

The symbolism of clothing in Vietnamese New Poetry

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Abstract

Adopting a linguistic approach, this paper focuses on examining the image of clothing in Vietnamese New Poetry. Based on an analysis of representative poems, the study elucidates the symbolic meanings of áo through three main aspects: as a symbol of the pure and pristine beauty of Vietnamese women; as a repository of the warmth of love, imbued with subtle yet enduring emotional vibrations; and as an expression of the rustic soul of the countryside, closely connected to everyday life and traditional cultural values. The novelty of this paper lies in its treatment of clothing as a recurring symbolic motif capable of linking the lyrical self of New Poetry with the foundations of national culture, thereby contributing a more systematic perspective on the imagistic world and aesthetic characteristics of the Vietnamese New Poetry movement.

Keywords: Symbolism, clothing, New Poetry, symbolic meaning, love, rural soul

Introduction

In literary works, symbols play an important role as a special type of artistic image. They not only represent reality but also profoundly generalize layers of philosophical, emotional, and cultural meanings. Symbols enable writers and poets to convey abstract and elusive ideas through concrete, multivalent, and evocative images, thereby enriching the aesthetic and humanistic value of a work.

In Vietnamese New Poetry (1932–1945), the symbol of clothing emerges as a familiar and highly suggestive motif. It is not merely an item of dress but also a symbol of the pure and innocent beauty of Vietnamese women, of the poetic and naïve first love of schooldays, and of nostalgic memories of a beautiful, distant youth. The symbol of clothing contributes to the romantic and contemplative character of the New Poetry movement, while also expressing a longing for beauty and love and a deep attachment to national cultural traditions.

Content

1. An Overview of Symbols

Symbols constitute an essential component of human spiritual life and have long been a widely researched topic in both Vietnamese and international literary criticism. Owing to their polysemous, abstract, and sometimes ambiguous nature, symbols often cause difficulties for those who attempt to interpret them. Raymond Firth once observed that “each interpretation may lead to endless debates about its meaning” (translated by Dinh Hong Hai) [5]. Therefore, the decoding of symbols requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary studies with semiotics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and related fields in order to grasp their complex essence.

According to Hoang Phe, “a symbol is a representative image, an image of cognition that transcends sensation, providing us with the image of an object that remains in the mind after the object’s impact on the senses has ceased” [9, p. 259]. Since ancient times, human beings have employed symbols as a way of recording and generalizing their lived experience, as a form of thinking. In the Dictionary of

Literary Terms, a symbol is defined as “a mode of semantic transference in language or a special artistic form with great expressive power, capable of both generalizing the essence of a certain image and expressing a conception, an idea, or a profound philosophy about human beings and life” [7, p. 23].

From a linguistic perspective, a symbol is an object, image, or phenomenon encoded as a message to evoke meanings that extend beyond itself. This process involves a transformation between the signifier and the signified, forming either a conventional or associative relationship. It is precisely this non-identical yet elastic relationship between the two elements that constitutes the basis for the polysemy of symbols, especially in literary discourse. Pham Duc Duong argues that “a symbol is always a two-sided aesthetic sign: the signifier consists of the material forms in which an idea exists within the real world, while the signified comprises the meanings, values, and messages belonging to the conceptual world hidden within the symbol” [4].

2. The Meaning of the Symbol of Clothing in Vietnamese New Poetry

Within the course of the Vietnamese New Poetry movement (1932–1945), alongside familiar symbols such as the moon, wind, and fire, the symbol of clothing emerged as a highly evocative artistic motif. Unostentatious and unadorned, clothing enters poetry through its intimate, everyday beauty, yet it carries the most delicate vibrations of the human soul. When associated with the image of women, clothing is not merely an object of daily life but a convergence of beauty, love, and national cultural identity.

2.1 The Pure and Innocent Beauty of Vietnamese Women

In New Poetry, the symbol of clothing is often chosen by poets to depict the pure and limpid beauty of Vietnamese women - a beauty that is both present in real life and elevated into an image imbued with dreamlike qualities. In *This Is Vĩ Dạ Village (Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ)* by Hàn Mặc Tử, the

white clothing is not only a realistic descriptive detail but also a focal point where light, mist, and emotion converge.

