



RESEARCH PAPER

Religious Symbolism in Adelaide Anne Procter's *Legends and Lyrics*

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: June 30, 2021</p> <p>Accepted: September 20, 2021</p> <p>Online: September 23, 2021</p> <p>Keywords: Adelaide Anne Procter, Feminine Religious Sensibility Religious Symbolism, Victorian Poetry</p> <p>*Corresponding Author: ajmal@gift.edu.pk</p>	<p>The present study investigates the religious symbolism in <i>Legends and Lyrics</i> by Adelaide Anne Procter, who represents Victorian feminine religious sensibility. In her poetry, we often find unique symbols with religious undertones entailing more profound spiritual implications. Symbols are used to represent the invisible and intangible facts that would otherwise remain only abstractions. When religious symbols are employed in an author's works, notably a poet, there is a clear indication that the writer is trying to answer questions of spiritual nature, divinity, and the beatific vision. The study helps to answer why symbols are so fundamental in religious literature, mainly that which deals with the esoteric side of dogma, especially in the Victorian era. It has been found that the overall imagery used in Procter's poetry is universal in nature but with clear biblical connotations.</p>

Introduction

Sacred symbols hold a significant function in religion, culture, and literature. The present study explores religious and biblical symbols in the poetic work *Legends and Lyrics* by Adelaide Anne Procter, a significant poet of the Victorian era. It relies on theological interpretations to explore the interconnection between literary and religious symbols. This study would help better understand the spiritual dimensions of Victorian literature in general and the feminist response in particular.

Through the capacity to make symbols, man creates a sense of the world and finds meaning in life (Cassirer, 1946). Using the ability to symbolise, the man stretches his ability to transcend, imagine and envision. Susanne Langer iterates that the "use of signs is the very first manifestation of mind" and "the power of understanding symbols...is the most characteristic mental trait of mankind" (Langer, 1938, pp. 21,72).

Evans describes that the objects of religious veneration, including all those things which form an element in the religious life of a believer and contribute to the exercise of the freedom to manifest their religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice, and observance (Evans, 2009, p. 63). These objects are symbolised to describe divinity and acts of sacred fulfilment. However, it is impossible to express religious convictions with considerable precision. The impression of a symbol is broader than that of an ordinary object of reverence (Evans, 2009, p. 64).

In his book *On Symbol and Allegory*, Schelling claims that a symbol's meaning can be found in its form as it concretises ideas. The most universally accepted symbol of the Christian faith is the *cross* which symbolises the sacrifice that Jesus Christ underwent for

humankind. Another widely spread and well-known symbol is the *fish*. It is one of the first Christian symbols and refers to Christianity as personal faith. Similarly, the *ram* or the *lamb* symbolises purity and innocence. For its innocent nature, it can also refer to Jesus himself. Similarly, the regular symbol for the church is the *ship*. In this metaphor, Jesus can be seen as a captain, the priests as officers, and believers as the crew (Frye, 1982). The Greek alphabet's first and last letters, 'alpha' and 'omega', are used to show that Jesus is everything: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Revelations 22:13).

Birds are usually perceived as symbols of the human soul. However, there are many types of birds with slightly different meanings. The blackbird symbolises sin, the crane shows loyalty, and the dove stands for the Holy Spirit. Both the eagle and phoenix represent resurrection. Also, the colours are of great importance in the Christian tradition. The critical study of Procter's poetry brings forth inherent Christian symbolism in several of her poems. She has used different symbols to represent the love of God, His word and His son. The critic H.J Gibbs has noted a deep admiration for Christian heroism in her poetry, which she symbolises through unnamed characters (Cassirer, 1946). For example, in her Poem *Strive, Wait and Pray*, she exclaims that striving is the ultimate secret of success, but it does not entail that only the desired object will be reached. One must believe that God can always bring a holier treasure whose dimensions become clear only later (Proctor, 1890, p. 59).

