

Various themes and their treatment in W.B. Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper discusses various prominent themes in the poems of W.B. Yeats. The article analyses several poems by Yeats and does not attempt to include all the poems composed by him due to the fact that being so inclusive is beyond the scope of such a paper or the ambitions of its author.

Keywords: occultism, romantic, nationalism, mythology

Introduction

The question of Yeats's identity has always been an important issue in the criticism of the Irish poet, beginning perhaps with Richard Ellmann's perceptive book, which bears the same title, *The Identity of Yeats*. With the advent of postcolonial theory into Irish studies in general and Yeats studies in particular, this controversial issue has gained new dimensions. Whether Yeats was a revolutionary and anti-colonial nationalist or a poet with unionist and colonialist inclinations has been the subject of much debate and less agreement. One can justify any of these versions of Yeats by concentrating on some of his works and utterances and ignoring some others. However, this will result in an incomplete and partial picture of a complex, multidimensional, and ever-changing poet such as Yeats. What Brian Graham mentions at the end of his preface to *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography* is quite apposite to Yeats. Graham refers to the book's contributors' variety of views and perspectives, and then notes that among all the contributors, however, there is 'an overall consensus on the need to deconstruct monoliths of exclusive identity in Ireland in favour of narratives of diversity, inclusiveness, hybridity and fluidity-cultural contexts which have to be matched by political flexibility'. George Bornstein has called Yeats 'perhaps the most complex mind of our century', and he has stressed that 'one cannot fully come to grips with him through any single approach'. The more one studies Yeats, the more one tends to agree with Bornstein's view. No single critical view can lay claim to a full exploration of the multiple facets of Yeats's personality and his poetry. In the thirty five years of his poetic career, Yeats saw many ups and downs in his own life in Ireland and the World. He tried to keep record of most of these ups and downs and interpreted them in his own unique poetic way. The result is that his themes cover such wide ranging areas as love, politics, old-age art, aristocracy, violence and prophecy, history myth, courtesy hatred, innocence, anarchy and nostalgia. Yeats consciously and deliberately made use of the detail of his personal life family, friends, convocation, ideas, readings and experiences to achieve combination of life and art rarely seen elsewhere. The persons who influenced him and the attitudes and the

attributes they represented are among his preoccupations. He was fortunate enough in having a wide ranging social circle of friends and acquaintances which includes Maud Gonne, Lady Augusta Gregory, John O'Leary, Ezra Pound, G.B Shaw etc., who were his life-long friends. He has also given references of places. The expression personal experiences in poetry are a part of the process of remaking himself. This process as Raymond Cousell has remarked was one of the constant modification rather than radical reorientation.

Yeats Belief in Nationalism

Yeats had actively participated in the colic Renaissance," I had a conviction which indeed I have still." Yeats wrote in 1902" That one's verses should hold, as in a mirror, The colours of one's own climate and scenery in their right proportion" And he goes on to add. We should make poem on the familiar landscape we love, not the strange and rare and glittering scenes we wonder at." Yeats was convinced that Irish folk literature was not only old but also priceless. His attempt to revive.

The oldest of the aristocracies of thought the folk art, The golden dream of king and peasant was prompted by this patriotic conviction. He was concerned more with the cultivation of the taste of his people than which political activities.

Irish Mythology

Irish Mythology legends and personalities form one of Yeats major themes.

Yeats has fully exploited The saga of Ireland and the Celtic Legends. His poems 'An Irish Air man foresees his Death, 'Easter 1916' and some others are based on Irish mythology and Irish politics. Yeats's participation in the Irish political system had origins in his interest in Irish myth and folklore. Irish myth and folklore had been suppressed by church doctrine and British control of the school system. Yeats used his poetry as a tool for re-educating the Irish population about their heritage and as a strategy for developing Irish nationalism.

Reference to Coole Park, Parnell, John Synge and Sligo in the

west of Ireland, are to be found in his poetry. At first Yeats drew upon the fairy and folk tales of the western Ireland which he had heard as a child and a young man. By the eighties, Yeats had become interested in spiritualism and even in magic.

Yeats's belief in Aristocracy

Yeats used to believe in the aristocracy. For Yeats August Gregory was a living symbol of the old Irish. Aristocracy. In practical life he had seen the selfishness, the irrational fury and low aim of the common multitude. At times he seemed to prefer a benign dictatorship to the modern democracy. The country aristocracy became for him the fostering mother of culture art and courtesy. The poem in memory of major Robert Gregory is a commemorative poem on the death of lady Gregory's son, when Yeats admired as a kind of symbol of aristocratic good breeding.

