



THEOLOGICAL EVENNESS IN W. B. YEATS: A PREAMBLE

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Abstract:

The current study deals with the development of a unique theological and philosophical system of Yeats that accentuated the role of fate or the beliefs that have been inevitable. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his lifelong study of mythology, theosophy, spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult reveal his deep curiosity in the divine and its interaction with humanity. Throughout his life, he formed a compound system of spirituality, using the image of intertwining gyres to outline the advance and revival of the soul. Yeats thought that history is dogged by fate and fate revealed its plan in split seconds when the human and divine interact. A quality of previously determined certainty pervades his poetry, particularly in descriptions of situations of human and divine interaction.

Key Words: The Sages, Rough Beast, Gyre, Anti Christ, Soul

1. Introduction:

The human experience, the corporal, emotional and spiritual elements of life, is inextricably related with the versatile notion of longing. Indeed, longing, as one of the most powerful elements of human sentiment, reflects as a central concern in Yeats' life and his poetry. His poetry, ranging over numerous decades, ideological factions and poetic forms, can be seen as a personal expedition to accomplish his desires. His early poems circle fanatically around desire and its objects. They depict a kind of desire that cannot be content, but feeds off its nuisance and surpasses its objects. His later poems, on the other hand, depict desire as an eternal, disembodied force that sweeps over humanity and possesses an enduring relevance.

The poetry of W. B. Yeats is full of spiritual essentials, symbols, subject matters and motifs. His spiritual philosophy attracts the readers and poem lovers for his extraordinary thoughts and ideas. This Irish poet lost his Christian faith as a boy, but he was a man of profoundly religious disposition. A passionate pastor of life on earth, he nevertheless upheld a lifelong search for a world beyond. This hastened him to various kinds of mysticism, to legends, theosophy, spiritualism, and Neo-Platonism— not in any stringent chronological order, for he kept returning to and reworking earlier aspects of his thought. In fact his poetry was a display of his passion for Irish mythology and folklore mixed with spirituality and the occult.

W. B. Yeats looks for a theory of the essence of spirit as spirit, a theory that chases what is absolutely universal in the spiritual order with its own constituents and decrees. Like one of his contemporaries Husserl, Yeats had a life-long concern also for recognizing and nurturing in Irish culture and art of those spiritual elements that were universal but, in his opinion, most noticeably present in Ireland.

2. Definition:

Spiritualism is the belief that there is hidden meaning in life or that each human being can unite with God. It also means the belief that living people can communicate with people who have died.

3. Spiritualism in Islam and Christianity:

In Islam, Sufism is the doctrine of spiritualism. It searches for a direct mystical knowledge of God and of his Love. Sufism is a school for the actualization of celestial

ethics. It involves an enlightened inner being, not intellectual proof; revelation and witnessing, not logic. Sufism used a figurative method opposing to the literal elucidation which looked for the hidden meaning and symbols in the holy texts. The substance of Sufism is the Truth and the meaning of Sufism is the selfless experiencing. The practice of Sufism is the intention to go towards the Truth, by means of love and devotion.

Christians have their thoughts little different than Islamic idea of spiritualism. Webster defines Spiritualism as: "The belief that the dead survive as spirits which can communicate with the living, especially with the help of a third party, called a medium." In Islam this medium is called spiritual guide.

The National Spiritualist Association of Churches defines Spiritualism as: "The science, philosophy and religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of medium ship, with those who live in the Spirit World."

4. Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to find out the spiritualism and universality of the thoughts and ideas of W. B. Yeats among the people studying his spiritual elements of his poetry. This work will observe the realistic representation of his mystic and religious philosophy of life.

5. Research Methodology:

To complete the research study, stimulation came from the study of the poetry of W. B. Yeats from different critical studies of English literature. The 'Observation Method' was applied successfully for this research work. By using this method, the researcher goes through different literary articles, critical compositions, and websites to find interrelated study materials, in order to be acknowledged in the allied topics. Different critical books composed by- Dr. S. Sen, Coles, Cliffs, Khondokar Mostak Ahmed, Ramji Lal, Dr. Syed Sajjad Hossain, Ramji Lal etc. remain supportive for the part of the study on poet's literary life.

6. A Short Biography of W. B. Yeats:

Yeats was born in Dublin. The juvenile Yeats was very much part of the fin de siècle in London; simultaneously he was active in societies that endeavored an Irish literary revival. Together with Lady Gregory he founded the Irish Theatre, which became the Abbey Theatre, and served as its chief playwright until the movement was joined by John Synge. His plays usually treat Irish legends; they also reflect his fascination with mysticism and spiritualism. *The Countess Cathleen*, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The King's Threshold*, and *Deirdre* are among the best known.

