

Maeterlinck's Poetic Symbolism in *Trei piese triste* (*Three Sad Plays*)

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Abstract: This article proposes an analysis of a staging from Maeterlinck (*Trei piese triste*/ *Three Sad Plays*) based on some poems of the author (from *Fifteen Songs – Three Little Maids They Did to Death*, *Maidens with Bounden Eyes*, *There Were Three Sisters Fain to Die*). Drawing on theatre studies and biographical criticism, poetics (of water and dreams) and theories of the soul, our aim is to account for the main themes of the symbolist current as envisaged by the Belgian author.

Keywords: symbolism in poetry and theatre, poetics of water and dreams, soul

Introduction

A representative of Belgian symbolism, Maeterlinck's contribution was as significant as that of Mallarmé in France, Gilbert Parker in England or Bliss Carman in America, and distinguished itself by a consistent, total allegory. Events, characters, phrases implicitly induce an esoteric meaning, without stating it; the romanticism of *The Seven Princesses* or the realism of *The Intruder* do not leave the impression of a moral masquerade; however, in the shadow of each incident we are given the promise of universality, of the possible fulfilment of greatness, not formulated but symbolized without the classic device of personification¹⁵. Among the symbolists, the author stood out for his romantic technique and conceptions, the atmosphere and realism of the dialogue of the dramatic characters, the vocabulary often belonging to the common people, sometimes more copious than that of the peasants, which distanced him from the impeccability of the literary language. He was accused of a lack of humour, Maeterlinck only opting for the hysterics of tragic crises or the grin of a skull due to the predilection for terror as the dominant tone; like Poe, he was a poet of the graveyard, being less successful with his plays and poems, than the latter with his stories¹⁶.

Biographers that also annotated the work of the Nobel prize winner in literature, Maurice Maeterlinck, while he was still alive were cautious in praising his

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¹⁵ Richard Hovey, "Modern Symbolism and Maurice Maeterlinck", *The Plays of Maurice Maeterlinck*, Stone and Kimball, Chicago, 1894, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶ *Idem*, pp. 9-11.

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life and writings; comparing him to a tamed lion that proved difficult to illustrate, requiring effort to focus on the essentials so as not to fall prey to ridicule. The events of his life were his books, as opposed to Strindberg, for example, who was much more fascinating due to his personality much different from the Belgian symbolist's, whose work can be characterized by impersonality¹⁷. He shunned literary celebrity, in the (post)modern acception¹⁸, showing his reluctance to fame by avoiding interviews¹⁹. This was expected from a loner, if we are to believe the gossip of the time: he smoked denarcotised cigarettes, his room was like a monk's cell, with poor furniture in it and no books, and the walls were covered with his thoughts on pinned butterfly-like pieces of paper; he did not receive visitors and devoted himself to meditation.²⁰

Maeterlinck contributed to literary history with his plays and distinguished himself through characters, often unseen presences associated with fate or death. Among the obsessions, it is worth mentioning that of water, a lethal substance for most of his heroines²¹. French poetics, in the analysis of the voice of water, argued that the author was caught in-between poetry and silence in the sonority of a dormant water²² waiting to be awakened.

Maeterlinck's Plays and Poetry

Maeterlinck wrote his plays to be played by marionettes, thus aligning himself with the modernist polemics against actors and their replacement by marionettes to whom Oscar Wilde and Edward Gordon Craig also adhered²³. The body was believed to prevent the actor from making 'symbolic gestures' because of the mimesis that was required to 'suggest thoughts', and in the plays of Maeterlinck and other representatives of the literary movement, symbolism is joined to abstraction and must

¹⁷ Jethro Bithell, *Life and Writings of Maurice Maeterlinck*, London and Felling-on-Tyne/ New York and Melbourne: The Walter Scott Publishing Co., LTD, 1913, pp. viii-ix, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38917/38917-h/38917-h.htm>. Retrieved on September 20, 2022.

