

Theme of Old Age, Death and Immortality in W.B. Yeats' Poetry

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Abstract

It goes without saying that the theme of the old age is the pivot around which the poetry of W.B. Yeats revolves. W.B. Yeats is primarily known for his mature poetic vision on the basis of it, he has shaped his poetry, and has moulded it what is known as 'Unity of Being'. In many of Yeats' poetry, the theme of old age is the recurrent theme that can be found running through his works. But, the poet has delineated old age not as the embodiment of sorrows, sufferings and predicaments, rather it is symbolic of maturity and wisdom as one comes across with the passage of time.

Key-Words: Romantic, Old age, Unity of Being, antinomy, Endeavour, Comprehensive, Juxtapose

Paper

There is no doubt in denying the fact that William Butler Yeats is a poet who is primarily known for his romantic yearning for the dream world of fairies or his longing to escape in to The Lake Isle of Innisfree,

but there is a serious endeavour on the part of the poet in the later phase of his life to explore some of the serious issues of life so as to achieve what is commonly known as the 'Unity of Being'. He can be a romantic dreamer and an escapist in the early poetry, but he is a mature artist with a comprehensive poetic vision, who has passed his apprenticeship with mastery over poetic language and idiom. That is why, in the early phase of his poetic career, there might be emotional outburst of wild feelings like:

“Come away, O
human child!

To the water and
the wild

With a fairy, hand
in hand”

But, in the later phase of his life, Yeats' poetry is more rich, more meaningful, more artistic and more harmonious to the extent that Edmund Wilson has rightly contended: “as W.B. Yeats grew old, his poetry turned young.” That is why, one of the recurrent themes of

W.B. Yeats' poetry is the theme of old age which can only be understood and appreciated within a total perspective of the poet's personal and artistic life. In other words, to comprehend the theme of old age, we must have a thorough acquaintance with the personal autobiographical details of the poet in relation to a number of people- both men and women- who have deeply influenced and even inspired the poetic vision of W.B. Yeats. Even Maud Gonne-the woman Yeats personally loved but lost- in an interview went to the extent of saying that the world should be obliged to her for motivating the poet to write such an excellent poetry. James Lovic Allen is right when he asserts: "Yeats' poetry got mature as it dealt with some serious matters of life in a very comprehensive manner."¹ It goes without saying that the poem, *When You are Old* is a powerful poetic expression of Maud Gonne where the poet visualizes her in her old age 'full of sleep and nodding by the fire', dreaming of her soft look and shining eyes which she once had. At that moment, she would remember how many people expressed their

love, false or true as the poet also asserts:

"But one loved the pilgrim soul in you,

"And loved the sorrows of your changing face"

In the same way, *Sailing to Byzantium* is also a beautiful poetic expression of the theme of old age, where the poet, at the outset of the poem points out:

"There is no country for the old man"

Here the poet juxtaposes the world of the 'Fish', 'Flesh', and 'Fowl' with the monuments of unaging intellect as the poet defines the old age as:

"An old man is but a paltry thing

A tattered coat upon a stick"

It is because of the poet's growing consciousness of the old age that he decides to sail to the holy city of Byzantium where the holy sages will become the singing masters of his soul and consume his heart to gather him in to the artifice of eternity. Even the poem, *The Tower*, powerfully expresses the theme of old age that has been introduced by the poet when he calls the old age as an absurdity and decrepit age that has been tied to me as to a dog's tail.

Here, the poet analyses the comparative significance of the various fields of knowledge to be indulged in by the old man, like whether the old man should study the philosophy, or he should write the poetry, then the poet invokes the ghost of Hanrahan to a certain whether the poetic imagination dwells most on the woman won or the woman lost as the poet himself says:

“Does the imagination dwell the most

Upon a woman won or woman lost”

In the same way, *Among School Children* is also a poetic rendering of the relationship between art and life, matter and spirit, and body and soul in terms of the theological, philosophical and psychological answers. Harold Bloom, in his observation says: “in the present poem, Yeats deals with some philosophical and theological aspects of life.”² Here, the poet is a sixty years old public man who ponders over the comprehension of a mother for the pangs of the birth of her son, if she knew that in the old age, he would be a scarecrow to scare away the birds as the poet also asserts:

“What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap

Honey of generations had betrayed”

Even the philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras who were world fame figures could not help become

“Old cloths upon old sticks to scare a bird”

So, the poet does not present a horrifying picture of man’s life in his old age, rather as says Stanley Sultan remarks: “Yeats deals with old age as a phase of maturity and wisdom and not of suffering and miseries.”³

In this way, after making a close and incisive study of W.B. Yeats’ poetry, we can safely and rightly aver the fact that the theme of old age is closely associated with personal life and friends of W.B. Yeats where in terms of the antinomies of life, the poet mocks at the old age as an inevitable termination of the childhood and youth with the attainment of maturity and wisdom in which the chestnut tree becomes an inseparable from its leaves, the blossom and the pole like the dance and the dancers becoming one in to a harmony called ‘Unity of Being.’

References



1. James Lovic Allen, "From Puzzle to Paradox: new Light on Yeats' Late Career," *Sewanee Review*, 1974, p. 81-92
2. Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1930) p. 70
3. Stanley Sultan, *Yeats and His Last* (Dublin: Dalmen Press, 1975) p. 63