

Pouring forth Emotions: Imagery and Symbolism of Water Bodies in some Poems from the Anglo-Saxon Period to the Early 20th Century

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Abstract

From the Anglo-Saxon times right down to the Modern age, we have seen that poets have used the symbolism of water bodies in order to give vent to the varied emotions of grief, loss, pain as well as joyful and happy feelings. The imagery of the seas, rivers and lakes have thus been beautifully adapted to render forth the appropriate emotions experienced by the poets and accordingly, water symbolism occurs in various capacities in these poems. Again, apart from such emotional outpourings, the water symbolism has also served the purpose of evoking the atmosphere of joy or sadness, as the case might be and of alerting the readers of different interpretations of the poems. This study, therefore, attempts an analysis of these various aspects of the imagery and symbolism of the water bodies.

[**Keywords:** Water Body, Symbolism, Imagery, Regeneration, Loss, Joy]

In the realm of English poetry, Nature as the theme has been made use of by various poets throughout the centuries. Among the nature imageries and symbols that occur often, we can observe the symbols of the different water bodies like seas, rivers and lakes which are used by different poets for different purposes. Thus, we may see that these symbols, when they occur, perform the dual functions of evoking the appropriate atmosphere and also give expression to the pent up emotions in the hearts of the poets concerned. So, these images and symbols of the water bodies blend in beautifully with the general mood and tone of the poems and the poets' expressions of joy or sorrow, gaiety or sadness, as the case might be.

If we look at the poems composed during the Anglo-Saxon period, we would find some poems which have wonderful sea passages and descriptions of sea voyages which often bring in an atmosphere of sadness and loss. As the Anglo-Saxons had themselves crossed the sea while coming to Britain from the Continent, they were well equipped sailors and loved to venture out to the sea. Their love of the sea and adventurous spirit led them to leave to us some exquisite poems where we get the imageries and symbols of the sea. Thus, the poems belonging to the Elegiac or Lyrical category, as also the Heroic poem- an epic like *Beowulf*, are found to be full of these superb sea passages.

Thus, a study of the two Anglo-Saxon elegiac poems, *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* would make it quite clear that the anonymous poets of these two poems have both extensively used sea imagery and symbolism to build up the atmosphere of loss, grief and sadness and to project their emotions too. Both these poems are somewhat similar in that in both we find one speaker who recounts the passing away of happy times and rues the present friendless and lonely condition. Both these men are undertaking sea voyages, moving away from their homelands into the mysterious and unfamiliar ways. In the beginning of *The Wanderer*, we see how the speaker has been forced to “the paths of exile” and how he has now taken to the “ice-cold sea”, losing his lord and his comrades(322). Thus, the depth of his feelings for his dead lord and his lost comrades is subtly dramatized by the ever-present waves of sorrow.

In his dreams, he feels that he has been re-united with his lord and his friends, but soon wakes up to the rude reality and sees “before him the tawny waves, sea-birds bathing, spreading their wings, rime falling and snow, mingled with hail”(323). All his hopes of a reunion with his lord are shattered and he is plunged into despair and sadness and he understands that his life henceforth would be marked by unmitigated sorrow and that he “must drive his weary spirit on over the ambit of the waves”(323). The sorrow of the speaker is given a greater emphasis by its being placed against the dreary and desolate atmosphere of the sea waves.

The companion piece to *The Wanderer*, another poem with a lot of similarities is *The Seafarer*. Here also, we come across another speaker who is undergoing hardships at sea, the “terrible surging of the waves” (332). In the first part of this poem, the speaker recounts how it is impossible for a person dwelling on land to understand the suffering of the seafarer on the “ice-cold wave” (332). There are some fine descriptions of the tumultuous sea waves and the various sea birds like the gannet, the curlew and the screeching sea-eagle who are the only companions of the speaker. These images intensify the sad and lonely nature of his life and his journey across the sea is a kind of physical experience for him which would finally lead on to the spiritual journey and the subsequent union with God. So this sea journey can be analysed as the personal action of a person who prefers the dangers and difficulties of the sea to the comforts and pleasures of a safe life on land. The sea voyage for the speaker, then, is an act that is symbolic of the renunciation of worldly life and the joyful acceptance of the struggles and sufferings involved in the quest for eternal bliss. Thus both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, found in the *Exeter Book*, have a lot of similarities in terms of the situations presented and the background of the sea, but the latter poem may be said to emphasize much more on the ephemeral nature of this mundane existence and the necessity to shun earthly pleasures in order to attain the union with the Almighty in the heavenly life. It therefore uses the arduous sea journey as a stepping stone towards a much higher goal.

