

## **Organic Strand in Literary Symbolism**

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**Abstract:** *The article is a study of organic symbolism in literature. It is impossible to comprehend the meaning of the symbol without a thorough investigation of its cognitive history understood as gradual apprehension of the physical properties of a natural object and a subsequent chain of associations triggered by mythological or religious consciousness, conventions of contemporary philosophy or ideology, or authors' original significations based on personal experience. Mental connections of a natural phenomenon with various cognitive domains form a referential system which make up the object's symbolic content within a specific culture. The study is focused on two referents – the cherry tree and cherry orchard – which display a multiplicity of associations instrumental in the interpretation of literary discourses. Symbols display inner dynamics that allows authors to create images of great expressive power and represent abstract concepts from a novel perspective.*

**Key Words:** *Archetype, associative thinking, gestalt, organicism, representation, referential complex, symbol.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Symbolic systems being indispensable elements of any culture are found in many areas of human activity such as art, sports, psychiatry, politics, and literature. In literature, symbolism is a special rhetoric technique that helps the writer to 'present' or 'illustrate' a concept too abstract for direct sensory representation, that can be expressed only "by analogy and by the transference of reflection" [1: 198]. A literary symbol may be a material thing, a natural element, a person, an event, or an action that is loaded with meaning much deeper than springs to the eye and interpretation of symbols calls for a broad cultural outlook and the aptitude to see below the surface.

It has been recognized that figurative thought and imagination play an important role in supplying schemata for conceptualizations. Usually, metaphor and metonymy are considered to be two basic imaginative cognitive mechanisms. Regrettably, researchers overlook such powerful preconception knowledge structures (Kant's intuitive mode of knowledge, Cassirer's mythico-religious thought) as symbols whose cognitive value is no less important: they, too, cognitively organize our experience and serve to fixate images in consciousness. According to Ernst Cassirer, human intelligence begins with conception, the process of conception always culminates in symbolic expression – a conception is fixed and held only when it has been embodied in a symbol. This archaic mode of thought still has enormous power in language, poetry and myth [2].

In the current article organic symbolism is studied over a wide space and time span, and an attempt is made to see how sensuous experience coupled with contemporary beliefs and ideology is instrumental in conceiving symbols as tools of non-discursive knowledge. The research describes organic patterns appropriated by the collective consciousness in a culture and suggests an interpretation of specific literary discourses containing the acquired symbol with the purpose of establishing the content of the symbol, the underlying cognitive processes, mechanisms of symbol formation and modification, and its actualization in literary discourses.

Tree symbolism has been chosen as trees are Man's natural environment and have been playing a role in mankind's survival throughout the history of many civilizations.

### **II. Theoretical Background**

#### **1.1 Organicism**

Two potent deep-rooted philosophical perspectives – organic versus mechanical – have been operating in forming worldviews and conceptualizing the objective reality for more than two millenniums. Organicism is probably the oldest approach in the history of human thought and cognition. In Zoroastrianism, the oldest

religion still active today, a Living Nature and Omnipresent Deity were the central truths of life. According to this teaching, the physical Nature is energized by the psychical and both are ensouled by the spiritual [3].

The image of the world as a living organism in Western philosophy has been present in writings ever since Plato [4], who used the notion '*anima mundi*' (the soul of the world) comparing the universe and all things within it to the human being:

*"We may consequently state that: this world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence ... The god made the world a single, visible, living being, containing within itself all living beings that are naturally akin to it"* (p. 19).

Organicism had been a powerful worldview up to the 17th century. Though popularized in the Middle Ages (John of Salisbury<sup>1</sup>) and later in the writings of F. Bacon, T. Hobbes, and J. Locke, organicism ceded its position to the Cartesian picture of the world, and for a long time Rene Descartes' concept of universal mechanism prevailed in philosophy and many other sciences including biology. However, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic organicism whose outstanding proponents were Fichte, Schelling, Goethe (in Germany), Coleridge (in Britain) opposed the overarching mechanical approach and posited organicism as a more satisfactory explicatory model of the world.

Friedrich Schelling was most consistent in these views. In his *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling extolled Nature as an original creative power and the universal essence of all things. The World-soul is the principle of life, and its trace is to be found in all phenomena constituting nature. He exalted Greek mythology: "*It was only for the deep-thinking Grecians, who everywhere felt the trace of the living and working essence, that nature could present many true gods*" [5: 261]. For him, matter was primary but informed with spirit.

Organicist ideology rests on several key notions. Trying to overcome the alienation from the natural world, the votaries of organicism advocate unity with Nature and a holistic vision of reality. The concept of *wholeness*, which is understood as a harmonious unity of separate parts whose *raison d'être* is meaningful only in their entirety, becomes central to this worldview. It places emphasis on the interdependence of organisms and the environment, conformity of all parts of a whole to the natural hierarchical order. As regards dialectical development, the organicist ideology rejects the classical notion of "external teleology" in Nature, and describes evolution as a process subject to the workings of the universal principles, among which a law of self-development is most important, the driving force being the inner impulse or inner necessity for survival, greater complexity, or perfection, which Goethe described as "*a state of ever-striving ascent*" [6]. Thus, the ideology of organicism comprises holism, diversity and integration, inherent growth and harmonized order.

