

THE "ACCURSED ARTIST" IN THE LITERATURE AND THE ART OF SYMBOLISM

*Johannis Tsoumas*¹, Technological Educational Institute of Athens / Hellenic Open University



Figure1. Edouard Manet, Portait of *Stéphane Mallarmé*, 1876

Abstract

This article aims at revising a particularly interesting area of European history of Art and Literature, which rests within the turbulent era of the late 19th century: the Symbolist Movement. Through the reading of the principles and axioms of its both literary and aesthetic characteristics, we will attempt an in-depth understanding of its interrelationship with the concepts of decline, derangement and error, the metaphysical element, the collapse and death, of human passions. But how these, for many people charming, while for others, gruesome details are encapsulated in life and / or the work of the main advocates of Symbolism? Our interest will focus on their own bitter or hedonic truth from within which some of the greatest masterpieces of literature and art were generated, while the creators themselves were classified in the list of the damned genius.

Key Words: Symbolism, literature, painting, decadence.

¹ Lecturer at *Faculty of Fine Arts and Design*, Department of Interior Architecture Decoration and Design.

1. Introduction

In the artistic circles of France in the late 1870's there was a growing concern about the rationalism and materialism climate that prevailed, as well as a parallel, strong revival of romantic ideas. This concern manifested itself in a concrete form in the international Symbolist Movement, which was inextricably linked with the sense of apotheosis for anything decadent, namely a hallmark of fin-de-siècle.

The Symbolism, which had congenital ideological bases with Art Nouveau, came from numerous and special movements, such as Aestheticism, Romanticism, Impressionism and the movement of Pre-Raphaelites, and emphasized the importance of the intuitive / irrational metaphysical qualities and the unreasonableness in the artistic potential of the creators representing it. Maybe that is why it gave a very distinct color in literature and art in the last years of the 19th century.

The basic principle of the Symbolist Movement was no longer the external nature of the work, but the concept of the idea underlying it. Oscar Wilde had then taken the expression: «... *All art is both surface and symbol. Those who go beyond the surface do so at their own risk ...*»², while Ludwig Wittgenstein had said: «...*to describe what you see helps you perceive what you see ... to perceive the meaning of what you see ...*». It was precisely on these concepts that the idea of 'decadent creativity' was founded, which was deservedly represented by writers and artists, the spirit and the life of whom had overcome the conventional limits of existence and creativity. Having no other choice but passion, the 'cursed creators' of Symbolism envisioned their fall through their ground-breaking ideas.

2. Word and Symbolism

Before embarking on the concept of Symbolism, it seems appropriate to quote the definition of the word symbol according to Thomas Carlyle: «... *in what we call a symbol, there is more or less, clearly and directly, some integration and revelation of infinity ... infinity exists in order to merge with the finite, to be visible or, as it was always standing, real ...*»³. In this sense, the word symbolism was used to describe a movement that paved the way deeply of the French literature in the late 19th century. As a term, it was firstly used in the manifesto issued by a French

² WILDE, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London, Penguin Popular Classics, 2007, p.6.

³ CARLYLE, Thomas. *Sanctus Resartus, The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröck in three books.*, Book 3 – Symbols. L.A., University of California Press, 2000, p. 98.

poet of Greek origin, Jean Moréas in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1880, in a text which dealt almost entirely with literature. He attributed the name *Symbolists* to the then school of French poets whose mentors were Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, and this was just an attempt to explain and systematize the innovative method of writing that is found throughout the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. Because of the work of these two outstanding poets, characterized by mental fatigue and boredom for the then existing state of affairs and by a strong tendency for melancholy sensuality, it was sort of how Symbolism was associated with the concept of decadence. However, this movement was born both as an idea and perception, long before the manifesto of Moreas within the written creations of the famous poet Charles Baudelaire. His poem *Correspondences*, completed in 1846, is considered the first written symbolist work⁴. As his title suggests, the poem deals with the bonds that unite all elements of life and which form bridges between the pragmatic and the spiritual world. The work of poets Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier had in fact laid the foundations of Symbolism much earlier: the former with the release of the poetry collection *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal)* in 1857, and the latter with the release of the erotic novel *Mademoiselle de Mapin*, two decades ago and so it is no wonder that both of them are considered as the fathers of the Movement.

