

**Edith Sitwell's Forest of Symbols:  
A Symbolist Study of her Poetry**

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The works of Edith Sitwell must be set against a background of spiritual despair and personal frustration. Her poetry reveals a shrinking from the external world, and the substitution of an artistic world of fancy. Moreover, in her poetry, one hears the voice of a young poetess seeking to express the moral discontent and the aesthetic aspirations of a generation in revolt against the tyranny and the establishments of the pre-1914 world. Like other modernist poets, Sitwell lives in an age of rapid changes and intense artistic experimentations that reflects the anxiety of the artists and their attempts to make sense of this chaotic world. This resulted in the emergence of many artistic movements and trends, among which is symbolism- the subject matter of the present paper.

Edith Sitwell was deeply influenced by the poetry of the French symbolists, Stephane Mallarme, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud. Like them, her view of contemporary civilization remained "unromantically pessimistic, cynically mocking the spiritual deadness of her time" (John Williams, p.37). Moreover, her poetry dealt with the superficialities of life and to this end, she developed a "self-consciously eccentric style, emphatically rhythmical and apparently chaotic in its imagery (ibid.).

Indeed, the use of symbols is pervasive in Sitwell's poetry. For her, the world may become- -as Baudelaire had sometimes seen it- - a 'forest of symbols.' All the things of the material world can, in this theory, be made into images of the inner world of the poet. This is evident in Sitwell's poetry where the universe becomes an outward and visible sign of the poet's spiritual condition (Stephane Coote, p.20). What is significant here is the peculiar way in which the symbols are used in Sitwell's poetry. A careful reading and comparison between the usage of symbols in her early and later poetry show the considerable changes these symbols underwent.

The symbols in Sitwell's early poetry, which can be described as just "a sequence of images bound by no conscious thought"(Geoffrey Bullough, p132), are mainly derived from the natural world around her and childhood memories. That is why the poems of this period represent a working out of "private fantasies" and a "fantastic manipulation of childhood recollection and warm untroubled images of art"(John Press, p.159). Whereas the symbols of her later poetry- especially after the eruption of World War II- are deeply embedded in the Christian mythology. In fact, her themes or images might be called elemental or archetypal. Consequently, one hears of the sun, earth, love, harvest, darkness, death, Cain, Adam, and Christ (David Perkins, p.433). But these themes and images are not presented with particularizing detail, but only in general reference. This reflects her tendency, like the symbolist, to suggest rather than to name objects directly, and to evoke or recreate the objects little by little in the mind of the reader through the use of suggestive symbols (For more information, see Charles Chadwick).

In 'Aubade,' Sitwell expresses an insistent personal need to be loved and taken care of. Implicitly, she describes in this poem her life which was devoid of love, warmth, and light. It is noteworthy to mention here that Sitwell's first autobiographical work was entitled Taken Care Of- a title which tells much about her psychological framework. Jane, the protagonist of the poem, stands for all the neglected and forgotten girls. She is a country girl, a servant on a farm and unhappy in her life. And because she is herself mindless and wooden-headed creature, the poem is suffused with images of wood, hardness, clumsiness and pallor. Jane here is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's characters in his early poetry: she is down-to-earth, mindless and a spiritually dead character who goes on living in a monotonous and barren life. What is more important here is Jane's inability to see light, in the spiritual sense of the word. So that

The creaking empty light  
 Will never harden into sight,  
 Will never penetrate [Jane's] brain  
 (Edith Sitwell, 1965, all subsequent  
 quotations are from this edition, p.16, ll. 10-12).

Light, which stands for enlightenment, is, for Jane, an empty thing which conveys nothing. Her vacuous brain would conceive life as eternities of kitchen garden, with flowers as ragged and wooden as her mind; and the flames of her kitchen fire have the colors of carrots and turnips. The pale milk, too, has a 'weak mind' which is turned by the sight of her hair. This imposition on the external world of symbols evoked by the poet's criticism of the central object is, Bullough points out, frequent in Sitwell's poetry. The world, in which Jane lives, with its dull and suffocated atmosphere, is a projection of Sitwell's personal frustration and yearning to escape. It is significant to note the irony implicit in the title of the poem 'Aubade' for there is no joy or love in this morning song.

In "The Sleeping Beauty," Sitwell moves a step forward in her contemplation and perception of spiritual evil and her horrified revulsion at the bestial cruelties of man to man in this modern mechanistic world (Vivian de Pinto, p.183). In this poem, Sitwell creates a fanciful world with a peculiar imaginative intensity in which she presents simple themes of love, betrayal, ambition, and death. This world is derived from fairytales, the Russian ballet and personal memories. It is a world of rich and varied beauty full of symbolic figures such as love, the goose girl, the good fairy Chatte Blanche and the bad fairy Lardronette, the Princess and the Governess, Mrs. Troy; Zambo, the Negro boy and many others.

