



Symbolism in *The Tempest* and *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*

Cristiana MARINELA VĂRGATU

Universitatea din Craiova

University of Craiova

Personal e-mail: cristiana_vargatu@yahoo.com

Symbolism in The Tempest and The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha

The worlds of the English and the Spanish literature are two sources of powerful symbols, characters and situations which have passed the test of time and have remained in the memory of the people. Taking into account the fact that symbols have a multitude of meanings, the purpose of the paper is to analyse symbolism in two works: *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare and *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote De La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, each of them representative for the literature to which they belong, with emphasis on the symbolism of the books.

Keywords: symbolism, books, illusion, expression, sanity



The attitude of people towards symbolism is represented by a combination of attraction and repulsion. It is obvious that those which have a clear theoretic intellect push aside symbols as being a deformation of the simple truth, but one cannot deny that mankind is surrounded by symbols. For instance, the etiquette of a royal court with its suggestions of personal subordination has been abolished but at official receptions one still ceremonially shakes the hand of the representatives of the state.

Even language itself can be perceived as a symbolism. As Rollo May states in *Symbolism in Literature and Religion*, "in addition to its bare indication of meaning, words and phrases carry with them an enveloping suggestiveness and an emotional efficacy." (1960: 237). This function of language depends on the way it has been used, on the familiarity of particular phrases, and on the emotional history associated with their meanings and therefore transferred to the phrases themselves.

In a discussion of symbolism, the first difficulty is to discover exactly what is being symbolized, to analyse what lies beyond them because a symbol will have different meanings for different people. Some people have the dominant mentality of the past, some of the present, others of the future, therefore, at any period in time, a symbol will have different shades of meaning for these various groups.

The Tempest is considered to be the last play written entirely by William Shakespeare and one of only two plays

written by him whose plot is entirely original, the other being *Love's Labor's Lost*. It can be read as Shakespeare's perception of European exploration of new lands. On the island that Prospero lands there is a native inhabitant, Caliban, a being he considers to be savage and uncivilized. Prospero teaches him his language and customs, enslaves him, forcing him to do work he considers beneath himself and his noble daughter.

In order to better understand the play and the symbolism of the books one must first see the significance of other elements which interconnect with the symbolism of the books.

The tempest begins the play and symbolizes the suffering that Prospero has endured and which he wants to inflict on others. Prospero wants to make his enemies suffer as he has suffered when some loyal friends helped him and his infant daughter out to sea in a ragged little boat. He wants them to learn from their suffering, as he has from his during the twelve years that had passed.

The tempest is also a symbol for his vengeance and his willingness to go to any lengths to get what he wants, for the frightening, potentially malevolent side of his magic, power that has its source in the books that he read.

This symbol also represents the political and social unrest in Milan which can be a glimpse of the English society at the time, society which had been shaken by political, social and religious conflicts. An example in

this regard is the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a failed assassination attempt against King James I of England and VI of Scotland by a group of English Catholics. The social unrest in England was exacerbated by King James's extravagant spending on court entertainment and the contrast between the poor and the rich became even more evident, unrest which would erupt several years later into revolution.

Another symbol is the game of chess, whose object is to capture the king. At the first level it is the symbolic significance of Prospero revealing Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess in the final scene. Prospero has caught the king Alonso and has married Alonso's son to his own daughter without the king's knowledge, a political decision that assures Alonso's support because he will have no interest in challenging a kingdom to which his own son is heir. This is the final move in Prospero's plot, which began with the tempest. Also, the entire play can be considered to be a great game of chess because Prospero has carried out his plan with the skill of a great chess player.

In this play, the books have a dual symbolism.

First of all, Prospero's books symbolize his power, taking into account both his knowledge and his magic. However, the books also represent his vulnerability because he was studying when Antonio took his dukedom.

"Why, as I told thee, 'tis a custom with him, / I th' afternoon to sleep: there thou mayst brain him, / Having first seized his books, or with a log / Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, / Or cut his wezand with thy knife. Remember / First to possess his books; for without them / He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not / One spirit to command: they all do hate him / As rootedly as I. Burn but his books." (3.2.11)

The books that Gonzalo hastily threw into Prospero's boat as he was exiled, enabled him to find his way across the oceans, to combat Sycorax, to colonise the island, to educate Miranda and to summon tempests and fulfil his plans against his enemies.

The books are the source of his magic, of his powers, powers which are beyond those of his enemies. Prospero uses the magic of nature, a white magic that does no harm. He does not want to use the magic of evil, the dark magic. Prospero has learned of this magic, not through the use of witches or evil spells, but through his studies. Actually, the reason why Prospero's white magic has supplanted the black, evil magic of Caliban's mother, Sycorax, is that Prospero, himself, is good.

Without the contents of his treasured library, Prospero is considered to be a "sot" (a stupid fool) and as powerless as Caliban. Another element that proves the origin of his powers is the scene where Prospero says he's going to give up magic. He promises that:

"I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound, / I'll drown my book." (5.1.5).

He has not used magic to control or evoke evil spirits

but to work in connection with nature. Now that he has his enemies under his control, Prospero's game of chess has ended, he has used magic to restore harmony and needs it no more.

As stated, the books are however, a symbol of Prospero's dangerous tendency to withdraw entirely from the world. It was his devotion to study that put him at the mercy of his ambitious brother because he was buried in the same books when his brother was making preparations to steal his dukedom. Even Prospero admitted that he was wrapped in secret studies and that he neglected his duties as a ruler and isolated himself from the rest of the world.

