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Archetypes and Metaphors in the Matrix of W. B. Yeats' Poetry

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Abstract

Irish culture and landscape fascinate W. B. Yeats that often determines the nature of his poetry. Literary archetypes and metaphors are two important literary assets which elevate his poetry to a greater height. His deep knowledge of history and myth is the genesis of his archetypes and metaphors. The rich heritage of Irish tradition serves for him a fertile mine from where he picks up his raw materials for archetypes and metaphors. Poetry, in general, is enriched by the artistic implementation of archetypes and metaphors. For Yeats, these two literary tools serve dual functions: the first one enables the reader to comprehend the greater understanding of the concept and the content and the second function is to create an image that catches the psyche of an aesthetic mind of a reader. Yeats is a dreamer as well as an artist. His poetry is the art of the highest order spun out of the creative genius. The present article in question is an evaluative attempt to locate the impact of literary devices like metaphors and archetypes in Yeats' poetry.

Keynotes: *metaphor, archetype, symbol and image.*

Poetry of highest order is manifested through literary archetypes and metaphors. An archetype in the domain of literature comes vividly to the discerning eye of a reader in the mould of a character, a situation or images that embody the expression of man's experience and nature that echo worldwide with their motifs being predominantly rooted in folklore. It at times acts as a recurrent narrative design, a pattern of action, a theme or an iconic image that determine the intensity of a literary work. Some distinguished settings, plots and characters recur in legends cutting across space and time.

They are actually symbols, motifs or themes universally acknowledged in varied cultures. The circulated archetypal pattern is the symbol rooted in a culture's mythology. Northrop Frye finds the nexus between an archetype and a myth. According to him, an archetype, in the mythical phase, is a communicable symbol, a typical and recurring image. Jung in his *Psychological Types* calls archetypes 'the collective unconsciousness'. Yeats makes use of archetypes by exploring the unconscious world of dreams through myths, symbols and metaphors. He takes advantages of the



rich heritages of myths, folklores and legends of his beloved country when it comes to using archetypes in his poetry.

Yeats' poetry embarks upon the rich tradition of Irish culture and myths. He aims at reviving the lost heritage of Irish literary tradition. His nationalist spirit drives him to unearth the mines of Irish legends and folklores. Yeats is a dreamer. His early poems are of escapade. His yearning soul often escapes into the world of dreams. He believed that poetry should be a means of escape from the harsh reality of life. He takes refuge of Irish mythology and folklores. He takes pride in being an Irish. His poems often celebrate the essence of Irish nationality. In this regard, Suheil B. Bushrui in his article '*Images of a Changing Ireland in the works of W. B. Yeats*' rightly observes, "All the efforts of Yeats' celebrations of Irish nationality were directed toward the spiritual ennoblement of Ireland, and to make Irish people aware and proud of their nobility. In order to envisage Ireland as it might become Yeats created a national myth, not loosely fabricated, but deeply rooted in heritage and history of Ireland." A new Ireland based on Irish rich past is his dream which is articulated in his poetry through symbols and images, most of which come in the form of archetypes. Yeats is a poet with a strong sense of history at his disposal. His repeated use of historical and mythical images takes the shape of archetypes which lie hidden in the unconscious. Yeats held that symbols had an autonomous power of their own in the unconscious. It was these symbols, age-long inherited memories, upon which the artist and the poet drew as the source of creativity. The mythological figures and themes out of the ancient memories acted

upon the individual, and one's creativity was an expression of these forces. These symbols and images could be brought to consciousness and expressed artistically via magic and ritual. Yeats' poetry was intended as an expression of these symbols.

Yeats makes Byzantium an archetype by its repeated use. It is the collective unconscious that speaks volume in regards to Byzantium. Byzantium by its name gives the impression as an eternal city of art and culture coming down the ages since the historical Roman Empire and Yeats too mean it. However, Yeats' journey motif is much ago manifested in one of his earlier poems entitled '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."*

Here the image of 'Innisfree' comes from the unconscious existed on Yeats' childhood memories of its beautiful landscape. 'Innisfree' turns the role of an archetype in the form of an iconic symbol. The beautiful landscape of Innisfree finds its tone in the nostalgic form:

*"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."
The archetypal images such as moon and
sky are beautifully employed by Yeats in
the poem, 'The Sorrow of Love':*

*"The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,*



Had blotted out man's image and his cry."