Organicism has provided philosophical underpinnings for many sciences including, in the first place, biology, but also social sciences, economics, culture, politics, and linguistics. The most direct influence organicism had on Gestalt psychology. Early theorists revolutionized views of perception stating that objects are perceived within an environment as global constructs – 'gestalt' – with all of their constituent parts taken together (principle of totality). Later, gestalt psychologists defined the principles of governing the process of perceiving objects as meaningful wholes among which *Prominence view* and *Attentional view* are of primary importance: the former explains why, when we look at an object in our environment, we single out this or that figure as perceptually prominent; the latter explicates that we express those parts of an event or an object which attract our attention. *Figure-Ground* is one more important principle of gestalt psychology which allows the human mind to separate a dominant object from the background [7] and is successfully used by many authors as a literary device of foregrounding. Other principles are: *Laws of Proximity, Similarity, Closure, Emergence, Reification* (regarding something abstract as a material thing), *Multistability* [8]. On the linguistic level, these psychological processes underlie the conception of metonymy, metaphor, idioms, lexical concepts, polysemy, etc.

Linguistics has not remained unaffected either. In 1911, Edward Sapir [9] advanced an idea that linguistic units are embedded in the physical and geographical environment. Sapir postulated that the physical/biological environment influences language at all levels and is as important as social or cultural milieu. Under physical environment he comprised geographical characteristics, climate, fauna, flora and mineral resources of the region and explained linguistic conceptualizations as interactions between a given language and its natural environment; however, he admitted: "*the physical environment is reflected in language only in so far as it has been influenced by social factors. ... In other words, all environmental influences reduces to the influence of social environment and are either supported or transformed by social forces*" [9: 226 - 228]. Modern theories such as Ecolinguistics, Linguistic emergentism, with their commitment to 'holism,' and 'connectivity' are greatly indebted to organicism in philosophy.

## 1.2 Associative thinking

A few remarks should be made about associative thinking which, in our opinion, constitutes the basic mental process of symbol formation. Aristotle is credited with being the first to describe associations of ideas in the human mind. He related it to memory and characterized the movement of thought as sequential: “*the one process occurs after the other*”. He also circumscribed the principles of associative links – “*similar or contrary or contiguous*” [10: 111].

Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, John Locke were also interested in the correlation of ideas in mental processing of esthesis. Locke is believed to have coined the phrase “*association of ideas*”; Hume devoted a special section in his *Treatise* to the human faculty of the “*connexion or association of ideas*.” According to Hume, the qualities from which associations of ideas arise and by which “*our imagination runs easily from one to any other, are three, viz. Resemblance, Contiguity in time or place, and Cause and Effect*” [11: 11]. Later, philosophers added some more cases of association: 'vicinity in time and place', 'accidental coincidence,' 'means and end,' and 'premise and conclusion.'

The doctrine of association is a fundamental principle of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. The associative relation concerns “closely consolidated multiplicities” of “prominent particulars” of rememberings. Answering the question “What brings about the process of joining together?” Husserl writes:

“*We are led here above all to the primordial phenomenon of succession. ... What is already prominently accentuated is going from one present to the next and is constituted as a lasting unity of identity*” [12: 181].

In his discussion of such fusions one insightful idea is of interest for the current research: rememberings may blend “*images of separate pasts to form a unity of an illusory image*” (ibid.,: 165), thus symbols may be regarded as associative fusion of several past lived experiences.

Associative thinking as the fundamental basis of symbol formation is the main principle of Ernst Cassirer's theory; the symbolic signification lies not in referential relations with an object, but in the relations it establishes with other referents forming referential complexes. Cassirer calls it “*a new intellectual dimension*” and emphasizes “*the freedom and ease with which the mind moves among specific objects and connects one with another*” [13: 54].

The associationist theory aims at exposing laws of mental succession. Today, linguistics adopts the technique of Connectionism, which studies the mind in terms of networks of neuron-like units and tries to model patterns of neuronal activation. It combines physiology, mental processing and memory with social interaction.

## 1.3 Symbol

Since the article concerns organic symbolism, the term *Symbol* needs some clarification. The most common definition of the symbol (from Latin *symbolum* whose primal meaning is 'thrown together') is “*a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract*” [14]. It is considered to be the sole prerogative of human beings to “*bestow meaning upon things and events in the external world, and the ability to comprehend such meanings*” [15:1]. Kant defines the symbol as a form of *hypotyposis*<sup>ii</sup> – a rhetorical mode involving presentation or illustration when an *Idea* of imagination is greater than the mere concept of rational thinking and fails to be clearly expressed by logic in any intelligible proposition [1; 175-177].

The roots of symbolism go back to mythological stages in human history where it performed an exegetical function when men by means of symbols represented to themselves natural phenomena (biological environment) and society they lived in (social environment) before those were categorized and became content of consciousness and rational logic. “*The act of becoming conscious consists in concentric grouping of symbols around the object describing the unknown from many sides*” [16: 7].

Symbolic meaning is a figurative extension of direct (literal) meaning of a language unit. The two meanings are indelibly intertwined and form a synthesized totality based on a vast complex of associations, displaying, as a result, a unique dynamic complex of meanings. The indirect meaning is the most characteristic feature of the symbol capable of carrying some enigma and mystery [17: 4]. Goethe [18] asserted that the greatest value of the symbol lies in the indefinability and immense depth of secondary signification, which renders them into means of artistic expression and a tool of creative thinking. More significant, Schelling

believed in poetical symbolism as a mode of interpretation of the world in which art played a leading role. He stretched this idea even further describing the objective world as “*the unconscious poesy of the spirit*” [19: 268]. Amazingly, the views of Schelling and Goethe resonate with the views of Philippe Jaccottet<sup>iii</sup>:

“... *there is something unknown, something evasive, at the origin of things, at the very centre of our being. ... I begin to see nonetheless that the poetic experience does give me direction, at least towards a sense of the high, and this is because I am quite naturally led to see poetry as a glimpse of the Highest*” [20: 157, 159].

