

“Literature is always personal, always one man’s vision of the world, and his experiences”: An Insight into W. B. Yeats’ Poetry

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ABSTRACT: *The Irish Literary Movement was one of the most remarkable manifestation of the romantic revival of the late nineteenth century and W.B. Yeats was the leader of the movement and its greatest figure. The early poetry of Yeats is steeped in the spirit of the rich mystic mythology of the Celtic race. But very soon Yeats evolved into a “modern” poet. From the self-conscious romanticism of the early poems to the complex magic of Byzantium or the packed austerity of the Crazy Jane poems, had been a long and tedious journey for Yeats. Yeats worked out his poetic salvation in his own way and he never lost the compelling individuality of his accent. Yeats’ poetic imagination was nurtured by vague Pre-Raphaelite notions, knowledge of the French Symbolists, earthiness from Sligo and Rosses, folklore and a racy dialect from Dublin, especially in the ‘lull in the politics’ that followed the death of Parnell. Thus we see that the social and literary milieu of the time led to the flowering of Yeats’ poetic genius. To understand Yeats’ poetry one has to be familiar with his interests in magic, occultism, theosophy and the complex symbolism which keeps changing meaning from poem to poem.*

KEYWORDS: *Poetry, mystic mythology, Byzantium, Symbolism, romanticism, occultism, theosophy*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

William Butler Yeats was one of the greatest English-language poets of the 20th century. William Butler Yeats was born on June 13, 1865, in Dublin, Ireland, the oldest child of John Butler Yeats and Susan Mary Pollexfen. Yeats spent much of his early years in London, where his father was studying art, but frequently returned to Ireland as well. He spent his early childhood in London. His father and brother were painters. In the mid-1880s, Yeats pursued his own interest in art as a student at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin. Following the publication of his poems in the Dublin University Review in 1885, he soon abandoned art school for other pursuits.

Yeats published his first works in the mid-1880s while a student at Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. He was a keen worker in the Renaissance of the Irish theatre in the 1900. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He penned rich works, including *The Tower* (1928) and *Words for Music, Perhaps and Other Poems* (1932). Yeats, died in 1939, is remembered as one of the leading Western poets of the 20th century.

The Irish Literary Movement revival came in the late 19th century. The early poetry of Yeats deals with the spirit of the rich mystic mythology of the Celtic race. But gradually his style changed. As a reaction to the verbal imprecision and lushness of the Romantics the Imagist movement emerged. Their leaders were T.S. Hulme and Ezra Pound. Yeats was one of the several poets who were influenced by this new attitude. However he never lost interest with the Anglo Irish culture in which he was brought up.

After returning to London in the late 1880s, Yeats met writers Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson and George Bernard Shaw. He also became acquainted with Maud Gonne, a supporter of Irish independence. This revolutionary woman served as a muse for Yeats for years. He even proposed marriage to her several times, but she turned him down. He dedicated his 1892 drama *The Countess Kathleen* to her.

Around this time, Yeats founded the Rhymers' Club poetry group with Ernest Rhys. He also joined the Order of the Golden Dawn, an organization that explored topics related to the occult and mysticism. While he was fascinated with otherworldly elements, Yeats' interest in Ireland, especially its folktales, fueled much of his output. The title work of *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *Other Poems* (1889) draws from the story of a mythic Irish hero.

In addition to his poetry, Yeats devoted significant energy to writing plays. He teamed with Lady Gregory to develop works for the Irish stage, the two collaborating for the 1902 production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Around that time, Yeats helped found the Irish National Theatre Society, serving as its president and co-director, with Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge. More works soon followed, including *On Baile's Strand*, *Deirdre* and *At the Hawk's Well*.

Following his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917, Yeats began a new creative period through experiments with automatic writing. The newlyweds sat together for writing sessions they believed to be guided by forces from the spirit world, through which Yeats formulated intricate theories of human nature and history. They soon had two children, daughter Anne and son William Michael.