The idea of decline, i.e. the view that culture was in decline, combined with the charm of everything that seemed doomed or bad, disavowed socially and marginalized, was seen as a revival of the charm of death and pain that we clearly identify in the early Romanticism. In literature it was implemented by several French writers, such as Paul Verlaine who, in his book *The accursed poets (Les poètes maudites)* (1884) put forward the idea that poetic genius was a sign of damnation. However, the concept of decadence in literature, namely the desire to release the narration of pain, fall and degradation found its complete version in the work of Stéphane Mallarmé. His poetry dealt with the same anxiety for the expression and he spent much of his life in an obsessive search for poetry, working on a minimum number of verses. It was with Stéphane Mallarmé that the 'pure poetry' began because the language for him is not a simple instrument of social communication, but it rather tends to present a set of ideas and situations for a reader who cannot be pre-existent for it, but whom the poetry itself must create.

3. The symbolist painting in France and the 'curse' of creativity

The rules of Symbolism in the visual arts were based on those ones, which had been already conceived in poetry. The wording is clearer in the article by the French art critic Albert

⁴ DORA, Henri. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*. L.A., University of California Press, 1994, p.128

Orie, which was published in the journal *Mercure de France* in 1891. Orie believed that a work of art should be:

1. Ideal, as its sole objective must be the expression of ideas;
2. Symbolic, as it should express ideas through forms;
3. Synthetic, because it should reflect the styles and symbols in a generally understandable way;
4. Subjective, since the object should not be considered as a mere object, but as an indication of the ideas that the subject perceives;
5. Decorative since the decorative painting, as perceived not only by the ancient Egyptians and, most probably Greeks, but also by the primitive cultures, would be nothing else but an art which is at the same time synthetic, symbolic and imaginary⁵.

The first trappings of Symbolism in painting were also identified before the Moreas's Manifesto in the work of the painters Gustave Moreau and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. The artists, whom the leading symbolist writers paid more attention to, were not those who rank on top positions in today's art history. A typical example is Gustave Moreau, who must be the lynchpin in any discussion that focuses on the issue of symbolist art. Moreau was the link between Romanticism and Symbolism as his early work clearly reflects the influence he has had from the ideology and technique of Eugène Delacroix⁶. Among his extensive work which distinctly evidences his admiration for the early Italian art, the ancient Greek vases, the early mosaics and the Byzantine enamels, we distinguish his composition titled *The Apparition*, done in 1876. Moreau's manipulation for Salome, the central figure of the work, is very charming, because she is presented as the degenerate princess of Judea before whom the severed head of John the Baptist appears, through a vision. The painter works on this sadomasochist image with a variety of exotic details that perfectly frame the central issue. However, we should mention that women throughout Moreau's works are equally ruthless and destructive to Salome, being at the same time the powerful and enigmatic creatures that it would be unwise for anyone to offend⁷. As well as a large part of the symbolist literature, the art of this great painter is an imaginative hymn to the male fears of castration and impotence (as acknowledged and analyzed by Freud) and this is particularly evident in this work⁸.

⁵ GERHARDUS, Maly, Dietfried. *Symbolism and Art Nouveau*. Oxford, Phaidon, 1979, p. 14.

⁶ DORA, Henri. *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ LUCIE-SMITH, Edward. *Symbolist Art*. London, Thames and Hudson, 1972, p. 66.

⁸ MATHIEU, Pierre-Louis. *Gustave Moreau: L'assembleur de rêves (1826-1898)*. Paris, ARC Editions, Poche Couleur, 1998, p.95.