Yeats' archetypes broaden their roles and help edge out man's follies. The final stanza of the same poem speaks of this aspect of archetypes:

*"Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry."*

Yeats uses the archetype of hero extensively in his poems drawn on Celtic myths. The heroic exploits of Cuchulain recurs as the theme of a number of his poems. Some other Celtic figures such as Oisín and Aengus form the archetypal figures. Yeats' poem, 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea' reminds the reader of the familiar Oedipal struggle in reverse where instead of the son slaying his father as is the case in the Oedipus tale, the father Cuchulain kills his son out of the utter ignorance. Cuchulain's spirit voices, "...some man has made/His evening fire amid the leafy shade. /I have often heard him singing to and fro,/ I often heard the sweet sound of his bow./Seek out what man he is". The heroic death of Cuchulain is articulated in 'Cuchulain Comforted': "A man that had six mortal wounds, a man/Violent and famous, strode among the dead; / Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone." The immortal lines of the same poem, "Cuchulain stirred,/ Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard/ The cars of battle and his own name cried;/ And fought with the invulnerable tide" are striking enough to evoke a sense of wonder as well as of pity in the minds of the readers. The agony stimulated from the knowledge of his murder of his own son in

ignorance is focused in these final four lines of the poem. Cuchulain remains as the most cherished archetypal figure for Yeats. Then the contemporary history, at Yeats' masterful hand, transforms into an archetypal symbol. Yeats' 'Easter 1916' testifies to his art of conversion: "I write it out in a verse -/MacDonagh and MacBride/ And Connolly and Pearse/ Now and in time to be,/ Wherever green is worn,/ Are changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born." Thus the real men and women turn heroes of the political myth of Ireland. The contemporary history and myth are integrated to immortalize the otherwise ordinary human beings. A harmony is resulted out of the creative fusion of myth and reality. In this regard, Ashok Bhargava's observation is remarkable: 'By integrating his own experience with that of the myths, Yeats sought to achieve harmony.'

His untiring love for Maud Gonne makes her an archetype of beauty. The archetypal beauty of Helen is revisited through the real character of Maud Gonne in his poetry. Yeats' creative skill creates myth out of actual incidents and figures. The poem, 'No Second Troy' elevates Gonne to the status of mythical Helen: "What could have made her peaceful with a mind/ That nobleness made simple as a fire,/ With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind/ That is not natural in an age like this,/ Being high and solitary and most stern?/ Why, what could she have done, being what she is? Was there another Troy for her to burn?" Maud Gonne is again likened to mythical Cathleen in the context of their noble efforts to rescue people from famines as is evident in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion': "*The Countess Cathleen* was the name I gave it,/ She,



pity-crazed, had given her soul away/ But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it./ I thought my dear must her own soul destroy/...my thought and love.”

Generally the swans are considered symbols of purity and modesty. However, the grandness of these creatures has also been employed as a tool for deception in several literary works. In Yeats’ ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, the modesty of the swan conforms to the ideal setting of Coole Park: “The trees are in their autumnal 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.” But another poem by Yeats named ‘Leda and the Swan’ presents the swan as a brutal creature which attempted to ravish a woman in the person of Leda. The content of the poem refers to the mythological story of how Leda, the queen of Sparta, was raped by a swan:

“A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.”

Of course, it was not really the swan that had raped Leda; rather, it was Zeus himself who took the shape of a swan. Thus the contrast evident in the archetypal image of the swan in Yeats’ two poems – ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ and ‘Leda and the Swan’ –is identifiable. Yeats, in the process, delves deep into myths to dig out archetypes. Yeats’ such artistic use of archetype elevates the whole design of a poem. ‘Leda and the Swan’ thus remains a great piece of work by Yeats. Nancy D.

Hargrove sums up the poem by saying in his article ‘*Esthetic Distance in Yeats’ ‘Leda and the Swan’*’: “Within the formal design of the sonnet, Yeats combines the mortal and the immortal, the sensuality of a violent rape and the abstraction of the divine, the specific intense moment in time and the broad sweep of a two-thousand-year cycle in human history.” In the process, myths and history play pivotal roles for Yeats in the effective implementation of archetypes in his poems.

Metaphor is an asset and an important vehicle for literature. Metaphor makes literature more imaginative and so more artistic. Metaphor is a penetrative trait of language. Metaphor in literature bears dual functions. The foremost function is to allow the reader to sense a better understanding of the concept, object, or character as reflected in poetry. This is done by comparing it to an item that may be more familiar to the reader. The second function is purely artistic: to create an image that is beautiful or profound or otherwise produces the effect that the writer desires. Yeats is a great poet with the penchant for using effective metaphors. Yeats’ metaphors are very much artistic evident in the poem, ‘A Coat’:

“I made my song a coat

Covered with embroideries

Out of old mythologies

From heel to throat;”

‘Song’ is suggestive of ‘a coat’, where ‘embroideries’ that of ‘old mythologies’. Thus the instance of the dual metaphors in this imagery is a striking one. Again poet Yeats is a genius when it comes to implementing an extended metaphor. He forms such a metaphor in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’:



*“And therefore I have sailed the seas
and come*

To the holy city of Byzantium.”

