us of things rather than announce things. Signs of this latter category are more properly considered symbols. Symbols and signs may be seen to differ in this approach: signs are proxy for the objects they represent, symbols are understood as the vehicles for the conception of objects. A person reacts toward a sign or is aware of it; one conceives a symbol, and it is this conception that the symbol directly means. The single word can be both sign and symbol—the sign indicate the object, whereas the symbol allows of a conception of the object. (Connor).

Commenting on the meaning symbols and the perception of symbols in poetry, Louis Cazamian says "Our effort has been, so far, to dissociate from the historical meaning of symbolism as a method of literary expression, another sense, infinitely wider and freer. But in one direction at least, it is time that a limit should be set to the widening process. Symbolism has not necessarily anything to do with symbols, or symbols with symbolism. A writer may find room 'in his work for definite symbols, partaking more or less of the nature of allegories, without using that method of expansive suggestion which is the essence of symbolism. Too definite a symbol, in our view, will lower the poetic value of the symbolism, and eventually destroy it. On the contrary, effective symbolism can very well do without definite, and, so to say, individualized symbols. Symbolist poetry of the highest order may convey a powerful and thrilling suggestion, while its meaning cannot be translated into the hard-and-fast language of ordinary life. The positive-minded reader will say that its meaning is obscure, or that it means just nothing at all; and the positive-minded reader will not be wrong. Therefore, the price the symbolist poet has to pay is that, his appeal being mainly to emotional and imaginative intuition, he is less sure than is the writer who deals in definite symbols. Our response to symbolist poetry is largely individual, and its fuller effectiveness may be restricted to a few. On the other hand, it is more sure in its elementary appeal than any other kind, of poetry, because a certain degree of emotional and imaginative sympathy is almost universal.(Cazamian) The individual perspective towards symbols and the way how the understanding of the symbols are unique to each individual is understood.

Moreover, considering the influences and techniques used by A. E. Houseman in his poetic expressions, Brooks provides the dominant and repeating theme that is found in his poems. It is claimed that in all of his poetry, Housman continually returns to significant themes. One of the prominent themes discussed by Cleanth Brooks in the Ricks collection of essays, is inevitability of death. [...] "Housman frequently deals with the plight of the young soldier, and he is usually able to maintain sympathy both for the youth who is the victim of war and for the patriotic cause of the nation." (*A. E. Housman | Poetry Foundation*). Thus, death has always been a dominating theme in Houseman's poems and "Farwell to Barn and Stack and Tree" is not an exception. By way of crime, guilt and fleeing, the idea of death is dealt in differing ideas.

On one of the earlier analyses on symbolism conducted by the researchers of this study, a descriptive idea of how the long lasting effect of the initial suggestive symbols could result in positively affecting the understanding was mentioned. "The study focused on the symbolism used in "The Voyage" by Katherine Mansfield and how this literary technique has been effectively used to project the psychoanalytic diagram of the subconscious mind of Fenella. The Textual analysis of the text, using the psychoanalysis-subconscious, as the theoretical framework finds that few significant symbols are used by Mansfield which either project or indicate the subconscious mind of Fenella. It can be concluded that there is an effective projection of the subconscious through the literary technique of symbolism. The study further encourages researchers to venture into parallel literary techniques that are used effectively in the text to project the inner-thoughts of Fenella." (Dananjaya and Veerasingam)

Contradicting to some of the understandings and notions of the coupling of Houseman and symbolism, "A Survey of the Criticisms of A.E. Housman's Poetry" by Claudia Newton Jackson provides a different view. Placing Houseman in the time period of the end of the celebrated era of symbolism, she identifies him being liberated from the extensive use of symbols. She continues by saying "Housman appeared in the midst of the declining years of the first full bloom of symbolism." Jackson continues to say that Houseman came with a poetry different from any of the cults. He continues to say that he had no new poetic theory and no political axe to grind; Carlyle, with his Sartor Resartus, was not from Housman's world; Ruskin and Rossetti were entirely too sensuous and passionate [...] and he saw no use for symbols when simple words carefully arranged could so clearly express a desired image or thought" (Jackson).

