



"The Disintegrating Art of the Ring-master: A Critical Study of Walter Butler Yeats's 'the Circus Animal's Desertion'"

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(1) Abstract:

The decaying of the artistic and imaginative faculties with age and simultaneous soul-searching introspection has been one of the favorite's subjects with the romantics as well as poets who expressed the personal in their poetry. One of 'the last romantics', W.B.Yeats deals with such a theme in "The Circus Animal's Desertion". In this poem, W.B .Yeats analyses his poetic career with devastating honesty. Failure in love, dissolution in the old age, Irish national concerns etc produced in Yeats a schism that led , according to the poet , the erosion of the creative imagination . As a result Yeats was not able to handle his images in the way he had been accustomed to deal with in his earlier days of poetic career. This loss of control over his images and symbols and decapitating poetic imagination caused a grievous wound in his mind. But the result is not altogether tragic. Loss of poetic sensibility is compensated by enlarged vision, wisdom and the strength of the mind. He realizes that art takes its root in the 'fury and more of human veins'.

(2) Key words: 'imagination'; 'creativity'; 'disintegration'; 'desertion'; 'heart'

(3) Introduction:

Two distinct picture crops up in our mind when we consider W.B.Yeats as a poet.First , the extravagant poet who wrote such lavishly ornamental poems as "The Song of Wandering Angus" or "The Lake Isles of Innisfree" in the tradition of Alfred Tennyson and the poets of the later part of his life when he grew more audacious , naked , refined and complex.His "The Circus Animal's Desertion " , included in his " Last Poems" , falls into the latter category of his poetry . The realisation of the loss of poetic power and synthetic imagination eats into the vitality of the poet.The poignancy of the pain of the poet could be gauged by the fact that he has used the metaphor of the circus animal's desertion of a ring master to express his feelings

of despondancy and the wearing away of the creative sensibilities . But this loss is more than compensated by gains that the poet probably is unaware of.

(A) Highlights of the Poem:

Disintegration, desolation, 'things falling apart' and disregard of the master by his subject has been the themes utilized by Yeats on more than one occasions . In "The Second Coming" the poet observes :

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer



Things fall apart the centre cannot hold."

(Yeats. "The Second Coming")

Though the emphasis here is more on the anarchism of the situation, the disobeying of the falconer by the falcon reminds us of the circus animals' disregard of the authority of the ringmaster. The poet-ringmaster here rues his inability to recreate the old magic in his poetry. Time has preyed upon his creative faculties. In the early days the circus animals obeyed their masters and the ringmaster had a deep affinity with them. But now they have deserted him and always elude his reach. In his youth the images came to Yeats naturally. Images from Gaelic mythology and sagas, Irish national history and personal experiences came pouring in whenever he wanted. He recreated Oisín, Angus, Cúchulain, Countess Cathleen and many more with ease. But now his imaginative faculties have got silted up. Therefore, the poet is at pain.

This is clear from his analogy of the circus animals' desertion of the ringmaster. The 'stilted boys', i.e., the characters of his early romantic poems, 'the burnished chariot', i.e., the luxuriously decorated chariot and 'the lion and the woman' all suggest the imaginative flight the poet was capable of in his former days of imaginative fertility. The 'Lion and women' brings before our mind the image of a Sphinx as well as Maud Gonne, the Irish Revolutionary leader whom he loved with all his heart, but who did not pay him back with the same kind of feeling. Yeats writes:

"Those stilted boys, those burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what."

(lines 7-8)

Yeats wanted Maud Gonne to be his wife and disapproved of her revolutionary zeal. He

believed that the fair sex should rather abjure revolutionary ardour and look after their own family.

The poet in the next stanza is pained to find out that he has the same kind of fate as that of his fictional creations like Oisín or Angus. Oisín of "The Wanderings of Oisín", the Gaelic mythological sea rider was led by the nose into different enchanted islands by the nymph Niamh. In the line:

"Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose."
(line-12)

the sarcasm and cynicism of the poet foregrounds his personal experiences in love rather than the love experiences of his fictional characters. The poet makes this clear in the following two lines:

"But what cared I that set him onto ride I starved
for the bosom of his faery bride."