Proceeding from its role in the history of intellectual development of mankind, *Symbol* is regarded as a cognitive mechanism participating in the construction of knowledge [21: xii] via a specific form of representation based on ontological connection with its referent and associative links with other objects or ideas. The cognitive significance of the symbol, according to W. Goethe and C. Jung, is to explicate “*something vague, unknown, or hidden from us*” [22: 21] or “*reveal the inscrutable*” [18: 470-71]. It gives insight to opaque concepts which can find no verbal expression of their meaning in discursive logic. Its communicative role is that it transmits hidden significations which otherwise would have remained feeble or untold.

Yung [23] distinguishes symbols from archetypes. The latter are “image-guides” of patrimonial origin, whereas the former are innumerable mythic and mystic representations of variations on these archetypes. Archetypes are universal, archaic patterns of instinctual behavior that exist at the level of the collective unconscious and represent a “*nebulous dynamic substratum*” for figurative thought, which gives rise to a myriad of images and symbols that get specific expression in a culture in the form of archetypal events, figures/characters, themes and motifs [22].

Jung was the first to give a tentative typology of archetypal symbols (which he called 'Grammar'); in the middle of the twentieth century it made its way into the area of literary criticism and was masterfully applied by Northorn Frye to the exploration of “literary universals.” For Frye, archetypes are “*recognizable, frequently recurring images*” [24: 365] which establish links of a separate work with past and future oeuvres and integrate it into literature as a whole. Frye was not only concerned with “*pre-generic categories of literature,*” but also suggested a notion of *archetypal symbol* related to individual works and authors. As Frye pointed out, in some works there is a key symbol which is dropped into the texture of work and like a magnet attracts other images becoming a unifying center for forming a conceptual unity and making it a phase of imaginative experience. [25: 18].

#### 1.4 Methods and material

In the current research, a **philological comparative method** is used, which includes **literary criticism** with its emphasis on an interpretive approach in search of symbolic meaning; **history** inasmuch as certain events and social developments conditioned specific symbolic meanings; and **linguistics**. Diachronic literary criticism embraces studies of written and oral texts considering them a result of human cognition adapted to a particular superstructure of culture. By a systematic comparison of related and unrelated cultures, we aim to establish a common core of symbolic content, single out recurrent motifs (small thematic elements) and patterns which direct human perception and are evocative vehicles of a vision in literary texts. The objectives are twofold: to circumscribe the various associative links of a particular percept (cherry tree) with other referents and concepts and analyze the role of this referential system in literary texts.

We proceed from the assumption that the conception of symbols is based on embodiment of human relations with the surrounding physical world underpinned by archetypal substratum: symbols appear and become meaningful when a certain object of the biological environment takes up the attention of a society, is processed, and validated by ideological structures of the time and gets linguistic expression in a symbolic concept.

Research material comprises literary pieces (both poetry and prose) of different epochs and different literary styles by authors from differing cultures and social environments in which 'cherry tree' is used as a symbol.

### III. Analysis of Cherry Tree Symbolism

#### 1.1 Anthropomorphization

The tree is one of the most essential symbols in human history. Its beauty as well as practical value as a source of food and fodder, protective power from heat, rain, or snow has made trees – both single and growing in gardens, groves, or forests – an object of worship and idolatry.

In many countries from time immemorial, certain trees have been revered as sacred: the oak was sacramental to the Celts; the ash sacrosanct to the Scandinavian peoples; the date palm of the valley of the Nile (later it was replaced by sycamore) to Egyptians. Trees were endowed with human souls: in Zoroastrianism, prayers were addressed to *Ferouers*, or spirits of the unborn assigned to trees to keep them in purity and communicate invocations to *Ormuzd*<sup>iv</sup>. In Graeco-Roman mythology, woods were peopled with nymphs, dryads, and hamadryads – all of them were spirits of different trees. In ancient Egypt there was a tale about a man who gave his heart to acacia and died when the tree was cut. In Japan, there exists the notion of *Kokoro* meaning 'heart; mind; mentality; emotions; feelings'. Each tree has its own nature and its own kokoro.

Western myths, folklore and literature abound in characters who are personified trees. The most famous are: Goethe's mythological "The Alder King"; the Russian "The Forest Tsar" by V. Zhukovsky. Russian folktales feature a wild apple tree which/who? helps peasant children hiding them from the evil witch, and Russian folk songs personify birch trees as young girls or brides. In English folklore, a willow tree is quite sinister, capable of chasing and frightening travelers. As numerous are transformation tales of human spirits being freed from imprisonment in a tree or vice versa immured into trees. Shakespeare, Grimm brothers, Anderson are just a few writers who used this motif.

Oriental lore and mythology have an overwhelming number of tales related to cherry trees which are believed to possess people or animal's souls that have undergone the process of transmigration and continue to live in them and work miracles. Suffice it to mention a tale about an old *samurai*<sup>v</sup> who after his only son and his favorite cherry tree had died, committed *harakiri* beneath the dry tree on a snowy winter day. His blood and spirit entered the tree and it blossomed amid the snow.