Dreaming guests, dreaming guests
The white áo grows too white to be seen.
Here, mist and haze blur human figures;
Who knows whose love is deep, whose heart sincere?
(áo: traditional Vietnamese garment, often associated with purity and femininity).

“Your white áo is so white it can hardly be seen” - the whiteness dissolves into the misty haze of Huế, rendering the image of the young woman indistinct and ethereal, at once intimate and distant. Here, the áo seems to melt into the surrounding space, evoking the fragile, fleeting nature of idealized beauty, while simultaneously suggesting an almost insurmountable distance in love. Through this image, Han Mac Tu conveys his desperate yearning for pure beauty together with a deeply personal sense of pain and obsession. Within Hàn Mặc Tử’s poetic world, the image of the “(“the green hem of an áo” (tả áo biếc) in the opening stanza of *Spring at Its Ripeness* (Mùa xuân chín) further intensifies the depiction of the clear, tender beauty of a rural maiden:

In the blushing sunlight, dreamlike mist dissolves,
Thatched rooftops glimmer, speckled with gold.
The teasing wind rustles the green hem of an áo,
By the trellis of star jasmine—spring’s shadow softly passes.

The áo does not appear directly but is merely heard “rustling” in the wind, allowing the human figure to blend into the spring landscape. The green hue of the áo evokes the freshness of early spring—youthful, gentle, and soft—while creating a subtle harmony with the new sunlight, the thatched roofs, and the jasmine trellis. The áo thus becomes a sign of youthful vitality and of a beauty that is modest and shy, imbued with the rustic soul of the countryside.

If Hàn Mặc Tử tends toward a mystical and dreamlike sensibility, in Huy Cận the image of the white áo of a schoolgirl in the poem *White Áo* (Áo trắng) appears with a beauty that is pure, innocent, and deeply rooted in everyday life:

Simple white áo, pure white dreams,
Yesterday you came, your eyes as clear as your heart.
Light suddenly blossomed. As you approached,
Jade heels gathered fragrance, your steps scattering rosy hues.

The long white áo of the schoolgirl becomes a gentle focal point within the expansive, subdued space characteristic of Huy Cận’s poetry. It not only accentuates the innocence of schooldays but is also associated with the first, naïve stirrings of youthful love. In this way, the white áo emerges as a symbol of a simple yet enduring beauty, of pristine memories deeply imprinted on the human soul.

Thus, across diverse voices and poetic styles, the symbol of the áo in Vietnamese New Poetry contributes to the portrayal of the pure and immaculate beauty of Vietnamese women, while enriching the aesthetic depth and emotional resonance of the poetic world of this period.

2.2 Traces of the Warmth of Love

In Vietnamese New Poetry, the áo is often elevated into a symbol of love and longing. Closely attached to the human

body, clothing carries the wearer’s warmth, rhythm of life, and emotional presence; it therefore readily becomes a repository for subtle, unspoken vibrations of affection. When entering poetry, the áo is no longer merely an object for covering or keeping warm, but is transformed into a symbol of care, waiting, and sacrifice. It is precisely here that love is expressed in a restrained yet enduring manner. In the poem *Lady Bân’s Cold* (Rét nàng Bân by Te Hanh, the áo appears as a crystallization of silent devotion and the benevolent beauty of Vietnamese womanhood:

When you knit a warm áo for me,
The wind still passes through your cold hands.
...
Soft wool threads compared with tangled heartstrings,
The áo is finished—yet winter is already gone!
...
You send me the áo, afraid I might feel wronged,
I receive it, yet hesitate, fearing to trouble you.
A cadre’s life leaves little leisure,
For public duty sometimes outweighs private feeling.
...
Long ago, Lady Bân stitched a warm áo for her husband;
When it was finished, winter had vanished.
Lady Bân wept, heaven and earth shed pitying tears,
And sent back the cold in answer to her waiting.
Wearing your áo, I can feel
The loving hand twice as warm.
Time understands our hearts so well:
Where there is human affection, there is Lady Bân’s cold.

