

UDC 82

## The parables of William Blake: allegories or symbols?

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### Abstract

The article is devoted to the problem of distinguishing symbol and allegory in Romanticism. This problem is considered by the example of William Blake's works, in particular, by his poem "The Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell". The main quality of allegory is the unique correlation of the signifier and the signified, whereas the symbol is potentially infinite in meaning. Unlike the symbol, allegorical signs appear in the system and represent a finite, logically deducible meaning. The symbolic approach to allegorical works is able to lead away from the author's intention expressed in the structure of the work. This is also true of Blake. Symbolic, extensive reading of Blake's poems allows a reader to interpret his position in different ways, including poet as an apostle of Evil. Images of the poem "The Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell", read allegorically may be built into a harmonious system, which represents the text as an artistic whole. Blake's Angels and Devils, if to be based on the text, can not be considered a new interpretation of the biblical images. Their names are just signs for a new meaning. These heroes of the poem are representatives of the opposite tendencies of being, without which, according to Blake, motion is impossible. Thus, careful reading of the poem protects Blake from reproaches in preaching the power of Evil. His Satan, Eternal Hell, Devils, taken as a system, with all the multitude of characteristics, reveals a significant inequality to cultural prototypes. A heir to the traditions of the XVIII century, Blake remains within the framework of his allegorical language, but his allegory becomes even more complicated.

### For citation

Serdechnaya V.V. (2018) Inoskazaniya Uil'yama Bleika: allegoriya ili simvol? [The parables of William Blake: allegories or symbols?]. *Yazyk. Slovesnost'. Yazyk. Slovesnost'. Kul'tura* [Language. Philology. Culture], 8 (3), pp. 10-19.

**Keywords**

William Blake, Romanticism, English Romanticism, allegory, symbol, parable, semantics, interpretation, hermeneutics, *The Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell*, prophetic poems.

**Introduction**

The works of the poet and artist William Blake, who was unrecognized during his lifetime and became a cult writer in the 20th century, always had mixed reviews from critics. The debate has no end as the Blake's world is open to contradictory interpretations (the examples are the William Blake and East conference in Tokyo, books about Blake's reception [Clark, Connolly, Whittaker, 2012; Clark, Suzuki, 2006] or Jarmusch's film "The Dead", where the poet's ideas organically combine the ideology of the 60s and Castaneda's artistic system).

Blake was spiritually close to the Pre-Raphaelites and the 60s, to Joyce and Eliot. It is possible to consider him as a predecessor of postmodernism, a socialist, a satanist, and simply as a madman. Such variety is explained by different ways of reading the poet's works.

**Blake's allegory vs Blake's character**

Allegory and symbol are two concepts that are often called the main components of Blake's creative method. Indeed, the apparent allegory of poet's texts is striking. A lot of researchers of Blake's work write about his allegorism / symbolism [Miner, 2016; Miner, 2013; Howard, 2006; Rose, 1980]. Blake himself called "allegory addressed to intellectual powers" to be "the Most Sublime Poetry" [Blake, 1988, 731].

The main difference between the allegory and the symbol is the unambiguous correlation of the signifier and the signified, whereas the symbol is potentially infinite in meaning. According to Veselovskii, "a symbol is stretchable, as the word is stretchable for new revelations of thought" [Veselovskii, 1989, 139]. Losev states: "The symbol of a thing really is its meaning", "the symbol of a thing is its generalization", "the symbol of a thing is its law", "the symbol of a thing is its structure ... charged with a finite or infinite series of corresponding individual manifestations of this structure" [Losev, 1976 66-70]. And it is natural that the structure of the symbol "aims to give a complete image of the world through each particular phenomenon" [Averintsev, 1989, 581].

But such an understanding of the symbol goes back to symbolism, which recognizes the law and the fact that "approaching the knowledge of all kinds of meaning, we endow all forms and all contents with symbolic being" [Losev, 1976, 330]. This extended interpretation draws a clear line between the symbol and allegory, which are still little distinguished in Romanticism (even now we can find opinions

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that “allegorical tales, allegory in general are essentially a kind of symbolism” [ibid, 326]). Thus, Friedrich Schlegel in the reprints of his theoretical works, replaces “allegory” with “symbol”. According to Hegel, a symbol is an abstract idea, which has not yet found a form within itself, and therefore it has its own image outside itself. That is, for Hegel, a character is the same as an allegory according to Pospelov – “such an allegorical image that has no direct independent meaning and serves only as a means of allegory” [ibid, 333].