The present study seeks to understand not only Procter's religious sentiment but also intends to interpret Victorian womanhood. It was a time marked by scientific advancement and the industrial revolution, which put spiritual concerns on the back burner. As the authority of scripture became unstable, gender roles rooted within biblical symbols also destabilised. Poetry allowed the women to reinterpret the scriptural symbols to replicate their experiences in a patriarchal setting. Precisely, the poetry written during the rule of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 is defined as Victorian poetry. The significant features of Victorian poetry include a focus on sensory elements, a recurring religion and science conflict, and an interest in medieval fables and legends ("The Victorian Era England").

Legends and Lyrics expresses feminine poetic sensibility towards liturgical, ceremonial, and sacramental symbols recurring in the Bible. A mundane explanation of the holy scriptures is impossible without unearthing sacrosanct symbolism. Several Victorian poets, including Matthew Arnold, Christina Rossetti, Dante Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne, E. B. Browning, and Thomas Hardy, employ medievalist religious discourse and iconography, resulting in a distinctive philosophical and spiritual impact on their readers (Goldman, 1994, p. 251).

Literature Review

William Holman Hunt refers to specific and powerful symbols in Victorian poetry. He asserts that the image of the crucified Christ on the cross evokes the condition of faith. The Christian symbolism had unlimited dominion in the world of poetry. He claims that Tennyson's poetic style was allegorical and represented the soul's failure to receive the higher purpose of life. However, some symbolists mainly believed that the images of the fallen woman were so pervasive in Victorian writings and portraits that they introduced secular and religious hermeneutics (Cronin et al., 2002, p. 402).

Miller's book *Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers* offers sections on Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Miller records that for some Victorians, God was quite existent, whereas others mourned the disappearance of God. Some poets debated the attempts to bring God back to the world as a benevolent authority integral to nature and the human community. Miller quotes the famous lines from Arnold's

Stanzas from The Grande Chartreuse to pronounce this middle position (Guthrie, 2018):
Wandering between two worlds, one dead / The other powerless to be born.

Some works of Victorian poets, authors, and novelists have made elaborate use of religious symbolism in their writings. For example, in their book *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*, Lance St. and John Butler discuss Hardy's religious affiliation, style, choice of words, and characters. Butler narrates that Hardy's affection for the Anglican Church shaped his religious understanding, which is the most fundamental element of his art. Despite his fatalist ideology, he desired a religious belief, an explanation of the universe in supernatural terms, more desperately than his contemporaries. *An Apology to Late Lyrics and Earlier*, written in 1922, illustrates Hardy's emotional need and intellectual confusion in matters of religion and describes that he was no less religious than other poets like Milton, T. S. Eliot or D. H. Lawrence (Butler, 1977). His association with the Bible enhanced his chronological sense. He sees a thousand years as yesterday and expresses the steadiness of life. Butler professes Biblical resonances and symbols can be found massively in Hardy's fiction and poetry. They refer to incidents of the Old Testament, the stories of characters like Cain, Abel, Job, Moses, and David, among others. According to Butler, in *Jude, the Obscure*, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is symbolised through Jude's suffering and anguish (Butler, 1977, pp. 5, 6).

Fatima Saleem and Guhfran Jumaa discussed religiosity and sacred symbolism in Alfred Tennyson's *The Two Voices* and *In Memoriam* (Fatima Saleem, n.d.). They see Tennyson describing man's nature as restless and hasty in numerous life matters. The symbolism of the Holy Communion represents the body of Christ as has been described in the New Testament. Luke also advised his readers to share the body of Christ by participating in the Holy Sacrament (Luke, 9:56). Similarly, in Robert Browning's poems, Anderson has noticed repeated imagery of a man created in God's image (Anderson, 1979). Dorothea Beale has also found many scriptural images and symbols in his works (Beale, 1882).