Yeats continued to write until his death. Some of his important later works include *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917), *A Vision* (1925), *The Tower* (1928) and *Words for Music Perhaps and Other Poems* (1932). Yeats passed away on January 28, 1939, in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France. The publication of *Last Poems and Two Plays* shortly after his death further cemented his legacy as a leading poet and playwright.

Though Yeats was influenced by Imagist movement but he maintained his individual style. The great stories of Irish history and Irish revolution provided him the background of his poetry. Even in his early poetry in which he dealt with the folk themes he was able to balance the contrasting pair of images such as human and fairy, natural and artificial modern and ancient and conveyed more suggestive patterns of meaning than might have been expected from such material. He was concerned from the very beginning with opposites.

His imagination was stirred by various factors. From London he got some vague Pre Raphaelite notions and some knowledge of the French symbolists. From Sligo he got earthiness and folk lore steeped in racy dialect. From Dublin, especially after the death of Parnell he got himself rooted in a National Literary Movement.

Yeats was a dreamer and visionary. He was fascinated by folk lore, ballad and the superstitions of the Irish peasantry. He gave a system of thought, which he had enunciated in his book “*A Vision*.” He has tried to bring back the simplicity and completeness of the earlier ages and blend it with the modern ideas of good and evil. He had a strong conviction that the true singer was one who told the most ancient story so that it is applied to the people of his time. In almost all his poems he dealt with the themes from ancient Ireland. He dealt with the contemporary themes also but they were again wrapped in the garb of ancients. In order to understand his poetry one has to be familiar with his interests in magic, occultism, and theosophy. He evolved a complex symbolism which keeps on changing from poem to poem.

Through out his poetic career Yeats kept on changing or we can say evolving. There was a major change in his later poetry as compared to the earlier one. In the early stage of his poetry he believed in the theory of art for life’s sake. He agreed with his father that dramatic poetry should be preferred as it was clear instead of lyric poetry which is vague. But his poetry was essentially lyrical. Later on under the influence of the French Symbolists and English Aesthetes he favoured pure poetry. Now he advocated art for art’s sake. There were no ornamentations in this poetry. In the last phase of his life he tried to reconcile both these strains i.e. art with life. he was convinced that life of the past can be made relevant to the present by the power of the poet’s imagination. He said literature should be guided by passions and beliefs of the ancient times otherwise it is a mere chronicle. He said literature is the expression of the self. But there should be fusion of the personal and the impersonal to realize the goal of good poetry.

Characteristics of W.B. Yeats’ Poetry

Yeats’ poetry is infused with multiple layers of meanings. He had training in the field of art. He studied in Dublin school of Art. He had a keen interest in the field of mystic religion, supernatural and the ancient stories. In his early poems his echoes the past glory of Shelly and Spenser. He was influenced by Pre Raphaelites also. But his themes were invariably from the Irish background. He was brought up under the spell of Irish folk tales and myths. He was interested in the songs and ballads of the rustic peasants. Gaelic legends contributed greatly in the development of his system of thought. In the introduction to his famous book “*A Vision*” he wrote “I wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet all is created or could create, part of the one history, and that the soul’s.”

His poetic career spans over a period of fifty years. He always tried to evolve further in the world of his art as well as his convictions. His poetry became mature and complex gradually as his thoughts. There is continuity in his poetry. The seeds of his great poetry later on can be traced in his early poems. He began writing poems in the romantic and Pre Raphaelite tradition. The imagery used in the earlier poetry is vague and decorative. He used Irish mythology in a fresh and vivid manner and it impressed everyone. It was poetry of classical myths and legends garnished with the freshness of modern age.

With the passage of time Yeats moved away from the realm of romanticism. His poetry became more elaborate and more mysterious. His earlier phase culminated in “*The Wind Among the Reeds*” in 1899. His style also changed. It was now more simple and realistic. There is a clash of opposites in his poetry. The contradiction of the human and non human, of the spiritual and the physical, the sensuous and the artistic, physical decay and intellectual maturity, the past and the present, the personal and the impersonal always pervade his poetry. These opposites are present in his poetry through out. In his earlier poems these are in a rough form and later on they are synthesized and the dichotomy is resolved. They are blended as an essential condition of human life.