Furthermore, in search of few examples where symbolic titles have been influential for the texts that followed them, some of the examples direct this research directly to the platform. Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*, where the night is used throughout the book to symbolize death, darkness, and loss of faith, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, where the letter "A" symbolizes adultery, *A Raisin in the Sun*, where a plant on the windowsill symbolizes need and hope and needs the sun to grow and Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, where Grinch steals the symbols of Christmas, like trees, presents and food, to find

out in the end, Christmas was more than those material things. (*Examples of Symbolism in Literature*).

With the synchronization of all the above discussed study of available literature, it is understandable that this research study could narrow down the need for the study into a particular category. As symbolism is still a literary technique of the art form of poetry, and since the symbolic title has been a widely-used device, it is noteworthy of concentrating on the title. Symbolism used in the titles of poetry is an area that has been less studied. Moreover, the idea of finding out the background that it creates for the poem based on the individual understanding of each reader is vital for this study. The notion that Houseman did not intend to base the understanding of his poems based on symbolism is an ignorable fact, as it is clearly observable on the first observations of this text that he has made a deliberate attempt to create the background for the poem by the symbols used in the title, namely barn, stack and tree.

II. SYNCHRONIZATION OF THEORY

The theoretical background for the textual analysis of this poems relies heavily on the theoretical implications of symbolism as a device. The practice of using symbolism as literary device, with consideration of the essential features of symbols, will be used for the analysis. The considered symbols will be filtered through the essential elements and functions that symbolism as a literary device is expected to contribute to the understanding of the text. Considering the elements that are essential features to analyze the symbols, the characteristics that designate symbols can be a suitable framework. In such a perspective, one of the theoretical explanations of symbols can be considered. "In the usage of literary historians, however, Symbolist Movement designates specifically a group of French writers beginning with Charles Baudelaire (*Fleurs du mal*, 1857) and including such later poets as Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry. Baudelaire placed the symbolic mode of his poems in part on the example of the American Edgar Allan Poe, but especially on the ancient belief in correspondences—the doctrine that explains that there exist inherent and systematic analogies between the human mind and the outer world, and also between the material and the spiritual worlds. As Baudelaire put this doctrine: "Everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural* world, is significant, reciprocal, converse, *correspondent*." The techniques of the Symbolists, who exploited an order of private Cummings, and Wallace Stevens. Symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness than explicit signification, was having a greater influence throughout Europe, and (especially in the 1890s and later) in England and America on poets such as Arthur Symonds and Ernest Dowson" (see *Decadence*) as well as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, e. e." (Norton et al.)

Thus, the elements to be continued in this approach towards understanding the elements for the analysis would be through the definitions of symbolism and how symbols are viewed. The symbols to be analysed will be filtered through the suggestive

nature that they attain through the inclusion of the reception senses. The sensory faculty of the human mind to absorb both the spiritual and natural world elements in looked as the basic element in order to find the significance that the symbols in a poem's title could attain. Presenting the initial impression to the reader to be carried out throughout the poem in order to attain the written purpose is a higher task to achieve. The study would synchronize the basic elements of symbolism and the functions of symbols and would tend to analyse the initial impact that the symbols prevalent in the title would find its influence in the following poem. An affective setting of the background, especially a country geographically and the setting for ballad.

III. METHODOLOGY

The methodology preferred to be used by the researchers for the purpose of analysis is the Textual Analysis method. By understanding the meanings, and by reading between the lines in order to explore the second layers of meanings, the analysis would set the platform for the comparison of the title and its significance concerning the narrative initiated in the text. With the findings of the meanings, the background for the text would be analyzed in terms of the impact the title creates. By using the designating elements of symbolism, the analysis will explore the symbols mentioned in the title of the text and then proceed in order to study how the symbols in the title of the text has enabled a better understanding of the text by creating significant backgrounds for the text. The analysis aims at finding whether the symbols used in the title has positively influenced the reader's reception of the themes of the poem. The researchers are that the methodology will be a limitation to find definite answers, but more of a suggestive approach.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. E. Housman provides an elaborate and empathetic expression of a person, probably a country lad, who is suffering from the feeling of guilt. This feeling of guilt leads the speaker to bid farewell to his own surrounding and seclude himself from the environment which is suggestive of the incident that happened on the same day. By allowing free flow of the emotions out of the speaker in this symbolic text, Housman attains his purpose of providing this explicit empathetic expression of a person suffering from fear and guilt. The research study believes that this understanding is a result of the suggestive nature of the symbols provided in the title of the poem.