Figure 2. Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876



Figure 3. Gustave Moreau, *The Voices*, 1867

Paul Sérusier was one of the most important proponents of Symbolism and responsible for creating the *Nabis*, an international group of artists who were fond of esoteric issues, which was founded in Paris in 1888. Its membership included Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis and Paul Ranson, and it had the strong support of Paul Gauguin, although he never became a member given that he lived ever since in Tahiti. The choice of the name *Nabis* for "the secret brotherhood" came from the homonymous Jewish word for *prophets*⁹. The artists of the group used to organize regular meetings during which they participated in secret rituals. In these ceremonies, a portrait was reported, which was painted by Paul Sérusier titled *Paul Ranson in a Nabis costume*. In this work, Ranson is depicted in a priestly suit, and framed by a halo, poised to read a probably Jewish book. Here, the artist seems to suggest again cabalistic issues, which were still a "forbidden district" for both the Catholic intellectual elite of France and the conservative, churchy mass.

⁹ DORA, Henri. *Symbolist Art Theory: A Critical Anthology*, *ibid.*, p. 230



Figure 4. Paul Sérusier , *O Paul Ranson in a Nabis costume*, 1890.

The interest of Symbolists in mystical theology also characterized the Rosicrucian Salon, which was administered by Josephin Pelladin, an idealist of the time who had undertaken to revise the ideal of Rosicrucianism¹⁰. This Salon gave the opportunity to many Symbolist artists to exhibit their work in Paris, because the regular Saloons organized by the state would frequently reject them preferring the formal academic art ever since the founding of the Academy in the 17th century. The first Rosicrucian Salon was organized in 1892, and emerged as a magnet for artists from both France and overseas, such as the Swiss Carlos Schwabe, who lived and developed his art in Paris later. Strict regulations setting the criteria to join the Salon stipulated that «... *the Order embraces the ideals of Catholicism and mysticism ...*». The list of eligible subjects included legends, myths, metaphors, dreams, insanity; in short, the whole lyricism, while forbidding historical, realistic, patriotic, military and agricultural themes, as well as issues related to landscapes and pets. These topics led to images that had much in common with the then-emerging Art Nouveau. Another member of the Nabis group was the artist Felix Vallotton; his persistence and admiration for the intelligence and the high technique of Japanese prints, as well as his worship for the major Symbolist poets of his time led him to work on their portraits through

¹⁰ An esoteric society founded by the legendary 15th century visionary Christian Rosencroix and which used the emblems of the rose and the cross as symbols of Jesus resurrection and redemption.

the technique of woodcut. In this way, he tried to pay 'tribute' to their multidimensional work, which profoundly influenced him ideologically¹¹.

In many of his works, we recognize the mood of the artist to concentrate on issues relating to human situations or events, such as illness or death, two fateful concepts which were the source of inspiration of the Symbolist poets along with the concepts of decadence, hedonism and the metaphysical element.



Figure 5. Felix Vallotton, *The sick girl*, 1892

4. The 'accursed artist' in the English painting and the graphic arts

Apart from painting, poetry and music, Symbolism had a great impact on graphic arts that were promoted mainly by the press of the time (magazines, pamphlets, newspapers). All the arts were directly connected to each other and all of them were an integral part of the Movement, as in Art Nouveau. The magazines of art of that era were appreciable and this is evidenced through the example of Moreas who chose this medium to publicize the manifesto of Symbolism. Many magazines were released, especially in France, dedicated to this remarkable Movement presenting to the public, exclusively, Symbolist works by great artists, the most important being the following ones: *Pleiades*, *Mercur de France*, *Vogue*, *Plume* and the famous *La Revue*

¹¹ KOSTENEVICH, Albert. *The Nabis*. New York, Parkstone Press International, 2009, p. 67,

*Blanche*¹². This magazine appeared between 1891 and 1903, and became a benchmark for mostly the younger members of the Movement. It was through this that Toulouse-Lautrec gave to light some of his most famous lithographs, as was also the case with the Nabis.

The brotherhood of Pre-Raphaelites emerged in England in 1850, being a movement which had obvious similarities with the Symbolism, although it was born ten years before the pioneer Gustave Moreau and thirty years before the Moréas’s Manifesto. Its founding members were Dandé Gabriel Rossetti and John Everet Millais, two great painters. The brotherhood of artists created works that had often biblical themes featuring a naturalistic style, rich in color combinations and details and bristle with symbolist elements.

