Thursday 15 January 2009 **110 ENH 3012**

How do any three of your set authors use symbolism within their novels?

Etymologically, a symbol was initially a broken token, whose parts would be retained by two different parties, and which, once reunited, would enable recognition. Unity, rupture and relationship, or resonance, are therefore three essential aspects of symbolism. In Saussure's theory[1], the symbol or sign is made of the signifier and the signified, with some arbitrariness in the relationship between the object and the meaning, and it is this intrinsic ambiguity which makes the symbol so powerful and so useful. It relies, literally, on a confusion of the senses, on synaesthesia: images, sounds, perfumes, shapes and tastes collide and echo each other, revealing some hidden meaning, as in Baudelaire's 'Correspondances', where "perfumes are fresh like the flesh of children"[2]. In literature, symbolism is intimately related to poetry, but what about its use in the novel, which is by definition interested in the representation of real life? Is there not a contradiction between realism and symbolism? To analyse and answer these questions, it is interesting to consider three very different novels, each from its own distinctive period: *Robinson Crusoe*, which is one of the first novels; *Far From The Madding Crowd*, a transition between two ages; and *To The Lighthouse*, a resolutely modern novel. The use of symbolism will be examined in each of these works: not only in the details, that is, where and how specific symbols are applied, but also in general, by discussing the artistic strategy of the writer, how it fits in the framework of the novel. By comparing and contrasting the three cases, it might then be possible to draw more general conclusions about symbolism in this particular genre.

[1] *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 'Saussure, Ferdinand de', pp.342-343.
[2] 'Correspondances', *Les Fleurs du Mal*, poem IV, p.10.

Robinson Crusoe, published in 1719, is associated with the emergence of the novel as a distinct genre, and therefore it still bears a strong resemblance to previous literary styles, be it the adventure story or travel book (most famously Alexander Selkirk's tale) or the didactic, spiritual guide (such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*)[3]. The themes of travel, trade, colonial expansion and marooned sailors are particularly salient, as well as the Puritan ideology of sin and punishment, repentance and deliverance. In terms of symbolism, there is a superposition of the natural and the spiritual worlds, of material objects and religious allusions, as Watt underlines[4]. Nature is there to be appropriated and shaped. One of the most interesting aspects of Robinson's discourse is how everything he senses is submitted to his engineering mind. The world is not described as much as surveyed: the first day on the island, 'I walk'd about a Furlong from the shore', 'this being within about a Mile from the Shore', 'about Two miles on my right hand'[5]. This imagery of the Surveyor is also associated with that of the Maker, as is underlined by the detailed descriptions on how to build a raft[6], a house, on how to make pots[7], or on agriculture and animal husbandry. As Watt points out[8], there is a strong economic theme, with book-keeping or inventories, contracts and, above all, money appearing throughout the work: for instance, when Crusoe weighs 'like Debtor and Creditor, the Comforts I enjoy'd against the Miseries I suffer'd'[9], his 'Account of the Rest' of the killed cannibals[10], his timekeeping, and the numerous occasions where he counts his coins, even while confessing their uselessness ('O Drug! Said I aloud, what art thou good for [...]'[11]). All these allusions reinforce the concept of Crusoe as "Material Man".

[3] Hunter, *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, 'The "Occasion" of *Robinson Crusoe*', Ch.I.
[4] Watt, I. 'Defoe as Novelist', *From Dryden to Johnson*, pp.203-216.
[5] *Robinson Crusoe*, p.42.
[6] Ibid, p.43.
[7] Ibid, pp.103-104.
[8] Watt, I. *The Rise of the Novel*, pp.63-70.
[9] *Robinson Crusoe*, pp.57-58.
[10] Ibid, p.199.
[11] Ibid, p.50.