Yeats and Magic (occultism)

Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and expanded and developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Mysticism figures prominently in Yeats's discussion of the reincarnation of the soul, as well as in his philosophical model of the conical gyres used to explain the journey of the soul, the passage of time, and the guiding hand of fate. Mysticism and the occult occur again and again in Yeats's poetry, most explicitly in "The Second Coming" but also in poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Magi" (1916). Yeats' adventure in magic and occultism had a great impact on his poetic career. Yeats himself had once written to John O' Leary in the following words:

"If I had not made magic my constant study, I could not have written a single word of my black book nor The Countess Cathleen ever have come to exist. The mystical life in the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write" The obscure messages got from the automatic writing of his wife helped Yeats in constructing his system which he later published in book form under the title "A Vision". The system became Yeats's mental stronghold against the pressing chaos of life and provided the principal themes and symbols of later poetry on which his reputation as a major poet rests.

Romantic longing and escape

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Romantic longing and Escape

The earlier poetry of Yeats is that of romantic longing to escape. The best example is the beautiful poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The body and the spirit also form another of Yeats's themes, and poems like 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' are representative in this regard.

Nostalgia for the past

Another of Yeats's themes is nostalgia for the old Ireland and the poem that expresses it best is 'September 1913. ' In his poem 'The Tower' images of people from Ireland's rich past, can be seen such as:

Before that ruin came, for centuries,
Rough men at arms.....
Come with loud cry and panting breast
To break upon a sleeper's rest.

This concept of aristocracy finds illustration in the poem, 'Major Robert Gregory'.

Doctrine of mask

The doctrine of Mask is another theme in his poetry it led Yeats to a sustained search for a way of balancing the two halves of his own self, The image of Ireland adopted and developed by Yeats is the myth- founded Mask of a heroic nation.

Yeats's patriotic zeal is inspired by his earnestness to please Maud Gonne, Who was an enthusiastic nationalist. One can appreciate his exercise of myth- making to give an accurate and organized expression to his relation with Ireland. His effort to define this relationship is one of the passions, operating behind a number of his poems.

Art and the Artist

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to educate his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively impacted Irish politics and social life. His early compilation of folklore sought to teach a literary history that had been suppressed by British rule, and his early poems were odes to the beauty and mystery of the Irish countryside. Art is another of Yeats's Major themes and the poems which beautifully tackle this theme are 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'lapis

lazuli' And to some extent 'Among School Children'.

Yeats's sense of history

Yeats's sense of history is another major theme of his poetry. The best expression of it comes in the great poem 'The Second Coming' where the whole of history is seen as alternating cycles. Yeats's knowledge of the anarchy in the contemporary world finds expression in poems, for example, 'Easter 1916' and 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' which give expressions to these themes. The poems like 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' give the scope of Yeats's Political vision with reference to the effect of war

Some Other Themes

Many of Yeats's poems have his "Love" for Maud Gonne as their theme and among the most well known of these poems are 'When You are Old' 'No second Troy' and her Praise. The poignant reference to his loss of Maud Gonne and her beauty are made in 'A prayer for Daughter' and 'The Tower'.

Old age is the theme of many of Yeats's poems and the most notable are 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'The Tower' and 'Why should not Old Men be Mad'. The opening lines of 'Sailing to Byzantium' are memorable:

That is no country for old men. The Young in one another's arms, bids in the tree.

The opening lines of 'The Tower' really touching for the plight of an old man:

"What shall I do with this absurdity
O heart, O troubled heart- This caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me as to dog's Tail".

Most of Yeats's themes, like love for Maud Gonne, his views on the relation between art and the artist his views on education and the concept of unity of being find a complex and synthetic expression in the poem 'Among School Children' which is remarkable for its thematic, Textual art and symbolic richness. Edmond Wilson says, "The actual sense in the poem, The personal emotions suggest have been inter-woven and made to play upon each other at the same time that they are kept separate and distinct" perceptions, fancies, feelings and thought all have their place in the poet's record

Thus after having made this survey, we find that Yeats chose various themes for his poems. He patiently probed in to different fields of learning to find the appropriate theme. Even if he took up personal theme, he made it universal by relating it to the Irish Folk- Lore and Mythology. His aim was to reach the ultimate truth and he resorted to the magic and mysticism in his poetry to come to this truth.

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