

From Celtic Twilight to Love Poems : An Overview of W.B. Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract. This paper attempts to look at the development of W.B. Yeats as a poet from the beginning to the later phase of his life the influences he had of people and circumstances in his life and its reflection in his poetry. His symbolism was based upon the poetry of Blake, Shelley and Rossette. Yeats started his long literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. His later love poems began to show a certain physicality, not of outrageous kind, but muted and soft.

Keywords : Irish mythology; nationalism; folklore; sensuality; asceticism.

Though poetry, politics and ideology are closely linked, literary critics have either ignored or disparaged this aspect as if politics and ideology would contaminate poetry. C. M. Bowra is one of the first to deplore this attitude:

Many people dislike the notion that poetry can have any connection with politics and think that even if we extend politics to cover a whole range of public events, it stands in backward relation to poetry, that its incursions are usually unsuccessful and often deplorable and that its influence defiles an otherwise pure art. (Bowra, 1)

It would, however be worthwhile to trace the different influences that shaped Yeats's ideology and explain how his political ideas find expression in his poetry. The great majority of critics evade Yeats's politics because they are not clear in their ideology and also because they have not been able to digest his partisan attitude to aristocracy and temporary flirtation with fascism. Yeats was a multi-faceted personality and throughout his life he strove to hammer different elements into a unity. Philosophy, religion, politics and esotericism were all welded into one in his poetry. To him, poetry was a means to achieve Unity of Being and Unity of Culture.

The impact of the current politics was great on the young Yeats. First, it made him a staunch nationalist who opposed the British rule all through his life. Secondly, it made him consider himself a link in the Irish poetic tradition. Although born in an Anglo-Irish family, he always considered himself an Irish poet writing in English. At the age of twenty-four he wrote to Elizabeth White:

You will find a good thing to make verses on
Irish legends and places so forth. It helps

originality and makes one's verses sincere and give one less numerous competitors. Besides, one should love best what is nearest and interwoven in one's life. (Wade, 104)

Yeats explored the ancient Irish mythology, rewrote the old heroic country tales and made aware his people of the present day misery. Later on, because of his bitter experience in Irish politics he became a realist. "The Coming of Wisdom With Time" published in the volume *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1916) is a true expression of this change:

Though leaves are many, the root is one; Though
all the lying days of my youth I swayed my leaves
and flowers in the sun; Now I may wither into the
truth. (*Collected Poems*, 105)

As one of the last romantics, Yeats was destined to experience a conflict of artistic and spiritual values already impressed upon Victorians like Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin and Morris. Yet the issue was made exceedingly more complicated by the passionate, violent or potentially violent element in nationalism. The national ideals of the poet and those of the politicians and the masses they levered were inevitably destined for variance. But nationalism was perhaps partly the immediate factor of stress covering the many points of stress existing in the relationship between idealistic artist and industrial society when Yeats spoke of 'an imaginary Ireland' (Page 246) for which he and his dead poet-friends laboured, his image entailed ideals of nobility, spiritual effort and sacrifice, and a piquant intangibility, that found small reciprocity in the minds of the men who followed Parnell's death in the cause of nationalism. In 1907 Yeats wrote:

I could not foresee that a new class, which had
begun to rise to power under the shadow of Parnell,
would change the nature of the Irish movement,
which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing
any great risk to individuals, could do without
exceptional men and those activities of the mind
that are founded on the exceptional moment.

(*Essay and Introduction*, 259)

After Parnell's death, the Irish militants took over the cause of Irish freedom. A two line poem by W. B. Yeats on Parnell in 1937, may be quoted here:

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man;
Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.
(*Collected Poems*, 11)

It cannot be said that Yeats was being very fair in the assessment of Catholic masses or the Catholic middle classes or the Anglo-Irish gentry. Yeats

was of rebellious temperament. He simply cared nothing. He never failed to stand up for the tyranny of the gentry. There was a strange transformation in Yeats as he was ageing. He now took upon himself to defend the Anglo-Irish against the new rulers of the Irish Free State now his conservative politics was well formed.

The early love poems of Yeats recreate what it best is a dream world, but a dream world not given to joyful and vibrant exploration of life. It undoubtedly belongs with the thinned out English romantic tradition; Yeats displays “the normal English romantic altitude toward things Celtic”. (77) The poet gives the impression of being frustrated and unhappy and for no reason he is full of wistful longing. He would like to re-structure the world and make it aureate. But the fire is wanting he would rather sit aside ‘on a green knoll apart,’ or he would rather be a white bird and fly on and away to the distant Danaan shore. The theme of love presented in “The White Birds”. Is inescapably allied to the theme of escape. The argument of the poem cited above is that the love reality out there is constantly acting upon the image of love that is within the writer’s heart:

All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old
They cry of a child by the roadway, the creak of a lumbring cart,
The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing the wantry moulds,
Are wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my
heart. (The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart, 1–4)

Yeats himself provides a gloss on the Rose symbol “The quality symbolised as the Rose differs from the intellectual beauty of Shelley and Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from far.” It is accepted that Yeats found the symbol in Irish folk lore. He, however, used it variously in various context. In some poems he used to allude to Maud Gonne.