However, symbolism is also used to suggest a spiritual dimension, and there is, as Hunter indicates[12], a strong Puritan influence in this novel. Like the pilgrims in Marvell's 'Bermudas'[13], Robinson is quick to see the Hand of God, or "Providence", in various events: his first shipwreck, his survival on the island, or the abundance of tools, plants and animals (e.g. the lucky growing of the barley[14]). His sin as a prodigal son, an aimless wanderer is punished by banishment on the island, and it is through repentance that he obtains deliverance. There are strong resonances with the Bible and the Book of Genesis: this island is a microcosm, a little world of plenty, emerging from the formless and chaotic sea. Like Adam, Crusoe tames his miniature Eden by naming – or taking stock of – objects and creatures. In God's image, Crusoe shapes and creates his island as much as he discovers it, and "Friday", the name he bestows on *his* Man, the sixth day of the Old Testament week, is in Genesis the day of the creation of man. This ambiguity between the material and the spiritual is central in *Robinson Crusoe*; Crusoe's angelic vision may be but a dream[15], contracts mirror the Alliance and book-keeping hints at the Day of Reckoning.

Similarly, there are strong biblical undertones in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (published in 1874), although it is set in a resolutely godless world. According to Miller[16], Hardy replaces God by natural forces (e.g. Darwinian selection), an "Immanent Will" which seems random to Man, who must accept his inability to control these powers and adapt to them. In this context, religious symbols introduce a relative dissonance. Gabriel Oak, whose name evokes an angelic messenger and a tree (both connecting Heaven and Earth), is a Christ-like shepherd, but one who failed to keep his sheep. Bathsheba is a biblical character, whose husband, like Troy, is killed, but Gabriel is no David. Religion is a social institution,

[12] *The Reluctant Pilgrim*, Ch.II 'The "Guide" Tradition' and III 'The "Providence" Tradition'.
[13] Andrew Marvell, 'Bermudas', *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, pp.470-471.
[14] *Robinson Crusoe*, pp.67-68.
[15] Ibid, pp.75-76.
[16] *Distance and Desire*, 'The Refusal of Involvement', Ch.I.

albeit a slightly annoying one: Gabriel 'thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon'[17]. Associating the supernatural with the grotesque, the gargoyle on the church's roof could be a judgment from above, or simply, as Bathsheba notices, a mere misplaced pipe[18]. This inversion between the sacred and the secular is particularly obvious in the episode of the sheep-shearing[19], with its priest-like attendants, where the great barn 'resembled a church with transepts'; 'unlike and superior to either of those two typical remnants of mediaevalism' (the church and the castle), it 'embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time'. It is work, the interaction of Man and Nature, 'the defence and salvation of the body by daily bread' - a bread more natural than Our Father's - which 'is still a study, a religion, a desire'.

Religious symbols are turned on their heads. Abandoned by God and Providence, Man is at the mercy of the will of Nature: this theme is played through a rich symbolism. Klingopulos notes the timeless of Hardy's pastoral settings[20], and Miller the spatial breadth – or distance – in his works[21]. Gabriel's 'small silver clock'[22] is no match for the stars; the main quality of the barn and the shearing is their timelessness. The cyclical nature of time is mirrored by the plot itself, which unfolds over one year, with each season described in detail, by the movement of the grinding wheel which 'has a wonderful tendency to benumb the mind'[23], or by the rotation of the heavens[24]. History repeats itself, making individual experiences ultimately insignificant: the premonitory songs at the shearing-supper[25] underline that it has all happened before and will happen again. Nature strikes at random, as illustrated

[17] *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Ch.I, p.3.
[18] Ibid, 'The Gurgoyle: its Doings', Ch.46. p.253.
[19] Ibid, 'The Great Barn and the Sheep-shearers', Ch. 22, pp.112-114.
[20] Klingopulos, G.D., 'Hardy's tales ancient and modern', *From Dickens to Hardy*, pp.406-419.
[21] *Distance and Desire*, 'What the Narrator Sees', Ch.III.
[22] *Far from the Madding Crowd*, pp.3-4.
[23] Ibid, p.103.
[24] Ibid, p.10.
[25] Ibid, pp.120-123.

by the martyrdom of Fanny, an innocent victim, or by the valentine sent to Boldwood (by tossing the Bible like a dice). In this Darwinian struggle, only the fit survives: Troy (named after a rather foolish war), superficial and irresolute, as inconstant as the wind, is – literally – blown away; whereas Boldwood, stubborn and inflexible, the archetypal Cain rooted in his soil, breaks down; only Oak, the settled nomad, and Bathsheba, the girl who matures into a woman, both practical and responsible, manage to make it, to check the fire and weather the storm because they can learn and adapt. As Poorgrass notes at the very end, 'it might have been worse'[26], an echo of the modest relativity of human experience. Although *Far from the Madding Crowd* is a realistic and detailed account of rural life, symbolism adds a metaphysical dimension to its plot.

