

**Stylistic Developments in  
W.B. Yeats' Poetry**

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**□ ABSTRACT □**

*This is an attempt to point out and study the gradual development in W.B. Yeats' poetry. Changes and developments occur in every aspect of his poetry: diction, rhythm, images, syntax and themes. He started as a dreamy, romantic, young poet who reached his maturity to become a modernist.*

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## تطورات أسلوبية في شعر وليم بطلر بيتس

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### □ ملخص □

هذه محاولة لتتبع التطورات الاسلوبية في شعر وليم بطلر بيتس ودراساتها . ويستطيع المرء ملاحظة هذه التغييرات و التطورات في جميع عناصر شعره ، في الموسيقى، والصور، والبناء اللغوي، والموضوعات . لقد بدأ شاعراً حالماً ، ورومنسياً ، ليصل بالتدريج إلى مرحلة النضج ويصبح شاعراً حديثاً .

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It is hard, if not impossible, to separate Yeats' poetry from his life. The scholar has to understand the life of Yeats in order to understand the development and changes the poetry of Yeats underwent. He began as a Victorian, or, as some people think, as the last romantic, and he ended as modernist. The changes and developments in his poetry did not only occur in themes but in every aspect of his poetry: diction, rhythm, images, syntax,... etc.

The development in his poetry occurred gradually and we find no sudden turn, therefore, I think that this poetic development was natural and self motivated. It is normal for a poet to start as a dreamy, romantic, young poet who gradually reaches his maturity by virtue of his education and experience. It is well known that Maud Gonne had influenced his life and poetry, but he had nothing to do with her- as regards love- after 1917, when he reached his peak, and kept going on in that direction from then on. I may subscribe to the idea that Yeats might have developed as he did because of her, but his further transformation was motivated by his own inner resources. In 1908 he met Ezra Pound, but he only got to know him in their second meeting in 1912, at which time Yeats was profoundly rooted in his own world of poetry and politics. Thus we may think Pound's influence did not exceed that of criticism and suggestion. I think that if there was any person who influenced him it was W.S. Blunt who was involved with Irish politics and knew Yeats at the first stage of his career. Blunt also introduced him to some people (i.e Lady Gregory) who played a big role in his life.

The early works of Yeats were dominated by an imaginative, dreamy world, a world of vision which was far from the real world. One can easily notice that his early works were concerned with longing and yearning for the

past of, Ireland, with the line of its heroes, and the perpetuation of those heroes in poetry. This was the first period in Yeats' poetic development. The characteristics I have described were clear in his works: "Crossways" (1889), "The Rose" (1939), "The Wind Among the Reeds" (1899) and in his two long poems "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889) and "The Shadowy Waters" (1900). The most famous and important poem in this period is "The lake Isle of Innisfree". In this poem we see the romantic longing for the quiet world of Sligo with its natural beauty. In this poem we see also how the poet tries to escape from the real world to that dreamy world. But although the poem is colored by the Poet's own character, it remains comprehensible and universal in appeal<sup>(1)</sup>.

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 honeybee,  
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.

(P.44)\*

In this poem he succeeds in fusing together universality and personal emotions. Furthermore, the poem shows that peace is possible as a human goal, as an escape from human misery.

Later in his life Yeats was exasperated by this poem and he almost omitted it from his collections because it was too famous, and because many of the "dime poets" among his contemporaries tried to imitate it. He explained his viewpoint about this poem clearly and beautifully in his Autobiography. He also explained what made him dislike this type of poetry later on.

The other poem which shares the celebrity of the preceding poem is the one he translated from French, "When You Are Old" which is founded upon Ronsard's sonnet to Helene de Surgres:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;  
How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;  
And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

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\* Poems cited in this paper are taken from The collected poems of W.B. Yeats- Macmillan: London. 1978.

(P.46).

It is a love poem written to Maud Gonne. Its tone and subject matter are very gentle and moving, and thus, it reveals the nature of Yeats's love. His concern for the beloved is selfless.

