

W.B. Yeats' Spiritual Gardens - Innisfree, Coole Park and Byzantium

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ABSTRACT. *William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. He was born in the period of Industrial Revolution and Ireland National Movement, the turmoil of the society made him more clear-headed and he expressed his pursuit of great art and Ireland spirits in his works. There were also many brilliant places that can be regarded as his spiritual gardens in his poetry. Three poems from his different stages are selected to analyzed his different attitudes toward life with the changes of the world.*

KEYWORDS: *W.B.Yeats, Ireland, art, spiritual gardens*

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. He can be regarded as the most important poet in Ireland. Since Ireland was a colony of England, as an Anglo-Irish poet, Yeats tried to find his identity and pursue the independence of Ireland during his whole life. His attribution on both literature and politics were worthy to be commemorated by Ireland and its people. Three poems are analyzed to show the change of the society and his attitude to life.

Yeats' poetry covered a wide range such as love, art, politics, and so on. Yeats' poetry can be divided into three stages: the first stage was from 1884 to 1899. During the first stage, Yeats was young and romantic, so the poems imitated the English poetry of Romanticism which was like the ballad poetry and full of beautiful Ireland elements. This stage his poems were mainly written for British people in order to let them know the real Ireland. Therefore, many folk legends that he heard from his hometown Sligo were written in his poetry to stress the feature of Ireland. The second stage was from 1900 to 1919 in which Yeats began to create his own style. In this stage, he proposed to Maud Gonne who was a passionate nationalist leading the liberation movement of Ireland. Her refusal to Yeats and her marriage with an officer made him desperate and heart broken. So he firstly expressed his sadness in his poetry and secondly let himself get immersed in busy work of Abbey Theatre to release his sad feelings. Besides, the mess situation of Ireland made him realize the importance of national responsibility. The poems of this stage were closer to the reality. The final stage was from 1920 to 1939. After experiencing the frustration of love, loss of close

friends and disappointment of political condition, the theme of his poetry became deeper. He tended to pursue the most perfect art and also hoped that Ireland would be the art centre of the world. The poetry of this stage were much maturer than before because he suffered a lot and became reasonable to life and death. Anyway, the Ireland elements were throughout his poetry creation and were closely related to the national liberation. Yeats said that “There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature” (Yeats, Letters to the New Island 30). Obviously he took literature as an important element in revitalizing the pride of Ireland. He can be regarded as one of the most influential participants of Irish Literary Revival. The three poems are selected in his different stages and each of them showed Yeats’ pursuit of peace and art.

2. W.B. Yeats’ Three Spiritual Gardens

2.1 The Lake Isle of Innisfree

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.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

——(Yeats, 1999)

This poem was written in Yeats’ first stage. One day he was lingering on the street in London and passing a shop when he found a fountain from the window, which made him remember this island of his hometown Sligo. Innisfree was an island in Sligo where Yeats grew up. After the Industrial Revolution, he was tired with the material world and missed the peace and serenity of nature. The Innisfree was an ideal and independence place that was far away from the city and without invasion of

colonizers. He seemed to find the recovery of the colonized land through the act of imagination. The first stanza describes the leisure life in Innisfree. “small cabin”, “bean-rows” and “a hive” represent the lifestyle in the island, which is totally different from the life in the city and also Yeats’ longing life. The second stanza shows the beautiful nature scenery of a day from sunrise to sunset. In this stanza, the image of fog is described as young girl’s veil. And the “cricket sings”, “linnet’s wings”, which seems like they are communicating with each other in their own ways. From morning to evening, from midnight to noon, the peace exists all the time and can never fade away. The last stanza is an echo of the first stanza, the poet stresses the strong wish that he wants to go to that peaceful place. Yeats makes a comparison between the “roadway and pavement” and “lake and shore”, which shows his hatred of the industrial city. For him, the pavements are grey, while the island is colorful, “noon a purple glow”. The Industrial Revolution makes the sky grey and gloomy and only far from the city can enjoy the clear sky which changes from time to time. It also can be explained that England is the place where full of industrial materials while Ireland is the independent and peaceful island. The colonization would break the peace of Ireland and also pollute the nature environment of Ireland. Said, one of the most important researchers of Yeats, claimed that Yeats against repression through the act of imagination at his early stage. On one hand, the life in Innisfree can be seen a good wish of Ireland although for Yeats this kind of life cannot be realized forever. On the other hand, it can also be read his disappointment of the situation of Ireland. Therefore, he wanted to run away from the reality. The loss of huge amount of people because of the Great Famine and the downfall of the Irish leader Parnell made the situation more serious and Yeats and other nationalists thought that “Romantic Ireland is dead and gone”. (Yeats, 1913) This whole poem describes a serene life in Innisfree, it can be read the trace of English Romanticism. At the early stage, Yeats was influenced deeply by England “Lake Poets” or Shelley and Keats. Innisfree is his dreaming place that he can seek the peace for both outside nature and inner spirit.

