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| **Symbolism** |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| Symbolism is a world-wide artistic and literary phenomenon that began in France, later filtering through all of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Americas. While its origins lie in the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Symbolism in art began to fully develop from the late 1880s as a consequence of Positivism and Industrialism in society, and Naturalism in art. The seventeenth century *vanitas* still life paintings proved to be another source of inspiration for Symbolist art. *Vanitas* (Latin for ‘emptiness’) paintings incorporated specific symbolic objects to illustrate the mortality of life (popular symbols included candles, clocks, hour-glasses, and skulls). Symbolist artists chose to represent the problems of society figuratively and indirectly. On the 18th of September 1886, the Jean Moréas’ Symbolist Manifesto (Le Symbolisme) was published in the Parisian Newspaper *Le Figaro.* Moréas articulated that Symbolism would not subscribe to naturalism, but would instead seek to communicate an ideal through *suggestion* as opposed to direct description. The three major themes of Symbolism — death, mythology and sex — were developed through the work of early Symbolist artists such as Gustave Moreau, and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Another early Symbolist artist, Félicien Rops favoured the supernatural over the mythological, and frequently depicted the idea of death through representations of the Devil and the human skull. These early artists paved the way for the development of many later Symbolist painters. |
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The Industrial Revolution accompanied Positivism within Europe, and introduced the dynamic pace of a modern, capitalist city complete with class divisions. Impressionist artists used naturalism as a direct approach to highlighting the social inequality between the upper and lower classes. Symbolism, however, arose from a need for something more spiritual than naturalism. Symbolist art is subjective rather than objective; a Symbolist artist would have focussed on a specific idea or the ‘Ideal’, which was a particular truth or story that they wished to convey to the audience, and, from there, sought to express this idea through the use of their own symbolic references.  Moreau (along with Puvis de Chavannes) was academically trained at the École des Beaux-Arts, and his paintings are a combination of classical figures set within mythological surroundings, inspired by ancient Greek mythology and the Bible. Moreau particularly favoured the combined depiction of sex and mythology. A popular theme, in particular, within his works was the story of Salomé from the Gospels of Mark (6:21-29) and Matthew (14:6-11) in the New Testament.  A useful and comprehensive definition of what Symbolist art should encompass was written by Albert Aurier in March 1891 for the Parisian publication *Mercure de France* entitled ‘Le Symbolisme en Peinture (‘Symbolism in Painting’), Paul Gauguin’ and intended as a five-point description of how Gauguin’s works were an example of Symbolist art. Below is a translation of this text taken from Edward Lucie-Smith’s book ‘Symbolist Art’:  1. Ideative - since its sole aim should be the expression of the Idea  2. Symbolist - since it must express this idea in forms  3. Synthetic - since it will express those forms and signs in a way that is generally comprehensible.  4. Subjective - since the object will never be considered merely as an object, but as the indication of an idea perceived by the subject  5. (in consequence) Decorative - since decorative painting, properly speaking, such as it was conceived by the Egyptians, very probably by the Greeks and the Primitives, is nothing other than an art at once synthetic, symbolist and ideative (Lucie-Smith 59).  ‘The Loss of Virginity’ (1890-1891; oil on canvas) by Paul Gauguin exemplifies modern symbolist painting. In 1888 Gauguin was living in Pont-Aven in Brittany, France. Gauguin had moved to Brittany in order, partly, to escape the Belle Époque culture of Paris and its capitalist values, to which he opposed. Gauguin, like many Symbolists, believed in promoting a simpler existence, and ‘The Loss of Virginity’ is considered symbolic of Gauguin’s frustration with the creeping advancement of the Industrial Revolution upon the Breton way of life. In this instance, if one assumes that the young naked girl is representative of Brittany and Breton culture, then the ‘loss of virginity’ may refer to Brittany’s loss of innocence as it evolved from a primarily agricultural town to a more industrial one. In the painting, the girl clutches a flower similar to a lily. Since the lily is most commonly associated with death, this has been interpreted as another reference to the ‘death’ of the innocence of Breton culture at the hands of the Industrial Revolution.  [Image: LossOf.jpg]  Figure ‘The Loss of Virginity’ (1890-1891; oil on canvas)  [*http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/3/title-asc?t:state:flow=4f9fbef9-eee7-45ea-8937-afdefe77d18d*](http://collection.chrysler.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search$0040/3/title-asc?t:state:flow=4f9fbef9-eee7-45ea-8937-afdefe77d18d)  Gauguin utilized the form of his painting to express his ideas. ‘The Loss of Virginity’ is deliberately simplistic in technique; block colours are used, the landscape is two-dimensional, while the mid-ground and horizon in the background are almost child-like in their execution. This abandonment of an academic style of painting in favour of a more primitive approach could be symbolic of Gauguin preferring a simpler society over the complexities that came with a modern, industrial, class-based society. Symbolism was a wide-spread artistic, and literary movement that used all aspects of art to express the thoughts and feelings of the artist creating the work.  Key Symbolist artists from the differing Symbolist movements throughout the world:  *France*  Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898)  Gustave Moreau (1826-1898)  Odilon Redon (1840-1916)  Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)  *Belgium and the Netherlands*  Félicien Rops (1833-1898)  Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921)  Jan Toorop (1858-1928)  James Ensor (1860-1949)  *Austria*  Gustav Klimt (1862-1918)  *Britain*  Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) |
| Further reading:  (Baudelaire)  (Delevoy)  (Facos)  (Gibson)  (Lucie-Smith) |