Jaccottet, in his poetic prose *Le Cerisier* (The Cherry Tree) brings forth phenomenological affinity of the human and the arborous, who can speak the same language, a silent language of emotional communion; he describes his encounter with a cherry tree on a June evening:

*"C'était une fois de plus comme si quelqu'un était apparu là-bas et vous parlait, mais sans vous parler, sans vous faire aucun signe; ... je n'avais absolument rien à attendre, à demander de plus; il s'agissait d'une autre espèce d'histoire, de rencontre, de parole. Plus difficile encore à saisir"* (26: 12) [It was once again an occasion as if someone had appeared over there and spoke to you but without speaking, without making you any sign. ... I had absolutely nothing to expect, nothing more to ask; this was another kind of history, of encounter, of speech. Even more difficult to grasp]. Human interaction with the surrounding world is complex and not necessarily effable; it is here that symbols come in.

## 1.2 Cherry tree: symbolic extensions

*Le Cerisier* is a vivid example of how the poet translates his phenomenological experience into images trying to get at the essence of a natural phenomenon and convey it to the reader without resorting to "*l'ordre du rationnel*" [rational order], but looking in the "*labyrinthe cérébral*" [mental labyrinth] for fragments of thought (*déchirements*) that will allow him to find a new name (*le nom de beauté*), and venture into new domains of human experience adding semantic extensions to the established ones. He thinks that "*un cerisier en fleurs, nous parle un langage limpide*" [a cherry tree in bloom speaks to us a crystal clear language], whereas a tree laden with berries contains a mystery and enigma. This literary piece spotlights a succession of algorithms in the process of creating new interpretations. The cherry tree is spotted and decoupled from the environment priming its berries and their distinctive feature – redness – as a focus of scrutiny; for the writer, cherries are "*comme une longue grappe de rouge, une coulée de rouge, dans du vert sombre*" [like a long grape of red, outpour of red, in the dark green] [26: 12]. He begins to analyze fuzzy images evoked and suggests a succession of "slow and silent metamorphosis": the red color prompts venues of associative links: 'wine', '*feu suspendu*' [suspended fire], then a 'votive offering', and finally, 'past experiences smoldering (*couvés*) under the green foliage'. The first two are conventional embodiments of red color symbolism, the third carries religious implications, and the last one is a new feeling of nature, idiosyncratic link (*lien*), projecting the perceived image onto a new domain. The image of 'Red cherries' as past experiences hidden from inquisitive eyes of strangers is completely devoid of trivial mode of expressiveness and crystallizes momentary illumination.

## 1.3 Cherry tree: beauty motif

The cherry tree is of special significance to oriental cultures. In the Chinese culture, it symbolizes ever-

lasting life. The Chinese Phoenix (*Fenghuang*) is believed to have slept on a bed of cherry blossom to endow them with immortality. A Chinese legend tells of the goddess Xi Wang Mu, in whose garden the cherries of immortality ripen every thousand years. Buddha is thought to have been born under a cherry tree.

The cherry tree has become a unique symbol of Japan (*sakura*), a hallmark of the country on an international level. Japanese poetry of all epochs is permeated with blossoming cherry branches and filled with emotions aroused by them. In occidental literature, too, the cherry tree is a widespread symbol displaying a rich diversity of meanings. What unites both cultures is the embodied representation of beauty, seen both in blossoms and berries, comprising the semantic nucleus of the semiotic structure of the symbol.

In Japan, since the Heian Period<sup>vi</sup> (784-1185), one form of feminine sexuality represented by the *geisha*, was described as cherry blossoms: a high-status geisha would be associated with cherry flowers in full bloom, their refined dancing embodied cherry blossoms motifs, and the payment for a geisha was the payment for a bunch of cherry blossoms [27: 35].

In English, ripe red cherries also have acquired the meaning of femininity, womanhood and sexuality, and the joys of life (e.g. the idiom *bowl of cherries*). In the 17th century play *Volpone*, Ben Johnson<sup>vii</sup> compares a beautiful woman to cherries.

*“All her looks are sweet,  
As the first grapes or cherries, and are watch'd  
As near as they are”* [28: 102].

The motif of beauty is rarely a sole motif of a poem, so it is typical to epitomize the diversity of meanings, allusions, and connotations into a multi-layered semantic structure. For example, in the poem *Loveliest of Trees* (1896) by Alfred Edward Housman<sup>viii</sup>, the meaning of beauty is interlaced with color symbolism and overlaid with religious and philosophical implications. The white color signifies purity and is associated with the Christian tradition to wear white at Easter. Easter signifies rebirth and everlasting life – trampling down death and bestowing life!

*“Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide”* [29: 3].

The eternal cycle of Nature's quietening and reawakening is contrasted with the brevity of human life. The poet meditates that even half a century that he hopes to live is too short a time to absorb the beauty of Nature. The philosophical purport is to enjoy every moment of life and see beauty in all manifestations of Nature:

*“And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow”* (ibid.)

The symbol fuses the referential and the expressive with the religious canon and a certain philosophical attitude.

A frequent motif in poetry intimately connected with the cherry tree beauty is that of romantic relations, love and passion. The poem *You, and Yellow Air* by John Shaw Neilson<sup>ix</sup> (1872 – 1942) describes the long gone spring and a girl that has receded into oblivion:

*“I dream of an old kissing-time  
And the flowered follies there;  
In the dim place of cherry-trees,  
Of you, and yellow air* [30: 46].

When he speaks about passion, he uses a different hypostasis of the cherry tree and a different color specter.

*“It was the time when red lovers  
With the red fevers burn;  
A time of bells and silver seeds  
And cherries on the turn”* (ibid., :46)

The same theme is found in the novel *Their Yesterdays* by Harold Bell Wright<sup>x</sup> written in 1912, in which the boy and his little friend played a wedding under the cherry tree, and the boy put a tiny brass ring on the little girl's finger, which she kept all her life as the most precious treasure.

