

CLASSICISM, MODERNITY, SYMBOLISM: ANALYSIS OF W.B.YEATS AS A POET

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Abstract

A dreamer, a thinker, a visionary, William Butler Yeats is one of the greatest poets of the modern age who influenced both his contemporaries as well as his successors. His poetry delineates artistically the doubts, the perplexities and insecurities of the modern age. Yeats was much influenced by Irish folklore, Irish mythology and legends, the undercurrent of which serves as a major theme in his poetry, along with Irish Nationalism and mysticism. He was at once a romantic and a realist. From beautiful, delicate romantic lyrics he gradually began writing poems of disillusionment and realism in which he heavily makes use of complex and rich symbols. The juxtaposition of past and present, of spiritual and physical are a marked feature of his body of work. He was at once traditional and modern, whose poetry expresses deep awareness of man in history and soul in eternity, regretting the loss of harmony and strength in the post War world. This paper endeavors to analyse the various aspects of Yeats' poems and Yeats as a traditional yet modern, as a romantic yet realist poet and visionary; as an escapist and a prophet; who can rightly be considered of the most towering men of letters of 20th century literature.

Key words: Symbols, romanticism, modernity, visionary, humanity.

The poetry of Yeats (1865-1939) is the poetry of movement, of continuous growth. Yeats was a poet, not of one age, but of various ages. His first poems breathe the atmosphere of romance and escape, his last poems land the readers in a world of intellect and reality. In the first phase, he looks within, in the second he looks without and in the last he seeks to harmonise the two. His interest always centre in man—whether in solitude or in society. He takes poetry both as 'revelation of a hidden life' and 'a criticism of life'. He realizes that 'the poet should know all classes of men as one of themselves, that he should combine the greatest possible personal realization with the greatest possible knowledge of the speech and

circumstances of the world.' His poetry constantly seeks to put this realisation into practice. He does not always succeed, but there is a ring of sincerity in all his endeavours.

Son of a Pre-Raphaelite Irish painter, William Butler Yeats was, in the early years of his poetic life, deeply influenced by Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. The influence of the French Symbolists, who were introduced to him by Arthur Symonds and of Walter Pater, brought him close to the spirit of Ivory Tower in literature and he wanted to "liberate the arts from 'their age' and from life." He developed friendship with Dawson, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Rhys, Synge and George Russell. Yeats celebrates this friendship in some memorable lines:

We were the last romantics-chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness,
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme.

(Coole Park and Ballylee)

Though for a time Yeats was drawn to the movement Art for Art's sake, yet his feet were deeply planted in the soil of Ireland. For emotional nourishment, he constantly looked towards Irish folk-lore. The Irish past, the Irish mythology and folk-lore made a living and lasting impact on his personality and his creations. His early poetry is the poetry of Celtic Twilight with Pre-Raphaelite embroidery.

Not only the Ireland of his ancestors ,but the Ireland of his time is reflected in his poetry. His lines betray his awareness of the Irish problems –the struggle of Ireland for freedom and existence. He knew many of the Irish revolutionaries through Maud Gonne, but he could not like all their ways. He could not appreciate their love of hatred and violence. He was a disciple of O'Leary, on whom he wrote a splendid elegy. He always wished for a free, beautiful and healthy Ireland - a land of sweetness and culture. Hence when he found the opposite atmosphere- the coarsened atmosphere of jealousy ,hatred and indiscipline-the vitiating atmosphere of ignorance debasing what is true and sublime in art and literature- he was sad and disillusioned.

But inspite of this disillusionment, his love for Ireland was always deep. He was not prepared for the Easter Rebellion, and yet he welcomed it saying:

All changed, changed utterly,
A terrible beauty is born .

(Easter, 1916)

Again,

There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.

(The Rose Tree)

The poet's love for Ireland was inspired and intensified by his devotion to Maud Gonne - a great political agitator. Yeats was passionately in love with her. He describes his first impression about her- 'Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heat of such

blossoms in the window'. She was to him 'like Helen.....beyond praise of comment'. Maud Gonne brought Yeats to active political life. But Yeats could never relish the agony and violence of that life. Maud Gonne, inspite of her refusal to marry him, remained a constant source of inspiration to him. Another women ,Lady Augusta Gregory, played an important part in the development of Yeats's genius. Often Yeats stayed with her at her house in County Galway. Because of her, Yeats had not to worry for a living. Again , it was because of her, that he could gain the direct contact of the Irish common man—the Irish peasantry at Calway. Yeats, together with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore, started the movement for the Irish National Theatre. Yeats remembered with deep sense of gratitude these women:

While up from my heart's root
So great a sweetness flows
I shake from head to foot.