The works of Rossetti, who was the greatest Symbolist of all, were suggestive, compared with those of the other diligent realists. Rossetti did not seem particularly interested in the details in his work, as much as the intensely realistic Millais did, the latter lacking the technical superiority of the former. When the painter Edward Burne-Jones discovered Rossetti’s work, he immediately became his disciple. The women of Burne-Jones appear in his paintings mild, pale and ethereal as they mainly come from Renaissance figures, but also from the Greek mythology or the Celtic legends¹³. His works, as well as those of Rossetti, lacked depth and, in conjunction with their narrative and allegorical content, give a lot of classic symbolist, qualities in his deeds¹⁴.



Figure 6. Edward Burne-Jones, *Galatea*, 1878



Figure 7. Edward Burne-Jones, *Perseus, The Doom.Fulfilled*, 1884

¹² The modern, headquarters of the magazine were designed by the Belgian Art Nouveau architect Henry van de Velde, confirming, once again, the connection of the Symbolism movement with Art Nouveau.

¹³ BELL, Malcolm. *Sir Edward Burne-Jones*. London, Bell & Sons Ltd., 1910, p. 35.

¹⁴ WILTON, Andrew; UPSTONE, Robert. *The Age Of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain (1860-1910)*. London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997, p. 1.

In his turn, Burne-Jones was particularly appreciated and admired by Aubrey Beardsley, an invaluable talent in the field of illustration. As early as at the age of fifteen, he had already illustrated covers of many important books such as *Madame Bovary*, the famous novel by Gustave Flaubert. He died at the age of just twenty-six years from tuberculosis having lived very intensely with mystery and passion, especially in his personal life; however, the work he has left in the field of illustration is still unique¹⁵. In 1891, at the age of eighteen, Beardsley met, through Burne-Jones, Oscar Wilde who was writing at the time in the French language his work *Salome* when he asked him to illustrate it. It was not before long that the two artists became friends, because their artistic identity in the Aesthetic Movement united them.

In 1893, Beardsley's work was presented in the first issue of a monthly-illustrated magazine of his, *The Studio*, which was dedicated to the fine and decorative arts. Notwithstanding that it was a British magazine, the *Studio*, was released across Europe, thus offering Beardsley an international field of artistic action, which helped his name to be identified soon with the new style. But in England, outside the circles which he belonged to, his work was accepted with an almost hostile concern. The trial and the subsequent conviction and imprisonment of Wilde for indecency in 1895 because of his homosexuality added a great reaction, on the grounds of indecent offense, to the existing, misunderstood attitude of the public toward the decadent Aesthetists in the 1890's.



Figure 8. *The Woman in the Moon, Salome*, 1893

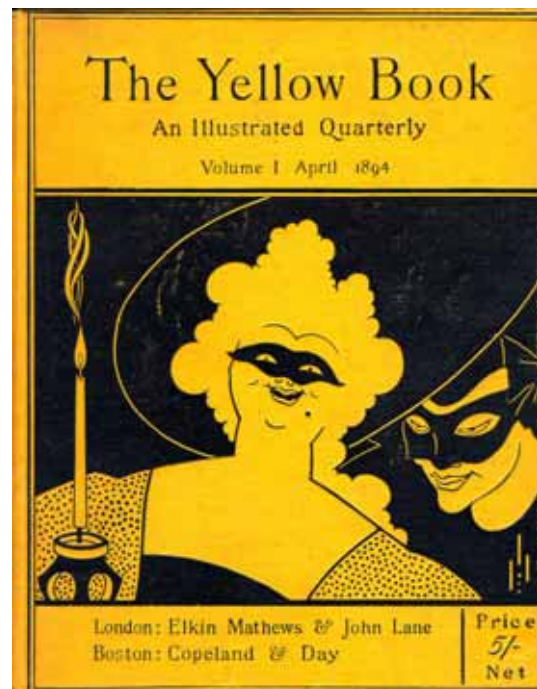


Figure 9. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Yellow Book*, cover, 1894

¹⁵ In the field of illustration, one of the most important arts of the English Art Nouveau, many notable artists produced masterpieces (including Walter Crane, an important strain of the Arts and Crafts Movement).