2.2 The Wild Swans at Coole

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,

All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

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,
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?
——(Yeats, 1999)

If the life in Innisfree is an imagination by Yeats, the Coole is the second unforgettable place he lived through his whole life except for his hometown Sligo. Coole Park was once the home of Lady Gregory, dramatist, folklorist and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre with William Butler Yeats and Edward Martyn. In the early 20th century, Coole was the centre of the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats lived there for many years and had a deep emotion with Coole. Many of his poems were related to the life in Coole, such as *In the Seven Woods* (1903). *The Wild Swans at Coole* was written in 1919 when Yeats was on a holiday in Coole. He was taking a walk by the

lake when he saw the swans were having a frolic in the water. The poem has five stanzas. The first stanza describes a environment of the Coole. In the golden October, “trees” and “woodland path” are beautiful. The “water” is clear to mirror “sky”. Fifty-nine swans are enjoying the peaceful time in the water. The nature scene in the first stanza is clear and beautiful and it has not been polluted by industry, and human and nature live in harmony, which shows the difference between the industrial city and the Coole Park. The swans are not only a kind of bird and they can be seen as the incarnation of freedom. Then the poet transfers the static state to the dynamic state. The fifty-nine swans in the second stanza are “all suddenly mount” and “scatter wheeling” when the poet first count them nineteen years ago. The poet witnessed and experienced a lot in the past nineteen years on love, life and society. About his personal life, he was refused by Maud Gonne for many times and she got married with another man and divorced. About his career, he set up the Abbey Theatre with Lady Gregory and other fellows and wrote plays with Irish features, and also worked for the Literary Revival with friends who have the common goal. About the society, the colonization by England made Irish people suffer a painful life, the Great Famine caused a huge reduction of Irish population, and the national revival movement was not smooth. The poet sighed the changes of the world and at the same time worried about the time when the new culture appears. The third stanza the “sore” feeling is expressed while “looking upon those brilliant creatures”. The poet felt “sore” because the changes of the society break not only the peace of the Park but also the cultures that have been accumulated for many centuries. No matter the big house of Lade Gregory in the Coole Park where he could do his writing or the big house during his childhood in his hometown Sligo where he spent a great time with his family was a part of his noble culture. He was afraid that this kind of culture would be gone with the development of society and the colonization by England. But the truth was crucial - the cultures did fade away, which made the poet feel distressed. The forth stanza a loneliness can be seen between the lines. Even the swans were “lover by lover”, the poet himself was still single. The poet expressed the pity of his relationship with Maud Gonne and also looked forward the true love coming upon him again. On the other hand, the swans in Coole seem unchangeable for many years and they were still carefree and leisurely even though the world was changing all the time. And maybe nineteen years ago, the poet himself was like the swans, free and passionate. But now, things remained as ever, yet the man was here no more and he was not young any more. In the last stanza, the poet cannot imagine that the swans would “fly away” “when he wakes up some day”. For him, although the Coole Park in autumn was “mysterious, beautiful”, the winter was coming soon. “their hearts have not grown old.” The swans, as symbols of energy and permanence impress him greatly. They have the ability to find their ideal habitat but the poet himself cannot run away with his home left in a disordered society. Looking through the whole poem, “a middle-aged man observes a flock of swans first seen years before; contrasting their unwearied energies to his own diminished spirits, he wonders what will happen when the vitality they symbolize leaves him behind for good”. (Holdeman, 2006)

2.3 Sailing to Byzantium

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
—Those dying generations—at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

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 knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

—(Yeats, 1999)

Yeats was born in a Protestant family but he had a close relationship with Ireland. Although he didn't understand Gaelic and all of his works were written in English, he liked the profound cultures of Ireland and many of his poetry and plays were created on the basis of Irish fairy tales. After entering the senate, he also stressed the tradition of being conservative and reasonable of the Protestants was suitable for the new Ireland. As a part of Aristocratic class, Yeats thought that only the Aristocratic class own the wealth and can create great art and protect art. Therefore, many of his poems praised the Aristocratic civilization represented by Byzantium. The art beauty of Byzantium attracted Yeats very much, and at that time, Yeats was over sixty years old, he could not avoid death and realize the immortality of his life so he can only lay the hope on art. Moreover, the modern society had developed in the period of the industrial society, the world had lost the cultural centre and he missed the Byzantium of Middle age. It also implied that he hoped that Ireland would have the glorious and splendid art and become the cultural centre of the world like Byzantium. Hence, he wrote a series of poems about Byzantium cultures like *Byzantium* and *Sailing to Byzantium*. In *Sailing to Byzantium*, Yeats expressed his lament for the loss of youth in the form of an inner monologue of a dying old man, full of yearning for the eternal world of art. The first stanza describes the youth abounding all around him; "birds in the tress", "the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas." "The young in one another's arms" are blissfully unaware of the horror that will soon capture them: aging, that concept which preoccupies him so. No one can avoid getting old and finally being dead and "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies." In the second stanza, the poet claims that old is negative, "an aged man is but a paltry thing" with "a tattered coat upon a stick". Therefore the poet tries to find the immortality of spirit and "sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium" through his imagination. The third stanza, the poet has passed the "God's holy fire" and "perne in a gyre" and finally become "the singing-masters of my soul." After his heart is "consumed away" the desires "fastened to a dying animal", he gets "Into the artifice of eternity." The poet thinks that the art is supreme and sublime and only a devout spirit without any desires can get close to the great art, which can be seen a highly praise of Byzantium civilization. In the last stanza, the poet "never take My bodily form from any natural thing" and would take the form of something golden. And then he will be immortal and never again be plagued by the harsh realities of aging. The whole poem can be seen the comparisons between the reality and imagination, between the death and immortality, and between the real world and great art. In Yeats opinion, people have lost sensibility and began to pursue the material life, and it caused the decadent and numbness of spirit.

Immortality can be realized only transcending the short life in the great art.

3. Conclusion

From Innisfree, Coole Park to Byzantium, Yeats was from romanticism in his youth, mature in his middle age to the eternity in his old age. But the unchangable topic is peace. The imagine peaceful life in Innisfree, the beautiful nature scenery in Coole Park, and the glory civilization and the eternity of art all entrust Yeats inner wish to live a peaceful life which was far away from the reality. And they also show the critique of the industrial society and the great pity of the loss of great art. W.B. Yeats could not find any peace in the real world and what he did was to create it in his spirit gardens. He casted a cold eye, on life, on death, and like a horseman, passed by the world, with many splendid works left.

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