Here, unlike T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, one notes that Sitwell's approach to the world is not through concepts but through feelings and images and the emotional association of favorite words such as "gold,

cold, and blind"(G. S. Frazer, p.286). In fact, the poem with its dreamlike and fairytale atmosphere tells of a world of lost innocence and betrayal, degradation and corruption through a succession of images and juxtaposition of themes. It is a world whose inhabitants are mere shadows and a 'nation of the blind.' It is a dead and terrible world where the

.....quick drum taps  
 That seem the anguish beat of our own heart  
 Making an endless battle without hope  
 Against materialism and the world.  
 And sometimes terrible lumbering Darkness comes  
 (p.86, ll. 57-61).

And in alliance with this tragic modern age

.....has dimmed our innocent paradise  
 With faint shadow, shaken dust within our eyes--  
 And we are one now with the lonely wise,  
 Knowing the spring is the only clear mirage  
 Of an eternal beauty that is not (p.74, ll. 21-5).

In this poem, Sitwell's preoccupation with images of cold, indifference, isolation, and betrayal stems, as she admits, from her own terror and loneliness as a young child (John Press, p.159). In fact, "The Sleeping Beauty" reflects one of the major themes which run through much of the modern poetry; that is of man's primal innocence. In an age where man has the material means to achieve any desired end, and where doubt has overrun certainty, it is natural that those who think and feel, like Sitwell, should be oppressed with a sense of guilt; guilt for the past and anxiety for the future are ruling contemporary states of mind. It is inevitable that poets should have concerned themselves deeply and desperately with the problems of lost innocence and the fall of man (James Reeves, p.xxi).

Man has lost his innocence, and with it, his spiritual values and certainties that dignify him as a human being. Man is an old, crumbling creature and for him

This is a different world; the snow lies cold  
Upon our heart, though midsummer is here...  
(p.88, ll.131-2).

'The snow' here stands for man's spiritual emptiness and desolation, whereas midsummer stands for faith and beliefs that upholds man. Hence, this continuous association between the glorious past and the shining period of youth and bright innocence:

When we were young, how beautiful life seemed!--  
The boundless bright horizons that we dreamed,  
And the immortal music of the Day and Night,  
(p.74, ll. 1-3).

But because 'the love' that this 'harsh, unkind world of unbelievers' bore for Christ 'was not deep enough,'

This primal innocence is lost for ever  
Deep in our hearts and minds. How could the dust  
Of superstitions taught in schoolrooms, lust  
In love's shape, dim our beauty? What dark lie?  
Or Cruelty's voice, could drown this God-made harmony?  
(p.74, ll. 5-9).

Evidently, in her diagnosis of the causes of modern malaise, Sitwell identifies them with man's betrayal of Christ; man's principal guide and perpetual savior in this world. This theme will gain more significance in Sitwell's later poetry, as she was to witness the complete loss of sense and meaning in this apparently reasonable world.

In this horrible vision of the contemporary world and its sordidness, people become mere ghosts, shadows whose lives are mean and unheroic, and where love is dead. Consequently, images of darkness, death, stagnation and old age are prevalent. In 'Colonel Fantock,' a poem

about the feelings of disillusionment in life, Sitwell admits that she always feels a 'little outside-life' for

[She] was like one dead, like a small ghost,  
A little cold air wandering and lost  
(p.174, ll. 26-7).

And in "The Little Ghost Who Died for Love," she laments that all the beautiful and splendid things in life are lost for

Now Time beats not, and dead Love is forgotten  
The spirit too is dead and dark and rotten.  
(p.178, ll. 5-9).

She and her world are in desperate need for medicines, but those are denied because of the world's sins:

Oh? give me medicine, for the world is sick;  
Not medicine, planet-spotted like fritillaries,  
For country sins and old stupidities...  
(p.179, ll.41-3).

And because this world is sick, so it "soon must die." This statement is prophetic for it foreshadows the collapse of western culture and the eruption of World War I which sweeps away the old institutions and beliefs.

Biblical images are used extensively to diagnose the primary causes for man's spiritual agony and lethargy

My little Lamb, of milk bereft  
My heart was all that I had left.  
Ah, could I give thee this for food,  
My Lamb, thou knowest that I would  
(p.183, ll. 61-4).

But when Judas

.....grew to manhood. Then one came,  
False hearted as Hell's blackest shame  
To steal my child from me, and thrust  
The soul I loved down to dust  
(p.183, ll.69-72).

