**Symons, Arthur William (1865 – 1945)**

Arthur Symons was a British poet, art and literary critic, memoirist, playwright, short story writer, and editor. He was born in Milford Haven, Wales, on 28 February 1865, the son of Cornish parents, Revd Mark Symons (1824-1898), a Wesleyan Methodist Minister, and Lydia Pascoe (1828-1896). Symons was the foremost exponent of Decadence and the leading promoter of French Symbolism in Britain. An enthused socialite, he manoeuvred successfully through London artistic circles and the Paris avant-garde. In 1901 he married Rhoda Bowser (1874-1936) and in his later years he retreated to Island Cottage, Wittersham, Kent. In 1908-1910 he mentally collapsed in Italy moving in and out of asylums; he chronicles this experience in *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (1930). He recovered and resumed his literary career until his seventies, mainly regurgitating themes of his *fin-de-siècle* period. He died on 22 January 1945.

Symons was tremendously well read and a perceptive writer who championed Impressionism, Decadence, and Symbolism, importing them to Victorian letters. He met, befriended, and supported the work of a remarkable roll-call of British and European writers and artists, including W. B. Yeats, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Walter Pater, Aubrey Beardsley, Havelock Ellis, George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Toulouse Lautrec, J.-K. Huysmans, and Gabrielle D’Annunzio. His unparalleled charisma at networking, from the Rhymers’ Club in London to the Chat Noir meetings in Paris, lead to important osmoses and productive artistic exchanges. In 1893 he planned for his idol Verlaine to deliver a series of prominent lectures in England. His partnership with the French poet had momentous transcultural implications, greater than the influence of Baudelaire on Swinburne in the 1860s.

With *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* (1886) Symons was noticed by Browning himself and Walter Pater. Of his numerous poetry collections, most notable are *Days and Nights* (1889), *Silhouettes* (1892), *London Nights* (1895; rev. ed. 1897), and *Amoris Victima* (1897). Symons’s poetry was met with derision by the press. Mastering an individual voice, his lyrics are set in metropolitan surroundings; they are slight, subjective, artificial, exhibiting strong illicit eroticism and experimenting with fragmented viewpoints and rhythms. Symons had a keen interest in dancers, actresses, and demimondaines, frequenting and copiously reviewing music hall performances at the Alhambra, the Empire, and the Moulin Rouge. His aesthetics of dance and obsession with famous *artistes*, such as Yvette Guilbert and Eleonora Duse, exercised a strong formative influence on Yeats who was a close friend.

In November 1893 Symons published one of the most quoted manifesto-essays of the period, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, defining Decadence as a departure from the classical ideal and ‘a new and beautiful and interesting disease.’ He expanded this essay and renamed it *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), enlarged and revised in 1919. This book became an indispensable document for the Modernists, introducing them to Nerval, [Villiers de L’Isle-Adam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste_Villiers_de_l%27Isle-Adam), Verlaine, Rimbaud, Laforgue, [Mallarmé](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St%C3%A9phane_Mallarm%C3%A9), Huysmans, and Maeterlinck. T. S. Eliot famously called Symons’s study ‘an introduction to wholly new feelings’ and ‘a revelation’. By teaming up with eclectic publisher Leonard Smithers and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, Symons edited *The Savoy*, a little magazine which rivalled *The Yellow Book*, running in eight issues from January through to December 1896, and accommodating the work of such emerging writers as Joseph Conrad.

Symons is notable for his impressionistic prose. Adopting Pater’s alertness to sensations, he developed a certain nerviness of style that steeps him well into modernity. Further significant works include the criticism of *Studies in Two Literatures* (1897), *Plays Acting and Music* (1903), the short story collection *Spiritual Adventures* (1905), *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906), studies-memoirs of individual artists such as Beardsley (1898), Blake (1907), and Baudelaire (1920), travel books such as *Cities* (1903), and performed plays such as *The Toy Cart* (1919). Symons’s privileged position in Modernism is that he was an influential ambassador of Continental avant-garde in the English-speaking world, impressing Eliot and Ezra Pound. Furthermore, he anticipated Imagism with the fragmented precision of his city images, and detected the talent of a young James Joyce, helping him to break into the publishing world.

**References and Further Reading**

Beckson, Karl (1987). *Arthur Symons: A Life*, Oxford: Clarendon P.

Beckson, Karl and John M. Munro, eds. (1989). *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters: 1980 –*

*1935*. Basington, Hampshire: Macmillan.

Eliot, T. S. (1920). *Sacred Wood*, London: Methuen: 4.

Munro, M. John (1969). *Arthur Symons*. New York: Twayne.

Symons, Arthur (Nov. 1893). ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s New*

*Monthly* 87: 859.

**List of Works**

**Note:** the following list is only a representative and important fraction of Symons’s prolific

output spanning 1882-1940.

*Collected Works* (1924-). 9 vols. New York: Secker. Incomplete set.

*Silhouettes*. (1892; rev. and enlarged 1896). London: Mathews & Lane. Poetry.

*London Nights* (1895). London: Smithers. Poetry.

*Studies in Two Literatures* (1897). London: Smithers. Essays.

*The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899; rev. 1908; rev. and enlarged 1919). London:

Heinemann. Essays.

*Spiritual Adventures* (1905). London: Constable. Short Stories.

*The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (1909). New York: Dutton. Essays.

*Cesare Borgia, Iseult of Brittany, The Toy Cart* (1920). New York: Brentano’s. Plays.

**Links**

Snakeskin – The Arthur Symons Page. <http://homepages.nildram.co.uk/~simmers/symons1.htm>

Works by Arthur Symons in Project Gutenberg

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/search/?query=Arthur+Symons>

Black Cat Poems – Poems by Arthur Symons

<http://www.blackcatpoems.com/s/arthur_symons.html>

The Victorian Web – Arthur Symons

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/symons/intro.html>