After 1910, his dramatic art took a sharp turn toward a highly poetical, static, and esoteric style. Yeats is one of the few writers whose greatest works were written after the award of the Nobel Prize. He got Nobel in 1923. Whereas he received the Prize chiefly for his dramatic works, his significance today rests on his lyric achievement. His poetry, especially the volumes *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, *The Tower*, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, and *Last Poems and Plays*, made him one of the outstanding and most influential 20th century poets writing in English. His recurrent themes are the contrast of art and life, masks, cyclical theories of life (the symbol of the winding stairs), and the ideal of beauty and ceremony contrasting with the tumult of modern life. William Butler Yeats died on January 28, 1939. Yeats' gravestone was made with his famous epitaph: "the place that has really influenced my life most is Sligo." Sligo is also home to a statue and memorial building in his honor.

7. Spiritualism in W. B. Yeats:

Spirituality takes many shapes in his poetry. Sometimes it appears literally as in *Leda and the Swan*, sometimes abstractly in *The Second Coming*. In other poems, the spirituality is gestured as the celestial sense in the Byzantine mosaics in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Whatever shape it takes, spiritualism indicates the role of fate in resolving the course of mysterious life journey.

William Butler Yeats is one of the most significant poets in the English language of the twentieth century. He had a life-long interest in mysticism and spiritualism. In 1885, Yeats and several friends formed the Dublin Hermetic Order. Yeats became heavily involved with heretics and theosophical beliefs, and in 1900 became head of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats, moved the family to London when Yeats was two years old. The Yeats family moved back and forth between Dublin and London several times during poet's youth. His poetry was permeated and immersed with images and symbols and he attributed this element to his artistic studies. Yeats returned to London where he met important literary figures such George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. The twin elements of Dublin and London played an important role in the progress of Yeats's aesthetic sensibility. Yeats's poetic vision was also heavily indebted to Irish folklore, spirituality, mythology, and the occult. Yeats was intrigued by the spiritual and mystical elements of Irish mythology and in interest in the spiritual domain was something that he pursued in depth.

One of the most significant personal influences in Yeats' life was the feminist poet Maud Gonne. Yeats always referred to Gonne as his muse and unrequited love. Yeats proposed to Gonne's daughter after Gonne turned down his proposal. At the age of 51 Yeats married Georgie Hyde Lee in 1917 (1892-1968). Lee was twenty five years junior to Yeats but the wedding was a success. She shared Yeats interests in mysticism and spiritualism. She introduced Yeats to the technique of automatic writing and experiments with trances and the spirit world.

C. M. Bowra said about Yeats that, "Yeats does not regard poetry as complete in itself, with its own ritual and meaning. He sees it as part of a larger experience, as a means of communication with the spiritual world which lies behind the visible. For him the poet is almost a medium, and interpreter of the unseen and his poetry is the record of the revelations given to him."

8. Discussion and Findings: Major Theological Elements:

8.1 Soul:

The rejection of Christian principles in favor of a more supernatural approach to spirituality creates a unique flavor in Yeats's poetry that impacts his discussion of history, politics, and love. Yeats is perhaps the one modern poet who built up a system of thought based on the occult and mystic religion and whose poetry was the direct outcome of it. *The Last Poems* of Yeats are steeped in spiritualism. *A Dialogue of Self and Soul* is in a way a debate between 'Atma' and 'Maya'. Here Soul says,

"Upon the stars that marks the hidden pole;
Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done;
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?"

8.2 Reincarnation:

Mysticism is being conscious not only of a divine presence in nature but also of the existence of an essential identity of being between man, nature and God. Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the

otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began at the School of Art in Dublin. Afterward his study of Theosophy developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Under the influence of the people of this society Yeats came to believe in re-incarnation. 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.

8.3 The Sages:

The appeal of the Roman Catholic is to the saints, whose lives on earth are commemorated, and whose present spiritual existence in the other world is represented, by the monuments. Such is the poet's attitude toward the 'sages' in *Sailing to Byzantium*. He does not say, "Come from the gold mosaic." He says:

"O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire. . . ."

The sages are to come from the holy fire, not from the gold mosaic, which, like the statues of saints for the Catholic, is merely the visible representation of the sages and the holy fire. If Yeats meant that the art might actually become animate, he would be little more than an idolater, or, even if he meant it only as a metaphor, it would be on about the same intellectual level as a fairy tale for children.

Of course, from a strictly rationalist standpoint, coming from the holy fire would be crude magic, but this symbol for a mystical, spiritual contact with the holy dead has considerable religious sanction and therefore a certain degree at least of intellectual dignity.

8.4 Gyre:

The 'gyre' is a circular or conical shape that appears recurrently in Yeats's poems and was developed in his book *A Vision*. He used the image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical twists—to represent his idealistic belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul or the civilization or the age would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. The symbol of the interlocking gyres reveals Yeats's belief in fate and historical determinism as well as his spiritual attitudes toward the development of the soul. With the image of the gyre, Yeats created a shorthand reference in his poetry that stood for his entire philosophy of history and spirituality.

8.5 Rough Beast:

Yeats uses the figure of a rough beast—an appalling, vicious animal—to personify difficult abstract concepts. The great beast represents evil and darkness. In *The Second Coming*, it emerges from the Spiritus Mundi, or soul of the universe, to function as the primary image of devastation in the poem.