Each knitted stitch is linked not only to the cold of the season but also to “tangled heartstrings”—to anxiety, longing, and patient waiting. By the time the áo is completed, winter has passed, leaving behind the aching regret of the one who made it. Drawing on the ancient legend of Lady Bân, the poem expands into a profound humanistic symbol: the áo bears the warmth of loving hands and silent sacrifice, making “the loving hand twice as warm” and transforming the cold itself into testimony to human affection. Here, the áo not only warms the body but also warms the soul, becoming a measure of sincere and enduring love.

With a similar significance, in Xuân Diệu’s poem *Áo em* (Your Áo), the áo is constructed as a delicate symbol of restrained yet deep affection:

Your áo still holds your shape,
Hanging on the rack, stirring my tenderness.
Small, ordinary shoulders,
Sleeves at the elbows recall your slender arms.
Slightly worn here and there,
Your áo is dyed deep blue, vast as the distant sea;
The honest buttons on the front—
Too short now—you left it to wear at home.
Looking at your áo, I feel such love,
I understand the hardship that made your arms so thin.
How close your áo is to me now!
In days of cassava and sweet potatoes, we shared together.
Your áo carries a faint scent of areca flowers,
Your áo is steeped in the dusky hue of agarwood;
By day remembered, by night missed,
Your áo—ripened by sun, seasoned by dew—I keep waiting...

The áo evokes the young woman's figure through "small shoulders" and "slender arms," while also preserving traces of a life of hardship in its "worn places" and "honest buttons." Gazing at the áo, the male speaker sees not only the beloved's image but also understands the poverty and deprivation she has endured. The áo becomes a substitute presence of the loved one—"closer to me now"—sharing the lean days of cassava and sweet potatoes. Beyond that, the áo is saturated with time and memory, carrying the fragrance of areca blossoms and agarwood, crystallizing the "nine suns and ten dews" of life and love.

In Luu Trong Lu's poem *Knitting an Áo (Đan áo)*, the image of the áo emerges as a symbol imbued with love and deep, muted emotion:

Day by day you knit the woolen áo,
Indifferent, leaving love to grow cold.
When did winter quietly arrive?
Fallen leaves fill the space beneath the eaves.

The woolen áo, seemingly warm through meticulous care, conceals within it an unnameable loneliness and sorrow. As winter silently spreads and leaves accumulate beneath the eaves, the natural scene resonates with the human state of mind, highlighting a coldness not only of weather but also of the heart. In this context, the áo proves powerless against the chill, just as love appears no longer strong enough to hold onto a happiness that is gradually fading. Through the symbol of the áo, Luu Trong Lu subtly expresses the missed chances of fate and a gentle, lingering sadness—a characteristic emotional tone of New Poetry.

In Luu Quang Vũ's poem *Áo cũ (The Old Áo)*, the image of the "old áo" is elevated into a profound artistic symbol, vividly expressing "love," especially the sacred bond of maternal love, through simple yet haunting details. The áo that grows "shorter each day" and whose shoulders are "frayed and faded" reflects not only the child's growth but also the countless hardships and sacrifices the mother has silently borne so that her child might be well fed and clothed. This wear and tear become living proof of a mother's unconditional love. The symbolic climax lies in the act of mending:

Only when mending the áo does Mother realize how fast
I've grown;

Her eyesight no longer clears as she threads the needle.
My áo bears the stitches sewn by Mother's hands—
The more I love Mother, the more I cherish the áo.

Each stitch represents a sacrifice of health and youth, embodying a love that is silent yet enduring. To cherish the old áo is to cherish the mother herself, for the garment is soaked with her warmth and affection. In the final stanza, the symbol expands into a universal message:

Learn to cherish those old garments,
So that we may cherish our mothers all the more.

The old áo thus becomes an emotional bridge, a place where love is preserved, awakening gratitude and reverence for the mother—the source of all love in life. Through this simple symbol, Luu Quang Vu conveys the message that genuine love often resides in the most ordinary things, and that they

must be treasured to preserve the sacred bond of motherhood.