Charles Dickens was a member of the Church of England and believed deeply in the historical Jesus as his spiritual teacher and a figure of deliverance. His moral teachings and novels symbolise the prevalent religious hypocrisy, greed, and arrogance. He has unearthed the church's negligence toward the poor in *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *A Christmas Carol* and *A Tale of Two Cities* (Stack, 2019).

The unique poetic style of Rossetti reflects biblical imagery. She exhibits the parables of Jesus Christ, where he preaches regarding the lilies of the field that have matchless beauty and do not struggle for their growth; God grows them from empty and barren soil and clothes them in incomparable colours and skins. To her, flowers and women represent humbleness and beauty. They have a uniqueness that shows their strength in moments of challenge. She advocates that women have a distinctive set of devout understanding while being objects of beauty (Scheinberg, 2002, p. 3).

Research Methodology:

The study is explorative and analytical in nature. A close reading of *Legends and Lyrics* has been employed with a detailed listing of religious references. These have been correlated with relevant Biblical references to ascertain the extent and variety of Procter's indulgence in the Biblical lore. The focus has remained on the use of clear religious symbols. Descriptive and explanatory approaches have helped the researchers analyse the poet's relevant themes, metaphors and images to fulfil her religious and liturgical ideals.

Religious Imagery in Procter's Works

In *Legends and Lyrics*, religious imagery is frequently employed. In her poem *Life and Death*, an imaginary devotee talks to the priest:

“What is Life, Father?”

“A Battle my child,

Where the strongest lance may fail,

Where the wariest eyes may be beguiled,

And the strongest heart may quail ...”

“What is Death, Father?”

“The rest, my child,

When the strife and the toil are o'er;

The Angel of God, who, calm and mild,

Says we need fight no more ...” (Proctor, 1890, p. 59).

The poem continues to speak in terms of choosing between life and death. The devotee wants to die, whereas the priest of God wants the struggle of life to continue. He is told that even though he is “weak and small” and the foes are “strong and tried”, the ultimate success would come to him. This is a clear reference to the prediction of Jesus Christ: ‘Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5), which in turn echoes the Psalms: ‘But the meek shall inherit the earth’ (37:11).

In her poem *God's Gifts*, Procter refers to the most important gift of God to ‘Earth’ – a weak, innocent, yet undefiled child, which is a reference to the birth of Jesus Christ. Similarly, in other poems, without explicit reference, Procter calls him by biblical names like the saviour, son of God, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the bread of life, light, and messenger, which are all biblical ideas (Zechariah 9:9). All the sects of Christianity believe in divinity, miraculous birth, power, execution, crucifixion, resurrection, and return to the world. Procter has made allusions to all these and has thus made her poetry an opportunity to preach general tenets of belief (Nixon, 2004).

Her poem *The Angel's Story* contains biblical allusions, metaphors, and even some parts of biblical verses. The imagery shows the miraculous birth of Jesus, details of surroundings in Bethlehem, and fulfilment of prophecies made by various seers, and the gospel (good news) for the underprivileged:

Many a one that night was merry

Who had toiled through all the year? (Proctor, 1890, p. 1)

In the above lines, *merry* and *toiled* represent paradoxical feelings because those who were toiled and tired celebrate the birth of their saviour. Isaiah, Luke, Matthew, and others have portrayed how joyous and cheerful the moment was for the underprivileged waiting for their deliverance. When Jesus was born, they celebrated happiness and merriment. In New Testament, the second chapter of Luke and the first chapter of Matthew represent the hope, joy, and cheering of the poor associated with the birth of their liberator. It is reflected further in the poem:

That night saw old wrongs forgiven,
Friends, long parted, reconciled;
Voices all unused to laughter,
Mournful eyes that rarely smiled (Procter, 1890, p. 2)

