

ULUSLARARASI SOSYAL ARAŞTIRMALAR DERGİSİ THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi/The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 14 Sayı: 78 Temmuz 2021 & Volume: 14 Issue: 78 July 2021

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

The Oscillation Between Romanticism and Modernism in William Butler Yeats' Poems

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Abstract

This paper analyzes William Butler Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "When You are Old," "An Irish Airman Foresees His Future," and "The Circus Animals' Desertion" by considering idiosyncratic characteristics of Yeats' poetry, touching upon the autobiographical elements, scrutinizing romantic and modernist themes interwoven in these poems with a specific focus on the shift between his romantic ideas and modernist visions. The oscillation between these two literary movements is so apparent in Yeats' poems that this becomes the primary characteristic of his style. He is inspired by the pastoral landscape and idealized serenity of nature to write poetry, yet his idealization and romantic sentimentalism are disrupted by his modernist thoughts. In this context, Yeats' poems mentioned above display this changeability between romanticism and modernism, enabling the readers to follow the traces of these two significant movements.

Keywords: William Butler Yeats, romanticism, modernism, Irish Literary Revival

Introduction

Yeats was an Irish poet, playwright, and one of the most renowned literary figures of the twentieth century. He worked to establish Irish literary consciousness and founded the Abbey Theatre. He was identified with the Irish Literary Revival also called the Irish Literary Renaissance along with Lady Gregory, George Russell, Edward Martyn, and John Millington Synge. His early poetry was highly influenced by the Irish cause, Irish legends, and mysticism. His early poetry contains the lyrical quality of Romanticism and traces of Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite themes. In the following years, his poetry transformed into a poetry of realism, and the bitter images of modernism began to pervade his poetry. Therefore, it is not possible to draw a clear-cut and complete picture of Yeats' development as a poet. However, it is not difficult to demonstrate the main outline of his poetic career. His early poetry, which is the poetry of dream and reverie, is mainly made up of "murmured incantations" (Lucas, 1986, 108). Most of his early poems bear some characteristics of poetry of reverie, and Yeats reached perfection of this style with the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). In addition to this style, his early poems usually combine all these elements: the occult, nationalism, love, mysticism, and idealization of Ireland. Yet, his poetry becomes mature and is influenced by modernism.

Discussion

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree," which was composed in 1888 and published in the *National Observer* in 1890, in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* in 1892 and finally in *The Rose* in 1893. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," one of the most frequently anthologized poems, came "out of homesickness for Sligo" (Jeffares, 1962, xvii). No critic denies the fact that it was written as an outcome of homesickness, but it has more than that as Yeats (1999) himself explains,

[m]y father had read to me some passage out of *Walden*, and I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree. [. . .] I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom. (85)

Later, Yeats wrote the poem by chance as mostly agreed by almost all critics: Yeats, stricken by homesickness, was walking through Fleet Street when he saw a fountain that reminded him of the lake water and the Irish countryside. However, it is not a strange invocation for Yeats who "rooted his imagination in the landscapes of Sligo and the West" (Allison, 2006, 185) and who thinks that all Irish

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writers should write for the Irish cause. Yeats (1999) also in *Autobiographies* agrees with this source of inspiration and adds that “[f]rom the sudden remembrance came my poem *Innisfree*, my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music” (153).

In the poem, Yeats, complicating this emotional moment of recognition and longing, imagines going to a world of natural beauty far away from the hubbub of the city. In the first lines of the poem, the desire of Yeats for leading a pastoral life in a lakeside cabin of “clay and wattles made” (“Lake” 2) is explicitly in the foreground. However, at the end of the poem, Yeats wakes up from his dream and acknowledges that he can hear the “lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore” (10) only “in the deep heart’s core” (12). Although the poem bears many romantic implications, the end reveals that it is not possible in the modern city, and pastoral dreams fail once more. As Howes (2006) states:

[. . .] “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” offers a speaker whose nostalgia for an idealized Ireland is a product of city life among the “pavements grey,” and whose wish to leave the city – “I will arise and go now” – will remain perpetually deferred. (3)