¹⁸ Cf. Lorraine York, *Literary Celebrity in Canada*, Toronto/ Buffalo/ New York: University of Toronto Press, 2007 și Lorraine York, *Reluctant Celebrity. Affect and Privilege in Contemporary Stardom*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer International Publishing, 2018. Despite being adapted to the Canadian and Hollywood spaces, the principles formulated by the authors are universal, in terms of ideological tension and contestation, and can be applied to the Belgian symbolist, as well.

¹⁹ Jethro Bithell, *op. cit.*, p. x.

²⁰ Jethro Bithell, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

²¹ Cristi Avram, "Isabelle – The Last Princess of Maurice Maeterlinck", *Theatrical Colloquia*, Artes, Iași, no. 30, 2020, p. 166.

²² Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, translated from the French by Edith R. Farrell, The Pegasus Foundation, The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983, p. 193.

²³ Martin Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theatre and Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 88.

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mould bodies and their materiality in the spirit of abstract thought²⁴. Symbolist theatre, in general, represented by Maeterlinck, Strindberg or Yeats, is essentially one of isolated objects and gestures in which they become primary signifiers, the resistance structure of the play and its creative energy²⁵. His belief, coined in *Menus propos – le théâtre* (1890), was that the great poems of humanity (*King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, etc.) are not meant to be staged since the stage is the place where masterpieces die; their mere (re)presentation by human means, intentional or accidental, is a contradiction in itself. All masterpieces are symbols, and the symbol should not be touched by the active human presence²⁶.

Maeterlinck's plays were not considered to belong to theatre and their author, a dramatic artist of the unusual was deemed an apostle of the new decadentism, devoid of Dickensianism (sic!). To the seven princesses from the mystical and symbolic poem with the same title, a healthy humour à la Martin Chuzzlewit²⁷ was thought to be better than the tense one attributed to them by their author. In his theory about dramatic art, later discarded as unhealthy and sterile, Maeterlinck formulated the concept of a 'static theatre', an analytical method that reminds us of Poe's *Raven*, as analysed in *The Philosophy of Composition*.²⁸

A reaction to Belgian naturalism, his work resonated more strongly than the dream poetry of Georges Rodenbach, the mystical poet of tranquillity that influenced him.²⁹ His poems (*Hot-Houses*, 1889, among others), as well as the plays and essays that will follow, have the soul as central theme, envisaged as oppressed and inactive in its helplessness in a place (hot house) with doors forever closed and a tropical atmosphere of the rooms with a view; however, the awakening from the dream follows and we find feverish patients in dark hospitals on the fetid canals of Ghent, frowned upon by the inhabitants of the respective city, as well as the decadent label³⁰ mentioned above. The blank verse brings him close to Whitman, and his poems have been said to be incoherent, as if written by a mental patient, impossible to digest by a Victorian of the time, just as Tennyson's poetry might seem insipid³¹. Influenced by Albert Mockel's learned and comforting doctrine of aspiration and the theory of the

²⁴ Martin Puchner, *Stage fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 128.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 161.

²⁶ Arnold Aronson, "Avant-Garde Scenography and the Frames of the Theatre", *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, Alan Ackerman & Martin Puchner (eds.), Hampshire/NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 28.

²⁷ Archibald Henderson, "Maurice Maeterlinck as a Dramatic Artist", *The Sewanee Review*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Apr., 1904), p. 209,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27530624.pdf>. Retrieved on September 15, 2022.

²⁸ *Idem*, p. 215.

²⁹ Jethro Bithell, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 24.

³¹ *Idem*, pp. 27-28.

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changing soul similar to flowing water into the ocean, in his later plays, Maeterlinck will detach himself from the pessimism of the dark cave and come into the light of reality³². It was argued that *Princess Maleine* drew on the Shakespearean style: Hjalmar resembles Hamlet, among the characters there is also a clown, the eclipse of the moon is the same as in the fall of Julius Caesar; however, Maeterlinck's originality shows in the dialogue, his aesthetic intention and mastery of irony (*Princess Maleine, The Blind, The Life of the Bee*)³³.

