



ITALO CALVINO: Symbolism & Style

“In the broadest sense, a symbol is something that represents something else. Words, for example, are symbols. But in literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself” (Griffith 52). Italo Calvino uses symbolism throughout his collected stories, *Cosmicomics* and *If on a winter's night a traveler*, to satirize the current dilemmas of our moral behavior such as fear, love, jealousy, opposition, and competition.

To better understand Italo Calvino's writing style Professor Frank Pajares has outlined several qualities found in “Six Memos for the Next Millennium” that Calvino sees as indispensable to artistic expression. The first of these qualities is lightness. Calvino contends, “Lightness for me goes with precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard” (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature). He also describes the three senses to lightness. According to Calvino:

First there is a lightening where meaning is conveyed through a texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency. Second, there is the narration of a train of thought or psychological process in which subtle and imperceptible elements are at work, or any kind of description that involves a high degree of abstraction. Third, there is a visual image of lightness that acquires emblematic value, such as vaulting on nimble legs over a tombstone (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature)

Calvino's description of lightness goes along with the “less is more” theory which is evident in his treatment of his characters. He never quite reveals enough information about them. By doing this Calvino is leaving more to the reader's imagination and at the same time, leaving more room for the story line.

In Calvino's stories, everything mentioned has a necessary function, which sets the basis for the second quality, quickness. Calvino says, “The most outlandish adventures are recounted with an eye fixed on the bare essentials. There is always a battle against time, against the obstacles that prevent or delay the fulfillment of a desire or the repossession of something cherished but lost” (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature). There is a difference between speed and quickness. Calvino uses quickness in his writing to keep the reader interested in the fluid delivery of a story. He never allows the reader to become bored. Calvino even goes to extremes of stopping in the middle of a story and never picking back up. The reader keeps reading hoping to find the outcome of the first story only to become wrapped up in another, almost forgetting about the first. Calvino does not, however, speed through a novel so fast that the reader will wonder what he just read. He will know, and it will leave him looking for another book to pick up.

The third indispensable function is exactitude. “Exactitude means a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination” (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature). Calvino often achieves this through a degree of elusiveness. In “The Form of Space”, Calvino never reveals too much about the background of Ursula H'x. By the way he describes her, the way she combs her hair, the way she rubs lotion on her legs almost taunting the men, the reader is able to paint a picture of her in his mind.

The fourth quality is visibility, about which Calvino says:

In devising a story the first thing that comes to my mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms. Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. Into the organization of this material, which is no longer purely visual but also conceptual, there now enters my deliberate intent to give order and sense to the development of the story; or rather, what I do is try to establish which meanings might be compatible with the overall design I wish to give the story and which meanings are not compatible, always leaving a certain margin of possible alternatives (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature).



Calvino finds a certain idea to be communicated and instead of over-exaggerating that one idea, he expresses it and plants ideas in the reader's mind about other possible outcomes. He does this in If on a winter's night a traveler, by setting a base story line in which two readers begin a book that has no end and begin a relationship. Intertwined in this story line are sub-stories of infatuation for the female reader by the translator, a love by the female reader for a "ghost voice", an obsession by the male reader about the female reading books, and constant pieces of open-ended stories. This is also a prime example of the final indispensable quality outlined in "The Six Memos for the Millennium", multiplicity. Multiplicity is, as Calvino describes it, "expression with a sense of infinite possibilities" (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature).

The beginning of "Games Without End", a story from Cosmicomics, is prefaced with, according to Michael Adams, "a dry scientific head note: 'When the galaxies become more remote, the rarefaction of the universe is compensated for by the formation of further galaxies composed of newly created matter.' This note provides the basis of the story, for this freshly created matter is imaginatively interpreted as shiny, new, atom-marbles" (395). Calvino plants the idea that the universe is formed by two competitive children playing with marbles, which is symbolic of how unimportant he views the creation of our universe. He uses this rather than a theory that is widely respected. For example, he did not use the theory in which God created the universe or the theory that objective forces of nature created the universe such as the "Big Bang Theory" or evolution. He does this with a slapstick sort of humor poking fun at those who truly believe in creation. Calvino writes:

'Go on, it's your turn. Aren't you in the game any more?'
'Of course I'm in the game. Don't rush me. I'm going to shoot now.'
Well, if you keep going off by yourself, we might as well stop playing!
'Hmph! You're only making all this fuss because you're losing' (*Games Without End*, 64).




The two young boys are playing a child's game. They are totally unaware of the consequences, and seemingly unconcerned that they are creating life.