*“It was up in that quiet corner of the garden, near the hedge, and the cherry tree was in bloom and showered its delicate blossoms down upon them with every puff of air that stirred the branches”* [31: 42]

This is a prefiguration of their meeting many years later in the same setting. They have changed, have gone through hardships, loneliness, and desolation, but both have gained understanding of the essence of life.

*“The cherry tree, in the corner of the garden near the hedge, showered the delicate petals of its blossoms down with every touch of the gentle breeze. But, in the years that had passed since that boy and girl played wedding, the tree had grown large, and scarred, and old”* (ibid.: 300).

#### 1.4 Cherry tree: war theme

The blooming season is magnificent, but very short-lived; fallen petals are blown away by spring winds like people's lives by the flow of time. They are remindful of the brevity of human life, of the ephemerality of beauty, and hence linked with 'death'. Cherry blossoms became representative of the *samurai*<sup>xi</sup> lot whose life is all too soon lost in battle. This class of warriors developed a unique philosophy that indoctrinated valor, honor, selflessness, loyalty, and the readiness to give up one's life for a cause. From the samurai ideology, this behavioral model and the conception of the beauty of sacrificial death was transferred to *kamikaze* pilots<sup>xii</sup>: during WWII they are said to have been painting blossoming cherry branches on the fuselage of their planes before performing suicide missions. Thus, in the East, the cherry blossoms have become a traditional symbol of the warrior and accumulated several symbolic meanings: mortality, evanescence of life, beauty of sacrificial death. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese *haiku* poet Kyorai wrote: *“What is this! / The long sword of one/ Viewing the blossoms.”* [32: 62]

The image created in these lines has endured throughout centuries. Ōkuma Kotomichi<sup>xiii</sup> highly appreciated the haiku and wrote in his *Monologue*:

*“How moving it is if warriors resigned to die on the morrow should view blossoms blooming in their camp!”* [33: 345]

War theme has become an integral part of the world poetry. The First World War changed its mood from heroic romanticism to rueful understanding of war's barbarity and compassion for the Fallen. War motif is present in the poetry of very different poets. Edward Thomas (1878 – 1917), who fought and perished in WWI, being a nature poet, integrated war and its effects in organic imagery of his poetry choosing the blooming cherry tree as a token of mourning for soldiers killed in war and lives un-lived. The pattern used by the poet 'falling cherry blossoms –soldiers' lives lost' is to emphasize that the visual image more appropriate for the wedding becomes a symbolic epitaph for fallen soldiers.

*“The cherry trees bend over and are shedding  
On the old road where all that passed are dead,  
Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding  
This early May morn when there is none to wed.”* [34: 28]

Another war poet, Robert Laurence Binyon (1869 –1943), better known for his poem *For the Fallen*, which is quoted every year in the Armistice Day service, in his poem *The Cherry Trees* resorts to the symbol of “Blossom-white cherry trees,” which in the context of war appear:

*“Like spirits strange to this ill world  
White strangers from a world apart  
Like silent promises of peace,  
Like hope that blossoms in the heart”* [35].

The theme of dissonance of natural beauty and war is present in Erich Maria Remarque's antiwar novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. He uses the blossoming cherry tree, a symbol of beauty, as an antithesis to the inhumanity and ugliness of war. Cherry blossoms stir nostalgia in a simple peasant farmer Detering and urge him to a reckless action that leads to a tragic end.

*“His misfortune was that he saw a cherry tree in a garden. We were just coming back from the front*

line, and at a turning of the road near our billets, marvelous in the morning twilight, stood this cherry tree before us. It had no leaves, but was one white mass of blossom.” [36: 275].

Psychological strain of the past months proved too much for him and he snapped. In the evening, he brought “a couple of branches of cherry blossom in his hand. We made fun of him, and asked whether he was going to a wedding.” He explained:

“I have a big orchard with cherry trees at home. When they are in blossom, from the hay loft they look like one single sheet, so white. It is just the time” (ibid.: 276).

A few days later he deserted the army and was arrested, and nothing was heard of him. In this historical context, the cherry tree symbolizes anything that is completely alien to war: 'wedding, 'home,' 'peace and safety.'

### 1.5 Cherry tree: Biblical motifs

In Western symbology, the Biblical significance of cherry trees is not as great as that of oaks, or cedars, or apple trees. However, red cherries gained significance as paradisiacal berries. In the Medieval play *Nativity*<sup>xiv</sup> there is an episode of pregnant Mary traveling to Bethlehem with Joseph; Mary sees a tree full of ripe cherries and asks her husband to pick some for her, but he refuses rather disrespectfully accusing her of adultery. Then Mary begs God: “Now, good Lord I pray thee, graunt me this boun [boon], To have of these cherries and it be youre wyll [will],” [37: lines 40 – 42] and the tree miraculously bends down its branches for Mary to pluck the fruit.

There is no episode like that in the canonical version of the Bible, but in the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew we find a similar scene, though with a palm tree. In this version, it is the baby Jesus who speaks to the tree: “O tree, bend thy branches, and refresh my mother with thy fruit.” In the play the palm tree is replaced with the cherry tree to make the setting more English and understandable to spectators. Jesus also asks God to “open from the roots a vein of water which has been hid in the earth, and immediately, here began to come forth a spring of water exceedingly clear and cool and sparkling” [38: 622].

The same scene is found in The Qur’an reproducing the same content and textural:

“She (Mary) withdrew to a distant place and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, ‘I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!’ but a voice cried to her from below, ‘Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you, so eat, drink, be glad!’” [39, surah 19: 191-192].