Procter's imagination and choice of words are cautious and vigilant, giving the readers the proper meaning and understanding. The phrase "old wrongs forgiven" has the complete story and presumably a perfect symbol and expression towards the beginning of the world. This phrase refers to how according to Bible, sin entered the world with the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Since then, man and God have been parted. Though Adam used to meet God daily and conversed with Him, the incident of disobedience separated them. In the line "Friends, long parted, reconciled", the word "Friends" symbolically establishes the relationship of God with humans. They have been friends and were parted long ago, but Jesus shed his blood and reconciled them. In the next stanza, she uses the symbol of "Costly Toys" that were presented to Jesus Christ and were lying beside him. Those costly toys were gold, frankincense, and myrrh and have a complete narrative of the Magi behind them. Gold remarks Jesus as king, frankincense symbolises his worldly service, whereas myrrh represents the incident of his crucifixion and resurrection (Frye 1982).

The books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah frequently caution against false teachers by elaborating on their wickedness. Procter's poem *A False Genius* echoes this and elaborates that the false teachers might be attractive, wise, loving and polite, but one should beware of their teachings that are more poisonous than serpents (Procter, 1890, p. 14).

In her poem *The Cradle Song of the Poor*, Procter refers to the weariness of life and the goodness of God: "God is good but life is dreary". She refers to every good and believing heart to be an angel of God that can help one sorrow cease from the world: "God has glory when his children / Bring his poor ones joy and peace! / Listen nearer while she sings / Sounds the fluttering of wings!" there is a close resemblance between this poem and the Gospel of John, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Procter claims that Jesus is the ultimate truth, and he should be the focus of one's faith. She warns of demons through her poems and declares spiritual discernment as part of faith. This is in line with the teachings of Paul, Peter, and other disciples who have emphasised the need for spiritual judgement because the anti-Christ will be in disguise. He may influence people, but he is not to be trusted (Matthew 7:15-17).

The title of the poem *Judge Not*, is similar to the teachings of Jesus about not being judgmental or giving verdicts on the face value of things. The caution regarding the differential of appearance and reality lies deep in all major systems of thought. Procter declares in the poem's first stanza that sometimes an apparent looking stain in someone's appearance or reputation may actually be a scar from a wound in the righteous path of God. In the Bible, Jesus Christ is reported to have said: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged? For, in the same way, you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Matthew-7:15) Ulrich Luz interprets these verses in the sense that God will judge and treat a person the way they judge and treat others. Consequently, even a lesser amount of judging by a person will bring great penance from God. When an individual judges someone, they find themselves perfect in their own eyes, which amounts to a sense of pride that, in turn, is a cardinal sin (Luz 1989). Procter furthers her argument by saying that sometimes an apparent defeat results in greater and surer success. At the poetic and philosophical level, Procter declares that if someone is seen to have fallen a long way into the abyss of sin, it is equally possible that they attain a similar height corresponding to the pain of realisation and love of God (Procter, 1890, p. 17).

Her images, allusion, metaphors and symbols are thus predominantly biblical and religious. In her poem *Friend Sorrow*, she suggests that one should not cheat one's heart by giving it hopes of fairer times and thus ruin the glory of the present. Instead, she recommends that the sorrows and griefs one bears today, strengthen and prepare one to bear future trials. Sorrow does not always break a person, but sometimes, it gives him a chance to enhance his capacity for forbearance. Like gold is purified by burning and melting in a crucible, and it also has to bear the hard punches of the hammer by the goldsmith, then it comes into its purest form; similarly, sorrows and sufferings purify one and enhance one's values in the estimation of God (Proctor, 1890, p. 18).

The poem *Three Rulers* has multidimensional scope for interpretations and themes. The arithmetic number of *three* is important in both the Old and New Testaments as it represents the Christian concept of the Trinity. These three rulers are the wise men who reached Jerusalem to see Jesus in the manger. They presented various gifts to Jesus and praised him. Their skills were precious, and they were the rulers of their respective towns or cities. The possible interpretation of Procter's *The Three Rulers* may be the struggle, love and zeal of the three wise men (magi) who were enthusiastic and passionate about seeing the little Jesus. Though they had to suffer a lot as Herod and the other ruling authorities of Jerusalem tried to punish them, they met Jesus and escaped safely to their countries (Learn Religions).