Apart from these two poems, another Anglo-Saxon poem which has some wonderful descriptions of the sea is of course the epic *Beowulf* where we find the hero's journey to the land of the Danes depicted beautifully and how “the currents swirled, sea against sand”(417). But this image of a happy sea journey is soon transformed when the poet describes Grendel's lair beneath the foul waters of the lake and how “when the wind

whips up foul weather, the turmoil of the waves mounts up dark to the clouds until the air grows thick with murk and the skies weep”(448). This description gives the readers an idea of the hellish nature of Grendel and his mother’s den under the lake and its sinister appearance along with a number of loathsome sea serpents and monsters make it a truly hideous place. The poet, through the portrayal of this place, has adequately summed up both the nature of the place and its abominable inhabitants.

It would be profitable now to move away from the Anglo-Saxon period and concentrate on the Romantic period and on two specific poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His poems, *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* both employ sea imagery and they have their own significance. In the former poem, which is in the nature of a fragment, we find the reference to the pleasure dome of Kubla Khan in a place called Xanadu and also the reference to the sacred river Alph which flowed “through caverns measureless to man” until it finally merged with the sea(275).

The reference to this river may have been taken by the poet from Thomas Taylor’s translation of *Description of Greece* written by the 2nd century geographer Pausanius. There it has been named as river Alpheus and Coleridge probably got the name of the river from that source. As this river was a holy river, it was believed that it had the power of fertilizing the land through which it flowed. The river, as described here by the poet, flowed for some time beneath the surface of the earth and then “five miles meandering with a mazy motion” it flowed to meet the “lifeless ocean”(276). Many critics including George Wilson Knight has interpreted the river to be “a symbol of life” since it was regarded holy and in spite of the fact that it went on to merge with a lifeless sea ¹

In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge presents the sea through the eyes of the old Mariner himself as he narrates his gruesome tale to the helpless wedding guest. Thus in Part I of the poem we learn how the ship had started its voyage and how it encountered snow and ice which made the journey impossible and how the albatross had suddenly come in through the fog and how it was welcomed by the crew. He then describes the dramatic improvement of the weather and the ship being able to proceed through the gradually splitting ice. But the mood of hope and joy is soon arrested when the Mariner confesses to his killing of the albatross at the end of the first part of the poem.

But at the beginning of part II of the poem, the wind fell and all progress was stopped so that the ship appeared to be a painted one on a “painted ocean”(260). The description of the lonely sea takes on a horrifying aspect as “slimy things” were seen to be crawling on the “slimy sea” and the sea water took on the peculiarly hellish colours of green, blue and white. It seemed that the Mariner’s ungodly act had started to bring in these terrible results. Thus the sea changed and the sailor suffered terribly, being left alone on a “wide wide sea” as all his friends died.(274) Finally, the Mariner was rescued

¹ G. Wilson Knight in his article *Coleridge’s Divine Comedy in English Romantic Poets* ed by M. H. Abrams,p208 suggests that the river Alph which runs through nature towards death clearly corresponds to life in some ways.

after the spell had been broken when he blessed the water-snakes and the ship was steered by the dead comrades of the sailor. So, in this poem, the sea has been the mirror, reflecting the good and the evil deeds of the Mariner and it, being an integral part of nature, changed and turned fearful and full of hateful creatures when the Mariner committed an act that was totally against the norms of nature. The sea, with all its changes, therefore becomes the benchmark of the slow progress of the Mariner towards spiritual regeneration, free from the sin of the killing of a creature of God.

The Victorian age saw two great poets, Tennyson and Arnold, who have used the imagery of the sea to express melancholy thoughts. Thus, Tennyson's exquisite little lyric poem, *Break, Break, Break* has made a very touching and poignant use of the imagery of the sea to pour forth his intense sorrow and sense of loss at the untimely death of his close friend, Arthur Henry Hallam who was drowned at sea. In the short space of sixteen lines, the poet has conveyed his pain at the cruel separation from his friend who has disappeared from his life forever:

And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill ;
But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still! (8-12)

Here of course the emphasis is on the uninterrupted flow of life outside with the ships going on their journeys as usual, though the change that has taken place in the life of the poet is a shattering one. Thus the imagery of the breaking waves of the sea poignantly describe the poet's emotional condition and his inability to give words to the surging feelings in his heart.

The sea imagery is used by another great Victorian poet, Matthew Arnold in his celebrated poem, *Dover Beach*, composed during his visit to Dover after his wedding, to give voice to a central theme of his poetry- the loss of all moral values and the poet's deep concern at the dwindling of faith. The opening lines of the poem present a calm and tranquil atmosphere and it is symbolical of the stability and poise that Arnold desires for himself in this world ridden with chaos and confusion, devoid of every value which previously sustained people:

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits...(1-3)

Again, the never ending and monotonous movement of the sea waves is wonderfully expressed in the phrase "with tremulous cadence slow"⁽¹³⁾ and this slow movement brings into the poet's mind the "eternal note of sadness" as he becomes aware of a strange resemblance between the motion of the sea waves and the flux of moral and religious ideas in the lives of human beings.