Yeats, who was a “boyish dreamer playing at being Byron’s Manfred and Shelley’s wandering poet” (Ross, 2009, 3), failed his attempt to arise and go to Innisfree. However, some critics labelled him an escapist whose earlier poetry can be considered escapist. Howes (2006) finds this label as misleading and supports his idea by pointing out that “the early work is full of speakers who yearn to escape from the everyday” (3). MacNiece (1967) manipulates the term and believes that “[t]he poem is a mannered poem and, in a sense, escapist, but the escape which Yeats here hankers for is not merely a whimsical fiction; it is an escape to a real place in Ireland which represented to him certain Irish realities” (57). Although MacNiece (1967) states it is an escape to an actual island called Innisfree, which is in Lough Gill, County Sligo, it does not draw a clear conclusion whether the isle in the poem is a real place or just an idealized image “in the deep heart’s core” (12). This ambiguity prevails in the poem and raises the constant question whether the poet is only concerned with the decision and action or with living in a world of his own imagination. Although this issue is a controversial one, the fact that cannot be rejected is that “[. . .] dream of freedom animates the most renowned of Yeats’s early lyrics, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”” (Bloom, 1970, 112).

The dream-like quality, which is primarily used in the early work of Yeats, clarifies that the focus of the poem is the longing and yearning rather than the arrival because he wants to get rid of all those drab realities of the city life which he hates once more while standing “on the roadway, or on the pavements grey” (11). That is the reason why the poem is considered a direct “protest against London” (MacNiece, 1967, 57) and as “a compound of [Yeats’s] unhappiness in London” (Macrae 21). Hence, the sudden appearance of the urban imagery creates a kind of contrast between ‘the romantic island’, in which primitivism is idealized, and the city with its greyness:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,

And live alone in the bee-loud glade. (1-4)

While he idealizes the life, he wished he led his life in Innisfree, he is even startled with the imagery of the drab city’s realities: “I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore / While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey” (10-11). Along with this contrast created between the island and the city, another contrast also contributes to the poem’s beauty. As O’Neill (2004) explains,

the poem derives much of its beauty from the contrast between its apparent assertiveness, “I will arise and go,” and the peaceful, almost somnolent, drift of its movement, and from a rhythm that is poised between solemn chant and relaxed speech. (97)

This contrast is used as a tool to create a balance throughout the poem. On the one hand, it asserts one to arise and go. On the other hand, it pacifies this assertiveness with a soft rhythm provided by the repetitions of certain words.

In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” Yeats recognizes the importance of Irish landscape as mentioned in *Modern Irish Poetry* (Quinn, 2008, 59). Being a poet who devotes his career for building Irish consciousness and literature, Yeats makes use of his poetic art to serve the Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The poetry of the period is chiefly descriptive rather than suggestive, and it tries to establish certainty of identity. Hence, its aim is to revive and restore the Irish tradition, language, and culture. Ironically, the poetry of the period is influenced by English romantic poetry rather than native Irish poetry. However, Yeats, in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” endeavours to describe and idealize Irish countryside through “the almost hypnotic incantatory use of sound and rhythm allied to the sense of romantic relief from filthy tide of modern world” (Denvir, 2005, 107). Although Innisfree seems to be associated with “freedom” because of its last syllable –free, it is the English version of Inis Fraoigh which means ‘the island of heather’. Since Innisfree is the English version of the name, it becomes “a doubly imagined space” (Denvir, 2005, 107). Denvir (2005) also believes that “the language shift from Irish to English, from Inis Fraoigh to Innisfree, leads to a sense of psychic, physical, and cultural loss or shattering” (107).

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is appreciated as one of the most important poems, which guaranteed Yeats’s fame. Nevertheless, it has received numerous criticisms. Yeats himself criticized his famous poem on technical grounds:

I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings, but I only understand vaguely and occasionally that I must for my special purpose use nothing but the common syntax. A couple of years later I would not have written the first line with its conventional archaism – “Arise and go” – nor the inversion in the last stanza. (as cited in MacNiece, 1967, 78)

Smith (1990) also criticizes the poem for being “one of the worst poems written by a great poet” (33). However, there are also positive comments on “The Lake.” For instance, W. H. Auden (1968) appreciates Yeats’s poetic skills and declares that, “Yeats is a consummate master” (49). Auden (1968) clarifies his claim as such: “[f]or it is the lyrics we read. In lyric writing what matters more than anything else, more than subject-matter or wisdom, is diction, and of diction, ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’” (49).



Most of the early poems of Yeats are love poems in which love and desire are interwoven in various patterns. The speakers are lover-poets, like Yeats, who are frustrated by the unreturned love of the beloved. As Howes (2006) remarks, “[. . .] much of the imagery [that Yeats uses] in his early poems [. . .] displays the influence of the poets of the 1890s” (4), and they are likened to pre-Raphaelite paintings (Watson, 2006, 46-47).