Also, the same devotion to study has made him content to raise Miranda in isolation. It is important to note that, in her case, the isolation has had a different effect: it has made her ignorant of where she came from. For instance, the repeated insistence of Prospero that Miranda should pay attention suggests that his story is boring her, but, once Prospero moves on to a subject other than his absorption in the pursuit of knowledge, Miranda's attention is captivated. One could consider that books are no substitute for experience.

However, his demand for attention is equally directed toward the audience. Prospero also wants to make sure that the audience is listening to his story, since he will return to the audience in the *Epilogue* and seek their judgment.

Before discussing the symbolism of books in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote De La Mancha*, one should remember that *Don Quixote* begins as a book about books. In an early modern European world marked by the violent social upheavals and by race, class, and gender wars that history seems to be repeating, *Don Quixote* remained a stubborn captive to the books of chivalry, to plots that replayed the ancient protocol of knight errantry. To understand why Cervantes' hero is represented, throughout his novel, as a "sane madman" requires some knowledge of the medium that led to his madness:

In a word, Don Quixote so buried himself in his books that he read all night from sundown to dawn, and all day from sunup to dusk, until with virtually no sleep and so much reading he dried out his brain and lost his sanity. He filled his imagination full to bursting with everything he read in his books, from witchcraft to duels, battles, challenges, wounds, flirtations, love affairs, anguish, and impossible foolishness, packing it all so firmly into his head that these sensational schemes and dreams became the literal truth and, as far as he was concerned, there were no more certain histories anywhere on earth (1.1).

The books that "dried out" Don Quixote's brain were published during the beginning of the printing press and these books had their efflorescence between 1508 and 1602, during the century of the conquest and exploration of America.

Indeed, his mind was so tattered and torn that, finally, it produced the strangest notion any madman ever conceived, and then considered it not just appropriate but inevitable. As



much for the sake of his own greater honour as for his duty to the nation, he decided to turn himself into a knight errant, travelling all over the world with his horse and his weapons, seeking adventures and doing everything that, according to his books, earlier knights had done, righting every manner of wrong, giving himself the opportunity to experience every sort of danger, so that, surmounting them all, he would cover himself with eternal fame and glory. (1.2)

The romances of chivalry display a somehow constant set of literary types: knights, lords, vassals, dwarfs, giants, hermits, phantoms, enchanters, and damsels in distress, which are actually crucial to the genre. Chivalric heroes indulge in violent swordplay, except for engaging in tournaments or questing for grails. As the opening chapter makes clear, Don Quixote lives by the book. Reinventing himself as a knight-errant, he creates Dulcinea as his supreme fiction, a woman who becomes the lady of his thoughts. The naive reading of this man leads him to imitate the idealized heroes of his cherished books. The obsession of the hero is presented as a kind of addiction.

These books of chivalry were perceived by the moralists as diabolical products. The priest in *Don Quixote* swore in reference to the books, "let such books be commended to Satan and Barrabas" and spoke later of "the diabolical and doubled-over arguments" they contained.

The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote De La Mancha is considered to be the first and greatest epic about addiction which brings up in one's mind another romance addict, Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Emma's favourite books were about love affairs between sensitive lovers and their damsels in distress, "there were gloomy forests, broken hearts, vows, sobs, tears and kisses"¹ and, in the high chivalric mode, horses were "ridden to death on every page."²

During the book, Cervantes returns to the subjective reader, he urges us to participate in authoring his book: "Reader, you decide" (11.24) is one of the narrator's most engaging imperatives.

Cervantes even makes Don Quixote participate in these interactive games. In *Part Two* of the book, the knight meets characters who recognize him as the hero of *Part One*. Therefore, Don Quixote becomes the hero of his own chivalric romance. This was indeed a novelty: a fictional character that worried about his own representation, who wondered whether the author had depicted his loves in a proper manner, whether he had discredited the purity of his lady, and whether the author had, in fact, promised a *Part Two*.

In the Prologue to *Part One*, Cervantes announces that *Don Quixote* is aimed at "demolishing the whole false, irrational network of those chivalric romances" a claim repeated many times throughout the text. Not all readers take that claim literally because many see it as an irony, not an intention. The importance and influence of fiction and literature in everyday life is symbolized by the books and

manuscripts that appear in *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote De La Mancha*.

Therefore, in order to evaluate the function, power and meaning of a symbol, one has to understand the individual, his experiences, and the society he lives in. When some elements of the human experience elicit beliefs and emotions, respecting other components of its experience, the human mind functions symbolically. The first set of components is represented by the *symbols* and the second set represents the *meaning* of the symbols. As Alfred North Whitehead states "mankind, it seems, has to find a symbol in order to express itself. Indeed *expression is symbolism.*" (1959: 62).

As obvious from the impact they have both on the life of Don Quixote and the one of Prospero, the books give the characters instruction on how to live and conduct their lives and also provide nowadays an imaginative escape for those who want to elude their own existence.

Notes:

1. Manuel Durán, Fay R. Rigg, *Fighting Windmills: Encounters with Don Quixote*, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 171.
2. Marina MacKay, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 96.

Bibliography:

- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel De. *Don Quixote De La Mancha*. Trans. Charles Jarvis. Ed. E. C. Riley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Durán, Manuel, Rigg, R. Fay. *Fighting Windmills: Encounters with Don Quixote*. Yale University Press, 2006.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Levi, Albert William. *Literature, Philosophy & the Imagination*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962.
- MacKay, Marina. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- May, Rollo. *Symbolism in Religion and Literature*. New York: George Braziller, 1960. Smith, Hallett. *Shakespeare's Romances: A Study of Some Ways of the Imagination*. San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1972.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1927.

Acknowledgment:

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133255, Project ID 133255 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013.