The Use of Celestial Images in the Early Twentieth Century British Poetry

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Abstract:

Each period has a tendency to develop its own conventions. The contemporary poets work together and have their own manners. Modern poetry had begun as a revolt against the conventions of the poetry of nineteenth century. But it has developed conventions of its own. The early twentieth century British poetry has a definite pattern. The poets of this period used images and symbols to present direct emotions and ideas. Many images are used conventionally by modern poets. They have retained many archetypal images and symbols. This paper focuses on the three archetypal images of the sun, the moon and the stars which have been traditional and accepted by moderns. These images stand for much the same things as they always have in poetry. They have deep subtle mystical ideas. For the study, the writings of early twentieth century poets have been taken up.

Keywords: Archetype, Celestial images, Convention, Divinity, Mystical.

Different ages develop their own tendency. Josephine Miles has allocated that each period develops its own convention. She finds that poets are generally grouped on the basis of time than on the basis of type. “Each decade has its own homogeneity, though each has a different degree of heterogeneity.” Miss Miles’ study indicates “how closely contemporary poets work together, whether consciously or not....” She also indicates that there is a common element in the feelings, sound arguments of contemporaries. A poet’s choices are limited by the choices of his times. She further hints that the poets directly participate in those choices. He helps to establish them. This development of a period manner was explained by John Livingston Lowes as a phase through which all poetry passes, part of a cycle consisting of alternating periods of convention and revolt which proceeds through certain roughly discernible stages. Of the growth of the conventions, Lowes writes: “... conventions become conventions through wholesale imitation, conscious or unconscious, of forms, devices, methods of expression, which they themselves have had their origins in any of a hundred ways.”

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Although imitation has been primarily responsible for the development of conventions, other factors are quite clearly involved. The Zeitgeist within which the poets write and the kind of audience for which they write has an effect on the sort of conventions which gets produced in a particular age. The process of growth and development of conventions has been recognised by various critics. They confirm to the view of Lowes that there is a level in the cycle at which there is development of rigidity in conventions. They also confirm with him that there is a requirement of revolt in art so that one may survive. Only then it is possible to bring forth fresh techniques and forms. Even the revolts have an essential irony, as Lowes points out, the new is able to remain new for only an instant. With a revolt against the conventions of the poetry of the nineteenth century, there was a rise of poetry of Modern times. Modern Poetry has reached such a stature wherein it has developed its own conventions. The term Modern poetry is used for the poets of early twentieth century. A few poems written by Gerard Manley Hopkins have been included because of their recognized importance in the history of Modern Poetry. This paper focuses on the work of the poets who gained height in the early twentieth century. These poets have not shown that there had been development of conventions in Modern Poetry too.

The development of Modern Poetry has a definite pattern. In the hope of achieving a new effectiveness, certain techniques and practices are introduced. These techniques and practices are accepted and so widely used that they have become the conventional manner for writing Modern Poetry. The Moderns began using images and symbols to present direct emotions and ideas. Merely through new techniques it was not enough for the Moderns to seek freshness. There was stress on the use of original images. Kenneth Burke, F.R. Leavis, and R.A. Scott-James supported Modern poetry. They advocate that the Moderns have originality in their images and symbols.

Studies indicate that the complete originality of images and symbols in Modern Poetry has been exaggerated. Maud Bodkin has charted correspondences in the works of all poets based on phenomena discovered by the psychoanalysts. The study of Miss Bodkin shows that the archetypal images concerned with nature are an expression of life's regenerative powers which appear to be constant in their symbolic meanings to all men. Naturally, such archetypal images can be expected to show up in Modern Poetry. Quite frequently an archetypal image, or any other one, may appear in new dress, as when T.S. Eliot imbues the image of Spring in the opening lines of *The Waste Land* with a freshness and vitality reminiscent of the kindred image opening of *The Canterbury Tales*; or when he converts the familiar image of evening into something significant by comparing it to a patient etherised in "Prufrock."
regeneration of the archetypal and the familiar into something fresh and new is the exception. The recurrent appearance of the regenerated form makes it conventional.

James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* also examine correspondences among all mankind in the materials of myth and romance. These and similar studies suggest there would be some degree of standardization among the symbols of Modern Poets as a result of racial inheritance regardless of how personal and original one might attempt to be. The effects of imitation can be seen in successful poets as Eliot and Pound. A great many images and symbols are used conventionally by Modern Poets.

