

W. B. YEATS: Mysticism Mellowed with Obscurity

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Abstract:

W. B. Yeats is a lyric poet. His poetry has a Celtic flavour often tinged with mysticism and melancholy. The early poetry of Yeats is steeped in the spirit of the rich mystic mythology of the Celtic race, but later he turned from pleasant lyrics to verse with sterner discipline and deeper thought. Yeats' obscurity enriches his poems rather than impoverishing it. Sometimes he indulges in hyperboles and exaggerations, but this was due to his constantly maturing poetry, right from the beginning upto the end of his poetic career.

Keywords: Romantics, Pre-Raphaelites, Celtic Flavour.

INTRODUCTION

Yeats is a modern poet. Some of the characteristics of modern poetry are complexity, obscurity, dramatic element, existentialism, scepticism and the shattering of values caused by the effect of two world wars. Some other characteristics are realism, pessimism, mysticism and symbolism. Yeats is a unique poet and is traditional and modern at the same time. He is traditional from the fact that he has great faith in aristocracy and also, he is very Irish in outlook. He started his poetic career under the influence of Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites. His early verse has an incantatory music and is marked by its wavering, meditative, organic rhythms which carries us to a Celtic twilight.

According to T. S. Eliot there is a kind of—

"lack of complete emotional expression in his early work."

It is a poetry of escape, which includes poems like "When You Are Old", "The Wanderings of Oisín", "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland", "The Happy Townland" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", about which R. L. Stevenson commented—

"It is so quaint and airy, simple, artful and eloquent to the heart."

"The Happy Townland" deals with a place where,

"Boughs have their fruit and blossom... At all times of the year..."

Just like Wordsworth, in Yeats's poems also there is a kind of lament at the disappearance of good things of life. This sense of nostalgia and languor is expressed in—

"The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy."

One of Yeats's poems of love, "A Prayer for my Daughter," is unmistakably reminiscent of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." His love for mythology is also a romantic trait; he refers many a time to Helen of Troy.

Leda, Zeus, Venus, Aphrodite and Byzantium.

About his later verse, T. S. Eliot very aptly comments—

"Yeats is pre-eminently the poet of middle age."

His later works include poems like "The Winding Stair", "The Tower", "The Wild Swans at Coole" etc. are very realistic. The metaphors are fresh, taken from a wider range of reference and there is cultivation of subtler, more varied and more dramatically balanced cadence. There is an increased tendency to use speech rhythms often harsh in effect.

He can express stark facts in a stark manner—

"An aged man is but a paltry thing,
a tattered coat upon a stick." (Sailing to Byzantium)

This realism in his poetry was partly due to the circumstances of his personal life. After his disappointment with Maud Gonne and his disenchantment with the Irish National Movement, Yeats started writing bitter and pessimistic poems which is the hallmark of modern poetry.

The poems include "When Helen Lived", "The Byzantium Poems" and "To a Shade" which illustrates—

"You had enough of sorrow before death;
Away, away you are safer in a tomb."

Like T. S. Eliot and George Russell, Yeats too took interest in religion and mysticism. He built up a system of thought based on occult and mysticism and his poetry is a direct outcome of it. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is a debate between Atma and Maya—

"I summon to the winding ancient stairs...
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?"

To express his ideas, Yeats frequently uses certain metaphors and allegories. As he says himself—

"I have no speech, but symbol."

In his youth, he chooses religious and even amorous symbols like rose, stars and Irish myths.

But as he matured, his symbols gained in evocative power and associative richness.

The rose symbolises austerity, beauty of woman, especially of Maud Gonne. In "The Rose of Peace", the symbol of this "rose" means earthly love. In "The Rose of Battle", the rose is a refuge from earthly love symbolising God's side in the battle of spirit against matter.

But it stands for the power of creative imagination and occult philosophy in the poem called "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time".

Like "the rose", the symbol of "dance" is closely connected with Yeats' "system of Symbolism".

In "Upon a Dying Lady", the woman's soul –
"flies to the pre-destined dancing place".

This place suggests all that is traditionally associated with a heavenly after life of perfect unity, peace and joy. In "Among School Children", the concept of "unity of being" is again evoked by suggesting that one cannot separate the part from the whole nor body from spirit nor being from becoming.

"O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

"Byzantium" too has been used by Yeats as a symbol of unity and perfection. In the poem "Byzantium", it is a symbol for timeless or persistent order of some sort set against an outer flux.

In "Sailing to Byzantium", it suggests a perfect, far off, unfamiliar civilization where the religious, aesthetic and practical life are one.

He wants to become immortal through timeless art. He ignores the "sensual music" made for "those dying generations" in favour of eternal music produced by the golden Byzantine bird.

In "Leda and the Swan", "brute blood of air" symbolises God Zeus disguised as a swan that flies through the element of air. This symbol of "Swan" is repeated in "The Wild Swans at Coole". Another recurring symbol is of "Helen". She symbolises the destructive beauty and is linked up with Dierde and Maud Gonne. It imports to poems like "No Second Troy"; an unimaginable vastness, complexity and continuous expansiveness.

The poem – "A Prayer For My Daughter" contains –
"rich stores in a little room".

For Yeats, one of the qualities that made life valuable under the dying aristocratic social tradition was the "ceremony of innocence" in the "Second Coming". This poem contains symbols like "falcon" and "falconer". A falcon is a hawk, symbol of the active or intellectual mind (our civilization). He is not listening to "falconer", the uniting principle. Thus the constantly recurring symbols like "Winding Stair", "Sword", "Helen", "Swan", "Byzantium", "Rose", "Dancer", "Tree", "Wind", "Tower", "Stone", "Stream" etc. give –

"dumb things voices and bodiless things bodies".

So what makes Yeats' poetry so complex and obscure is his personally invented "system of symbolism" based on his prose works. He fuses impersonal with personal. He wrote from inner compulsion, which gives to his poetry –

"its peculiar inner-glow ... and comes among the monuments of unageing intellect".

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