Similarly, in Te Hanh's poem *The Patched Basket (Chiếc rổ may)*, the áo is associated with the sacred mother-child bond, emerging as a highly evocative symbol linked to longing for one's mother and the loneliness of a child far from home. The áo, whose function is to protect and keep warm, is now torn and no longer capable of shielding the child from the cold wind, thereby suggesting deprivation both material and emotional. The wish to "return home for Mother to mend it" expresses a yearning to return to the protective embrace of the mother, a place of care, love, and peace. Thus, the áo becomes a symbol of maternal love and family warmth, powerfully conveying human loneliness and the longing to be loved:

Mother! My áo is torn—
How can I return home
For you to mend it? I feel cold,
The wind slips in, soaking memory into my skin.

2.3 The Rustic Soul of the Countryside

Alongside its role as a symbol of love and longing, the image of the áo also stands out as a symbol of the everyday life of rural people in Northern Vietnam. The áo is not merely an ordinary item of clothing but vividly reflects simplicity, rusticity, and traditional cultural values embedded in daily practices. Through poems such as *Rustic Roots (Chân quê)*, Nguyen Binh portrays familiar images—objects closely associated with agricultural labor, weaving looms, water-carrying, apricot picking, and village festivals.

Velvet scarves, silk trousers in bustling display.
A snap-buttoned áo—how you torment me so!
Where is the coarse silk bodice?
The homespun belt dyed soft rose for spring?
Where is the four-panel áo?
The crow-beak headscarf, the black peasant trousers?

These details evoke a simple rural life intimately connected with rice fields, bamboo hedges, and village ponds, while also expressing the modest, shy beauty of country girls. By contrast, in the same poem, the image of the "snap-buttoned áo"—a symbol of the influx of urban civilization—becomes a source of sorrow and lingering pain, as the girl who "returns from the town" changes her appearance and gradually distances herself from traditional beauty. Similarly, in the poem *Spring Rain (Mưa xuân)*, Nguyen Binh writes:

Alone I trudge along the way home,
How short is not that strip of dike at all.
A thin áo shields my head from the heavy rain,
The late night deepens the chill and the sorrow.

The line "a thin áo shields my head from the heavy rain" portrays the fragility yet resilience of a young woman during cold drizzling days, trudging silently along the long dike—a thoroughly ordinary image closely tied to labor and daily hardship. Through such imagery, the áo in Nguyen Binh's poetry is not merely a realistic detail but a multilayered symbol that both preserves the rustic soul of the countryside and articulates anxiety over social change amid the intersection of tradition and modernity in the

1930s–1940s. It is precisely for this reason that the áo contributes to the enduring vitality and profound humanistic value of his rural poetry.

Conclusion

Through an examination and analysis of the symbol of the áo in the Vietnamese New Poetry movement (1932–1945), it becomes evident that this is a distinctive artistic motif, rich in suggestiveness and layered in meaning, playing an important role in shaping the characteristic romantic and lyrical quality of the period. From the white áo in Hàn Mặc Tử's *This Is Vĩ Dạ Village (Đây thôn Vĩ Dạ)* - a symbol of pure, fragile, and ethereal beauty and of the yearning for unfulfilled love—to the white schoolgirl's áo in Huy Cận's *White áo (Áo trắng)*, embodying the innocence and sincerity of youthful love; from the green hem of an áo fluttering in the spring breeze in *Spring at Its Ripeness (Mùa xuân chín)* to the worn-shouldered áo with its honest buttons in Xuân Diệu's *Your áo (Áo em)*, which conveys a rustic, enduring love rooted in hardship; from the four-panel áo and snap-buttoned áo in Nguyễn Bình's poetry, which both preserve the rustic spirit of the countryside and express anxiety over the encounter between tradition and modernity; to the old áo in Luu Quang Vu's poem of the same name, a profound symbol of sacred maternal love, silent sacrifice, and gratitude for the simple things that accompany a life over time.

The symbol of the áo is not merely a garment but a bridge between the visible and the invisible, between everyday reality and the inner world, between the individual and the community. It reflects a longing for ideal beauty, pure love, nostalgia for youth, and attachment to national culture, while also conveying deep anxieties in the face of the passage of time and social change.

Thus, the symbol of the áo enriches the aesthetic and humanistic values of Vietnamese New Poetry, affirms the poets' distinctive creative talents, and leaves a lasting impression on readers of the traditional beauty and enduring vitality of modern Vietnamese poetry.

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