A close examination of poetry written in the early twentieth century provides strong evidence that many images and symbols are used conventionally and become standardized during that period. Modern poets claim to originality. They attack upon the conventional language and images of earlier poetry. But they have developed conventional images. This is similar to their arrival at a conventional manner of creating poetry. They have retained many images and symbols of the archetypal sort described by Miss Bodkin which have been common throughout the history of poetry. Most of the images they have continued to use are in the conventional manner of their predecessors. When the Moderns introduced images and symbols of their own, they have become conventionalized. A great many of the images retained by the Moderns are nature images, and it should not be surprising to find among these nature images a number of the archetypes already mentioned or suggested by Maud Bodkin. Modern Poets use images of water, snow and winter, spring and April, the sun, the moon and the stars, mountains and hills, and fallen leaves to stand for much the same things they always have in poetry.

Three archetypal images traditional in poetry have been accepted by the Moderns. The twentieth-century poets freely and consistently use celestial images like that of the sun, the moon, and the stars. The symbolism surrounding them can also be said to have become conventionalized. There is recurrence of three images in Modern Poetry. We note that there is a correlation in the ideas they express. There is subtle mystical idea associated with Divinity that inspires the readers. One may derive distinct differences in the implications of these images when considered individually. The sun usually stands for the source of life or a great revelation. It is in general a correlative of vigour and vitality of life. On the other hand, the moon is cool, an image of softness that ordinarily gives comfort and solace. The image of the star too has the mystical connotation, but is more often associated with inspiration or hope. Arthur Davison Ficke describes the functions of poetry in the following passage. We also find here the correlation between life and hope and the sun and the stars:

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From darkened sea-coasts without stars or sun,
   Like trumpet-voices in a holy war,
   Utter the heralds tidings of the deep.⁴

The poet stresses on darkness and the absence of light from the sun and stars. In "The Singing Place" of Lily A. Long, the sun is identified with life:

   But the life of the throbbing Sun
   Is in the song,
   And we weave the world anew,
   And the Singing Throng
   Fill every corner of space.⁵

Sun imagery as a symbol for warmth and a source of life is common during the early part of modern poetry. Clark Ashton Smith remarks:

   Thus it was that some slant of sunset
   In the chasms of piled cloud --
   . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
   Smote warm in a buried realm of the spirit
   Till the snows of forgetfulness were gone. ⁶

Harriet Monroe in her poem to "Mother Earth" has made apparent the warmth of the sun as a life-giving force:

   Proudly she trails
   Her flower-broidered dresses
   In the sight of the sun.
   Loudly she hails
   Through her far-streaming tresses
   His coursers that run.⁷

She further writes that there is growth of eagerness for life. The warmth of sun gives delight towards life. It fires the passions. A similar image is used by Amy Lowell in one of her poems. The description of a woman who has once lived a joyous vital life but now leads a dull, shapeless days in her older life is given. The joyous glorious life of past is compared to “a glory of great suns....”⁸ But over a period of time the desires have become like short lived bubbles in the goblet of wine. Here we find the expression of eternal truth of life. Life itself is transitory. Worldly happiness is transient.
In the second decade of the Twentieth century, there is continuity of the use of the image of sun. It is used in the similar way as in the past. Robert Graves’ "The Cool Web" is a poem about the way language and thought act as a barrier between feeling and emotion for the adult in contrast to the spontaneous reactions of the child. The poet says that for children the sun in their expression is not hot. There is recurrence of image: “But we have speech that cools the hottest sun.”

The sun is identified with Christ in the writing by Elizabeth J. Coatsworth. The halo of Christ is compared with the rays of the sun. His cross “stretches down into hell.”

Frank Mitalsky presents the association of the life with sun. He writes, "Girls when they run/Are lined with sun.” Another poet who uses this kind of sun imagery in the Twenties is Conrad Aiken. He says that even the snails in cold look for heat. It “Creeps out with trembling horn to feel that heat…” It is because of this heat of the sun which helps in survival that the living beings look for it and praise it wholeheartedly.

In his "You, Andrew Marvell" Archibald MacLeish uses a similar image of sun to present the idea of present life amidst the consciousness of time fleeting:

And here face down beneath the sun
And here upon the earth's noon ward height
To feel the always coming on
The always rising of the night
...And here face downward in the sun
To feel how swift how secretly
The shadow of the night comes on....

In the works of Jean Garrigue in the fourth decade of twentieth century, there is occurrence of sun imagery. It is remarked that a dog which is lost in forest is in pitiable condition “where the sun has never struck down.” This is because of the complete darkness there. If there is to be healthy life within the forest, it is essential to have the light and warmth of the sun. For the twentieth century poets the image of the sun stands for life, light and warmth.

In the twentieth century, the moon images are just as persistent as those of the sun. Some critics feel that throughout William Butler Yeats’ poetry the moon stands for the woman principle. The moon appears as a symbol of something sympathetic and soothing in the entire
The restful moon of the following passage is, by and large, the typical moon for the century’s poetry:

- Moon of poets dead and gone,
- Moon to gods of music dear,
- Gardens they have looked upon
- Let them re-discover here:
- Rest -- and dream a little space
- Of some heart-remembered place!\(^ {15} \)

In Charles Hanson Towne’s poem there is emphasis on the sympathetic aspect of the moon. Various mourners speak of a dead friend that they saw the moon the previous night. The moon is compared with a tremendous lantern in the sky. But they think of their beloved friend and mourn.