The reference to the great Greek dramatist Sophocles in the second stanza is brought in by Arnold to put emphasis on the eternal nature of the problems besetting the human world today which must have troubled great minds so many years ago. So, the

poet here refers to the “turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery” (17-18) and soon the seascape turns dramatically into a metaphor, the withdrawal of the waves becomes a symbol of the withdrawal of faith. The loss of faith is strongly reinforced by the imagery of the sea waves receding far, far away, taking along with it the last remnants of faith is moving indeed and the words “naked shingles of the world” powerfully evoke a sense of utter desolation and moral destitution. (28)

The imagery of water bodies like lakes have been dealt with by W. B. Yeats in his poems *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* and *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* to present the charm of a rural, secluded life on the lake island of Innisfree in his native country and in case of the second poem, to depict the regenerative power of water. Thus, the first poem occurs in his collection of poems *The Rose* published in 1893 and is one of his finest early poems dealing with the poet’s wish to leave the busy life of the city and stay there amidst a simple, natural environment:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (1-4)

So here Yeats has described an idyllic place where he would love to live in the manner suggested by Henry David Thoreau’s book *Walden* where Thoreau describes how he had built a cabin by Walden Pond in Massachusetts and had lived there for two years. Inspired by this work, Yeats decided to go back to Lough Gill in County Sligo of which he had fond memories. Thus the tinkling sound of water in a shop in London brought back to his mind the lapping sound of lake water in Lough Gill and thus in the final stanza of the poem, he has given touching expression to his love for this beautiful natural surroundings :

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (9-12)

The refrain “I will arise and go now” serves to emphasize the poet’s determination to leave the city of London and go to a place where he can hear the lilting sound of the lake water and where “peace comes dropping slow”.(5) Thus here the imagery of the lake water and its sound has been adroitly used to convey the poet’s longing and sense of anticipation of an ideal place of residence.

In Yeats’ collection of poems titled *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* published in 1933, the poem *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* is a brilliant evocation of the passing away of a time that the poet had spent with his friend Lady Augusta Gregory in her home at Coole Park. In the first stanza of the poem, Yeats looks at the birds and animals playing at the water’s edge and how the water travels underground for some time and later joins a lake. The poet, as A. Norman Jeffares says, is reminded of the regenerative power of

water, a theory propounded by the Neoplatonic philosophers such as Porphyry.² Again, in the second stanza of the poem, the poet moves on to a description of the “flooded lake” during winter and the sudden mounting of the swan.(16) So, in this poem the water imagery has been used to bring out the regenerative aspect and in the second stanza it is in consonance with the poet’s sad and melancholy thoughts as he reflects on the past memories associated with the estate of Lady Gregory.

Another important modern poet, Wystan Hugh Auden, in his poem *Seascape* has presented the picture of the sea by the cliffs of Dover in a beautiful manner. Thus, in his address to a stranger who is visiting England for the first time, he urges him to stand on the seashore for a few minutes and silently imbibe the “swaying sound of the sea”.(7) The poet’s patriotic fervour is exemplified in the beautiful description of the waves of the sea dashing against the shore and retreating, the seagull perching on the steep side of the cliff and the ships looking like small seeds far away in the sea.

Here the picture is of a tranquil seascape which someone who views it for the very first time will remember for a long time and the poet therefore asks the person addressed to take in the beauty of this scene fully:

And this full view
Indeed may enter
And move in memory as now these clouds do,
That pass the harbour mirror
And all the summer through the water saunter. (18-22)

Auden here, therefore, has painted a splendid picture of the sea by the picturesque chalk cliffs of Dover and thereby he has voiced his love for his country and its manifold charms by presenting the pictures before a stranger.

In conclusion, it may be said that the different presentations of the water bodies in poems right from the Anglo-Saxon times to the Modern period have been often done with the view to the expression of intense personal feelings and sentiments, mainly tinged with sad and melancholy thoughts. While the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poets made use of the sea images to pour forth their loneliness and wretchedness, the poets like Tennyson or Arnold in the Victorian age has used it to express the sense of loss and sadness that they felt. Coleridge, Yeats and Auden have used sea or river imagery differently. Thus throughout the history of poetical compositions, the imagery of the water bodies have played major roles and have consequently remained in the memories of readers through centuries.

² A. Norman Jeffares refers to the Neoplatonic doctrine of the regenerative powers of water and particularly refers to the philosopher Porphyry (233-c.301) from whom Yeats might have taken his images in his commentary to *Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931* in *Selected Poems: W. B. Yeats*, p.114.

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