(Friends)

The early poetry of years, influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, is the poetry of escape. Yeats is here, 'a good pupil of William Morris, a poet of escape, singer of music in the deep heart's core.' The escape is in ivory tower-in the romantic land of Irish Sagas. Yeats makes constant use of Irish mythology in his early poems-and this use of Irish mythology make his poetry different in character from the poetry of the rest of his group. Again his lines have a facile rhythm and a rare delicacy which make him stand away from the rest:

The wind blows out of the gates of the day,
The wind blows over the lonely of heart
And the lonely of heart is with heart away.

(The Land of Heart's Deasire)

But even, in the early period, there are moments when Yeats is conscious of the age. In his first verse play, *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), there is expression of this awareness in the purchase of the souls of poverty-stricken and starving peasant by the demon merchants.

There's money for a soul, sweet yellow
There's money for men's soul, good money, money.

(The Countess Cathleen)

The influence of the French symbolists is also very deep on him at this stage. Arthur Symons introduced Mallarme to him. Yeats accepts him whole heartedly and wants to reach absolute beauty 'by the rapt contemplation of symbols'. But there is a difference between the symbols of Yeats and Mallarme. The French poet's symbols are essentially private: Yeats' symbols are drawn from Celtic mythology. Sometime he uses symbols to express his different states of mind; sometime the story become a symbol; sometime the symbols are not precise and yet they exist and move by their power and intensity. His symbolism reaches a rare height in his delineation of romantic love:

You and I.
Shall be alone for ever.... We two –this crown
I half remember. It has been in my dreams.

Bend lower, O king, that I may crown you with it
O flower of the branch, O bird among the leaves,
O silver fish that my live hands have taken
Out of running stream, O morning star,
Trembling in the blue heavens like a white fawn
Upon the misty border of the wood,
Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair,
For me will gaze upon the world no longer.

(*The Shadowy Waters*)

The Wind among the Reeds and *The Shadowy Waters* are his best excursions in symbolism.

Yeats bids farewell to his romantic adoration and faith in absolute beauty on the turn of the century. He comes nearer to the Mother Earth and regrets his old love for ivory tower. He is deeply influenced by the dramatist Synge who believes that there is no poetry 'that has not strong roots among the clay and worms'. He is now engaged in the practical activities of the Abbey Theatre. He has so far enriched his inner life, but now he comes out in the open and tries to harmonize the claims of the inner and outer lives. So he banishes the imaginary Innisfree from his poetry and seeks to catch the spirit of the day. Instead of that quality of languor in his early poetry, there is now a concreteness of expression and an affirmation of life. This change is first visible in *The Green Helmet* (1910). But what is in the bud in *The Green Helmet* is fully blossomed in *Responsibilities* (1914) and the volumes thereafter. Yeats is now in the thick of the Irish National Movement. He writes poems to inspire the freedom fighters—'every poem is a battleground and the sounds of gunfire are heard throughout'. The struggle for freedom is violent and bitter—all Ireland has grown fanatic and is expressing her hatred in a life and death battle—

Out of Ireland have we come.
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
I carry from my mother's womb
A fanatic heart.

(*Remorse for Intemperate Speech*)

The new approach of a realist—the new attitude to face the challenges of life boldly and the firm determination to reject the frail world of imagination are expressed beautifully in the highly self-critical poem- *A Coat*:

I made my song my coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.

Song ,there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

Sometimes he is disillusioned; sometimes he is against the ways of the freedom fighters. There is much of vulgarity, much of coarseness in them .They often act irresponsibly and indulge in character –assassination .They often fail to appreciate the real worth of a good drama or a good painting---

They must to keep their certainty accuse
All that are different of a base intent ;
Pull down established honour; hawk for news
Whatever their lose fantasy invent
And murmur it with bated breath

(The Leaders of the Crowd)

The poet is deep in his anguish for the decay in the honest and revolutionary spirit of Ireland :

You have dried the marrow from the bone;
For men were born to pray and save;
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone;
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

(September 1913)

But all his opposition, criticism and despair are washed away by the terrible rebellion of Easter 1916 .All men are now changed; even those for whom he had but scant respect, are all clothed in the glory of martyrdom .Was it needless death after all ? the poet asks. No, it cannot be. Everything is changed. The rebellion of Easter may have been crushed, but the revolution has triumphed. There is one aim, one ideal, one purpose only 'hearts with one purpose alone/through summer and winter-'And so everything is changed:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered a while and said
Polite meaningless words
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed ,changed utterly :
A terrible beauty is born.