The Seven Princesses was received negatively in its time, as a 'girl's bad dream' (Mieschner), an 'indecipherable enigma' (Adolphe Brisson), 'something purely pictorial, a pictorial transposition of Burne-Jones' (Anselma Heine), which 'barely rises to the rank of an intermezzo, an unfinished sketch' (Monty Jacobs), 'a test of the mystical-symbolic apparatus' (Oppeln von Bronikowski), the meaning lying, perhaps, in its own strangeness (Beaunier).³⁴ The positive review (van Dijk) praises the setting and the characters,

In a spacious marble hall, decorated with laurel bushes, lavender plants, and lilies in porcelain vases, is a white marble staircase with seven steps, on which seven white-robed princesses are lying, one on each step, sleeping on cushions of pale silk. Fearing lest they should awaken in the dark, they have lit a silver lamp, which casts its light over them. The lovely princesses sleep on and on; they must not be wakened, they are so weak! It is their weakness that has sent them to sleep. They have been so listless and weary since they came here; it is so cold and dreamy in this Castle in the North. They came hither from warm lands; and here they are always watching for the sun, but there is hardly any sun, and no sweet heaven over this level waste of fens, over these green ponds black with the shadows of forests of oaks and pines, over this willow-hung canal that runs to the rounded grey of the horizon. It is home-sickness that has sunk them in sleep. They sleep forlorn. Everything around them is so very old. Their life is so dreary with their long, long waiting; they are weary, weary.... They are waiting for the comrade of their youth; always they are looking for his ship on the canal between the willows; but, 'He cometh not,' they say. Now at last he is come while they are sleeping, and they have bolted the door from the inside. They cannot be wakened. With sick longing the Prince gazes at the seven through the thick window-panes. His eyes rest longest on the loveliest, Ursula, with whom he had loved best to play when he was a boy. Seven years she has looked for his coming, seven years, by day and by night. He sees them lying with linked hands, as though they were afraid of losing each other.... And yet they must have moved in their sleep, for the two sisters on the steps above and below Ursula have let go her hand; she is holding her hands so strangely.... At last the Prince makes his way into the room by an

³² *Idem*, p. 30.

³³ *Idem*, p. 44.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 56.

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underground passage, past the tombs of the dead. The noise of his entrance awakens six of the Princesses, but not Ursula. The six cry: 'The Prince has come!' But she lies motionless, stiff.... She has died of her long, long waiting, of the deep, unfulfilled longing of her soul...³⁵

Maeterlinck's imagination has been compared to a lake with stagnant and desolate waters that endlessly reflect the same dark landscapes and shelter on the shore characters in distress; the old castle, the underground passages, the black forest, the old tower repeat themselves, as well (*Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1892)³⁶.

Trei piese triste (Three Sad Plays) on the stage of the National Theatre of Iași

For the common man who passed the Baccalaureate exam in Romania and became familiar with the symbolism of the poet George Bacovia, *Trei piese triste/ Three Sad Plays (Intrusa/ The Intruder, Șapte prințese/ The Seven Princesses, Interior)* based on the poems from the volume *Quinze chansons (Fifteen Songs)* – III (*Three Little Maids They Did to Death*), IV (*Maidens with Bounden Eyes*), XIV (*There Were Three Sisters Fain to Die*) – becomes an opportunity to hear matter crying: of the living nature – forest, sea, snowy winter road, of the frightened trees at the arrival of death. A vaporous black matter, death will take the life of a sick young mother, leaving the family grieving and giving way to the first cries of the dead mother's baby, a little girl whom everyone thought was deaf, in a house full of girls and a blind woman. The whisper of death is always present – the hunting stays hidden, the audience hears the fall of the birds shot in the sky, then sees the image of two dead birds placed on the table in the house of a hunter. The latter cares for his wife and takes the maiden as mistress, he loves them both in his own way, while the dead daughter haunts the rooms, scaring those left alive and telling her story like a modern-day Scheherazade. The hunted rabbit brought in by the owner of the house is left in the kitchen, probably to die a decadent death, rotting as Sam Taylor Wood's artwork³⁷.