Unlike the symbol, which is semantically complete enough to represent the image of the whole world, allegorical signs appear in the system and represent the final, logically deducible meaning. It is evidenced by the internal form of the terms: ἀλληγορία, derived from ἄλλος, a different one; ἀγορά a meeting / agora, it can be translated literally as “differently said (in the agora)”; σύμβολον from σύν, together; and βάλλω, to throw, as “connected, compared together”. In the allegory, two layers of meaning are initially emphasized, while in the symbol the accumulation of interpretations is more important.

Allegory is unambiguous, as in the first allegorical reading of the Bible proposed by Philo of Alexandria. It is interesting that Dionysius the Areopagite, who also offered apophatic, that is, essentially non-affirmative knowledge of God, was a supporter of symbolic theology.

At the same time, Andrei Bely’s remark about symbolism for the cognizer of any form and content can be considered legitimate from a historical point of view. It is well known that, for example, the images of literary heroes in different eras receive different semantic meaning, and become multi-valued, symbolic figures.

Allegory in a cultural space also tends to expand, trying to incorporate new meanings. Thus, the fish, which was once an allegory of Christ, became its symbol, having received a sufficiently broad interpretation.

The doors of perception, Blake’s image, has also undergone a symbolic expansion. This image, reinterpreted by Huxley in the light of the consciousness altered by mescalite, was logically associated with Native American culture and entered the name of the group “Doors”. And now the opening of the doors of perception is no longer an allegory, but a symbol that can signify narcotic intoxication, the ecstasy of free consciousness, and the magical expansion of human abilities. Speaking of “The Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell”, P.A. Schock calls Satan a “political symbol” [Schock, 1993, 441].

Nevertheless, such an approach to allegorical works is able to divert from the author’s intention expressed in the structure of the work. This is also true of Blake. If D. Howard reproaches Blake's researchers for being too “allegorical” [Howard, 2006], we tend to blame him more for the unreasonableness of symbolic interpretations.

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### Evil or not evil?

Symbolic, extensive reading of Blake allows to interpret his position in different ways, including one of a fan of Evil. Indeed, apart from the context of Blake's thought, his Hell quite naturally appears to be a symbol of evil.

At the same time, contradictory approaches to creativity open up different aspects of the poet's understanding, and therefore the remark of J. Bataille that "a comment, which is not limited to clarifying, that a comment is not necessary and impossible, removes the very truth from us" [Bataille, 1994, 71], seems illegal. Bataille and his Russian followers, who accuse Blake of promoting violence, do not fully follow this principle.

One of the most "demonic" works of Blake is "The Marriage of the Heaven and the Hell". Bataille describes the poem as "The Light shed on Evil" [ibid, 66]. And if Blake's Evil really becomes something else, then the following critic's statement clearly contradicts the Blake's text: the poem, according to Bataille, offers the reader "not to put an end to the horrors of Evil and not look away, but, on the contrary, look at it intently" [ibid., 68].

To understand the poem, first it is necessary to look closely at the poem. Blake's perception as a spiritual man, half-mad, under the power of unknown forces, contributes to a biased reading of his texts. But his poems speak for themselves.

Blake himself gives the hermeneutic key to his text, noting that his way of portrayal is allegory (allegorical genres are mentioned in the poem itself – proverb and parable). Blake's address to prophetic texts, both in form (prophetic poem) and in content (Isaiah and Ezekiel become the heroes of Blake) also proves the allegory of the text.

But Blake also gives exact matches that directly decode the allegory. From the paradoxical statements in Plates 3-4 it follows that Blake's Good and Evil are allegorical signs. Good is "the passive that obeys Reason"; "Heaven". Evil is "the active springing from Energy"; "Hell". It would be a mistake to think that Blake, a believer and mystic, explains the meanings of well-known words. It is only the key to understand the text.

Declarative statements about opposites, without which there is no movement, are replaced by a demonstration of Blake's dialectic. Good and Evil, seen by the Angel and the Devil - it all depends on the point of view. So, "enjoyments of the Genius ... look like torment and insanity"; the future seen by the Angel and the hero of the poem is very different; and the Angel, as shown in the last "Memorable Fancy", can turn into the Devil.