The centrality of this fascinating woman Maud Gonne, in Yeats’s poems of love cannot be denied. The Maud Gonne affair never reached fruition. At various stages of his life, Yeats came in contact with various women. He readily and repeatedly acknowledged the contribution that his female friends made to his life and to his heart. Yeats’s early poetry give a foretaste of the greater poetry of his mature years. Although in the early poems there is a definite anticipation of the later phase, the difference between Yeats’s early and later manner is so great that the change seems almost akin to a rebirth. Yeats was a shy young man, a dreamer and not overtly aggressive in female companionship. His experience of physical love would come in the forties. the fact is that his unrequited love for Maud Gonne formed the basis of a number of poems. Maud Gonne was the nearest thing to the great love for which he had questing for from the beginning :

I thought of your beauty, and this arrow.
Made out of a gild thought. Is in my marrow,
There’s no man may look upon her no man,

As when newly grown to be a woman,
Tall and noble but with face and bosom.
Delicate in colour as apple blossom.
This beauty's kinder, yet for a reason
I could weep that the old is out of season.

(The Arrow, 1-8)

Yeats began to praise the refinement and public - spiritedness of aristocratic life, drawing images from the great Renaissance patrons of Italy and also veered to the other extreme, of a gusty enjoyment of coarseness in the poems he wrote about beggars. He repudiated all the Celtic Twilight's embroideries out of old mythologies in 'A Coat'; 'The Fisherman'; and 'To A Shade'. And as A Norman Jeffares asserts: "behind all this sounds the ground swell of his frustrated love for Maud Gonne.

Yeats's love poems relating to Maud Gonne, Olivia Shakespeare or other women are spread over his whole writing career. That is to say we get love poems which belong to his early phase as also love poems which belong to his late phase. Yeats was a poet of passion and love. What is worth noting is that he did not write love poems in one style or in one mode. He was in the habit of teaching himself new modes and new concerns. The later poems of Yeats yield a sense of continuous fastness, expansion and complexity. This richness, to my mind, is the outcome of the fullness of his life. It would seem that he succeeded in defining his likes and dislikes defining what life is and what it should be. He no longer shies away from the rough spots of life nor from its fecund vitality.

The different phases of his life and poetry may appear disconnected, but on closer examination, what emerges is not a loosely spun sheet but a significant pattern. It is only by looking at his whole poetic achievement in perspective that we can realize Yeats's greatness as an artist. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" acquires a new significance when related to "Byzantium" and "The Valley of the Black Pig" receives an additional richness of meaning when set beside "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "The Second Coming". Even individual images, vague and imprecise in the earlier poems, crystallise in the later phase into significant forms.

As a poet, Yeats has had three distinct phases. The lyrics of "The Seven Woods" (1903), of "The Green Helmet" (1910), and the "Responsibilities" (1914) are written in his third and probably final manner. The symbolism of "The Wind Among the Reeds" has almost completely vanished. In a poem called "A Coat", in his last book, he gives a reason for thus breaking with the past:

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,

Were it in the World's eye
 As though they'd wrought it.
 Song, let them take it
 For there is more enterprise
 In walking naked.

(*Selected Poetry, A Coat*, 1-10)

The turning point in Yeats's development was the publication of the volume of poems called 'Responsibilities'. In these poem he widens the scope his subject matter to include ironic commentary on contemporary affairs. Now instead of the remote mythology of Gaelic legend he creates a new mythology out of the memory of the patriots of the eighteenth century Ireland who still lived in the popular imagination:

Was it for this the wild geese spread
 The grey wing upon every tide;
 For this that all the blood was shed,
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
 And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone
 All that delirium of the brave. (September, 1-6)

"The Second Coming" is one of the most mature poems of Yeats. It is a major poem of W.B. Yeats's later phase. It expresses the poet's faith in the cyclic movement of history. Two thousand years of the Christian era have ended. With the vision of a seer, the poet prophesies the doom of an evil age. He points to the breakdown of central authority. He uses the image of gyres. Moving round and round in 'the widening gyre', the falcon cannot hear the commands of its trainer:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 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 Second Coming, 1-6)

Two principal threads run through all of Yeats's later poems: preoccupation with age, youth and beauty leading to the central antimony between sensuality and asceticism, and the grappling with the crisis of the present civilization, leading to a vision of the dark future of humanity. The Irish-situation becomes readily linked to the world-situation and the contemporary phase is seen as part of the revolving cycles of history. Different thought-strands of Yeats's later phase converge on his poem 'The Tower' which is of supreme technical excellence is equalled only by the Byzantium poems.

The central theme of "The Tower" is the poet's reaction to his own physical infirmity wrought by time. The paradox is that with the decreasing vitality, he has gained immensely in powers of the mind, in the gift of imagination. It begins in a tone of bitter agony and desperation:

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? (The Tower, 1-4)

The poetic effect is both tragic and ironic: a dog's tail sets the tone. 'O' intensifies the impact of feeling.

I submit that this strain of natural passion was always there, may be in a dormant state. Yes early poems of love are virginally chaste. He shies away from physical love. When Yeats was in his forties he was introduced to the excitement and fulfilment of physical passion. It was only later, when he was in his forties, that Yeats would lose his virginity with Olivia Shakespeare. Therefore, his poems of love begin to show a certain physicality, not of the outrageous kind, but muted and soft. Later, a strange thing happened. Yeats began to talk freely and unlimitedly about sexual love. As an example, I will again quote the following lines:

A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent. (Crazy Jane Talks With The Bishop, 13-18)

He opts for the personae of the wild old wicked man, and takes the church for fostering wrong ideas about man-woman love.

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