"Farewell to barn and stack and tree,
Farewell to Severn shore.
Terence, look your last at me,
For I come home no more." (Houseman)

A farewell. The title that begins with the word that suggests a farewell, indeed becomes a prelude before the essential symbols are introduced. This suggestive nature influences the first impression and the understanding of the first stanza and its receptions. A painful farewell that a country lad is giving to his familiar environment. The sense of pain that the word "no more" creates portrays that this lad is with the decision that he will not be returning. The reason for this urgent decision to leave his surrounding is suspected to be a crime; probably a murder this person has committed without premeditation. Suggestively, an argument has erupted within siblings while they were at work, and it has resulted in this murder. The country lads have fought for the same young mistress, probably. It is also evident that the brothers have been together until the noon in which probably the argument had broken in between them. Therefore, this person who is bidding farewell is in a shock not able to accept that he had done such a gruesome and regretful act. The speaker's words are for this barn and stack and tree, which are his familiar surroundings, realizing the essential fact that he had just now killed the only companion who was there for him in this place. While bidding farewell to the speaker's familiar surroundings, the speaker brings out the feeling of urgency in him. And the speaker requests his brother whom he had just killed, to look at himself for the last time. The speaker here addresses a third person referred by the name "Terence." Even though we are not assured about who this third person could be in the narrative, by the words that are addressed to this Terence, we understand that the speaker has made a decision not to return to this his own place, his won surroundings. While we also attempt to guess who this person could be, we may end up with conclusions which are depending on our perspectives. Either a neighbour, a friend of these siblings or the mistress for whom the brothers were fighting for. The first stanza itself provides this much-expressed urgency and suspense which leads the reader to go further into the incident and inquire about this in the following stanzas.

"The sun burns on the half-mown hill,
By now the blood is dried;
And Maurice amongst the hay lies still
And my knife is in his side." (Houseman)

This is the first instance where the reader realizes that this urgent bidding of farewell follows a murder. The 'sunburn' being mentioned here shows that it is probably noontime. While the 'half-mown hill' reminds us of a landscape of farming background and the countryside, it is followed by an explicit expression that it was a bloody murder, and this crime had happened early in the day, so that the blood is dried. The victim's name is introduced - Maurice. The name is being mentioned than any other word in order to refer to the dead person in the middle of this feeling of guilt shows that they were very close to each other. It brings in that personal attachment the assailant had with the killed. And he had committed the murder with his knife that he had left near the person in a hurry in order to evacuate from the place where he had murdered.

"My mother thinks us long away;
'Tis time the field were mown.
She had two sons at rising day,

To-night she'll be alone." (Houseman)

This stanza again proves the vital point the speaker and the person who was killed are brothers; the murderer and the victim. The speaker remembers his own family, his mother, and he would have found it an impossible act to face her ever again. He imagination with the guilt is about how his mother would be waiting for her sons who had set out for mowing that morning to the fields. He goes further in empathising the sorrow and pain that their mother will go through. The same morning his mother had two sons in her side, and today when the day ends one of them is killed and the other has ran away. This stanza evokes in the reader feelings of their mother. It creates empathy.

"And here's a bloody hand to shake,
And oh, man, here's good-bye;
We'll sweat no more on scythe and rake,
My bloody hands and I." (Houseman)

Remembering the times they, as brothers, have worked together, shared proud moments of both accomplishment and failure, as men who live together under the same roof in the same family, the speaker is even unable to say a proper heartfelt farewell. He would have not expected to bid such an urgent farewell to his own brother, with such blood-stained hands. He remembers that these moments are not going to repeat.