Two images are contrasted here; one is of innocence and love, symbolized by 'Christ', and the other of betrayal and foulness, symbolized by Judas. Dust has a symbolic significance here, also, for it stands for death, corruption, dirt and at times, spiritual emptiness.

The 'Cruelty's Voice' in 'The Sleeping Beauty' is symbolized by such figures as Sir Pompey Alexander, the rich and stupid philistine, Dr. Gradus, the solemn and dry pedant, and Mrs. Behemoth, the possessive female. All these characters are reminiscent of the waste Landers of Eliot's significant poem 'The Wasteland.' They are bereft of all that gives them real life, spiritual certainties and confidence in the future. Their lives are barren and devoid of any significance. Through them, one notes arising strain of imagination against the stupidity and cruelty of the contemporary world, which reaches a terrifying culmination, as Pinto points out, in 'Gold Coast Customs'(p.192).

'Gold Coast Customs' is a poem about the state that led to World War II. It is, Sitwell stresses, a "definite prophecy of what would rise from such state, what has arisen"(p.xxxv). The Gold Coast is that of Africa; the customs are savage and shocking, and throughout the poem these are juxtaposed with the "customs" of contemporary London, which are equally savage and repulsive. Biblical and Christian imagery are used extensively here in order to shed light on the bestiality of modern man.

In the world where these 'customs' are practiced, man is part ravenous beast of prey, part worm, part ape, or is but the worm turned vertebrate. It is the world of the 'Rich man Judas', 'Brother Cain' and Lady Bamburgher, the fashionable mindless lady of modern London. Each one of these characters is reduced to the primal mud; they are at once with the slum ignorance, the blackness and the superstition of the African swamp. The beauty of their fevered hearts are no more than the beating of the



drums that heralded the Customs, as they were called in Ashantee, a hundred and fifty years ago, when, at the death of any rich man or important person, slaves and poor people were killed so that the bones of the dead might be washed by a human blood. It is the drums of World War II where millions will be eaten up and killed meaninglessly. So, the spiritual dead-in life cry, in our time, for another sacrifice-that of the starved (ibid., p.xxxvi).

A sense of a flesh decaying continuously is evident in this poem. The process is symbolized by two objects, both taken from the bestial kingdom: The Worm and The Rat. Both stand for death-in-life feelings, sordidness, decay and rottenness.

So our worm-skin and paper masks still keep,  
 Above the rotting bones they hide,  
 The marks of the Plague whereof we died:  
 The belief,  
 The grief,  
 The love,  
 Or the grin  
 Of the shapeless worm soft unshaping sin-  
 Unshaping till no more the beat of the blood  
 Can raise up the body from endless mud  
 Though the hell-fires cold  
 As the worm, and old,  
 Are painted upon each unshaped form-  
 No more man, woman, or beast to see-  
 But the universal devouring Worm.  
 (p.239, ll. 59-73).

This inability to rise up the body from the mud and slime and this formlessness of man's endeavors and existence remind us of Eliot's 'The Hollow-Stuffed Men,' with their 'shape[s] without form[s], shape[s] without color[s], and paralyzed force. It is significant to note that both poems use rats to signify the cannibalism and spiritual lethargy of modern man.

The Rat has eaten  
 That and beaten  
 Hope and love and memory,  
 At last, and even the will to die.  
 (p.248, ll.373-6).

It is an utterly grim world where even the desire to die is unattainable to man, who lives in houses like 'rat-skin.' Whenever mentioned, the Rat and Worm are associated with images of sordidness, death and darkness. This draws our attention to the image of the city symbolized by London where the rats and worms thrive.

Edith presents her perception of the physical world around her through an impressive description of the modern city of London, its slums, rotten alleys, where "the nations of Dead crowd in. "These images of the City's sordidness, dirt, and corruption are juxtaposed with images of brutality and darkness in the African city, Gold Coast.

It is noteworthy here that like Baudelaire, Sitwell in this poem, is concerned with presenting the nature of the spiritual life in the modern city and with creating a world of moral and emotional suggestion through the presentation of successive images of the city and its inhabitants. So, we smell and see

The sick thick smoke from London burning,  
 Gomorrah turning  
 Like worms in the grave,  
 The Bedlam daylight's murderous roar,  
 Those pillars of fire the drunkard and whore,  
 Dirty souls boiled in cannibal cookshops to paper  
 To make into newspapers, flags?  
 (p.251, ll. 473-9).