Each "Memorable Fancy" is a detailed allegory, a system of ordered signs [see, in particular, Stewart, 1994]. So, the points of view of the Angel and the hero interact in the fourth Fancy. With a biographical

reading, this story of flights to Saturn, descents into the Abyss and Leviathan can be presented simply as a mystical vision, which was unchanged. With a symbolic reading, the hero, rhetorically defeating the Angel, is a herald of the victory of the forces of Evil. Only with an allegorical reading, the images of the "Fancy" are arranged in a coherent system, which presents the text as the whole.

The Abyss is real only in the presence of the Angel. Its inhabitants are black and white spiders, between them the Leviathan appears - an allegory of the black-and-white views of moralists, regardless of which there is a creative impulse that is not bound by this dichotomy. Leviathan appears from the east, he has the serpent and tiger traits, and his description ends with a meaningful remark: he rushes to the heroes "with all the fury of spiritual existence. When, frightened by what he saw, the Angel runs upstairs, the hero remains "on a pleasant bank beside a river by moonlight", where the harper sings: "The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind". This is the peculiar moral of the parable.

So, Blake is allegorical. His allegory is built on a new sense attached to common, culturally loaded signs. It still introduces the reader (who is not completely naive like Bataille) to the temptation of a symbolically expansive reading: "Blake could shine the whole human to poetry with simple words and poetry to Evil" [Bataille, 1994, 59]. But Blake's Angels and Devils, based on the text, can not be considered a new interpretation of biblical images. Their names are just signs for a new meaning. These heroes of the poem are representatives of opposing tendencies of being, without which, according to Blake, movement is impossible. Therefore, their relationship helps to understand the structure of allegory in the poem.

To clarify the semantics of the signified, you can make a list of the characteristics given to these images by the author.

Thus, the Angel warns the hero of the coming doom and shows him his future, the essence of which, however, depends on the beholder. The mill where the Angel is saved is a sign of subordination to the rational mind, just as his works the "Analytics" of Aristotle, a set of laws of formal logic. The path to the fate of the Angel, which the hero promises to point out, lies through the stable, the church, the altar, the Bible, from which a deep dungeon opens, to the seven brick houses, where monkeys fight and multiply violently, the skeleton of one monkey turns out to be "Analytics". In other words, the journey of the Angel leads to the seven churches which lead the Bible into the deep dungeons of interpretations and are always fighting for the accuracy of the explanation. As Thomas Altizer summarizes, "it was Blake who understood that the Christian church, reinterpreted Paul's Incarnation and dialectical vision, crushed the body, separated God from the creation, replaced charity with the court and stifled imagination" [Altizer, 2009, 33].

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In addition, the Angels “have the vanity to speak of themselves as the only wise”, they are religious and sit in the clouds. But they are capable of rebirth: changing colors, one of the Angels, persuaded by the Devil's eloquence, “stretched out his arms, embracing the flame of fire, & he was consumed and arose as Elijah”. And the harper's morality, mentioned above, directly leads us to the semantics of the image of the Angel.

Angels are religious, rational and reasonable, confident and self-contained, finding refuge in technical progress, whose highest spiritual achievement is the achievement of formal logic. But they are capable of rebirth. Who can an angel be reborn?

Blake's Devil is the first to whom the author gives a voice. The third chapter, which sets out the principles of allegory, is called “The voice of the Devil”. The first Archangel, Satan, is later called the Devil. Milton as a true poet belongs to his party. The way of communication with the Devil's world is acid etching of words (engraving method, discovered by Blake), which in Hell are “salutary and medicinal”. Devils are called the Forces of the air, and, unlike the Angels, they fly. They hate religion, but the Devil in his flame has enough convincing strength to turn the Angel into the Devil.

Thus, Blake's Devils are inspired, close to nature and art, not religious, they know the falsity of conventional wisdom and therefore they are convincing in their rhetoric.

The image of Hell complements this picture. Blake calls it Eternal, restored, filled with traditional lights that get rethinking as signs of inspiration. Hell is also a place of wisdom. It is here that the hero collects Proverbs of Hell, here he hears about the end of the world, which will come through “an improvement of sensual enjoyment”, and it is here that knowledge comes out of the Printed House, and the Hell Bible, about which the hero reports, will certainly become known to the world.

