

Water and Fire in Modern Poetry

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study the symbolic meaning of the imagery of “Water” and “Fire” in their poetic world. The symbols that fire and water represent may vary according to the context. This paper analyses the contextual meaning and use of the two elements with examples.

Keywords: water, fire, eternity, purification, destruction, symbol.

INTRODUCTION

It has been seen that almost all authors use symbol within their works of literature in order to pull the attention of their readers. Using such symbolic concept it helps the poets in creating a secondary meaning. It also helps in connecting the gaps. Symbols need a careful analysis while in some circumstance it is quite clear. Water can be seen in many forms in literature including waterfalls, lakes, rivers, streams, or rain. The meaning of water symbol in literature can be taken in many ways. The most obvious are life, being born, purity, cleansing, or the washing away of sins. Water is very important to life and growth and it mainly appears as a birth and rebirth symbol. It is used in the baptism service which solemnizes spiritual births. Even the appearance of rain in the work of literature it suggests a spiritual birth.

The unique property of water is to take the shape of that which surrounds it but to never possess a specific shape by itself. As Mircea Eliade notes in *The Sacred & The Profane*, this is so because water is incapable of "transcending" its own mode of being and of manifesting itself in forms. Eliade observes that everything that has form "manifests itself above the waters, by detaching itself from the waters." These qualities of humidity and fluidity has given water a symbolism of potentialities which are unmanifested and undifferentiated rather than realized and actualized. Whereas earth symbolizes the embodiment of form, water symbolizes the dissolution of form into a mass of possibilities. Eliade comments about this symbolism of potentials in *The Sacred & The Profane* noting:

"The waters symbolize the universal sum of virtualities; they are 'spring and origin,' the reservoir of all possibilities of existence; they precede every form and support every creation."

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This symbolism of dissolution is found to be present in all religions. As Eliade observes, "In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, 'wash away sins'; they are at once purifying and regenerating. Their destiny is to precede the Creation and to reabsorb it." And in fact the waters are very old with the Bible placing their existence before the earth. In Genesis 1,2 it is written that "Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

This ability to abolish forms relates to birth, death and regeneration. Water is associated with the principle of "moisture" and the circulatory movement of blood and sap as life within vegetation and animals. It is also associated with the water of the womb where individual life comes from and from the water of the oceans where human life evolved from. Water has the power to abolish, dissolve, purify, wash away and regenerate. In opposition to this is the principle of "dryness" and the static condition of life.

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These aspects of water relating to birth, death and regression have given it an important part in baptism, one of the major rituals of religion. Eliade observes in *The Sacred & The Profane* that "immersion in water signifies regression to the preformed, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence; immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why a symbolism of water implies both death and rebirth." He notes that contact with water always brings about a regeneration "because dissolution is followed by a new birth (and)...because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life." This aquatic cosmology, he notes, has its counterpart on the human level in the belief that mankind was born of the waters.

Fire symbolizes many things, including passion, desire, rebirth, resurrection, eternity, destruction, hope, hell and purification. These symbols have been used in literature, film and religious texts for millennia. Fire has been used by humans for over 400,000 years. Our ability to control fire is linked to our ability to evolve as a species. We used fire to cook food, forge tools, and stay warm at night. Fire has had enormous benefits to humankind. And from our earliest literature, humans have written about fire. They have written about its ability to nourish and protect, but also harm and even kill.

We can see that fire is one of the most important symbols to us. Perhaps that is why it is considered one of the four elements essential to life (along with water, air and earth)

Symbolism of Fire: Passion and Desire; Rebirth and Resurrection; Eternity; Destruction; Hope; Hell; Purification.

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The symbolism of fire can change depending upon the context. In one book, it may represent passion. In another, it may represent destruction. Similarly, you and I may read the same book and interpret fire in completely different ways. But over time and throughout history, fire seems to have repeatedly symbolized a few key things. By understanding these symbolic motifs, we can better understand humans' complex historical relationship with fires.

Passion and Desire

The flicking of a flame evokes thoughts of passion and desire. Fires leap, dance and spread with reckless abandon.

Is there little wonder we see young lovers and remark on their "fiery passion!" The link between fire and passion is also evident in the expression "light my fire!" This expression indicates someone or something inspired passion within someone's soul.

Shakespeare often uses fire as a symbol of passion in his plays. One of his most famous quotes in *Henry VIII* is:

"My drops of tears I'll turn to sparks of fire." Here, Queen Katherine speaks of turning sadness into action. She then declares Cardinal Wolsey her enemy and blames him for causing trouble between the queen and her husband.

Rebirth and Resurrection

It is odd that fire can symbolize both death and life. But it just goes to show how versatile the symbolism of fire is. The role of fire in the symbol of rebirth is best known through the phoenix. The mythical phoenix dies by spontaneous combustion. It bursts into flames and disintegrates into ashes. Then, from the ashes, a new phoenix is born to live this life.

Eternity

Fire represents eternity is through the metaphor of the "eternal flame." So long as the symbolic flame burns, life and hope remain in this world. We might say that an eternal flame burns in our hearts. This will indicate that some belief still lives on within us. Eternal flames are also used in memorium. We remember people's love and sacrifice by burning the flame. So long as the flame burns, we remember and respect the memory of someone who has died. In this case, might say that the eternal flame symbolizes that the memory of someone lives on.



The eternal flame is perhaps most common in war memorials. For example, the Australian War Memorial explains the eternal flame that burns within its commemorative courtyard in this way: "A flame is widely accepted as a symbol of eternal life. An eternal flame at a war memorial symbolizes a nation's perpetual gratitude towards, and remembrance of, its war dead."

Destruction

Fire has the ability to decimate things it comes in touch with. This has helped authors throughout the years use fire as a symbol of destructiveness.

In Fahrenheit 451, fire is used as a literal destructive force. The main character, Montag, burns books for a living. He is literally burning knowledge to keep people in the intellectual dark ages. But fire is also a symbol of destruction in this book. It symbolises the destructiveness of mankind and the pleasure and power we feel in destroying beauty. The book opens with an explanation of the destructiveness of fire, which remains as a motif throughout the novel: "It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed."

Fire is something we look to - sometimes on the horizon as a symbol that salvation is near. There are a few reasons for this: 1. Fire has long been an excellent form of long-distance communication due to its brightness

2. Fire is warmth, and its sight may signify refuge from the cold outside;

3. A fire on the horizon can symbolize an Inn or safehaven in which a traveller may rest

CONCLUSION

Our modern view of hell almost always involves fire. We might curse about an evil person by saying, "may you burn in the fiery pits of hell!" This view of hell is closely associated with Dante's vision of hell in *The Inferno*. Fire awaits us in hell, and there we will be tortured as it burns us insufferably. Even before Christian beliefs, hell seemed to be associated with fire. Plato wrote of a lake of fire in which evil spirits burn in *Gorgias*, written in 380BC. Similarly, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in 1250BC spoke of a lake of fire awaiting sinners.

Purification

I just spoke of how fire symbolizes hell in the Bible. It seems that the Bible has another use of fire, too. Fire is often used to symbolize purification. Fire rids people (or the world) of sin. This is perhaps because fire leaves no trace of the thing it burns besides its ashes. Thus, to purify a witch, we burn her at the stake.

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