Yeats depicts the commencement of apocalyptic events: "blood-dimmed tide is loosed"
Again he says: "ceremony of innocence is drowned"

The world enters into a new age and the things fall apart as a result of the widening of the gyres. The speaker predicts the arrival of the Second Coming, and this prediction summons an enormous figure of a scary monster pulled from the consciousness of the world. Yeats modifies the well-known image of the sphinx to embody the poem's vision of the coming. By providing the horrifying prospect of commotion and change into a probable appalling monster, Yeats makes an abstract fear become touchable and real. The rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born, where it will evolve into an

anti-Christ figure for the dark new age. In this way, Yeats uses distinct, concrete imagery to symbolize complex spiritual ideas about the state of the modern world.

9. The Second Coming:

One of the aspects of Yeats that intrigued the readers was his ability to wrap numinous and conceptual ideas in concrete words and images such as in *The Second Coming*.

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”

The Second Coming is similar to the holy sonnet in that the speaker can't control the fate of himself or the world. He speaks of a world in chaos where-

“The falcon cannot hear the falconer.”

In this metaphor, the falcon is the speaker, or a human, and the falconer is God. The speaker goes on to say that ‘the Second Coming’ is at hand; not the second coming of Christ, but the second coming of the pagan gods, which is represented by the ‘rough beast’, its hour comes at last and then it,

“Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born”

Yeats believed that every 2000 years, the gods changed. So the speaker in the poem is living during a time when the gods are changing, which is why there is chaos. Again, this poem puts the fate of the speaker and the world in the hands of the gods. However, unlike the holy sonnet, this poem isn't about the speaker's relationship with God, but rather the lack of relationship and the arrival of new gods. The poem isn't about the relationship with God at all. It's about the chaotic times where it seems like God has left to let the new gods take over.

10. Spiritual Masterpiece: Sailing To Byzantium:

Sailing to Byzantium is indeed one of the most well-known lyrics of W.B. Yeats. And perhaps for good reason as the poem shows how someone can gain immortality through artifice, a structure created by man that exists in both the mortal and eternal realm. Though, it is hardly the only poem where Yeats presents this theme, and by explicating artifice from other poems the readers understand the level of density concerned and, thus, can better appreciate the success in ‘Sailing’. Most of the critics have alleged Byzantium in several ways; as a representation of the thoughts, the imaginative act, the soul, apparition, and Unity of Being. The poem has also been sighted and construed as the source of supreme beauty and permanent appeal of artifacts. According to Yeats old age is useless if at that time one does not respond to spirituality, or the soul's claps and songs. Here he also depicts the modern spiritual barrenness.

The lyric centers the contrast between the transient and the eternal. The poem transmits the point that human body is mortal and is sure to crumble and expire whereas art or beautifully crafted artifacts are timeless, eternal, unchangeable and of permanent value. The poem is thus the poet's intensifying wish to leave this world of death and sorrow and to escape into a world of immortal beauty perceived imaginatively as a spiritual escape to Byzantium. Byzantium is a world of immortality beyond limits of time and space. It also denotes a place of unity; spiritual or otherwise.

‘Byzantium’ is indeed an admirable endeavor at bringing together aesthetics, spiritualism, symbolism, and mysticism together on one common platform. The effect is both revealing and enthralling. The epic exploration of the other world brings into perspective, the question of life in death and death in life. The poet metaphorically leaves the world of limitations to steer into a world of permanence and artistic eternity. Tired of life's agonizing existence, the poet seeks recluse and relief in death and beyond.

The flames of the Emperor's pavement are fuelled by deep spiritual realization. Thus, these flames are flames of divine purgatorial fire. The spirits brought to Byzantium by Dolphins through the sea of time are covered with 'mire and blood'; here blood signifies impurity or spurious state. 'Faggot' in the poem signifies martyrdom. This means, the impure spirits must pass through an intensely trying spiritual fire, they must consign themselves to this fire to emerge like a phoenix. This agonizing dance of fire, flames and faggots would eventually turn these spirits into something pure or 'Herculean'.

11. Conclusion:

Yeats had a life-long interest in mysticism, spiritualism, occultism, astrology and numerology. He read broadly on the subjects all through his life, and was especially influenced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. His spiritual interests are also inspired by his study of Hinduism, under the Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee, and the occult is formed much of the basis of his late poetry.

Yeats offers a wide range, a substantial body of spiritual work, and a mastery of verse: he manifests an exceptionally long and impressive development. Winding stairs, spirals of all kinds, gyres and spinning tops are some of the terms that hold spiritual importance in his later poetry.

Yeats's success in turning his spiritual emotions and likes and dislikes into great poetry was really remarkable. Very few modern poets have succeeded in turning the powers of poetry to such effective spiritual use and yet preserve the necessary impersonality of poetry in which Yeats believed as much as T. S. Eliot did.

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