

## W.B. Yeats's treatment of Irish mythology

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Page \_\_\_\_\_

A review of Yeats's poetry reveals that he is a poet of 'Celtic Twilight'. The underlying idea of his theory of the 'Celtic Twilight' is the realization - that poetry has lost its contact with religion; its images no longer express man's deepest thoughts about his own destiny. Industrial civilization has destroyed his relation with the natural world; and science and puritanism has initiated his relations with the Unseen. Therefore, W.B. Yeats found an escape from the modern impasse, a tap-root by which the arts could regain their sources of primitive energy. In his *The Celtic Twilight*, he wrote - "Folk-art is, indeed the oldest of the aristocracies of thought and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and the pretty, as certainly, as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered in to itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. Wherever it is spoken by the fireside, or sung by the roadside, or carved upon the lintel, appreciation of the arts that a single mind gives unity and design to, spreads quickly, when its hour is come."

Yeats was instinctively inclined towards Irish mythology and folklore. In his poem *A Coat*, he wrote:

"I made my song a coat  
Covered with embroideries  
Out of old mythologies  
Dragons and gods and moons,  
From heel to throat  
And gave it to my song  
And my song wore it."

Yeats believed that the modern literature lacked passion, whereas ancient Irish literature had a lot of it along with rich imagination and melancholy. Moreover, he also believed

that if a literature was not imbued with passion and ancient beliefs, it would degenerate into a 'chronicle or circumstances or pastorous fantasies'. The Irish literature "infused life into European literature. The framework of the Divine Comedy has been borrowed from the Celtic material. The Arthurian Legends, his Round Table and the Holy Grail and a variety of Gaelic legends transformed European literature and enthused it with a strength and spirits." That is why most important characters of the Irish literature - Cassandra, Helen, Deirdre, Lear, Trisham, Oisin, Cuchulain etc reappear and figure on the pages of Yeats.

There are several reasons behind Yeats's inclination towards Irish mythology and folklore. In childhood he had stayed for most of the time in a beautiful landscape of Ireland. His maternal grandparents and his mother had great interest in Irish folklore. His aunt used to narrate many a fairy tale. O'Leary's influence and Maude Gonne's inspiration, and his active involvement in Irish nationalism also strengthened his beliefs and convictions about the importance of the legendary past of his country. Not only by birth and breeding, but also by temperament. Yeats's love for Irish seems natural. Ireland is a country where the ghosts linger with a persistence rare; there are many faces in the countryside where the dead emigrate, but the dead stay on. Unlike people in Britain, the Irish with their faith in spirits, fairies and folklore are 'physically and mentally sound'; it is the least collectivized, least industrialized country in western Europe, and unlike England it has not much of middle class?

Yeats himself believed in the existence of fairies, spirits and ghosts. He believed that Ballisodore was visited by the spirits and fairies and that whenever he went to their collages, he was on the lookout for supernatural beings or happenings. It was on account of his such beliefs that he very much advocated for the element of imagination and the visionary in poetry. Very early in his career Yeats attempted to treat Irish legendary material on a large scale. The mythology which Yeats used extensively in his early poems was the great body of Gaelic heroic legend which had been represented to English readers of the late eighteenth century in the folk prose 'epic' of Ossian by Macpherson. This mythology had never been wholly forgotten in Ireland and for the young Yeats it had the fascination that Greek mythology had for the men of the Renaissance. For him it was no mere antiquarianism, but something which he wholly absorbed and made part of his imaginative life as Milton absorbed the Hebrew sagas and Keats the Greek myths.

The Wandering of Oisín is a long narrative poem full of echoes of Morris, Shelley, Coleridge, Keats and Ferguson. Yet the mythology of Niamh and Angus, the Fenians and the Danaans is fresh and has "the beauty and altogether new things." In the first part, Oisín is playing about and going a-hunting. When Niamh, the daughter of a legendary king, entices him to accompany her to her place where only the youthful live. With this 'pearl-pale high born' lady he lives for a hundred years in a land where broken faith has never been known before coming over to this land, his eyes grow dim with tears. This is a breach of country's laws and he has to leave it. In the second voyage during which he is accompanied by Niamh, Oisín thrust out from the Kingdom of Joy, is a pale copy of Hyperion. In the third voyage he comes upon an island (evidently Ireland) where he meets 'a monstrous slumbering folk'. Niamh and

her husband halt near the king of these people, and ask him his story. Oisin after hearing the story decides to act on behalf of these people but finds that he has become old and therefore useless.

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