Another Ruler then I saw----

Love and sweet pity were his law

The greatest and least had part

(Yet most the unhappy) in his heart

The people, in a mighty band,

Rose, and drove him from the land! (Proctor, 1890, pp. 37-38)

The poem *A Doubting Heart* is another piece of writing where Procter discusses the importance of faith and doubt (Proverbs-4:23). The Old Testament describes many stories where God spoke to His people and told them not to be frightened and to have pure and faithful hearts. For example, when Israelites went to war, the situations were tragic and threatening. Still, the messengers like Abraham, Isaac, Noah, Moses, David and others preached the lesson not to doubt and have a faithful heart. They knew God was always with them and would never forsake them on any occasion (2-Chronicles-20). She takes the argument to its philosophical height where there is absolute darkness, and despair has engulfed any remnants of hope, and since the heart has started doubting, there is no sound of relief. And then there is a sudden gush of fresh air, stars appear in the skies and angels with their silver voices fill the air with hope. This is an instance of healing literature which is religious in nature through its sacred symbols (Proctor, 1890, p. 41).

In *A Doubting Heart* Procter's vision might as well have been driven by the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis when an angel came to Abraham and gave him the good news of having a son in his old age. He and his wife Sara were doubtful regarding the angel's statement, and Sara also laughed in her heart and said, how could they have a son at that old? God's angel assured Abraham and Sara that with God, everything was possible, and they were granted a son (Genesis-18-12). It also bears a relationship with the incident reported in the New Testament that represents the feeling of doubt that Peter expressed when he saw Jesus walking on water. Jesus felt his pain of self-doubt and affirmed to him that he could do

everything through his faith. But when Peter started walking on water, he suddenly got frightened by seeing the strong and heavy waves of water and started drowning. He shouted to Jesus and pleaded with him to come to his rescue. Jesus saved him and warned him against harbouring doubts in his heart. (Matthew-14:22-33).

Homeward Bound is richly symbolic and has many religious interpretations. Here the poet refers to the ultimate permanent residence in the hereafter that everyone is destined to reach. She starts this poem while describing life's difficulties and twice uses the figure of six and thirty years that shows her age when she was suffering from tuberculosis. She expresses that life is tiring and challenging, and everyone must struggle hard to lead it. Sometimes an individual feels alone, helpless, half dead and bruised, but life goes on, and man travels towards the place that has been prepared for him before he was born. Life is never easy for anyone; even the most favourite people of God had to struggle, and they were put in very difficult situations. They had to prove how faithful they were to their God. Similarly, the book of Genesis, Chapter 3, Verse 18, describes the reality of life and states that "the thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field" (Genesis 3:15-18). Thus poem after poem, Procter seems to indulge in the biblical lore and makes her poetry an occasion to describe Victorian feminine sensibility.

Throughout the poem, she refers to the mighty tempests that have ravaged ships off "red Algiers", sandstorms that have often hit "black moors of Barabary" and the passage of time in which every day has seemed to her like a year in span. She refers to "demon fate" and her own "tender vision". This feminine sensibility then attains directly to her time and space where she concludes:

Then I gazed at the great Ocean,
Till she grew a friend again;
And And because she knew old England,
I forgave her all my pain (Proctor, 1890, p. 51).

In her poem *The Pilgrims*, she again adopts a preaching stance of a mother nun. She refers to the uphill task of perseverance through life despite all its odds and oddities. She resolves not to give in to despair despite the swollen feet of being a pilgrim. She compares her condition with that of Christ himself:

More heavy was thy burthen,
More desolate Thy way;-
Oh Lamb of God who takest
The sin of the world away,
Have mercy on us (Proctor, 1890, p. 136).