(Easter,1916)

Therefore the poet celebrates the martyrdom of all freedom fighter- of MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly and Pearse who are to him now symbols of patriotism and heroic sacrifice. Their sacrifice, their blood, can enliven the rose Tree which is withered by 'a wind that blows across the bitter sea':

There's nothing but our own red blood.
Can make a right rose Tree.

(*The Rose Tree*)

During the last twenty years of his life, Yeats wrote his poetry of the deepest significance. His marriage with Miss Hyde Lees in 1917 brought certain new experiences to him. She was a good medium and with her he had several experiments in spiritualism. These experiments and experience were his materials for *A Vision* (1925) where he sought to construct a system of belief. Here is Yeats' conception of Great Wheel. Yeats feels that there is a clash of personalities within a man. These Ideas are directly translated in but few poems and they are not of very great merit. But these ideas serve as background to his poetry of the last days.

The period immediately following the First World War saw Yeats writing poems about the new state of disintegration and barrenness. There is a deep change in him and in *The Wild Swans at Coole* he writes:

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Second Coming expresses starkly the imbalance of the age, the nightmare of the time. It is a prophetic poem. It prophesies the dawn of an evil age--an age of devastation. The post-war anarchy and hysteria, boredom and frustration are directly brought on surface:

... Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

The poet thinks that some revelation is at hand'. But what revelation?-

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

The shrieks of the 'botched civilization' the aimlessness of the age, the perversity of the day are portrayed in so many of his poems of this period:

What shall I do with this absurdity-?
O heart, o troubled heart- this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?

(Tower)

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood , and go scot free;

(Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen)

The poet is terrible shocked and perturbed; he want to escape the tentacles of despair.

He seeks a refuge- sometime in the tower, sometime in Byzantium. He want the enrichment of the inner life, but not at the expense of the outer life. Hence he does not ignore the body.

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age ;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song? (*Spur*)

Yeats is never a solitary recluse- there is always the call of life in his poetry. The two Byzantium poems reveal the inner richness of the poet. Yeats seeks safe refuge— an anchorage. He cannot find himself in tune with the decrepit age. The poems are meditation on timeless existence. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, he wants to sail to Byzantium – the holy city of culture and unageing intellect-where one can escape the physical processes of birth and death. Byzantium may also be taken as the ideal Ireland of the poet's dream. These two poems reveal the poet's spiritual adventure. The poet feel that the claims of the physical life have got to be accepted, and yet he must strive to reach the artifice of eternity. Life has got both hope and despair, with hope triumphing in the end :

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall ,
Come from the holy fire perne in a gyre,
And be the singing –masters of my soul ,
Consume my heart away ; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It know not what it is ; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

(*Sailing to Byzantium*)

In the great poem *Among the School Children*, he seeks to achieve a true 'unity of life, here 'a sixty – year old smiling public man' look back to his past. Question about the mysteries of life come to his mind and he tries to solve them. It is a poem of rare beauty and strength where the poet's experiences of the outer world are harmonized with the adventures of his inner life:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own de
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil,
O chest nut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf , the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music , O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Till the end of his life, Yeats retained a vigorous and passionate zest for life and a highly inquisitive philosophical mind. His passion for life led him to declare—‘... I may seem , though I die old/ A foolish, passionate man.’ Yeats tried to compare the tension of body and soul, of the outer and the inner life, of the sage in him and the passionate lover in him . He did not always succeed; hence his epitaph that he wrote in 1938 speaks of an ironic detachment.

Cast a cold eye
On life , on death.
Horseman, pass by!|

Yet, Yeats is the greatest poet of the twentieth century writing in English. He is great because of his ‘ eagle mind’ , because of his great love for humanity , because of his sincere efforts to resolve the tensions of the modern world, great success in translating the agonies and complexities of the modern mind into superb poetic equivalents. In *The Municipal Gallery Revisited*, Yeats talks of his vocation and his faith:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory , thought
All that we did , all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil ,from that
Contact everything Antaeus – like grew strong.

Because of his deep love for humanity and the world the poet prophesied a bright future for man and poetry:

Sing on : Somewhere at some new moon,
We’ll learn that sleeping is not death,
Hearing the whole earth change its tune.

(*At Galway Races*)

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