He was very active in literary circles and he helped establish "The Rhymers' Club". The French symbolists affected Yeats as did his fellows from "The Rhymers' Club" at the time. He visited Paris and met the leading figures of the Symbolist Movement. His friends in "The Rhymers' Club", however, were his only source of information about the Symbolists, because he never mastered the French language. In the Club he also met Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson whom he portrayed in his autobiographies and poetry. These two and others from the Club helped Yeats to be acquainted with different European literary trends and also helped him in establishing a new theory of poetry.

The french influence on his poetry increased, especially between 1890 and 1900 when he announced his belief in Mallarme and his literary school. He also agreed with Mallarme that, "At is but the world of dream".

The dreamy temper left its mark on Yeats' poems about his love for Maud Gonn, who invoked his imagination. He described her beauty as the beauty of queens, and he used many symbols when he spoke of her. These poems had a high imaginative color, presenting spirits which had left the body and were roaming in a world of dreams and ether. He expressed his impassioned love for Maud Gonne in mercurial poems which are fraught with symbols. He uses the rose as a symbol of his beloved and he compares her with Helen of Troy when he describes the beauty of his homeland Ireland. He draws, too, on nature for connotations which will convey his

feelings towards his beloved. His poem, "He Reproves the Curlew" describes his disturbed emotional state. Richard F. Peterson thinks that "the wind here symbolized a disturbance that awakens both passion and dreams, dooming the poet to a state of limbo between eternal beauty and moral love".<sup>(2)</sup>

O curlew cry no more in the air,  
Or only to the water in the West;  
Because your crying brings to my mind  
Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair  
That was shaken out over my breasts;  
There is enough evil in the crying of the wind.

(P.69).

Although Yeats' collection "The Wind Among the Reeds" (1899) showed a promising new poetic genius in relation to his collection "In the Seven Woods" (1903) and reached the peak in "The Green Helmet and Other Poems" (1910), "which shows a complete change of tone,"<sup>(3)</sup> and in "Responsibilities" (191), his poems in "The Seven Woods" suffer, somehow, from some of the same defects that we find in the poems of the first period but his inventiveness begins after this. The best poem which shows his development in this period is "Adam's Curse", in which we find a new starkness, directness, and the beginnings of the direct style which characterized his poetry later. In addition, the poem is concerned specifically with the poetical effort and the hardship of poetry-making. Yeats draws a connection here between poetry, love and beauty and he compares the process of creation in these three worlds. He emphasized that these are arts in which man must labor hard in order to create the optimum. In "In the

Seven Woods" he also expresses his disappointment and failure in love in three poems; "The Folly of Being Comforted", in which, as Jeffares thinks, "The strain of his hopeless passion vibrates through the poem in answer to the note of realism with which it opens".<sup>(4)</sup> "Never Give All the Heart" and "O Do Not Love Too Long" , from which we quote:

Sweetheart, do not love too long:  
I loved long and long,  
And grew to be out of fashion  
Like an old song.

All through the years of our youth  
Neither could have known  
Their own though from the other's.  
We were so much at one.

But o, in a minute she changed  
O do not love too long.  
Or you will grow lout of fashion  
Like an old song.

(P.93)

We cannot but feel the bitterness in these three poems<sup>(5)</sup> Maud Gonne was careless about his passion and pleas. She married another man in 1903 which was a big disappointment to Yeats and he expressed this in his collection "The Green Helmet and Other Poems". In the years between 1899 and 1910 Yeats went back to his poetry and revised it. He omitted what he did not agree with according to his new artistic views, about which we read in this writing " Ideas of Good and Evil" (1903) and Discoveries" (1907) of which



Vinod Sena says: "that remarkable collection marking in so many ways Yeats' coming to maturity as critic"<sup>(6)</sup>. He published this revised edition in 1908 and it made him a big name in English poetry at the time.

Yeats left poetry and was deeply drawn to theater for almost a decade. This experience enriched his literary career to a great extent. In his collection "The Wind Among the Reeds" he reached the peak of lyrical poetry. But he had to break away from lyrical poetry and mix its reveries with real human experience. In 1908 he met Ezra Pound and a friendship between the two developed. Before that he was a close friend of Wilfred Scawen Blunt who devoted most of his late poetry to politics and theater. In 1904 Blunt was able to perform one more service for Ireland. This was the age of the Irish literary renaissance, and through his friendship with Lady Gregory, he was on its periphery. In May, Yeats, whom Blunt described as being "brilliant in conversation and full of affection", asked Blunt if he would approach George Wyndham to grant them a parent for their new theater, the Abby, and this the next day. Blunt was delighted to do.