In 1917 he married Georgie Hyde Lees. This marriage was a source of another phase in his poetic career. His wife shared his religious and mystic views. She was involved in automatic writing. She thought she was inspired and guided by some higher spirits and she was only a medium, a tool to convey the wisdom of higher planes. Yeats took inspiration from the automatic writing of his wife. He composed thousands of pages out of this automatic writing. Later on he compiled this philosophy in his book “A Vision.” It was a system of symbolism. It dealt with various types of human personality. It also talks about the supernatural and the gyres of historical change. The symbols used in his early poetry are simple and easy to understand. Gradually in later poetry these symbols become more complex and individual. These symbols recur in his various poems but with a different meaning. Symbols like the tower, the winding stair, the gyres and the swan are highly charged with his philosophy and they convey different meanings in different poems.

Yeats took the folktales and myths as the raw material and moulded them in a modern framework. Yeats’ imagination was mythopoetic. He experimented with different systems of thought, created his own myths or adapted them from the mythological tales of old Ireland. He took the past and impersonal material and created their counterparts in the present and personal themes. He managed to glorify the present and impart to it the universal significance of a myth. He invented new myths or used the old ones in a modern context. There is a streak of mysticism in his poetry and the different meanings that particular symbol takes on in various poems. His poetry sometimes looks obscure because of this complexity of symbols.

Yeats experimented with different verse forms. He moved away from the traditional iambic meter. His imagination is full of fire and fantasies. He used big statements like the days grow dragon ridden. He also used the device of self dramatization. He often projects his personality in the poems. It was well explained by him in his theory of a mask. He has developed the theory that the poet in the act of creation is not seeking his self, but a mask which is his anti self. It is the opposite of all that he is in real life. he feels that the tragic poet is in conflict both with the world and the self. The conflict between the acceptance of the natural world and the denial of it, and the assumption of the mask is the theme of Yeats’s greatest verse “The Tower” and the two Byzantium poems.

He took great interest in the past. His imageries are drawn from the old world and the contemporary scene is invested with the past symbols. In his last poems we have the glorification of violence and war and the celebration of sexuality. These poems are highly charged with energy. These are full of passion and fervor. Yeats’ poetry offers a wide range of themes. He matured from early romantic influence to a tougher and terser writing.

Symbolism of W.B. Yeats

Yeats’ poetry is great panorama of symbols steeped in ancient mythology and rich resources. The same symbol gives a new colour when it is used in subsequent poems and enriches the beauty of the wide canvass of his poetry. His symbols are derived from old legends, occult studies, automatic writing and prophetic dreams. He believed that great memory of nature preserved the legends of all nations. Through the study of Irish legends he came in contact with the great memory of nature.

Yeats was inspired by Baudelaire and Mallarme. But his symbolism is different from them. Arthur Symons called him the chief representative of the Symbolist Movement. The French symbolist poet Mallarme believed in the diction that to name is to destroy but to suggest is to create. Yeats was trained at the school of art in Dublin. He never forgets the concrete and visual which was the starting point. He adhered to Blake’s emphasis on hard rectitude and certainty. When he composed “The Tower” he said he need not make any suggestion, except the tower should not be too unlike the real object, or rather it should suggest the real object.

In his words a symbol is the possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame. Symbols are not merely denotative but are also connotative. The symbol should convey a host of associations in the reader’s mind apart from its literal meaning. The word rose not only tells about a flower but it also evokes images of beauty and love. Yeats believed that symbols are a part of our consciousness and they come to you. They choose to be conveyed through your words and you don’t choose them. They are a part of collective consciousness which Yeats described as Anima Mundi. He said that there are numberless meanings hidden in ancient symbols. The poet touches the realm of ancient knowledge enshrined in collective consciousness to give meaning to his poems. Yeats took his symbols from many resources such as Irish folk lore and mythology, magic, the occult disciplines, philosophy, metaphysics and paintings. He compressed several meanings in a single symbol. He got a sword as a gift. He used this symbol to convey a host of meanings. It could convey the soul unaffected by time, and tattered covering stood for the old and decayed body which could not protect the soul. It became a symbol of war and love.

