



THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARTISTIC IMAGERY FROM CLASSICAL LITERATURE TO MODERNIST SYMBOLISM

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Abstract

This article explores the development of artistic imagery from classical literature to modernist symbolism. Artistic imagery has always played a central role in literary expression, serving as a means of representing reality, human character, moral values, emotional experience, and philosophical ideas. In classical literature, imagery was mainly connected with harmony, proportion, imitation of nature, heroic ideals, and moral instruction. However, with the development of literary traditions, artistic imagery gradually moved from direct representation toward more complex, subjective, symbolic, and psychological forms. Modernist symbolism transformed the artistic image into a multilayered sign that expresses inner conflict, alienation, uncertainty, spiritual crisis, and the fragmented nature of modern human consciousness. The article analyzes the historical transformation of imagery and shows how literary images changed from realistic and idealized representation into symbolic and associative structures.

Keywords: Artistic imagery, classical literature, symbolism, modernism, representation, literary image, metaphor, aesthetic evolution.

Introduction

Artistic imagery is one of the most important elements of literature. Through images, writers create characters, landscapes, emotions, ideas, and symbolic meanings. A literary image is not only a description of an object or event; it is also a means of expressing the author's worldview, aesthetic position, and philosophical



understanding of life. In different historical periods, artistic imagery has performed different functions. In classical literature, the image was often connected with beauty, order, moral perfection, and the imitation of reality. In modernist literature, however, the artistic image became more complex, symbolic, fragmented, and psychologically deep.

The development of artistic imagery from classical literature to modernist symbolism reflects the general evolution of literary thought. Classical literature usually aimed to represent the world according to certain aesthetic norms and moral ideals. Later literary movements, especially romanticism, realism, symbolism, and modernism, changed the nature of the literary image. Writers began to use images not only to describe the external world, but also to reveal hidden emotions, subconscious desires, spiritual anxiety, and the complexity of human existence.

The aim of this article is to examine the transformation of artistic imagery from classical representation to modernist symbolism. The article discusses the main features of classical imagery, the gradual shift toward subjective and symbolic expression, and the role of modernist symbolism in changing the structure and function of the artistic image.

In classical literature, artistic imagery was closely connected with the idea of imitation, or mimesis. Aristotle considered art as an imitation of life and human action [1]. According to classical aesthetics, literature should represent reality in an ordered, harmonious, and meaningful form. Therefore, classical images were often clear, balanced, and idealized. They reflected moral values, heroic behavior, social order, and universal human experience.

Classical literature of ancient Greece and Rome used artistic images to present heroes, gods, nature, fate, courage, wisdom, and moral conflict. For example, in Homer's epics, heroic images are created through physical strength, bravery, loyalty, and honor. The image of the hero is not only an individual character, but also a symbol of social and moral ideals. Such imagery is connected with collective values and cultural memory.

In classical tragedy, artistic imagery often serves to express the conflict between human will and divine law. The image of the tragic hero represents nobility, suffering, moral responsibility, and the inevitability of fate. This type of imagery is not purely individualistic; it has a universal meaning. As Abrams notes, classical literary theory valued order, proportion, clarity, and unity as important aesthetic principles [2].



Nature imagery in classical literature also had symbolic and moral functions. The sea, sky, mountains, light, darkness, and seasons were used not only as descriptive details, but also as signs of divine power, human destiny, emotional condition, or moral order. However, these images were usually understandable and connected with a stable worldview. The reader could interpret them within a shared cultural and mythological system. Thus, classical artistic imagery was characterized by clarity, harmony, idealization, and moral significance. It aimed to represent the world as meaningful and ordered. The image was usually connected with external reality and collective cultural values.

The transformation of artistic imagery did not happen suddenly. It was a gradual process influenced by historical, philosophical, and aesthetic changes. With the rise of medieval, Renaissance, romantic, and realist literature, the function of imagery became broader and more diverse.

During the Renaissance, artistic imagery began to focus more strongly on the individual human being. Human personality, beauty, reason, love, ambition, and inner conflict became important subjects of literary representation. Renaissance literature preserved many classical ideals, but it also developed a deeper interest in human individuality and emotional complexity.

Romanticism played a particularly important role in changing the nature of artistic imagery. Romantic writers rejected strict classical rules and emphasized imagination, emotion, individuality, nature, and the inner world of the poet. In romantic literature, images became more subjective and emotional. Nature was no longer only a harmonious background; it became a mirror of the human soul. A storm, a mountain, a lonely road, or the night sky could express loneliness, freedom, rebellion, or spiritual searching.

According to Wellek and Warren, imagery is not only ornamental language, but an essential part of literary structure and meaning [3]. This idea is especially relevant to romantic and modern literature, where images often carry the central emotional and philosophical message of the text.

Realism also contributed to the development of artistic imagery, although in a different way. Realist writers used images to represent social life, everyday reality, class relations, psychological motivation, and historical conditions. Unlike classical idealization, realist imagery aimed to show life more objectively and concretely. However, even in realism, images could carry symbolic meanings. For example, a



house, a road, clothes, money, or urban space could reveal social status, moral decline, or personal tragedy. Therefore, between classical literature and modernist symbolism, artistic imagery passed through several stages. It moved from idealized and universal representation toward individual, emotional, social, and psychological expression.