We see images of her, deceased, at the base of a dead Yggdrasil in miniature, in a pool of water, on a small island surrounded by calm waters, as argued by theatre criticism and in Bachelard's poetics of water. She is brought by those who found her and placed on the couch in the house, only one passer-by who walks around her can look her in the eyes; he is speechless to those who are still alive, but she would not know what to tell him of the reasons why she ended her life, unknown to her as well.

The clairvoyance of the blind girl who only distinguishes shadows and has a visual knowledge close to the Platonic myth of the cave, comes in a palimpsestic manner over that of Cassandra of the Greek tragedy, whose predictions were not

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 57.

³⁶ *Idem*, p. 60.

³⁷ Sam Taylor-Wood, *A Little Death*, 2002, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYka4ouQXqk>. Retrieved on May 15, 2022.

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believed, either; she had “a power that made her look strange in the eyes of others (...), a power of controlling the unknown”³⁸ which would lead her to perdition; unlike the ancient oracle woman, the blind daughter’s premonitions come true, her mother dies despite the family’s efforts to ward off the evil (holding hands around the dying bed). The libertine aunt in black contributes to her death, taking the food from the mouth of the sister-in-law, the grapes fed by the husband to his wife, fruits of envy in the fable starring the fox that cannot reach the vine and says they are undesirable, grapes of wrath to put it in Steinbeck’s terms; the aunt is foreshadowing the mourning, being already dressed in black, her clothes resembling Whistler’s mother and always mutters complaints against her nieces, thus lessening the authority of her brother, the *pater familias*.

Round, central character, in Forster’s tradition, the blind girl is surrounded by the flat sisters who support her (they put the chess pieces from the board in her hand to guess their names, she is agitated and does not succeed in doing so, her power almost crushes them like the magic of the wizard chess in *Harry Potter*. The sisters look out the window and confirm that there is no one, it is only her, the blind girl, that feels the presence of death. Her counterpoint is Ursula from the seven girls wearing golden crowns, seeking their death (in the forest, in the sea, in the winter); they feel that it is theirs and they deserve it, in the existentialist way, but they are left alive, more like living dead in the marble room of some uncle and aunt, where cousin Marcel makes his appearance, circling the place, waiting for the proper moment to break in; he takes the path of an underground labyrinth because he cannot open the doors and takes Ursula, his favourite, in his arms, and then leaves, adventure calls him out to sea.

The plays are sad, end tragically and will not appeal to the average Disney consumer indulged with the happy-ending of cartoons or romantic comedies; the first one ends with the death of the mother, leaving behind a grieving father with a lot of girls to raise and an indifferent aunt in black who lives in her world; the second one, with the loss of Ursula, who fades into non-existence or faints, but is reborn in the dream world, as in symbolism proper, holding in the palm of her hand the replica of the ship on which Marcel disappears at sea, in a lit circle that may symbolise sunlight, the seaman’s spyglass or the porthole of a ship; last but not least, the ending of the third play finds everyone scared and troubled by the ghost of the dead woman that haunts the house and the unfortunate closure is her body being brought to be mourned and paid homage to.

Trei piese triste (Three Sad Plays) may be viewed/ experienced as a meditation on sickness and death, a wake-up call for those who waste their lives or have dark thoughts daydreaming of a quiet eternal place, without heeding of the suffering of those around them after their possible death. An opportunity to change for the better,

³⁸ Ioana Petcu, *Urmaşii lui Thespis. Identitate și alteritate în tragedia greacă (The Followers of Thespis. Identity and Alterity in Greek Tragedy)*, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Publishing House, Iași, 2012, p. 103.

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to give and find comfort in moments of despair, the accuracy of the characters' experiences on the stage gives us goosebumps like a ghost story by Gogol or a good horror movie.

Conclusions

A staging of Maeterlinck's poetic symbolism, *Trei triste triste (Three Sad Plays)* grasps the essence of the Belgian author's dramatic artworks, his favourite themes (fear, death) and the related setting (dark forest, frozen winter) acting like puppeteers for the marionette-like actors, a goal of his artistic creed. The soul haunts in ghost form after the body dies of waiting, longing, or disease, drowned in the waters that also carry away the object of desire.

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