In "The Form of Space", another story from Cosmicomics, Calvino uses private symbols as early as the first sentence. He says, "To fall in the void as I fell" (322). Calvino's protagonist is falling; he is falling for a woman called Ursula H'x. When Calvino prefaces the story with "The equations of the gravitational field which relate the curve of space to the distribution of matter are already becoming common knowledge" (322), he is leading the reader to believe that the story truly is about space. Perhaps to one reader it might be a confusing story about a man falling through space. To another reader it could be perceived as a satirical story subtly addressing the innate drive of competition, as a man's struggle with his passion for a woman that he sees as nothing more than an object of his desire.

At one point, Calvino says that he had always remained immobile in the same place, or that he could have been moving upward, but he would just rather think of it as falling. At any given time all people are after a goal. They could be reaching for it, running for it, or failing miserably at obtaining it, but their goal remains. The protagonist's goal is Ursula H'x. Both the protagonist and Lieutenant Fenimore see

Ursula H'x as a sexual object. They are both constantly competing for her attention. Lieutenant Fenimore makes gestures toward her in the direct view of the protagonist to make it seem that he and Ursula have some sort of connection. The protagonist tries to get her attention by shouting to her that he sees a universe. She also rejects him as she ignores him to fawn over her flawless legs. Calvino shows that Ursula means nothing more than a conquest to the men by giving her the last name of H'x. Her name does not matter. She could be any woman, and she could represent all women.

Calvino also uses symbolism when he says, "And so we pursued each other. Lieutenant Fenimore and I, hiding behind the loops of the l's, especially the l's of the word 'parallel,' in order to shoot and take cover from the bullets and pretend to be dead and wait" (327). By doing this, Calvino also expresses that words are not enough, you must use fluid imagination to understand the way he is poking fun at society's natural behavior. He is using this to represent the pieces of language that are meaninglessly falling together, going no-where. They are the words that are used in their competition for Ursula, which is also meaningless.

Calvino says, "The properties of space, in fact, were such that one parallel went one way, and another in another way: I for example was plunging within a tortuous cavern while Ursula H'x was being sucked along a passage communicating with that same cavern so that we found ourselves rolling together on a lawn of algae in a kind of subsatial island, writhing, she and I, in every pose, upright and capsized, until of all a sudden our two straight lines resumed their distance, the same as always, and each continued on its own as if nothing had happened" (326-327). Calvino seemingly states this to show that the protagonist is playing out another route of the fall. He sees the sudden, torrid affair after which the two would resume their usual routine of not really knowing each other. She would not even acknowledge him. After realizing the likely outcome, he decides to continue his competition for Ursula H'x. He does not care what the outcome would be; he just wants to attain that object of his desire, which fuels his competition with Lieutenant Fenimore. By saying this, Calvino again jests at society. He brings out the childish immoral behavior of men. 

In the end, Calvino says, "Whereas the same lines, rather than remain series of letters and words, can easily be drawn out in their black thread and unwound in continuous, parallel, straight lines which mean nothing beyond themselves in their constant flow, never meeting, just as we never meet in our constant fall: Ursula H'x, Lieutenant Fenimore, and all the others" (328). Calvino is saying that all of the actions of the three characters- the taunting, the teasing, the competing- all meant nothing. They never got to know one another. They did not even try, nor did they want to. The society at that time, and even more so now, is so intent on those moral behaviors Calvino subtly speaks about. The people do not care about one another; they are just out to beat their neighbor for the top spot, or in this case, the most attractive partner.

In *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Calvino begins by telling the reader to, "Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (3). He uses the whole first chapter to talk to the reader. There are two implied readers in this story- one male and one female, and a translator. This sets the basis for this story, which is filled with ministories read by the two "readers". The true story deals with the translator in his quest for love from the female reader, who is in turn, in love with books. In the second chapter, Calvino writes, "And as you continue, what develops? Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read! Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17!" (25). This is symbolic of relationships. In the beginning a person prepares, as Calvino has instructed the reader to do. He gets comfortable with someone just as the reader has gotten comfortable with and interested in the book, and as often happens it suddenly stops. The book is a misprint. The reader gets mad and wants to throw the book out of the window, just as a person gets frustrated when a relationship that seems to be going along fine comes to an abrupt end. John Leonard contends, "Mr. Calvino, an expert on modernism, enjoys himself in his disdain of the problematical. Each of his chapters may not advance the novel, but the titles of the 'suspended' novels add up to a story as pure as a Japanese poem. Disintegration, prison, collective consciousness, syntax- none of these deters

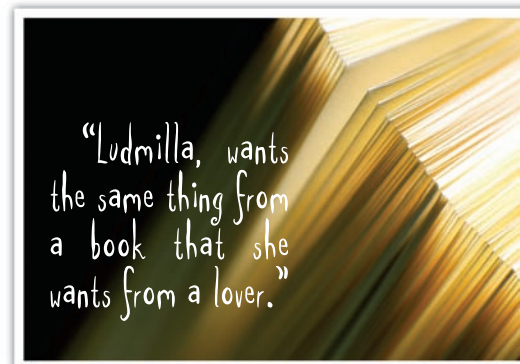
the story or the lover. The Other Reader, Ludmilla, wants the same thing from a book that she wants from a lover. No codes need apply” (Leonard, New York Times). A title of a short story, “In a network of lines that enlase” is as symbolic as it is beautiful. It is symbolic of the book itself; it is a network of pieces of books that intertwine to form If on a winter’s night a traveler.

