

Analysis of the use of symbolism in a work of poetry

Introduction

The work of literature to be examined is 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' by Robert Browning, published in 1855. The title foreshadows something to be dreaded and the third stanza sets the mood of the poem and its symbolism:

'Into that ominous tract which, all agree,
Hides the Dark Tower.....'.

Symbols in the poem

The following are the major symbols which are used by Browning in the poem:

Childe Roland himself;
The Knights (the Band)
The Dark Tower;
Hoary cripple with his staff;
The quest;
The grey plain all round;
One stiff blind horse;
Darkening path;
A river across the path;
Drenched willows;
Remains of carnage;
Palsied oak with cleft;
Great black bird;
Low hills; tall mountain
Lost peers in the waste;
Slug-horn.

In addition, the poem uses imagery to suggest meaning or mood. The imagery may be based upon a specific symbol (as from the above list) or simply a visual description to create the emotional tone.

Analysis of the symbols and how symbols enhance the work

Each symbol will be analysed by the following criteria, only where they apply meaningfully: levels of meaning; creating original meaning; use of imagery; and alternative interpretations of symbols.

It should be noted that, unlike a metaphor, the symbol's application is left open. It is unstated; perhaps only a hint is given by context or tone of language. This is what makes the use of a symbol such a powerful literary device in a work such as the Childe Roland.

The reader unconsciously takes in the hint suggested by the symbol, which may be a matter of imagery (a 'dark' tower; a 'hoary' cripple'), and then tries to fit an interpretation to it; this ambiguity is part of the pleasure found in the process of assigning meaning to symbols.

Some writers just play games with symbols, suggesting a deep meaning but in fact just trading on the allure and mystery of symbols – they are the 'smoke and mirrors' of a literary work. It is possible that is the case with some of the symbols used by Browning, but I doubt it, because of the context in which they are found. However, if they were intended as just literary tricks, that too is a legitimate part of a writer's arsenal.

In Browning's poem, the symbols add a looming mystery. You cannot avoid them in the text as you encounter them, and they leave behind a trace of meaning as you pass them by and move on to another stanza. This lingering of the symbol in the psyche of the reader is the literary effect of the way the symbols are used in this work. There are not too many of them and they are judiciously

scattered in the narrative; too many and the effect is undermined, in the way that too much sugar in a cake ruins the taste.

The interpretation of the symbols and the meaning of the poem are personal to this reader. Other interpretations are just as valid (see references, many of which I do not agree with), if they consistently assign meaning and make sense of the poem.

Browning is not here to tell us what he meant by the poem, although it did appear to him in a dream and he subsequently wrote it very quickly: a dream genesis but with no allegorical intention ; the poem invites 'interpretive activity' (McSweeney, 2002).

Childe Roland

The protagonist and narrator of the poem is referred to as 'Childe' which according to Webster's, refers to a child or youth that is well-born (Webster's, 1971); this kind of reference was used in early English ballads and romantic adventures. This is also the imagery suggested by the use of the symbol-word 'childe'. The poet soon turns this image on its head. In Browning's poem, Roland is hardly even a young man, sounding like someone who has left childhood long behind but has yet to prove his manhood.

This symbol resonates with meaning. At the surface it is a would-be Knight, a warrior needing to earn his spurs, and following a quest in order to do so. This symbolises the young man's rite of passage. But this is not a quest which can be won; it leads to failure - a battle which must be fought but which cannot be won. Why must it be fought? Because the child is always doomed to become man; man perishes at the end of life. This is the creative meaning with which Browning imbues his symbol of a 'childe'. The 'voice' which Browning uses is not that of a young man – it is not a child – but a mature man, educated, reflective, sad, angry, cynical (see the first stanza). This is man at the end of his quest facing his doom, as will we. The image has changed to become ourselves. Note further, there is no reference to Roland riding a horse. Most readers assume he must be, but this is not said in the poem. This lack of a reference to a horse (which a Knight would be upon) is also suggestive of a man, old and coming to the end of his trial after much journeying.

Roland was, of course, always bound to find the Dark Tower.

The Knights

These are 'The Band', that is, the Knights who have searched for the Dark Tower and declared it a failing cause. We know that Roland is not quite of that band, but has modelled himself upon them – an aspirant. They represent the futility of a cause which we all have to face. Their quest, and Roland's, is bound to fail, but there is no choice – the world is thus, and 'just to fail as they seemed best'. At one level, a symbol of trial for youth and Knights; at another, the futility of lost causes that must be taken up, and the only important matter is 'And all the doubt was now – should I be fit?'

The Dark Tower

Towers feature prominently in our cultural traditions as symbols of power and progress (phallic symbols, the Eiffel Tower, castles and their towers, castle keeps; tower of strength; remember the Twin-Towers?) or as important landmarks which guide our journeys (lighthouse towers), or as marks of human doom (the tower of Mordor in Lord of the Rings; 'the dark tower' series by Stephen King).