His collection "The Green Helmet and Other Poems" put an end to his political silence. In this collection we notice that he begins to depend on his human experience in poetic creation, and we find a broader artistic horizon. Richard Ellmann believes that "The poet, here, speaks less often in his own person but uses beggars hermits, and fools to voice with safety opinions about life and after-life that he is not prepared to guarantee"<sup>(7)</sup>. Furthermore, it seems that in this collection and in his collection of essays, "Discovery", Yeats started to express, with a new degree of intensity, his personality and experience, a broadening and an intensification which were crucial not only to his collection "Responsibilities" (1914), but to his poetry after that.

However, the title he chose for the book "Responsibilities", and the year of its publication are very significant. Here we find the maturity of that trend; we found in "The Helmet and other Poems," and we also notice the change in his artistic mood. He writes in a caustic vein with a new bitterness in tone and diction. We also see how he began to deal with political problems in his poetry. He made some vague indications to this political problem in "The Seven Woods" and with more clarity in "The Green Helmet"; but, he expresses very clearly his strong feelings towards the political and social responsibilities which lie on the poet's shoulders in "Responsibilities", with its echo of the famous line that corrects the indulgences of reverie in his previous work: "In dreams begins responsibility".

In his poem "A Coat", in which he detests his old style and the "old mythology" which occupied him for a while, he condemns those "stupid" poets who imitated that style and mythology. He, in the words of Johan Ramazani, "Overcomes himself by taking off his embroidered coat of mythologies"<sup>(8)</sup> He desired from now on to express his character, as it is, and to express his feelings and ideas as those of a man made of flesh and blood:

I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
From heel to throat;  
But the fools caught it,  
Wore it in the world's eyes  
As though they'd drought it.  
Song, let them take it.  
For there's more enterprise  
In walking naked

(P. 142).

But his artistic maturity went further still. His aim was to express artistically the deep human meaning of life, and to elevate that expression from the level of human experience to the level of original art. He published after the end of World War I his collection "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1919), which, Ramazani believes,

Can be seen as a lament over estrangement from a self  
passionately attached to feminine... Now the imagination  
dwelled the most not upon a woman lost but on a self lost- a  
self whose imagination dwelled the most upon a woman lost. <sup>(9)</sup>

This book was unique in English poetry. During this period he professed his artistic doctrine which resembled that which T.S. Elliot had implied in his phrase "Objective correlative". Yeats was developing the idea of the "mask" or the "antithetical self". The idea of the "mask", in general, is the poet's attempt to create for himself, through the artistic creation, the image of the personality he wished to be, which may be different from the personality of the poet himself and may be different from his experience, but, nevertheless, is an image dear to him. Yeats was influenced by modern psychology and also by Oscar Wilde who was the first one to inspire Yeats with the importance of this device for the artist or the writer. "

"The Wild Swans at Coole", contains many magnificent poems. But the most important are the elegies "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" and "Shepherd and Goatherd". He says in the first poem:

I know that I shall meet fate.  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do no hate;  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartans poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss.  
**Or** leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impose of delight.  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind.  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind.  
In balance with this life, this death

(p.152).

Robert Gregory, here, symbolizes the perfect human personality: he represents the values of heroism and courage in which the poet believed. This poem, furthermore is a great example of all those poems by Yeats' in which he interprets the character and destiny of his friends and by getting them in order, like his ideas, transforms them into human images of his conventions, and thus poet and hero can interchange personalities. Yeats is inventing a heroic mode for modern lyrical sensibility.

Despite the failure in love and marriage which put an end to any hope of winning Maud Gonne's heart, she remained a living symbol in his poetry and continued to be a source of inspiration, as we see in his short poem "Memory" and in his long poem "Broken Dreams". He says in "Memory":

One had a lovely face,  
And two or three had charm,  
But charm and face were in vain,  
Because the mountain grass,  
Cannot but keep the form,  
Where the mountain hare has lain.