The destination of his journey is somewhere that is ideal and eternal, somewhat away from the earth and the reality, albeit Byzantium was a real historical place. However, another beautiful metaphor is perceived in his ‘The Cat and The Moon’:

*“The cat went here and there
And the moon spun round like a top,
And the nearest kin of the moon,
The creeping cat looked up.”*

The movement of the cat is likened to that of the moon. The whole picture is spun out of the poet’s play of imagination based on his keen observation. In ‘The White Birds’ Yeats produces a splendid metaphor where the poetic persona aspires himself and his lover to be white birds and play together ‘on the foam of the sea’:

*“I would that I were, my beloved, white
birds
On the foam of the sea,”*

Yeats’ another poem, ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’ is a romantic poem charged with imageries and mysteries. The final couplet of the poem offers a beautiful image boasting of two splendid metaphors, one of ‘the moon’ and the other, of ‘the sun’: “The silver apples of the moon,/ The golden apples of the sun.” Here the moon is likened to ‘the silver apples’ where the sun to ‘the golden apples’. Yeats’ idea of thoughts is often transformed into metaphors with the sole object of the clarification as well as the justification of concerned thoughts. The poem, ‘The Circus Animals’ Dissertation’ offers such an instance:

*“I must be satisfied with my heart,
although*

*Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished
chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord know
what.”*

The phrase, ‘My circus animals’ is the metaphor of his poetic characters and figures derived from Irish myths such as Cuchulaine whose ‘burnished chariot’ is highlighted in Yeats’ one early tragedy ‘On Baile’s Strand’. The thought reflected in the imagery is conceived in Yeats’ confession of his inefficacy of poetic imagination and inspiration in his old age contrary to his active imagination in his youth. He falls short of poetic materials in his old age, by his own admission. Thus the whole idea of his thought is exposed by his creative implementation of the metaphor.

Metaphors often beautify poetic lines. Yeats is never shy of embellishing his poetic sentences with the aesthetic stroke of a metaphor. Yeats’ ‘Adam’s Curse’ offers such a beautiful metaphor:

*“We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die
And in the trembling blue-green of the
sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time’s waters as they rose
and fell about the stars and broke in
days and years.”*

Yeats here makes a beautiful analogy of the moon and love, both of which shed their vigour and fascination under the influence of time. The moon is ‘Washed by time’s waters’ in course of time; in the similar fashion, love pales into something that makes lovers sit ‘grown quiet’ under the striking blow of time. Thus a tinge of sorrow strikes the poem. Yeats’ yearning



for Maud Gonne never transforms into a happy union with her in his actual life. However, the poem beautifully brings out an unexpressed agony through the use of metaphors. Sonjoy Dutta-Roy in his article 'Adam's Curse: Labor, Truth and Beauty in Yeats' Autobiographical Poems' comments: "Adam's Curse explores the theme of beauty, the theme of love, the suffering and labor out of which true beauty is born, and the sorrow inherent in love." Again, metaphors, for Yeats, serve as a mouthpiece for his views and statements. In 'The Second Coming' such metaphors are noteworthy in the backdrop of the aftermath of the First World War:

*"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..."*

Here the falcon plays the role of the metaphor for the creatures—the human beings and their belief and the falconer the creator; the falcon cannot hear the falconer; the soul of human being no longer responds to the call of God; Its outcome is that 'Things fall apart'; disorder sets in; the belief is subdued by mere anarchy which is 'loosed upon the world'. The poem, in the context of symbolic and metaphoric implementation, offers the omen that the Second Coming is not the expected second time arrival of Christ but of the arrival of Anti-christ.

At times, Yeats' metaphors bear a sarcastic vein as is evident in the opening line of his poem, 'The Scholars': "BALD heads forgetful of their sins,". The phrase 'BALD heads' is the metaphor for the

scholars who turn bald because of being excessively engrossed in fault-findings in others' creative works; their scholarly garb seems to rest only in the criticism of literary works. Yeats puts the word 'bald' in his poem in all four capital letters as 'BALD' in order to focus the apparent pedantry of the so-called scholars. Thus Yeats' metaphors serve varied purposes for the desired effects.

His passion in being an Irish often finds its outlet through his poetry. It is this passion that drives him to yield to his creative urge. Ronald Bush in his article 'The Rhythm of Metaphor: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Unity of Image in Post symbolist Poetry' has this to comment; "Poetry for Yeats is an expression of mood; it may involve intellectual attitudes, but it is primarily an emotional state." But Yeats' emotional state never interferes in the play of his artistic contemplation. He is primarily an artist. His images are picturesque which helps catch psyche of readers. His sense of history and time coupled with his vision is objectified through archetypes and metaphors. Yeats, by virtue of his knowledge of Irish history and myth aided by his creative imagination, creates poetry of the highest order, well reflected and manifested in the artistic implementation of literary archetypes and metaphors. The history of both past and present is judiciously juxtaposed in his poetry, thanks to his creative vehicles, namely metaphors and archetypes. It will be befitting at the end to quote Rob Jackman from his article 'Black and White : The Balanced View in Yeats' Poetry': " So as a final balance in Yeats' poetry, one has the ephemeral everyday experience juxtaposed with, and often even coinciding with, archetypal



experience: the world of historical, linear recurrence.”
time balances against the world of cyclical

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