At the surface, the symbol of the tower suggests a place where the Childe is to become a Knight through some kind of challenge he meets at the tower – an abode of evil which must be vanquished. We all have to encounter and overcome challenges – the tower symbolises this challenge. But as we read on, and combine the imagery of 'dark' with 'tower' we realise this is a symbol of a more fundamental meaning.

Tierce interprets this symbol as suggesting imperfection in the creative arts – Roland reaches the

tower and blows his horn to become one with all the other failures in the arts; this imperfection is the best you can ever do and still you will fall short of the mark: hence the concept of 'perfection in imperfection' (Tierce, 1984). This view requires an allegorical reading of the poem as being really about Browning's (and other poets') creative journey. Sounds like English Literature on steroids (or perhaps LSD) to this reader. I prefer the interpretation of the poem as an inevitable journey to the bitter end of life and how one should meet this end, as exemplified in this cynical, weary childe.

This tower is dark, it is a 'round, squat' thing a turret in a grey, dessicated landscape, surrounded by low ugly hills and a tall mountain. It does not really exude danger – it merely is.

This suggests it marks a point in the journey of man (as does a lighthouse), although in this poem, it is a terminus. It is dark because its meaning is death claiming mastery over all. There is a sense of waiting at the end (the hills, as giants, watching a hunted game), as though the tower marks an entrance to another world, a passage all must take. There is no sentimentality or comfort to be found at the feet of this tower.

The imagery is strongly expressed – we are left in no doubt as to its appearance or surroundings. Its meaning is clear. Death.

The Hoary Cripple

This is the classic archetype of a gatekeeper, which can also be seen as the symbol of passage into the other world. His 'malicious eye' and incipient 'glee' at another potential victim seeking directions to his doom, is a masterly touch by Browning to start the poem.

The cripple has a staff (also a sign of a wisdom of sorts) so we infer he is either old or crippled by injury. Perhaps he is himself a sign of the failure to be encountered at the Dark Tower – he may have been a 'childe' himself, only to fail in some crucial way, and become death's gatekeeper and trickster: take the wrong road and you will never reach the tower, but wander endlessly.

Roland, it seems, decides to take the advice and not turn aside, sealing his fate at the Dark Tower.

Besides the conventionality of the symbol (gatekeeper; one who waits; guide) we can also see this as a symbol of the cruel gamesmanship of whatever spirit has mastery over this world, challenging the instinct or faith of people. Roland could have 'turned aside' from the directions of one so vile and suspect, and ended up in some other nightmare. He does not. He recognises at a deeper level that this is the gatekeeper and the path leads him to a fate which has an ending, one way or the other.

The Quest

This has traditionally represented a rite of passage for youth approaching manhood; it may be a physical or spiritual journey to find something of value (win your spurs; the truth; the chalice); it may also be a journey to the inevitable which must be met manfully, as with the journey of life coming to the end. The notion of a quest is perhaps allegory, except when referred to directly, as in 'I had so long suffered in this quest'. The combination of this and the apparent maturity of the narrator, suggest a journey to the inevitable.

The Grey Plain

This is the world through which Roland wanders as he approaches the tower. It symbolises an ending to things; colours, which represent life and energy, are leeches from the world. The joy of youth, which is taken with the vitality of the world, is lacking in the old approaching their end. Once again this reinforces the idea of the journey to meet a challenge which you know cannot be overcome but must be faced. The image may also be reflective of the inner life of Roland, that the emptiness and self torture inside him, affect how he perceives the journey through this landscape, where only the ending is thought about: 'I might go on; nought else remained to do.'

Stiff, Blind Horse

Abandoned in this grey landscape, it is almost an affront to Roland, who assumes it must be evil to deserve such a fate. The horse normally symbolises power and beauty; it can be evil if it is the charger of a vile, dark Knight. Usually it is a symbol of nobility when it carries a fair Knight. In this poem I see it as symbolising the corruption of nature. What would be a noble carrier of a Knight in a noble cause is here just a symbol of inevitable failure. It is also a symbol of warning - a horse alone, riderless, perhaps even dead.

An alternative interpretation is to view the horse as a symbol of the poet's failure to achieve a standard of work he sought to achieve – hence this ‘imperfect’ horse (Tierce, 1984). This requires seeing the whole poem as an allegory on the poetic activity and its shortcomings from perfection, as argued by Tierce (Tierce, 1984). I am not moved by such a viewpoint, but then again, this is a poem for interpretive gymnastics.

By this stage of the poem we have probably assumed that Roland is riding on a horse – how else could he travel and quest? Yet there is no such reference to his horse. It is a journey or quest. He may be traversing it on foot (see above under 'Childe').