Symbolism marked a major turning point in the development of artistic imagery. Symbolist writers believed that external reality could not fully express the deeper truths of human existence. For them, the visible world was only a surface behind which hidden meanings, spiritual states, and mysterious connections existed. As a result, the artistic image became more suggestive, ambiguous, and multilayered.

In symbolic literature, an image does not simply represent an object. It suggests meanings that cannot be explained directly. A flower, a bird, a mirror, a shadow, a city, or music may become a symbol of beauty, death, memory, illusion, loneliness, or spiritual aspiration. Symbolist imagery is based on association rather than direct explanation.

Baudelaire's poetry, for example, developed the idea that the material world is full of correspondences and hidden connections [4]. This principle strongly influenced later symbolist and modernist writers. The image became a bridge between the visible and invisible, the physical and spiritual, the conscious and subconscious.

Symbolist imagery differs from classical imagery in several ways. First, it is less direct and more ambiguous. Second, it focuses not on external clarity, but on inner suggestion. Third, it invites the reader to participate in interpretation. Fourth, it often expresses uncertainty, mystery, and emotional complexity. This change was important because it prepared the ground for modernist literature. Modernist writers inherited the symbolist interest in suggestion, ambiguity, and psychological depth, but they used these features to express the crisis of modern life.

Modernism changed the artistic image more radically than any earlier literary movement. The modernist period was shaped by social changes, industrialization, urbanization, war, scientific discoveries, and the crisis of traditional values. Writers felt that old forms of representation were no longer sufficient to express the modern human condition. Therefore, modernist imagery became fragmented, symbolic, psychological, and often difficult to interpret.

Modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, and others used images to show the complexity and instability of consciousness. In modernist literature, the image often reflects alienation, spiritual emptiness, loss of



identity, and the breakdown of traditional order. Eliot's poetic imagery, for instance, often combines mythological, religious, urban, and everyday images to express the cultural crisis of modern civilization [5].

Unlike classical literature, where images usually support unity and harmony, modernist imagery often emphasizes fragmentation and disconnection. A city may appear as a symbol of loneliness and moral decay. A room may represent psychological imprisonment. A journey may symbolize not heroic adventure, but existential searching. A mirror may suggest divided identity or self-alienation.

Modernist symbolism is also closely connected with the stream-of-consciousness technique. In the works of Joyce and Woolf, images often appear through memory, perception, association, and inner speech. They do not always follow logical order. Instead, they reflect the movement of the human mind. This type of imagery shows that reality is not only external, but also internal and subjective.

As Lodge explains, modernist literature often breaks traditional narrative forms and creates new ways of representing consciousness and experience [6]. Artistic imagery becomes one of the main tools of this innovation. It helps writers express what cannot be fully explained through ordinary narration.

The difference between classical and modernist imagery can be understood through their functions, structure, and meaning. Classical imagery is usually clear, harmonious, and connected with stable moral or aesthetic values. It often presents the world as ordered and meaningful. Modernist imagery, on the other hand, is often fragmented, ambiguous, and symbolic. It reflects uncertainty, inner conflict, and the complexity of modern consciousness.

In classical literature, the image of the hero represents courage, honor, and moral greatness. In modernist literature, the central character may be weak, confused, isolated, or psychologically divided. In classical imagery, nature may represent harmony and divine order. In modernist symbolism, nature may express loss, silence, emptiness, or spiritual searching.

Another important difference is the role of the reader. Classical imagery usually guides the reader toward a relatively clear interpretation. Modernist imagery requires active interpretation. The reader must connect symbols, associations, memories, and cultural references in order to understand the deeper meaning of the text. However, modernist symbolism did not completely reject classical tradition. Many modernist writers used classical myths, archetypes, and literary references, but they transformed



them according to the needs of the modern age. For example, ancient myths in modernist literature often appear in fragmented form and are used to show the contrast between past order and present chaos. Thus, the development of artistic imagery is not a simple movement from old to new. It is a complex process of continuity and transformation. Modernist symbolism preserved some elements of classical imagery, but gave them new meanings and functions.

Conclusion

The development of artistic imagery from classical literature to modernist symbolism shows the deep transformation of literary aesthetics. In classical literature, artistic imagery was mainly connected with imitation, harmony, moral ideals, and universal values. Images were clear, balanced, and often idealized. Over time, literary imagery became more subjective, emotional, psychological, and symbolic.

Symbolism introduced a new understanding of the artistic image as a means of suggesting hidden meanings and spiritual realities. Modernism further transformed imagery into a fragmented, ambiguous, and psychologically complex structure. Modernist symbolism used images to express alienation, uncertainty, inner conflict, and the crisis of modern civilization.

Therefore, the evolution of artistic imagery reflects the changing relationship between literature, reality, and human consciousness. From classical representation to modernist symbolism, the artistic image moved from external description toward inner meaning, from harmony toward fragmentation, and from direct representation toward symbolic interpretation. This transformation demonstrates the richness and flexibility of literature as an art form capable of expressing different historical, cultural, and psychological experiences.

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