In one of the sub-stories, a love-triangle arises between the narrator, Irina, and Valerian. “There are two serpents whose heads Irina grasps with her hands, and they react to her grasp, while she was insisting, on the contrary, that the maximum of controlled power should correspond to a reptile pliability bending to overtake her in impossible contortions” (*If on a winter’s night a traveler*, 89). This is symbolic because the two other lovers are referred to as “serpents” in her control. Serpents are usually associated with evil and or men. In this sentence is it showing Irina’s power over them. She is a woman controlling men. Kathryn Hume contends, “As the sexual triangle develops, consisting of Irina, Valerian, and the narrator, Alex, she becomes goddess and priestess, and they her erotic slaves. Such sensual extravagance is unusual in Calvino, but both its intensity and the humor with which he treats it add to the playful tone of the tale. Like the Magna Mater of Mediterranean cults, Irina is associated with serpents, serpentine lines, spirals, and shadows. Hilariously, she echoes the stance of goddess holding two serpents” (118). Calvino uses a humorous reference in this passage to stress how unusual he sees it is to have a female dominating over two different men.

In the main story, the Reader feels more connected with The Other Reader, Ludmilla, as she is building a connection with a ghost voice that does not exist. She feels close to this voice as she reads and begins to fall for this “ghost”. As Hume points out, “Ludmilla certainly enjoys her contact with this voice through reading. The author as actual person is of no interest to her at all, but that voice lures her on.” She goes on to say, “Calvino offers us one very good reason for harkening to that voice; the voice enjoys immense power, and by following its lead, we too may bask in that power” (125). The voice is also described as the ghost with a thousand faces. Ludmilla is driven by her attraction to literature, to this ghost. The fact that she is enamored with a “ghost” leads one to believe that she is somewhat afraid of a tangible man. She is afraid of anything real, especially relationships. She can be in bed with a man, but is still thinking of literature, lost in the sheets of a book. The translator sees this and becomes almost envious of the books. Leonard says, “The translator loses Ludmilla because he is obsessed by the image of her reading: ‘It’s what he was never able to bear.’ She loses herself in books. He is jealous of that ‘silent voice,’ a ‘ghost with a thousand faces and faceless, all the more elusive since for Ludmilla authors are never incarnated in individuals of flesh and blood, they exist for her only in published pages, the living and the dead both are always there to communicate with her, to amaze her, and Ludmilla is always ready to follow them, in the fickle, carefree relations one can have with incorporeal persons” (Leonard, New York Times).

At the end, the Reader and The Other Reader end up together, bonded by their common love and understanding for literature. The translator has lost Ludmilla. Calvino says, “Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings” (*If on a winter’s night a traveler*, 260). The whole story is symbolic of the parallel of literature to reality, whether it be the verticality of the male pride, the shadows of a woman, or the common urge to escape one reality only to find love in another. André Brink says that the story, “ is constructed around the relationship between a Male Writer and a Woman Reader: In this book reading, like writing, is a function of desire, literally. The pursuit of the book’s ending corresponds to the pursuit of the unattainable love object, narrative closure is impeded by écriture, the dispersal of meaning, writing as différance; and the pleasure of the text is infiltrated or undercut with the jouissance of the text. More simply put [...] the archetype of this fiction is the male sexual act” (310). Calvino “will end up, in spite of himself, writing a love story that, in spite of itself, is as complicated as a jigsaw puzzle of the void” (Leonard, New York Times).

As Griffith states, “In literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself” (52). Italo Calvino uses symbolism throughout his collected stories, “Cosmicomics” and “If on a winter’s night a traveler”, to satirize the current dilemmas of our moral behavior such as fear, love, jealousy, opposition, and competition. In conclusion, Italo Calvino takes an idea, puts it in print, and with great precision and determination offers



the reader as many schemes as possible. He then takes the story and paints a beautiful, intriguing picture that leaves the reader yearning for more, all the while noticing how different everything around him now looks. As Calvino states in his Harvard Lecture Series, “Six Memos for the Next Millennium”, “Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the *self* of the artist, his inner sincerity, and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined. Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable” (Pajares, Calvino and the Craft of Literature).

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