Every stanza similarly ends with a deep sense of prayer of hope for a better tomorrow. In her poem *Incompleteness*, she shares the gist of her religious learning by suggesting that we should learn what she calls "the mystery of Progression". It entails a consistent intellectual march "towards a truer, deeper Life above". It says that spiritual equilibrium can only be achieved when human love is perfected in consonance with divine love (Proctor, 1890, p. 138). Thus, seeming incompleteness of human life is a movement into ultimate fulfilment. She frequently uses the words Heaven, Father, and the Angel of God in her poems. Even *Death* appears as a benign angel that must not be feared. It awaits the human souls at the

portals of the sky and kisses away the struggling breath of those who are in pain: "Thy treasures wait thee in the far-off skies, and Death, thy friend, will give them all to thee." (Proctor, 1890, p. xxxi).

Since she was a prayerful lady, she also prayed through her poetry. Her life shows piety, righteousness, and firm belief in the teaching of Jesus Christ. In her poem, *Strive Wait and Pray*, she uses the theme of the commandment of Jesus when he was with his disciples and instructs them to be awake and keep praying. The gospel of *Matthew*, Chapter 26, Verse 41 reads, "Stay awake and pray for strength against temptation" (Matthew 26:41). Proctor echoes the same:

Pray; though the gift you ask for...

Yet pray, and with hopeful tears;

But diviner will come one day (Proctor, 1890, p. 102).

Her 1855 poem *The Two Spirits* presents a dialogue between the Spirit of the Present and the Spirit of the Past. All time is divided between these two characters, and they talk and resolve the enigma of the universe. The Past entombs the great heroes and gems of history, and the Present boasts of those who will turn into memories. The poem universalises existence and concludes that striving for honour attains a deathless name in the heavens. The poem concludes that despite the significance of the historical time, the present moment promises more scope: "The Past's bright diadem had paled before / The starry crown the glorious Present wore" (Proctor, 1890, p. 190).

The more significant part of *Legends and Lyrics* includes religious poems that are liturgical, ceremonial and have biblical interpretations. A religious-minded reader can derive sacred themes from every piece of writing in this series. The other part contains multi-thematic poems such as optimism, sympathy, continuous struggle and chivalric behaviour which is also religious in nature as it deals with high morality. The poems like *The Angel of Death*, *A Dream*, *The Present* and *Changes* have the themes of cheerfulness, rejoicing and sorrow. Though they explicitly do not express religious teachings, their interpretations and symbolic meanings are similar to the teachings of Christianity. Each poem powerfully convinces its readers to believe in themselves and work to fulfil their dreams.

Conclusion

The overwhelming use of religious symbols in *Legends and Lyrics* proves the religious affiliations that Victorian times harboured. Charles Dickens acknowledged how Proctor's poems helped shape the readers' literary taste. Although there was a widespread desire to have recourse to religion during the growth of industry and colonial wealth during Victorian times, women were not socially in the habit of expressing their religious feelings through writing. Instead, poets like Elizabeth Barrette Browning, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Adelaide Anne Procter took the lead and produced religious and devotional poetry.

Procter's poetry is replete with the themes of Jesus's birth, suffering, anguish, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. It also carries the themes of optimism, goodwill, positivity, and continuous struggle. Her devotional and sacramental poems had been used in church as hymns due to a vivid sense of religious teaching, sacred allusions, metaphors and symbols. The way she expresses her faith in Christianity is simple, brief and authentic. Poems like *The Pilgrims*, *Judge Not*, *The Angel's Story*, *The Legends of Bregenz*, *A Tomb in the Ghent*, *The Storm*, *Life in Death* and *Death in Life* and *Homeward Bound* sound like sermons

delivered over the pulpit. Corresponding to the holy trinity, Procter seems to have achieved a poetic trinity of life, love, and death. These three forces seem to have a liberating influence on human life and destiny: "For Love is Life, and Death at last / Crowns it eternal and divine (Procter, 1890, p. 221). The study is expected to help future researchers who want to generally study the spiritual symbolism of the Victorian age or, more specifically, Procter's other works.

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