- For I remembered evenings wonderful
- When he was faint with Life's sad loneliness,
- And watched the silver ribbons wandering far
- Along the shore, and out upon the sea.\(^ {16} \)

Fannie Stearns Davis’ about Conn the Fool carries the theme of the mystical power of moon and its human attraction. The poet here imagines that the moon will be followed by climbing a mountain. With a leap the moon will be clasped in the cold hands to carry it home. Sitting day and night by fire, the poet will enjoy the experience of the presence of the moon. The moon is fulfilling for the poet. The world too will run after the post for this blissful experience. The poet says:

- And some day, all of the world that beats
- And cries at my door, shall see
- A thousand moon-leaves sprout from my thatch
- On a marvellous white Moon-tree!
- Then each shall have moons to his heart's desire.\(^ {17} \)

The moon is an image having the power of magic. Its coolness and softness makes wonderful even the unpleasant scenes of modern times. This is observed by Hart Crane too when he writes:

- ... but we have seen
- The moon in lonely alleyes make
- A grail of laughter of an empty ash can.\(^ {18} \)
Florence Frank has written a poem about a moonlit night on the prairie. In this poem we find the tenderness of the moon:

No night will come again like this, with moon
Melting the prairie, drawing up the tog.
No night will come again for us, not soon
Or any time.19

The predominant note of tenderness of the image of moon is found in yet another love poem of modern times:

I shall remember this moon
............................................
I shall remember at noon,
In the morning, and sometime s, maybe, in sudden
showers of rain .
I shall remember this night --
This burden, heavy and sweet with loneliness, your head.
I shall be hoarding this bright,
This precious, unbearable happiness ... after I'm
long, long dead.20

"Wonderings"21 and "A Bird Sings at Night"22 are two other modern times poems of 1927 which are suggestive of the mystery related to moon. The moon image of early twentieth century is certainly conventional.

In the following decades of twentieth century, the moon continues to be used to symbolize transfiguring qualities of the moon in a manner similar to some of the previous writers of the century. Hart crane writes in the poem “Lullaby” about the strangeness in the presence of the moon in the sky. The poet describes the surroundings of nature at night time. He writes, “Is the moon that lights the mining towns, dim as the / light upon tenement roofs....23 The Modern poets have adopted a traditional image in the moon. They have used it regularly and conventionally throughout their poetry.

The traditional image of star has been given the same treatment by the Moderns as that of the previous writers. In the early twentieth century, star has been treated as a symbol for inspiration. This celestial image stands for the light of God and Divinity. In the fourth decade of twentieth century too it was used with the same idea. Charles Hanson Towne’s following expression too has the typical idea related to the image of the stars. The poet says about loving the world. He further says:

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The sighing ocean and the flaming stars,
The everlasting glamour God has given --
His tapestries that wrap the earth’s wide room.\(^{24}\)

The above lines give the idea of mystery correlated with the image of star. Throughout the twentieth century the idea of mystery and divinity behind the image of star has had a recurring use. Alice Corbin writes:

I saw a star fall in the night,
And a gray moth touched my cheek;
Such majesty immortals have,
Such pity for the weak.\(^{25}\)

The star signifies some kind of sympathetic Divine presence for her. A similar idea is expressed by Fannie Stearns Davis. The poet feels the presence of the stars. The poet experiences their flame, their breaking and falling.

Their excellent array, their free
Encounter with Eternity,
I learned, and it was good to mow
That where God walked, I too might go.

This day I have great peace. With me
Shall stars abide eternally.\(^{26}\)

The star image is correlated with God in the poetry of Edward Kemper Broadus too. The poet writes of human existence that it is nothing without divine experience of light within. He advocates “Into the making of a single star.”\(^{27}\)

Frank Mitalsky’s poem written in second decade of twentieth century presents the idea of motivation:

Go, girl, go in green -
Go just as you are!
Life sees as I have seen -
Go to meet a star!\(^{28}\)

All the three celestial images of the moon, the sun and the stars have same symbolic connotation in twentieth century. All the three have deep subtle mystical ideas. They are deeply associated with the idea of divinity. There is subtle idea of inspiration, sympathy, and
immortality associated with them. They are used in a conventional manner reminiscent of traditional poetry.

The twentieth century British poets use the celestial images in a conventional manner. The study shows that these images have been retained in much the same form and have been used in much the same manner as always in the history of poetry. We find that imagery and symbols used in the poetry of modern age is very much in conformity to the ideas which they represented in the traditional poetry.

Works Cited:


2 Ibid., p.149.


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