The cherry tree has become associated with the Virgin Mary and Jesus, which is also reflected in devotional paintings: In Titian's “Madonna of the Cherries” (1515) John the Baptist, depicted as a naked little boy, is giving the Madonna a bunch of two paradisiac berries (cherries and strawberries) as a symbol of purity and sainthood; Joos van Cleve in the “Virgin of the Cherries/ Kirschenmadonna” (c.1540) portrayed the Christ child playing with red cherries as foreknowledge of blood that will be shed by Him for the sake of human salvation.

Religious ideology is felt strongly in the interpretation by H. Wright of the most important concepts in the novel *Their Yesterdays*. 'Knowledge' is represented by the dry, bare cherry tree – cognitively based on the well-known archetype of the Dry tree (Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). The author praises 'Ignorance' (Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?) as in it “lies peace, contentment, happiness, and safety” [31: 111]. That is why 'Ignorance' is symbolically presented as “the springtime of life” [ibid.: 113]. The cherry tree symbolism is used in the representation of Christmas. The birth of the Savior marks the starting point of Nature's awakening and renewal.

“By looking carefully, one could see that the twigs of the cherry tree were brightening with a delicate touch of fresh color; while the tiny tips of the tender green buds were cautiously peeping out of their snug wrappings as if to ask the state of the weather. In the orchard and the woods, too, the Life that slept deep in the roots and under the bark of trunks was beginning to stir.” [ibid.: 245]

Finally, 'Religion' is interpreted as a blossoming world. Here a strong parallelism is felt with the Dry Tree, or the Cross, which sprouted fresh green leaves after Christ's Passion and resurrection.

“Every twig that a few weeks before had been a bare, unsightly stick was now a miracle of dainty beauty. From the creek, the orchard hill appeared against the soft, blue, sky a wondrous, cumulus, cloud of

*fleecy whiteness flushed with a glow of delicate pink. ... The fairy hands that had thrown over the wood a filmy veil of dainty color now dressed each tree and bush in robes of shimmering, shining, green.*" [ibid.: 137].

### 1.6 Cherry tree: cohesive function

As an archetypal symbol in this novel, the cherry tree performs a unifying function connecting diverse episodes into an integrated whole and provides a rich scale of nuances of the characters' emotional state and an atmosphere attuned to it.

There is no plot in the novel in the traditional sense, we get only glimpses into the lives of a Man and a Woman, who learn the essence of the "Thirteen Truly Great Things of Life" the hard way. In their grown up life, they both seek an escape in their past – childhood and early adolescence – finding there "*a new heart, new courage and determination.*" They both return in their memories to the same "moments of being," which eventually bring them together in their adult life. The most significant things take place under the cherry tree or are metaphysically related with it.

The author uses various hypostases of the tree to mark significant events in the lives of his characters. When the boy's mother died, he was very young, on the brink of adolescence, completely unprotected and not prepared for adult life.

*"It was green fruit time. From the cherry tree that grew in the upper corner of the garden next door, close by the hedge that separated the two places, the blossoms were gone and the tiny cherries were already well formed"* [31: 16].

The state of despair which they both went through in their adulthood is conveyed by the frost bound cherry tree. Rejected by the world, jobless and penniless, "*in a small, bare, room in a cheap city boarding house, the man covered like a wild thing, wounded, neglected, afraid,*" and "*in the garden the wind had heaped a great drift high against the hedge on the boy's side, and, on the little girl's side, the cherry tree in the corner stood shivering in its nakedness with bare arms uplifted as though praying for mercy to the stinging cold wind*" [ibid.: 71]. The woman ashamed of and humiliated by her occupation, longs to change her life. The cherry tree is also described as frost bound, except for the final phrase, which gives a different turn to the episode. "*But the drift in the garden on the boy's side of the hedge was still piled high against the barrier of thickly interwoven branches and twigs and the cherry tree, in its shivering nakedness, seemed to be pleading, now, for spring to come quickly*" [ibid.: 87].

The cherry tree is a sacred tree for both characters, and the space under it is a kind of sanctuary. Vows made there "*seemed more holy, more sacred,*" [ibid.: 178] than any other vows in the world. Like any other sacred tree, the cherry tree in the novel communicates its spiritual energy to the worshipper. It filled the woman with new energy. "*And the tired look went out of her eyes. Strength returned to her weary body, courage to her heart, and calmness to her over-wrought nerves*" [ibid.: 192]. It is also a wish-fulfilling tree. The final reunion takes place under the blossoming cherry.

### 1.7 Cherry tree and Polysymbolism

Henry Bates (1905 – 1974), a novelist who had unsurpassed mastery of depicting the sensory context of events described, in the story *The Wild Cherry Tree* (1968), uses the cherry tree in bloom as the central symbol which gravitates all the other symbols of the narrative. The scene is set on the edge of the chalk hills on a pig farm owned by the Boorman family. The ancient Greek legend tells us about the rustic demi-god of mountain forests *Oxylus*, who had eight nymph-daughters, each being a spirit of some tree species. His daughter *Kraneia* was the spirit of the wild cherry tree – a tree which produced food for swine. It is impossible to say now whether the plot of the story was prompted by the old myth, but coincidences are far from being accidental. The triad 'hills/mountain – wild cherry tree – swine' is reconstituted in the story as a background for a number of contensive antitheses: beauty and ugliness, destruction and rebirth, surrender and resilience, love and non committal relationship, integrity and split personality.