This modern city landscapes of London root it in an immediate physical world, physical world that nonetheless symbolizes its spiritual deadness. The inhabitants of this 'unreal city' are the 'Rich Judas and

Brother Cain' who are associated with fleshlessness, worms and universal blackness, and Lady Bumburgher who holds parties in her cannibal modern house and arranges competitions in which prizes are given

For those that on all four run  
Through the rotten slum  
Till those who come  
Could never guess from the mud-covered shapes  
Which are the rich or the mind dire apes,  
As the run where the souls, dirty paper, are blown  
In the hour before dawn, through this long hell of  
stone (p.250, ll. 442-9).

Despite this horrible picture of the modern society which consists of the heartless possessors of wealth and the lusty like the inane Lady Bumburgher who symbolizes here the hypocritical and materialistic humanity, the poem is not a pessimistic one. The last line 'in the hour before dawn' is very significant for dawn stands for Christ. Accordingly, the appalling atmosphere of the poem is combined with a faith in a divine cleansing power that will ultimately triumph. The poet is sure that somewhere in God's vast love [one soul] would shine and that

The fires of God shall wash the mud  
Till the skin drums rolling (p.252, ll.526-7).

In her later poetry, Sitwell reveals the same preoccupations and concerns. Once again, she tackles the themes of the suffering of humanity, the lost innocence, brutality, and cruelty of the modern age, with such an impressive and musical intensity that had never reached such an extent before.

In 'Still Falls the Rain'-subtitled 'The Raid,' the tragic vision of the world which Sitwell presents was imbued with the Christian mythology and symbols to such a degree that the poem itself becomes a kind of

ritualistic enactment through the rhythmical repetition of the phrase 'Still Falls the Rain.'

What is remarkable about this poem is Sitwell's power of investing ancient symbols with new meanings. Her crucified Christ in this poem is nowhere pious allegory but the living embodiment of the suffering of the whole world, identified in a flash of inspired imagination with the incarnation of divine love. The tragic vision of a world at war is irradiated by a constructive faith, a vivid apprehension of the divine nature of the world. This faith is not tied to any 'dogmatic orthodoxy' but to a kind of 'Christian pantheism' that shows the universe not as a dead matter, but as the true manifestation of God Himself (Pinto, p.193).

In this poem, Sitwell wrote of the state of the world, of the terrible rain:

Dark as the world of man, black as our loss  
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails  
Upon the Cross (p.272, ll. 2-4).

They are falling alike upon guilty and guiltless, upon Dives and Lazarus. The poem is about the suffering of Christ, the Starved man hung upon the Cross, the God of the Poor man, who bears in His Heart all the wounds.

The rain, here, is no longer a symbol of fertility and life. It brings death and destruction which is associated with the lethal showers of the German bombs. Christ is crucified and re-crucified every day and his suffering is vividly concretized through the repetition of such words as 'wounds' and 'nails.' Moreover, the repetition of 'Still Falls the Rain' helps to invoke the terrible fatality and destructiveness of the rain in a ritualistic manner.

The suffering of Christ has a strong redemptive power which is derived from the archetypal experience of love and innocence that figure

in his character. Besides, Rain becomes an equivalent to Christ's 'Blood' and this association between these two elemental objects is significant in making clear the contrast between their ancient and modern symbolic significance. In ancient Christian mythology, both Blood and Rain are symbols of fertility. Furthermore, Blood is associated with wine in that mythology. The sterility of the Rain thus, stands in opposition to these symbols which are suggestive of primitive totamism.

The main Biblical figures are Christ who is a symbol of rebirth-through love and Cain, of death and betrayal. Dives and Lazarus figure out also to point at the division of the modern world into two nations: of rich and poor.

The same images are employed with more poignancy and intensity in 'Three poems of the Atomic Age: Dirge for the New Sunrise, The Shadow of Cain, and The canticle of the Rose.'

'The Shadow of Cain' is a prophetic vision of the modern crisis and a revelation of its significance. It shows humanity emerging from the 'ancient Cold' of the Glacial Age and splitting into the duality of Rich and Poor symbolized by the Tiger and the Bird. This spiritual cleavage culminates in, and is symbolized by, the explosion of the Atomic Bomb in Hiroshima when

The primal Matter  
Was broken, the womb from which all life began.  
(p.373, ll. 97-8).

Dives and Lazarus, the two halves of the modern man, lie in the hollow of the split atom. Each one of them carries with him his symbol of gold- gold as the life- giving wheat and gold as money which is death and corruption. In this New Glacial Age, Lazarus is mistaken for Christ and Dives thinks his gold can cure the ills of the modern world. A kind of a dialogue develops between the two through which the modern crisis is

faced and understood and from which a new unity, 'Christ'- the Whole Man- will arise.