(p.168).

In 1921 Yeats published another collection of poetry "Michael Robartes and the Dancer". The collection has political orientations. The 1916 revolution had already taken place. It was led by some of his Irish poet friends, and was a turning point in his life. He decided to reside permanently in his home, Ireland, and this marked a turning point in his patriotism.

The poems which dealt with the martyrs of the revolution of Easter 1916 are: "Easter 1916", "Sixteen Dead Men," "The Rose Tree" and "On A Political Prisoner." The most important one is the first. In it a nexus of contradictory feelings and emotions is conveyed by means of linguistic complexities which always necessarily result from a complex situation which cannot be reduced or expressed in easy or simple language, or it will lose its meaning and significance. These are the situations which Yeats' contemporary poets considered recondite, artistic problems in need of a resolution. But in "Easter 1916" Yeats shows that this problem could be solved and poetry could be popularized without losing its purity, and it will not be contaminated by temporal ideologies. Yeats did not describe the event which is taken as the subject of the poem. He reconstructed the event without aiming to eulogize the heroism therein. The characters of the poem all of whom are dead, are transformed and become immortal symbols. His views and stance on the issue do not interfere with the poem. Rather, he uses

the mask which separates him from his subject, which enables him to be a just judge. He contemplates the event he is about to speak about and he is able to distinguish between its contradictory elements: he sees how heroism is mixed with carelessness and death with beauty. From all this he creates a poetic image in which he reconciles these opposites. In this poem he uses that special event to make a symbol for all similar events in the history of mankind. He has realized that death is an ordinary thing that does not carry the meaning of perpetual tragedy unless poetry makes it a subject for contemplation and thought. Thus, Ramazani states, "the pressure of death discloses the collectivity within the poet's language and historical consciousness, so the nation is transformed from "a subject of knowledge" "into a dumb struggling through seeking a mouth to utter it."<sup>(10)</sup>

The poem "Easter 1916" shows the development in Yeats' poetry and how he now adopts a controversial event as subject for his poetry. The complexities of his perspectives - political, philosophical, mythological - are now such that tensions and the drama of metaphors, begin to invade his thought, and transformations of these perspectives are part of the new authority with which he speaks.

Yeats surpassed his previous achievements when he published in 1928 "The Tower," in which he reached the peak in poetic art and became one of the masters in European poetry." He treated his subjects and poems in a dramatic way which was full of life and movement. He succeeded very well in accomodating and balancing the desires of the heart and those of the mind. This collection also shows maturity in his personality and it shows profound thinking on his part. It demonstrates that the poet knew the secret of life and enjoyed its sweetness. He loved to sing its beauty. Upon reaching old age, he accepted life without reluctance and could freely play with

certain philosophical paradigms as to life's meanings. He found a reasonable analysis and tried to elevate it to the high level which we find in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium". Byzantium for Yeats is the symbol of the world of reason and spirit, contrary to the world of material and mortal things. It is also a symbol of the "Platonic heaven" where there is pure reason, no opposition and the realization of harmony and perfection. The reason that he chose Byzantium as a symbol of the world which he hoped to attain in his writing is that Byzantium represents to him the highest level of human civilization attainable in those days when religion was mixed with beauty and life.

We can also see how the poet's life and personality became the center of his poetic experience. For example, we see how his personal life is mixed with the social and political matters in his poem, especially in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "1919". Furthermore, we could also see the development in his use of symbols and how he invented new symbols. He uses in this collection his special symbols of Tower, birds, the tree, the dancer, the cone and Byzantium. He also substitutes for "the ancient mythology" a special mythology which he draws from his life and from the human personalities which inspired and enriched his imagination and emotions. He takes poetry back to its original source: Mythology. Despite all that, his symbolism here is clear, not difficult to understand, and very effective. In addition, his poems could be understood at different levels and could arise in the readers' mind many different thoughts and ideas. In this collection Yeats reconciled all the contradictory matters which bothered him and tried to create in his poetry a world of harmony and order, in contrast to the world of chaos and disorder around him.