Beardsley and the new style were suffering because of their links with Wilde, and when *Salome* was released with its bold, sensuous illustration, the magazine *Art Journal* warned its readers that the book is deemed inappropriate. In the same year Beardsley became both the editor and the illustrator of a new magazine called *The Yellow Book*, a publication that quickly shared the notoriety of its famous illustrator.

5. Conclusions

*«Our sins are stubborn, our repentance is loose,
we pay dearly for the confessions;
we happily wander about in the debauchery road
believing that stains are washed with tears»¹⁶.*

With these verses, Charles Baudelaire in his collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* outlined in the most ideal way the ideology, the work and in many cases the very lives of writers and painters of the period of our interest. The blatant desire of Vallotton to find joy, charm, beauty and balance in the human inability so as to cope with an incurable illness and death is a typical interpretation of these verses. The irresistible attraction of this artist to anything which is dismal and declining, and their apotheosis through his work, rank him among those artists who seemed to love life less than death.

The passion of Moreau and Sérusier for the concept of the metaphysical and numinous for the need to escape from the earthly and the transition into mystical and perhaps pagan realms would most likely confer them on the other side of Christian morality. By adopting and, at the same time, applying concepts which the conventional universal society of France has disavowed, these two artists exemplify the spirit that prevailed at that time both in literature and the visual arts and thus it is now wonder that it was considered 'cursed'.

The pale, almost funereal sensuality of the female figures of Burne-Jones and many Pre-Raphaelites painters seemed to outweigh the attractions of their curviform nakedness. The female figures of their works featuring the eerie, look like visions or spirits, which have discouraged every male fantasy since they seem to have invaded it as ambassadors of the underworld.

Like a curse, it also seemed to dominate the lives of those personalities who lived, acted, and created, enjoying their passions and their decline. The pessimism of Rimbaud's and Verlaine's poetry, as well as their scandalous love affair that led them to the marginalization and

¹⁶ BAUDELAIRE, Charles. *Τα Άνθη του Κακού, (Les Fleurs du Mal)*, (translation Despo Karotsou), Athens, Govostis Publications, 2001, p. 219.

ultimately the destruction is yet another proof of the passionate and violent relationship between art and the personal life of the artists themselves.

Although Beardsley was not homosexual, his fatal and-according to many people - his wrong collaboration with Wilde was the main reason for his fall -, as his rare talent for illustration was considered of minor importance. Of course, his passion to stand out through his unbridled personal eroticism that characterized his art, his sensuality and narcissism contributed to this fact, while the multiple abuses have given the final blow to his fragile health and led him to premature death.

However, the word *symbol* acquired, in our view, the importance that accounted for the scraping and the activation of emotion and senses against logic, through the work and life of Oscar Wilde. Through his diverse work, but also his self-destructive lifestyle, we find now that the relationship of this word with reality was latent compared with its relationship to the meaning of the myth which was immediate¹⁷. With his 'hedonistic' attitude which oscillated between his erotic passion, his delight in the use of opium, the decadent way of nightlife, but also in his innovative literary genius, Wilde constituted perhaps the strongest artist model who could claim the identity of the 'accursed' through the blessing of his creative talent and high technical skills.

Immediately after his death, his fame spread throughout Great Britain and from there around the world, becoming mythical, and perhaps the archetype of the cursed genius.

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¹⁷ TSOUMAS, Johannis. *Η Ιστορία των Διακοσμητικών Τεχνών και της Αρχιτεκτονικής στην Ευρώπη και την Αμερική (1760-1914 (The History of the Decorative Arts and Architecture in Europe and the U.S.A. (1760-1914))*, Athens, ION Publications, 2005, p. 293, 294.

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