.....Think! When  
 The last clamor of the Bought and Sold  
 The agony of Gold  
 Is hushed...When the last Judas-kiss  
 He died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ,  
 Those ashes that were men  
 Will rise again  
 To be our Fires upon the Judgment Day!  
 And yet-who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?  
 He walks again on the Seas of Blood. He comes in the  
 terrible rain (p.376, ll. 205-215).

This reminds us of Sitwell's earnest call in 'Metamorphosis' for 'Christ' to come and save this world:

So, out of the dark, see our great spring begins  
 Our Christ, the new Song, breaking out in  
 the fields and hedgerows  
 The heart of Man! O the new temper of Christ, in veins and  
 branches  
 He comes, our sun, to melt the eternal ice  
 Of Death, the crusts of Time round the sunken soul  
 Coming again in the spring of the world, clotted  
 with the scarlet-colored  
 Blood of our martyrdoms,-- the fire of spring.  
 (p.225-226, ll. 133-142).

Christ is associated here with Spring- the symbol of youth, fertility, and regeneration. He is our savior and guide. Evidently, as a true Christian, Sitwell arms herself with strong belief in Christ as the only source of redemption and salvation.

In 'The Shadow of Cain,' Sitwell spoke of the change from the worship of the holy, living, life giving gold of the wheat to the destructive gold of Dives, of the change from the warmth of love that makes all men brothers to state in which men only call their fellow men 'brothers' in

order to act the part of Cain, of the migration of mankind, after the Second Fall, which took the shape of separation of brother and brother, Abel and Cain, rich and poor. It is a spiritual migration of those into the desert of the Cold, towards the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima.

In this new desert, Man is left only with primal realities: Birth, Struggle of Bread and Death:

There was great lightning  
 In flashes coming to us over the floor:  
 The whiteness of the Bread--  
 The whiteness of the Dead--  
 The whiteness of the Claw--  
 All this coming to us in flashes through the open door  
 (p.372, ll. 64-9).

The door here, Sitwell explains, is the door of birth, through which we come to this cold desert. Besides, this door has a symbolic significance for it means also the door through which we must find our path. This means that the poet is still confident of the spring returning to revitalize man's modern desert. The spring will return in the figure of Christ with the life giving wheat of the harvest. Christ is associated here with myths of fertility and harvest, with the 'Sun,' and 'Spring.' He is the 'Rose of the world' who will redeem us:

Proclaim our Christ and roar 'Let  
 there be harvest!  
 Let there be no more Poor—  
 For the Son of God is sowed in every furrow!  
 (p.372, ll.89-92).

In fact, what is significant in Sitwell's handling of symbols is the changing perspective through which they are presented in her poems. For example, two types of sun are presented, the first is a source of fertility,

golden love and warmth, and Christ is the embodiment of this sun. He is in the "The Canticle of the Rose" the

Ineffable bright  
Effluence of bright essence...From my little span  
I cry of Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire  
Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man.  
(p.378, ll.57-60).

While the second is the leprous Sun, symbolized by Dives, and is covered with the sores of the world and unable to bring 'warmth to the loveless lips' or 'harvest to barren land.' Or it could be the Red Sun of Cain, and therefore, symbolic of sterility and death. It is the

.....phantom Sun in Famine Street  
The ghost of the heart of Man...red Cain  
(p.368, ll. 5-6).

The symbolic significance of the 'Rain' changes considerably also. Thus, the rain which was a symbol of death and sterility in 'Still Falls the Rain,' becomes in 'April Rain' the embodiment of love and the beginning of a new life. The character in the poem identifies his beloved with the 'April Rain.' Their world is 'a bright swift raindrop falling.' Significantly, the two words of the title 'April and rain,' both are symbols of fertility and regeneration.

In spite of her modern tragic vision of the world and presentation of a modern man as a homeless, shadowy, blind and spiritually dead creature, Sitwell believes in his capability of redemption only if he 'finds his way near the Sun' or clings to the rock which 'Once She was the whole world's gain and loss' as she writes in the "Elegy for Dylan Thomas" and "Prometheus' Song" respectively. The 'Sun,' of course, stands for Christ and the rock stands for the abode of the Christian beliefs.

As a result, Sitwell's later poetry can be seen as a 'sustained protest in the name of both Christian beliefs and natural rhythms of life against



everything that is cruel, mechanical, and destructive."(G. S. Frazer, p.285)

In fact, reading Edith Sitwell's poetry, one feels that when she says she possesses the "eyes of someone who had witnessed and foretold all the tragedy of the world," she was not entirely fanciful (John Pearson, pp.30-31).

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