Symbols are of two types, the traditional and personal. Many poets have created their personal symbolism. William Blake conceived a world of symbolism which was a complex system but the symbols in his poems don’t have shifting identity. Once you understand his philosophy they are easy to decode. Yeats was a member of the Hermetic Student of the Golden Dawn. The Rose was the central symbol of this theosophist

society. Traditionally the rose is a symbol of love. We have an example of Robert Burns’ poem “O my luvie is like a red, red rose.” Rose as a central symbol of this society was interpreted in new different dimensions and layers of meanings. In the volume *The Rose*, Rose is a key symbol. It symbolizes intellectual beauty and austerity. It is a symbol of beauty like the beauty of women like Maud Gonne. Numbers of poems are composed around such key symbols and each new poem adds to the meaning of the same symbol used in previous poems. Such symbols are rooted in old legends and mythology. The symbol of Swan recurs in many poems. There is symbol of Helen which symbolizes destructive beauty like Maud Gonne.

The symbol of dance often appears in his poetry. It is used as a symbol of patterned movement. It is also used as an ecstatic joy; it conveys the perfect unity of soul and the universe which is at peace and joy with each other. In the last stanza of poem “Among School Children” the symbol of dance conveys the concept of unity. It again talks about the balance and unity of mind and body. It suggests that we cannot separate the part from the whole and same is the case of soul and body. Byzantium is also used as a symbol of unity and perfection. Byzantium is a symbol of ideal state. The different aspects of life are in harmony in this place. The practical life is in unison with the life of ideas. In this place the art and life complement each other. He wants to go to the world of Byzantium and he rejects this world of birth and death. He wants to travel to that perfect world where art is timeless. In the poem “The Second Coming” the phrase falcon and the falconer has a symbolic reference. He is dissatisfied with the present dispensation but there is a heavenly spark when he talks about ceremony of innocence. Winding stairs, gyres and spinning tops are some symbols which are important in his later poetry.

Yeats took a keen interest in occultism also. In 1890 he joined the Golden Dawn a secret society that practiced ritual magic. The society offered initiation in a ten levels. First seven levels were achievable by common man and the last three were in the domain of magus. A magus was a blessed one who knew the eternal secrets of supernatural wisdom and he can have extended life with the help of magic. Yeats was fascinated by the idea and he reached up to sixth level. His wife also joined the society. Though Yeats was impressed by the force of occultism but as a poet he remained in touch with the common activities of physical world. He was inspired by romantic poets. He was inspired by Keats’ interest in the pursuit of life. Though his early poetry is full of visionary ideas and occult symbolism and it is somewhat similar to William Blake’s style.

Yeats explored the field of mysticism also. His wife underwent a psychic phenomenon called automatic writing. It was presumed that she is the medium through which the spirits from the higher world send information. Yeats had more than four hundred sessions of automatic writing with his wife and in the process he composed four thousand pages. He evolved his theory about life that there are some patterns that always exist and manifest themselves in different ages. The most important is the theory of the gyres. Gyres are the mixture of opposites of both personal and historical events. He said that gyres were initiated by the divine impregnation of a mortal woman – the rape of Leda by Zeus and later on the conception of Mary. In the space of 2000 years some important events occur at the midpoint i.e. 1000 year.

Yeats used symbols from ordinary life and familiar traditions. He became a member of Rhymer’s Club. It was a group of London poets who frequently met to read and discuss poems. They stressed subjectivity and fine craftsmanship. It is said by many critics that Yeats was greatly influenced by French Symbolist movement. Yeats came across the Mallarmé and other French symbolists through the translations of Arthur Symonds. But Yeats’ symbolism is different from the French symbolists. His symbolism was a melting pot of theories of occult, magic, automatic writing and old legends. He invests the old legends with new hues and colours. With the growth of his poetic career his symbolism became more complex and obscure. It added the richness to his poetry.