(lines -15-16)

The 'counter-truth', i.e., Yeats' real interest and love in his own affairs rather than that of his fictional characters became more important.

Yeats undertook the project of writing the play "The Countess Cathleen" with the intention of pleasing Maud Gonne. But as he started writing the play he gradually got engrossed into the character and forgot all about his personal interest. That is the way most romantics achieve objectivity and universality. The stealing away of Maud Gonne by 'the bandy-legged fool' MacBride and the poet's subsequent rage finds an apt parallel in Cúchulain's rage. The Greek mythological hero Cúchulain unknowingly killed his own son and suffered a rage. He waged a life long battle against the intimidating sea. Yeats started building the character keeping Maud Gonne in mind, but ultimately he objectified his personal tale for the sake of the art.



"Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblem of."

(lines-31-32)

In the last octave of the poem there comes a revelation. The poet reveals that poetic creation or artistic creation, however pure it might appear to be, has its root in the ugly and baser things of life. Cuchulain, Countess Cathleen, Oisín are all sparkling gems of poetic translation found in Yeats's literary repertoire. But all such brilliant creations proceeded from all too vulnerable human heart :

"Those masterful images because complete

Grew in pure mind but out of what began?

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,

Old kettles, old bottles and a broken can,"

(lines - 33-36)

The heart was subjected to a lot of trials and tribulations before the dross could be purged out to give birth to pure images. Art as a finished product is certainly pure but what actually is the origin of such art works, is the blood and soil, personal woundings and the lowly bottom of life. This same belief weaves many of his poems. In "Vacillation", he writes:

"From man's blood-sodden hearts
ate sprung

Those branches of night and day

Where the gaudy moon is hung."

(Yeats. "Vacillation")

Again in "Two Songs from a Play", he writes:

"Whatever flames upon the
night

Man's own resinous heart has fed."

In one of his finest poems "Byzantium" he writes:

"Those images that yet

Fresh images beget

That dolphin torn, that gong-tormented soul."

(Yeats. "Byzantium")

Such instances are innumerable in Yeats's poetry. What we, therefore, understand is that due importance should be given not to the particular images in isolation, but its store house i.e., the wounded heart.

The poem "The Circus Animal's Desertion" ends on a note of clinching finality and the poet firmly utters:

" I must lie down where all the ladders
start

In the foul rag and bone shop of the
heart."

(lines 39-40)

Further, what is to be noted here is that the term 'ladder' connotes the determination of the poet to start right from the very beginning. A man may be old but he can always set out for a new journey and compete with those who are much younger. Life is a journey and not a station.

(B) The Gain :

The noted philosopher Hume in his philosophical work "Treatise" observes:



"While memory allows us to recall past experiences, we can make use of the imagination to produce new ideas by imposing a new order on past"

(Streminger, "Hume's Theory of Imagination")

and it is the inability of the old aged poet to come to terms with the new changed order that produces the conflict and supposed sterility and infertility in the poet's mind. But, truly if he has lost anything, he has gained also. The loss of youthful exuberance is more than compensated by the widened vision, stronger will power and spurts of creativity. A realisation has dawned upon his mind that the glittering is not always the gold and that creativity comes from within. He has realised that age cannot altogether black out creative effulgence and that heart is the reservoir of millions of images.

(4) Conclusion:

So what we find in the ultimate analysis is that the aged poet casts a sentimental 'longing lingering look behind' into his youth and early poetic career and finds it more inviting than the barren and rugged old age. But when we look into the poetic career of W.B. Yeats we find that the

last stage of his life was more creative and fertile than the first stage. And his poetic imagination was not in the wane. It was rather on the rise. So, these lamentations or pseudo lamentations are nothing more than a poetic poseur.

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