So, Hell is a certain inevitable law of true being, which is impersonal and therefore wise.

Allegorical moments are built not only on the reinterpretation of traditional images, but also on reminiscences. For example, Blake's picture in “The Argument”:

*And a river, and a spring  
On every cliff and tomb;  
And on the bleached bones  
Red clay brought forth.*

V. Karacharovskii notes that in these lines “Blake hints at the imminent coming of Hell to Earth” [Karacharovskii, www]. But for a more complete understanding of this image, it is necessary to read the “Book of the Prophet Isaiah”, which describes the coming of the new world: “Then ... waters will break through in the desert, and streams in the desert” (Is. 35. 6), “Your dead will alive again ... and the Earth will open the blood it has absorbed and will no longer hide its dead ”(Is. 26. 19-21). The

biblical context (and the introduction to the poem is entirely based on the reminiscences of the book of Isaiah) helps to decipher the allegory of the revival of the chosen humanity.

The last part of the poem, “A Song of Liberty”, confirms the allegorical explanation. The image of the liberation of countries, the exclamation “Empire is no more!” is the final part of the story about the Devils, Angels and the liberation of dogma from power. It means that allegory speaks of the human world; it is interesting that already generalized images of nations act here: Jew, African.

## Conclusion

Thus, a careful reading of the poem protects Blake from the reproaches of the preaching of the power of Evil. His Satan, Eternal Hell, Devils, images taken in the system with all characteristics, reveal significant inequality to cultural prototypes. Blake, a heir of the traditions of the XVIII century, remains within his allegorical language, but his allegory becomes even more difficult.

Blake creates an allegory of rethinking the established symbols of the era of mythomorphism, the era of the “finished word” (A.V. Mikhailov). This complexity of allegory leads to the fact that Blake's texts are difficult to understand. But strictly built, aphoristic, laconic phrases of Blake say the least about the vagueness or ultimate non-cognition of his intention. The complex structure of his mythological world, for which later he chooses new signs and images, can nevertheless be unraveled. A rigorous approach to the text, consideration of Blake's works in their interrelationship and continuity, attention to the intertextual connections of his work will help to build a harmonious, light, transparent view of his allegorical intention.

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## **Иносказания Уильяма Блейка: аллегория или символ?**

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### **Аннотация**

Статья посвящена теоретической проблеме различения символа и аллегории как различных способов иносказания в романтизме. Данная проблема решается на примере творчества английского поэта Уильяма Блейка, в частности, его поэмы «Бракосочетание Рая



и Ада». Главным отличием аллегории является однозначная соотнесенность в ней означающего и означаемого, тогда как символ потенциально бесконечен по смыслу. В отличие от символа аллегорические знаки выступают в системе и представляют конечный, логически выводимый смысл. Символический подход к аллегорическим произведениям способен увести в сторону от замысла автора, выраженного в структуре произведения. Это справедливо и относительно Блейка. Символическое, расширительное прочтение Блейка позволяет интерпретировать его позицию по-разному, в том числе и как взгляд поклонника Зла. Только при аллегорическом прочтении образы «Бракосочетания Рая и Ада» выстраиваются в стройную систему, которая представляет текст как художественное целое. Ангелы и Дьяволы Блейка, исходя из текста, не могут считаться новой трактовкой библейских образов. Их имена – лишь знаки для нового смысла. Эти герои поэмы – представители противоположных тенденций бытия, без которых, по Блейку, невозможно движение. Таким образом, внимательное чтение поэмы защищает Блейка от упреков в проповеди власти Зла. Его Сатана, Вечный Ад, Дьяволы, образы, взятые в системе, со всем множеством характеристик, обнаруживают значимое неравенство культурным прототипам. Наследник традиций XVIII века, Блейк остается в рамках его аллегорического языка, но его иносказание становится еще сложнее.

#### **Для цитирования в научных исследованиях**

Сердечная В.В. Иносказания Уильяма Блейка: аллегория или символ? // Язык. Словесность. Культура. 2018. Том 8. № 3. С. 10-19.

#### **Ключевые слова**

Уильям Блейк, романтизм, английский романтизм, аллегория, символ, иносказание, семантика, истолкование, герменевтика, Бракосочетание Рая и Ада, пророческие поэмы.

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