One of the love poems of Yeats is “When You Are Old,” which was composed in 1891 during a period Yeats’s relationship with Maud Gonne hung in the balance. When Maud Gonne’s son by French politician Lucien Millevoye died in the same year, she became much closer to Yeats because of her grief. In *Memoirs*, Yeats (1973) wrote about this event,

[s]he had come have need of me, as it seemed, and I had no doubt that need would become love, that it was already coming so. I had even as I watched her in a sense of cruelty, as though I were a hunter taking captive some beautiful wild creature. (49)

However, this *beautiful wild creature* turns out to be “old and grey and full of sleep” (“When” 1) in the hands of Yeats. In his late forties, Yeats begins to realize the changes, which life brought. He crystallized these changes by demonstrating the change in women’s beauty. Although melancholy and romanticism are dominant as themes in the poem, age is given as a kind of threat to Maud Gonne and her beauty (Unterecker, 1959, 80). Since the poem describes Maud Gonne “old and grey and full of sleep” (1) while she takes “this book” (2), Yeats imagines her dreaming of her admirers, but specifically “one man,” (7) who is most probably Yeats himself, while she whispers to herself disappointedly how
[. . .] Love fled

And paced upon the mountains overhead
And his face amid a crowd of stars. (10-12)

Thus, “When You are Old” can be interpreted as “a salvo [. . .], a reminder of the wistful, solitary old age that awaits those who let slip the chance at love” (Ross, 2009, 284).

Evidently, “When You are Old” is based on a sonnet by Pierre de Ronsard (1524- 85). Ronsard’s sonnet, “Quand vous serez bien vieille,” which was published in *Le Second Livre des Sonnets pour Helene* (1578) may be translated as such:

When you are old, sitting by the fire,
Stitching and unstitching by the evening candle,
You will sing my words and marvel,
“Ronsard made poems of me when I was beautiful”
There’ll be no maid, finished with work
And already half asleep, to hear
And stir at the sound of my verse
And praise your immortal name.
Beneath the earth, a boneless phantom
Amid the myrtle shade, I’ll take my rest.
You will stand before the hearth, crouched with age,
Regretting my love and your proud disdain.
Live, if you hear me, wait not for tomorrow:
Gather today the roses of life. (as cited in Ross 284)

Both poems deal with such themes as sadness and assertion. Moreover, O’Neill (2004) exemplifies these themes in detail: “sadness at the thought of the woman’s loss of beauty and of her regret at the passing of love; assertion of the constancy of the lover’s love and of the continuing worth of the woman’s “pilgrim soul”” (100). Being an adaptation, “When You are Old” still bears the stance of the lover poet, - Yeats, who was rejected repeatedly by Maud Gonne.

Yeats’s poetic career changes strikingly around 1914 with the publication of *Responsibilities*. Draper (1999) states that, “[t]hat change, of which Yeats was highly conscious, is neatly encapsulated in his often-quoted poem “A Coat,” in which he seems to dismiss his earlier work as ‘a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies’” (62). Yeats becomes much more straightforward. Also, his poetry deals with the social, philosophical and political issues unlike all his earlier works, whose subject matter borrows from old mythological tales, imbued with dreamy and symbolist style. Therefore, Yeats’s poetry after 1914 is deemed “the antithesis of his early work, stripped of its decoration and mystery” (Jeffares, 1962, xxv).

“An Irish Airman Foresees His Future” was written in 1919, a year after World War I. The poem, written in dramatic monologues, is actually planned as a lament for the death of Lady Gregory’s son. Major Robert Gregory, a pilot of Royal Flying Corps, was shot down while returning to the base in Italy. Although the title and the poem’s content indicate that the poem is about the war, it is an implicit lament because Yeats chooses to make his speaker anonymous. The presentation of Robert Gregory is important for Yeats, who wants to create a prototype fulfilling everything he admired (Malins, 1974, 84). Perhaps the most admiring feature of Robert for Yeats is that he has psychic second sight, through which he understands he will die.