The Irish Background of Yeats’ Poetry

Yeats belonged to the Protestant, Anglo Irish minority. This minority controlled the overall affairs of Ireland. They were born in Ireland but they considered themselves English people. But Yeats was firm in his loyalty towards Ireland. He lived in London for many years but he was always connected with his Irish roots. Yeats’ poetry is deeply steeped in Irish folklore and legends. He has not only used the Irish mythology in his poetry but he continuously endeavored to transcend the folk lore themes and create new poems out of the classic material. He always desired for and worked for Ireland’s independence. His art was also a vehicle for carrying forward the struggle of independence by taking the help of cultural roots and stories from the past. He said in his work “Autobiographies” that all the races had the first unity in the common mythological past. He himself tried to create the counterparts of the ancient stories in his poems.

In 1885 he met John O’ Leary, a famous patriot. John O’ Leary came back to Ireland after an imprisonment and exile of twenty years. He suffered because of his revolutionary activities. O’Leary was a strong supporter of Irish books, music and folk songs. Yeats was inspired by O’ Leary and he started composing poems based on Irish legends, folklore and ballads. Yeats moved from his early streak of romanticism to the poetry for a cause of Ireland. Because of his focus on Irish themes he has to move to London. But there also he

remained devoted to the Irish subjects. He wrote poems, plays, novels and short stories soaked in Irish background. He was acquainted with Maud Gonne who was also devoted to Irish nationalism. Yeats fell in love with her but she never reciprocated his feelings. He was now more devoted to Irish nationalism after meeting Maud Gonne. He produced nationalistic plays as “The Countess Kathleen” and “Cathleen ni Houlihan”. He projected her as the personification of Ireland in the title role.

He tried to revive the folk art which he considered to be the golden dream of king and peasant. He considered Irish folk tale as one of the oldest aristocracies of thought. He believed that Irish folk lore and legends are priceless and they are the source from which the Irish imagination should take strength. He was greatly influenced by a great Irish patriot John O’ Leary. He sought imaginative connection in the Irish places and names. “The Wanderings of the Oisín” and “The Countess Cathleen” are soaked in Irish background. Yeats lived in an era which was full of trouble. Many of his poems are coloured in political tone of the time. His poem “September 1913” is about the municipal controversy in Dublin in the year 1913. He wanted to revive the dignity of culture in Ireland. He was sad that the fine values and dignity of art is under threat by the growing materialism of Irish middle class and the censorship. He composed many other poems about political situation and he was criticized for this. His personal life was troubled on account of his involvement in troubled political scene. But he considered his contribution as a step toward the Irish cause.

The Easter uprising of the 1916 provided him another chance to reflect on the political scene through his poetry in the poem “Easter 1916”. The uprising has changed everything. The Ireland of the “Easter 1916” is the Ireland of common people who worked hard. It was a great attempt to renew the Irish revolution by restoring its soul. In many poems he laments the weaknesses of the Irish people. Some beautiful poems like “A Prayer for My Daughter” and “The Tower” capture the beauty of Ireland and the Sligo country where he lived as a child.

Yeats’ love and pride in Irish roots was manifested in literary and artistic sense. The literary contribution of Yeats is much more than merely political. He was primarily concerned with the revival of old glory, the refined artistic taste than the agenda and struggle of parties and groups around him. Maud Gonne has a great influence on his poetry. He was also influenced by Lady Augusta Gregory who was a symbol of old Irish aristocracy. He collaborated with her in the collection of old legends and ballads and in the foundation of Irish National Stage. This stage later on is known as the Abbey Theatre.

Yeats loved Ireland but his nationalism was liberal and modern. He gradually moved away from the contemporary fanaticism of Irish politics. Yeats grew in the scenic beauty of Ireland. His identity and role as a poet began to take concrete shape in the context of Irish Nationalism and his effort to provide the Irish National Movement some finer values rather than simply mere hatred for the English.

II. CONCLUSION:

Thus after having made this survey, we find that Yeats chose various themes for his poems. He patiently probed into different fields of learning to find the appropriate theme and the means of presenting it to his readers. Even when he took personal themes, he made it universal by relating it to Irish folk-lore and mythology. Like any true artist his aim was to reach the ultimate truth and he resorted to magic and mysticism in his poetry to come to this truth.

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