In 1933 Yeats published "The Winding Stair and Other Poems". We could divide this collection into two main parts. In the first, he follows the pattern of "The Tower."<sup>(12)</sup> For example, in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", we see the same mysticism we saw before. But we find the second part of the collection full of complicated psychological instances and tormenting personal experiences which almost replace the equanimity and total harmony among all the elements of poetry<sup>(13)</sup> In this collection there are also some other poems entitled "A Woman Young and Old." He had written these poems before "The Tower" but published them at the beginning of this collection because of the frank way he treated feelings, emotions and sexual love in general. In these poems, one finds contrast between colloquialism and heroic tone, and the ways in which vivid old voices rasp caustically the erotic mysteries, where the poet "mixed his strange love with love...most of the poems blend the understandable, apparently inevitable, quality of love with its cruder physical elements."<sup>(14)</sup> A good example of this is his poem "A Last Confession", in which he says:

What lively lad most pleased me  
Of all that with me lay?  
I answer that I gave my soul  
and loved in misery,  
But had great pleasure with a lad  
that I loved bodily  
I gave what other women gave  
That stepped out of their clothes,  
But when this soul its body off,  
naked to naked goes,  
He it has found shall find therein  
what none other knows.



(313-314)

Towards the end of his life, Yeats tried to write a number of political poems. But these poems were artistically not at the same level, as are his poems in his last collection "Last Poems" (1939) in which we find artistic and philosophical depth. The poems "The Circus Animals" and "Lapis Lazuli" show his spiritual and artistic vision and outlook at the end of his life. In the first one he talks about some of his literary works and shows how he was occupied with writing. He mentions some of the artistic images which were a ladder to help him reach the skies of imagination. But he realizes his own senility and how these images have escaped like the animals of the circus when they abandon the circus place. He marches back to the starting point where he finds the naked reality. And as Paterson puts it,

Yeats parades for the last time his major themes and  
images in what Bradford calls an allegorical  
procession, and admits the truth behind Oisín,  
Cathleen and Cuchulain, in that each figure, though  
complete because it developed out of pure mind was  
initially created out of the frustrated desires of the  
poet's heart<sup>(15)</sup>

Yeats says, in the poem "The Circus Animals' Dissertation":

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind but of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweeping of a streets,  
Old kettles old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladders gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

(p.392).

This poem epitomizes all those features of Yeats' development. It does not make the reader pity him, but it arouses admiration for him and for how he courageously accepts the challenge of life and translates every bit of his experience in that life into art.

Finally, it is evident, I think, changes and developments in Yeats' poetry can be attributed and closely linked to changes and developments in the poet's own life, and thus he gradually developed from a dreamy, romantic young poet into a mature modernist poet.

## Notes

1. A. Norman Jeffares, W.B. Yeats. Man and Poet (London: Roudedge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 1978) p.91.
1. Richard F. Peterson, William Butler Yeats. (Boston: Twayne  
2. Publishers. 1982). p.65.
3. T.R. Henn, The lonely Tower. (London and New York; Methuen.  
1979) p.55.
4. Jeffares. p. 128.
5. Stan Smith, W. B. Yeats. A Critical Introduction (London:  
MacmiUan, 1990). p. 92.
6. Vinod Sena, W. B. Yeats. The Poet as Critic. (London: MacmiUan,  
1980) p.64.
7. Richard Eumann, Yeats The Man And The Masks. (London: Penguin  
Books, 1988) p. 05.
8. Jahan Ramazani, Yeats and the Poetry of Death (New Haven: Yale  
University Press, 1990). p.190.
9. Ibid. p. 144.
10. Ibid, pp. 59-60.
11. See for example, Richard Ellmann, A. Norman Jeffares F. Peterson.
12. See Daniel A. Harris, "Tragic War", in Critical Essays on W.B. Yeats,  
ed. Richard. J. Finneran. (G.K. Hall and Co. Boston, 1986) pp. 172-  
173.
13. Ibid, pp. 174-175.
14. A. Norman Jeffares, op. cit., p. 245.
15. Richard F. Peterson, op. cit. p. 185. See also Stan Smith, pp.77.

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