The narrative technique of the "stream of consciousness" that Woolf uses in *To The Lighthouse* pushes language to its limits, as Bradbrook stresses out[27]; her characters' sensations and thoughts are intermingled, as their minds jump from the environment around them to their own inner world. To her, 'life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning to the end'[28], which implies complexity and ambiguity. Descriptions of what the characters feel, in both the sensory and mental senses, dominate and constitute a 'private code, [a] secret language'[29]. Because the point of view moves constantly from character to character, the reader is exposed to different – and conflicting – sensations and interpretations (most acutely during the dinner party[30]). Every little detail is pregnant with multiple significations, meanings which might only be glimpsed later through secondary reflections,

[26] *Far from the Madding Crowd*, p.318.
[27] Bradbrook, F.W., 'Virginia Woolf: the Theory and Practice of Fiction', *The Modern Age*, pp.257-269.
[28] Woolf, quoted in 'Virginia Woolf: the Theory and Practice of Fiction', p.258.
[29] *To The Lighthouse*, pp.3-4.
[30] Ibid, ch.17, pp.96-130.

such as the sentence 'Someone had blundered'[31], muttered by Mr Ramsay, perhaps a sign of his insecurity, but afterwards echoed in '[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty]'[32]: he "blunders" into widowhood, as his wife stumbles into death, a symbol of the chaotic, accidental nature of life. Woolf tries in her language to mimic this chaos, this ever-changing, flowing pattern of life, through long, convoluted sentences with repeating motifs, such as 'But it may be fine' and 'But it won't be fine' (to go to the lighthouse). As in *Robinson Crusoe*, the sea is the formless chaos which surrounds and shapes human experience, a flow against which the lighthouse – like the island – acts as an anchor, a point of reference.

As Friedman argues[33], one cannot – and must not – try to establish a single or main relationship between a symbol and a meaning, since the whole point of the book is precisely the question of making sense out of chaos, of producing art out of life: this is what Lily Briscoe tries to achieve in her painting, even if it is ultimately pointless since 'it would be hung in the attics; it would be destroyed'. As she finishes her painting, crucially, her vision (of Mrs Ramsay and of her picture) vanishes: 'She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred'[34], and it is only for an ephemeral instant that she sees and understand enough to finish her work. There is a fundamental juxtaposition of flow and stasis throughout the novel, including the title itself, which combines movement and goal, and could be interpreted actively, as an exhortation to go to the lighthouse, or passively, as an indication to look towards it, to watch it. The dynamic movement of Mrs Ramsay's letters being blown by the wind and caught by Tansley becomes a static image in Lily's memory.

[31] Ibid, p.21.
[32] Ibid, p.149.
[33] Friedman, N., 'Double Vision in *To the Lighthouse*', in Beja, M. ed., *Woolf: To The Lighthouse*, pp.149-167.
[34] *To The Lighthouse*, p.242.

The lighthouse, the focus, the elusive guiding light of meaning is approached, but never quite reached: Mr Ramsay springs 'on to the rock'; '"He must have reached it"'; and surely '"They will have landed"'[35], will they not?

There is no contradiction between symbolism and realism; in the struggle to represent real life in literature, it can even be argued that the novelist must use symbols, whose multiplicity of meanings mirrors the complexity and ambiguity which is at the heart of life itself. Symbolism may be used to underline the tension between materialism and spirituality (*Robinson Crusoe*), to suggest a metaphysical framework for human experience (*Far from the Madding Crowd*), or to illustrate the tenuous and somewhat illusory link between sensation and consciousness (*To the Lighthouse*). Symbolism complements realism, enabling the novelist to capture, like Mr. Ramsay, 'subject and object and the nature of reality'[36].

[35] Ibid, pp.241-242.
[36] Ibid, p.26.

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