Mrs. Boorman, the wife of the farmer and mother of five sons whom "*life with pigs had made pig-like*" tends her pigs and her family. "*It was sometimes difficult to tell, especially in the short, mud-dark days of winter, who were the Boormans and who the pigs. Difficult, that is, with one exception: Mrs. Boorman*" [40: 17]. The land was once beautiful: "*a thick triangular copse had covered part of the hillside. Now generation after generation of pigs had rooted it into a churned morass of mud and stumps*" [ibid.:18]. Among this "*grotesque desolation*" there survived one stubborn wild cherry tree which burst into bloom every spring, "*its*

*white-flowered branches like some graceful and pointless flag of surrender long since forgotten*" [ibid.: 18]. Mrs. Boorman does not want to surrender, she finds an escape from the sludge of her surroundings in buying exquisite clothes and jewelry, absolutely useless on the farm. It is her own world of "*elegant adventure*," escape from reality. But one April evening, dressed in a light summer frock in a rich shade of apricot, she ventures out of her room "*to look, for a few moments, at the wild cherry tree. It too was in flower*" [ibid.: 20 ] Under the cherry tree she meets a gentleman traveling through (Jack Gilbert), has a fleeting love affair, and gets her share of disillusionment and torment when he does not recognize her in her work clothes. "*She endured...the torment of the old dilemma she had created for herself, the fraudulent trap of being two people*" [ibid.: 38].

The wild cherry tree is a representation of Mrs Boorman's internal turmoil, yearning for beauty, love, tenderness, a different life, a new beginning, for which she pays dearly. This psychological condition is resonant with Ōkuma Kotomichi's waka despite the fact that there is an age long distance between him and Bates:

*"My heart that was rapt away by / the wild cherry blossoms – will it / return to my body when they scatter?"* [33]

The symbolic structure of the story is complex comprising both congenial and contradistinct symbols. Interlacing with the central symbol are plants of the surrounding flora: primroses, violets, bluebells, anemones – symbolic identification of romantic relationship; conflicting with it is animal symbolism – pigs represent sloth, uncleanness, gluttony, and uncouth manners. Organic symbolism is further compounded by clothing symbolism. The clothing is a semiotic system of non verbal communication that conveys social values imbedded in collective consciousness concerning social status, financial position, class or group membership, etc. It is easily decoded, sometimes mistakenly, when the expressivity of clothes conceals the real self. Jack Gilbert misinterpreted the clothing message at their first-impression meeting and identified Mrs. Boorman as "Lady in the Apricot Dress," who she was not. It explains why he did not recognize her in the final scene: "*her identity was lost under the sack apron, the mud-caked boots, the floppy ancient hat*" [40: 37] – a dressing code of a different social identity. Clothing is also indicative of the person's psychological state. Dissatisfied with her life, Mrs. Boorman tried to live in a make-believe world of dressing up, "of sensuous elegance and impossibly useless beauty" [ibid.: 36] Her emotional state of loneliness is conveyed through organic symbolism. "She felt an ache of most barren loneliness ... a feeling of being completely arid, a dead sapless branch rotted to dry touchwood at the core" [ibid.: 35].

## 1.8 Cherry tree in Russian classic literature

In Russian literature, cherry tree symbolism has many facets. In the poem *Green Noise* by N.A. Nekrasov [41], it means renovation both environmental and spiritual. First goes the description of the awakening world: "*As if splashed by milk, stand cherry orchards low-humming a song of spring, they rustle in a new way, in a new spring.*" Rebirth of nature is emphasized by the repetition of a refrain: "*Go-a-ringing Green Noise, Green Noise, the Noise of Spring!*" The literary ego of the poem tells how he planned to kill his unfaithful wife and her lover, but purity of renewed Nature banished evil from his heart. So the final stanza interprets Nature's rebirth as God's sublime behest tinged with a bit of folk wisdom: "*Love while you can, Bear your cross with patience, Forgive all while forgiveness is in your heart, And – God be your Judge.*"<sup>1</sup>

But the most profound symbolic significance is attached to the cherry orchard in Chekhov's eponymous play. It combines aesthetic, personal, moral, social, and philosophical aspects. The plot of the play is simple. A family of land-owning gentry whose estate is put up for auction because of heavy debts, returns from Paris to Russia hoping to save the property. But instead of undertaking some practical steps, they indulge in building castles in the air. Eventually, their land is sold to a rich man, ironically, the son of their former serf. Dispossessed of their ancestral home, the family has to leave.

Aesthetically, the *Cherry orchard* is a symbol of pure beauty and refined elegance: it has lost its importance as a source of income and any idea to put it to use is regarded by impoverished aristocrats as "*vulgar*". So the question arises whether it is morally correct to destroy beauty, and Nature for that matter, to "*clear net profit.*"

At the personal level, it means different things to different people. It means 'home' to Anya: "*I am at home again ! When I wake up in the morning I shall run out into the garden.*" [42: 254]. For Lyubov Ranevksy, it is a symbol of her past happiness, her grief (her son was drowned here), but also of God's grace and ever-

lasting life.

*“Oh, my childhood, my pure and happy childhood! I used to sleep in this nursery. I used to look out from here into the garden. Happiness awoke with me every morning; and the orchard was just the same then as it is now; nothing is altered. (Laughing with joy.) It is all white, all white ! Oh, my cherry orchard ! After the dark and stormy autumn and the frosts of winter you are young again and full of happiness; the angels of heaven have not abandoned you.”* (ibid.: 263).

Petya Trofimov, perceives it is a symbol of slavery: *“human spirits look out at you from every tree in the orchard, from every leaf and every stem ? Do you not hear human voices ? ... Oh ! it is terrible. Your orchard frightens me”* (ibid.: 279). Actually, his talk about slavery is only speculative philosophizing. For Lopakhin, on the contrary, it is the history of his family and his personal experience, so the orchard is a symbol of his own triumph over the barbarity of the old order.