Darkening Path

A symbol of time passing and the closer approach to a dire fate which is an ending to the quest. The path is a symbol of a journey or a way to something which must be traversed a certain way (the path to riches; he has take the spiritual path) in order for a destination to be reached. In this poem, the path reflects the wasteland, a reinforcing of the many symbols for decay, a petering out of life.

River Across Path

Rivers are symbols of passage (river Styx) to another world either as a crossing or as a path for travelling along (ancient Egyptians viewed the Milky Way as a river to the next life; it reflected the Nile on Earth: Bauval, 2000). Rivers (as does the water in some cases), represent life. Here it is a contrast to the wasteland through which it passes, setting it in relief.

This river is a neutral symbol in the poem. It rolls on 'deterred no whit' by the affairs of the world. It is another landmark/gateway which Roland must cross, fearing as he does the drowned remains of other Knights. Note, it is at this point that we have the strongest hint that Childe Roland is on foot as there is no indication he dismounts to cross: 'Which while I forded – good saints, how I feared/To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek'. Even for brevity's sake, there would have been some reference to a dismount. In this image of fording the river, recall the image of the dead warriors sleeping under the waters in Lord of the Rings.

The river, such as it is, is a gate or border, and crossing (fording the river is a powerful symbol) it takes the questing 'childe' further into his doom. The literary effect is conventional, reinforcing the sense of a journey, building to a climax.

Drenched Willows

The 'Weeping Willow' at a riverbank is a conventional symbol for life reaching to water for nourishment, a sign of the health giving properties of rivers. In this poem, these trees and the 'low scrubby alders' are trying to leap into the river to escape via 'suicide' the decay of the land in which they are cursed to be. This reflects the inner mood of Roland, for that is how he sees them. Everything in this place is now a symbol of doom.

Remains of Carnage

Some horrifying battle must have taken place, for Roland comes across the remains and imagines all sorts of possibilities with the remains of war machines. This symbol can be interpreted as signifying the futility of war, as the combatants are not even a memory, but the havoc wreaked remains. Pointlessness in a wasted land. As a literary effect, the symbol increases the sense of horror we feel as Roland approaches the tower.

Palsied Oak with Cleft

He sees this cleft as a distorted mouth. A symbol of the pain of the land expressed through one of the great symbols of energy and life – the tree (and a powerful Oak, at that). This is a natural symbol turned around, to express pain and death instead of life, as a created symbol by Browning (others have done the same: Donaldson in his fantasy series 'The chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever').

Great Black Bird

As we know from the role of the Raven (and Crow) as symbols, it represents the foreshadowing of death, this familiar and messenger of the gods. In the poem, it is a final sign that he has reached the place where the tower will be found.

Low Hills and Mountain

These giants of the earth appear to Roland as though they are the remains of sentient beings, frozen in time. The symbol represents the power of fate and death to bring down even the most powerful. And mountains are stunted, as were the trees he passed by. Everything in this twilight land is grey and in the process of final decay. A deeper meaning may be that we are witnessing the transition point to death. This land is in a stasis of lifeless transition to death – the whole poem perhaps a metaphor for the final journey of life.

Lost Peers in the Waste

He sees finally, the fate that awaits him, as he recognises that the strong, clever, lucky - all of them - have ended in the same place. He will be joining them now. This is a created symbol whose meaning is that whatever you are (mountain, hill, powerful warrior, an ordinary man, animal) the ending is the same.

Another interpretation of this symbol is that of comfort in fellowship (failure). Life is not as glorious as you may have thought when young, but you must get on with it and endure; the comfort of fellowship (his peers or Band) in difficult challenges may be the only relief to be had (D'Avanzo, 1977).

The 'sheet of flame' comes, revealing your fate and that of your predecessors. What remains?

Slug-horn

Only to meet your fate with one final act of defiance, doomed like all others, but asserting your being, your arrival at this place, ready to face whatever horrors may next await you. Courage at the end is all you have left. It seems the childe has earned his spurs.

The slug-horn is a fictitious horn but blowing the horn itself, is a conventional symbol, used by Browning to assert the manhood of Roland as he reaches the Dark Tower.

Conclusion

Without the judicious use of symbols, Browning's poem would have been far less effective. The

images which the symbols convey add strength to the narrative, each a stepping stone closer to the end.

There are many reasonable interpretations of the symbols, besides those I have mentioned above. My instinctive response is to treat the symbols as illuminating a journey to the inevitable (the inevitability of death), and about how that can be faced. Others have taken the poem as an allegory on the challenge of the poetic process and dealing with creative failure.

Throughout this poem, Roland has no actual foes to fight – no enemies leaping out from behind rocks or trees to challenge him. But he is nonetheless a warrior of life, aged and tired, facing his end defiantly with perhaps just a hint that there is more to come, should the sound of the slug-horn be heard.

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