"I wish you strength to bring you pride,
And a love to keep you clean,
And I wish you luck, come Lammastide,
At racing on the green."
"Long for me the rick will wait,
And long will wait the fold,
And long will stand the empty plate,
And dinner will be cold." (Houseman)

It is a farewell to the social, professional and personal memories and moments he had experienced. As the speaker bids farewell, he remembers the festivals and the celebrations that he had been celebrating with his family. We are with a question here. Why would the speaker wish something for the dead person, and with the guilt of knowing he is a reason behind this murder? Especially for the Lammastide or for the racing on the green? It was, probably, the speakers imaginary thinking that his brother would enjoy and cherish the same things in his life after death. The speaker remembers all that he is leaving behind while he is fleeing and going away and also remembers that this is going to be a changed life for him from now on. And what he chooses to do will be a different profession for the survival, somewhere far away from his home and surroundings. To make the lines more personal, Houseman has presented the speaker with the fear that he would even end in someplace without the basic necessities and needs for his life. In order to show that the speaker's return is not a possibility, Houseman mentions the "long wait." The phrase also gives the reader hope; a return after the suffering of guilt is over. This is literally a (Veerasingam) The analysis proves that the initial suggestions displayed in the

title of the poem have positively influenced the understanding of the background of the poem.

Barn, as the symbol of Home.

The analysis of the text finds the first symbol mentioned in the title - barn, being symbolic of the home of the speaker. It suggests an impression that is profoundly bringing in the feelings and emotions connected with home. In the middle of the countryside, the barn is the place where the homeliness is felt. The barn is the place where the family lives, gathers the harvest and keeps themselves safe from the environment, and this being mentioned in the title of the poem suggests the home of the speaker. He is expressing his farewell to his home, first of all. It is a farewell to his home first. Fleeing from the guilt and the fear of facing his surroundings after such an unforgivable crime, the speaker expresses his farewell to his home. Thus, the barn being employed into the title of the poem is not a mere expression, but a powerful symbol of that being in the feelings and emotions of home. It is used here as a powerful technique to be suggestive of this part of the farewell.

Stack, as the symbol of Workplace.

The second symbol included in the suggestive title is the stack. Based on the analysis of the text it is evident that the stack is being used as a symbol of the workplace. Same as the speaker had expressed his farewell to his home, now a step further, he remembers his workplace and the farewell that he bids is not just to his home and its surroundings but also to his workplace. The speaker remembers the times he had spent in the stack, it being the centre of all the work they did, and bids farewell to the workplace too. As the farming and pastoral culture had given the importance to the result of the hard work. The stack is a symbol of harvest, and in turn, harvest turns out to be the result of the hard work that has been put in the workplace. It is reminder of the season's work that has been done. And when the speaker is bidding farewell to the stack, it is symbolic in providing the understanding that he is, in real, bidding farewell to the work and the workplace that he remembers. It is also symbolic of the times he had spent with his brother, mowing the land, and the stack is pregnant with memories which will haunt him for the coming days, probably years. Thus, it is observable that stack has been used as a powerful symbol to bring in the impressions of the workplace.

Tree, as the symbol of Social Space.

The third symbol used in the title by Houseman is the tree. It is a highly compressed, symbolic image that is being presented in terms of the country landscape. In the midst of the vast landscape of fields, the mowing takes place with the entire community of farmers, working on their own lands. The trees that are in the midst of these lands become the place where they gather to take rest. And while taking rest, there is a vast possibility of socialisation. Probably, underneath the trees, the food and thoughts could be shared. The memories of the laughter and

sadness that is being shared in the midst of the day remains powerful in each community member's mind and these moments of socialisation could be the time that the country lads yearn for to free themselves in the middle of the hard work of the day. Thus, the tree being included in the title of the poem is heavily suggestive of the social space. As the speaker is bidding farewell to his environment, he remembers that he also is bidding farewell to his society.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the approach the study took towards understanding the symbols used in poetry titles, it is evident that symbolic titles in poetry positively influence the readers in terms of being suggestive of the background of the poem. The symbols, such as barn, stack and tree are functioning as powerful symbols in the understanding of the background of the poem. They are highly suggestive of the essential elements of a country lad's places of memory such as home, workplace and social space, namely. The study is indicative that symbols used in poetry titles positively influence the readers in the process of creating a background. The literary art of using symbols in poetry, especially the titles of poems, can be studied further as a powerful literary technique that enables a better understanding of the poem in terms of the suggestive nature of symbols. Further study on this field could be developed by way of analyzing symbols employed into various literary texts and how they contribute to the understanding of the poem.

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