*“Heavens alive! Just think of it! The cherry orchard is mine!...If only my father and my grandfather could rise from their graves . ...I had bought a property that hasn't its equal for beauty anywhere in the whole world! I have bought the property where my father and grandfather were slaves, where they weren't even allowed into the kitchen”* (ibid.: 292).

In the social dimension, the orchard is a symbol of the world of highly privileged nobility represented by Ranevsky and her family. It marks the borderline between two social strata and two world orders. The old order that is coming to an end and a new one peopled with smart, enterprising *nouveaux riches* like Lopakhin, for whom the cherry orchard is an obstacle to more money and a living reminder of his unhappy childhood, so it must go.

*“Come everyone and see Yermolai Lopakhin lay his axe to the cherry orchard, come and see the trees fall down! We'll fill the place with villas; our grandsons and great-grandsons shall see a new life here.”*

The play closes with the sound of *“the stroke of the axe on the trees far away in the cherry orchard.”* (ibid.: 304).

At the metaphysical level, the cherry orchard of such a gigantic size is the symbol of Russia. Trofimov exclaims:

*“The whole of Russia is our orchard. The earth is great and beautiful, and there are many, many wonderful places on it”* (ibid., p. 279). Lopakhin muses, *“O Lord, you have given us mighty forests, boundless fields and immeasurable horizons, and, we living in their midst, ought really to be giants.”* (ibid.: 277).

As a physical object, the cherry orchard makes up the background (we only get a glimpse of a blossoming branch through the window in the first act), but symbolically, it is present at all levels of the hierarchy of the play, and spiritually, it is omnipresent in dialogues, thoughts, reminiscences, plans, attitudes of the characters creating a special aura of the play.

#### IV. Conclusion

The organic view of the world has been operative in symbol formation in many cultures, both oriental and western, ancient and modern. Symbols derived from natural phenomena combine sensory experience with abstract ideas within respective cultural frames, fusing visual objects and contemporary ideological paradigms into a symbolic entity. The significance of symbols as cognitive tools and vehicles of sense generation lies in their representational faculty, an ability to give mental access to abstract domains still vague for logical denotation or for metaphorical and metonymic mappings, and forge new connections between sensory impressions and mental images.

The cherry tree is a well established symbol, a multidimensional construct with a long history and a rich semantic network. Cherry blossoms represent beauty and femininity, joys of life and romantic relations, renewal and immortality and at the same time the ephemeral nature of life, which links them with death. The multiplicity of contexts, often semantically contradictory, are united by the cognitively salient referent, which makes it possible to put together varying meanings, what Husserl called “free imaginative variation,” into one symbolic whole with a mental core ('beauty,' 'immortality,' 'death and rebirth,' 'romance and love,') from which radiate new significations forming a blurred-boundary periphery of the symbol's semantics. The mental processes involved in symbol formation run through a chain of algorithms. The first is detecting the object and decoupling it from immediate sensory experience, the second is priming a differentiating feature, the third is looking for pathways to highlight its hidden meaning (truth), and finally actualizing it in literary discourses.

Ontologically, the nature of the perceived phenomenon forms the foundation for generating meanings,

but assumptions made about the essence of this phenomenon are subjective and result in a great variety of author-specific interpretations conditioned by their personal world views, mastery and talent, and a broad cultural and historical context. Functionally, symbols provide cohesion within the text and with other texts no matter how far removed in space and time they are.

Psychologically, symbols are dynamic, sense generating and pattern setting constructs of the human mind which help cognize the world. Socially, they play a role in world making and human development (personal, social, and cultural). As Cassirer put it, “*Instead of defining man as an 'animal rationale,' we should define him as an 'animal symbolicum.'* By so doing we can designate his specific difference, and we can understand the new way open to man – the way to civilization” [13: 44].

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- i 12<sup>th</sup> century thinker who used organic metaphor of the body to describe the relations of the different parts of the commonwealth.
- ii A vivid, picturesque description of thing or event.
- iii The Swiss French poet, considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, called *le poète de lumière* (a poet of light), born 1925.
- iv Avestan name for the creator and sole God of Zoroastrianism.
- v Member of the Japanese warrior caste. The term *samurai* was originally used to denote the aristocratic warriors (*bushi*), but it came to apply to all the members of the warrior class that rose to power in the 12th century. The basis of samurai conduct is *bushido*, "the way of the warrior".
- vi The period in Japanese history when Chinese influences were at their height. It is noted for its art, poetry and prose.
- vii An English playwright, poet, actor, and literary critic (1572 –1637), a prominent representative of Jacobean drama.
- viii An English poet (1859 –1936), one of the foremost classicists of his age ranked as one of the greatest scholars who ever lived.
- ix One of the early Australian poets whose poetry abounds in floral imagery.
- x H.B. Wright (1872 –1944) a preacher and a best-selling American writer of fiction, essays, and nonfiction at the beginning of the 20th century.
- xi The middle and upper echelons of the military nobility. An early use of the word is registered in the first imperial anthology of poems, completed in the first part of the 10th century.
- xii The Japanese word *kamikaze* translates to "divine wind." It refers to the storms that saved Japan from the invading fleets under Kublai Kahn, and it was the name given to the pilots in World War II who carried out attacks on the American fleet.
- suicide
- xiii Japanese poet (1798-1868) and literary critic.
- xiv N-town cycle of forty two Bible-based mystery plays.