Moreover, Robert is the ideal man for Yeats since he has no superficial reasons for the war, and he is just in pursuit of “lonely impulse of delight” (“Irish” 11). Giving voice to the inner thoughts of Robert in the poem, Yeats is highly criticized for reducing the entire war into a lament for his friend. However, Yeats’s treatment of war in the poem can be considered revolutionary. He complicates the idea of war and even trivializes the political dimension of it:



Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
[...]
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight. (3-11)

While Robert's loyalty to the Irish countryside and countrymen is explicitly demonstrated, the politics of the time are ignored by Robert. His only motivation is the "lonely impulse of delight" (11). All the other possible motives such as law, duty, public men, and cheering crowds are all ignored, but his impulse of delight is highlighted. This is "the impulse to realize some solitary ecstasy, some inexpressible freedom" (Ross, 2009, 131) which Robert will be able to find "among the clouds above" (2). Gregory's allegiance to his impulse makes Faulkner (1987) define him as "a kind of existentialist hero, fighting not to produce results but for the satisfaction of the activity in itself" (7). However, his impulse will only be satisfied with his death, which will also provide the 'balance' between his past life, which was a waste, and his future life, which would be likewise.

Balance, which is in the centre of the poem, may refer to the airman's struggle to stabilise his plane. It may also be a reference to the style of the poem, in which the words, the phrases, the content, and the lines were balanced (Gill 66) as well as the mind of the hero whose "heroism [. . .] is self-sufficient" (Smith, 1990, 78). Although it is a short dramatic monologue, it is pretty significant in that it displays Yeats's development as a poet: "It is a magnificent, short poem, showing Yeats's development as a poet in verse absolutely suitable to his living in the Ireland of his day, rather than in any Celtic dream world" (Malins, 1974, 85).

"The Circus Animals' Desertion," which was one of the last poems that Yeats completed before his death in 1939, was written between the years 1937 and 1938, and it was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *London Mercury* in 1939 as well as in *Last Poems and Two Plays* in 1939. The poem epitomizes Yeats's fierce and angry statement of the wrath of his age, because of which he cannot find a proper theme to make his circus animals play again. Writing on the writing of poems, thus being "a reflexive poet" (Gill, 1993, 128), Yeats himself discovers his desperate and futile search for new themes:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, [. . .] (1-4)

In pursuit of new themes, Yeats catches a bitter awareness of the fact that he will not be able to find one, but this is "a bitterness that possesses aesthetic dignity" (Bloom, 1970, 457). His bitterness becomes much more transparent and deeper with his constant repetition of 'sought', which underlines the abandonment of his poetic skills. Whining about not finding a theme as he could do in his old golden days, Yeats begins to enumerate his old works. He even meditates upon them by making clear what motivations lie behind those works. Hence, "The Circus Animals' Desertion," which is "an impersonal evaluation" (Unterecker, 1959, 8), serves not only as a reconciliation of Yeats with the enumeration of his old themes but also as a final statement and/or self-summary. He presents "a kind of retrospective" (Draper, 1999, 71) of his old works, which are *The Wanderings of Oisín*, in which he describes Oisín's adventures. Oisín goes to three islands under the spell of his infatuation with the Niamh. *The Countess Kathleen* deals with the countess who sells her soul to the devil to feed her subjects. *Baile's Strand* narrates the story of Irish hero Cúchulain who kills his son without knowing, and he fights against the sea. Yeats evaluates these three specific works and analyses his treatment of them. He confesses that his real aim for writing *The Wanderings of Oisín* was simply for "the bosom of his fairy bride" (16), implying Maud Gonne, while the real motive that makes him write *Countess Kathleen* is "the dream itself [that] had all [his] thought and love" (24). His objective to write *Baile's Strand* is about his preoccupation with the theatre and the notion that the character should be isolated by a single deed:

It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed

To engross the present and dominate memory. (28-30)

Although his poems and plays have allegorical or symbolic importance, it is actually the heroes which attract Yeats's imagination (Smith, 1990, 77). In this poem, Yeats reduces all his characters into "circus animals" which were all on the show once:

Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. (36-38)

He finally concludes that he must "lie down where all ladders start, / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (39-40).

Conclusion

In conclusion, W. B. Yeats, who is one of the most prominent Irish literary figures, cannot be categorized into only one century and/or one literary movement. There are very few poets whose careers are as complex and diverse as Yeats, who produced works that may belong to three literary-historical periods, Romantic, Victorian and Modernist. Therefore, Yeats' poetry, as Quinn points out, is "the culmination of the nineteenth century and the unsurpassed achievement of the twentieth" (59). Consequently, this paper demonstrates that romantic idealization of tranquillity of nature, primitivism, intuition, and feelings is disrupted with modernist vision in his poems by making a close reading of the poems titled "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "When You are Old," "An Irish Airman Foresees His Future," and "The Circus Animals' Desertion".



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