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Monuments of Eternity Revisited: Exploring the Mood of Loss, Regret and Mourning in Select Poems of W. B. Yeats

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Abstract: W. B. Yeats is unquestionably one of the most important modern poets in English literature. He is both a romantic and a modern poet, for the elements of these two schools of poetry exist in his poems. Irish legends and folklores are part and parcel of his early poetry. A romantic note of escapism is quite evident in these poems. His later poetry, however, shows a shift from romanticism to realism and modernism. Besides dealing with the beauty and bounty of nature, his poetry lays bare his personal joy, sorrow and despair. His grief at the loss of his youth and beauty is revealed in a number of his poems. His disappointment and pain, stemming from his failure to win the heart of his beloved Maud Gonne for ever, also permeate many a poem by Yeats. His poetry also mourns the loss of spirituality, aesthetic temperament, discipline, law, peace and happiness in the modern world devastated by violent wars. However, the present paper seeks to explore the mood of loss, regret and mourning in some important poems of W. B. Yeats. In other words, the paper will bring to the fore how such a mood reigns supreme in a number of his notable poems.

Keywords: Loss, regret, mourning, despair, nostalgia.

Introduction

William Butler Yeats is, no doubt, a renowned modern poet in English literature. His poetry, however, shows a curious blend of both modernism and romanticism. Like his contemporaries, he was acutely aware of the spiritual emptiness and moral degradation of the modern age. His early poetry shows his efforts to escape from the sordid materialism of his age. His strong faith in magic and mysticism made him escape into the world of fairies through his poetry. It thus goes without saying that he borrowed his themes for his early poetry from the Irish legends and folklores. One may also point out that the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites is quite unmistakable in these poems.



Of the collections of his early poetry, mention may be made of *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), *Poems* (1895), *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) and *The Shadowy Waters* (1900). However, his poetry gradually shifted from escapism to realism. The increasing realism can be seen in his later collections of poems like *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), *Responsibilities* (1914) and *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). Interestingly enough, he reached the peak of his achievement through his collections *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). His last period of poetic creation gave birth to the Crazy Jane Poems. According to Edward Albert, Yeats is “one of the most difficult of the modern poets. His preoccupation with the attempt to formulate a philosophical system which could replace the scientific materialism of his age underlies most of his later verse” (Albert 485). Again, it is beyond doubt that Yeats started his poetic career under the influences of great poets like Rossetti, Spenser and Shelley. The aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century also exerted a great deal of influence upon the poet. While London introduced Yeats to the younger poets of England, Dublin acquainted him with the Irish literary nationalism.

A mood of loss, regret and mourning reigns supreme in Yeats’ celebrated poem “The Wild Swans at Coole”. The poem presents the aged poet’s pangs springing from the loss of his youth, vigour and vitality. It foregrounds a sharp contrast between the poet, who has lost his youth and passions, and the wild swans at Coole, who have been able to defy the onslaughts of time. The poem opens with the autumnal beauty of nature. Then, the poet goes on to point out that nineteen years have passed since he first visited the Coolelake. On his first visit to the Coolelake, he found the swans young, passionate and untamed. At that time, he himself was full of youth, life and vivacity. But on his second visit to Coole, he finds out that time has robbed him of his youth, vigour and passions while the swans remain unaffected by the passage of time. In fact, they are as young and wild as they had been. This contrast fills the poet with a mood of loss and regret:

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,

And now my heart is sore. (*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 107)

In sharp contrast to the poet’s old age and physical decay, the swans are paddling in the cold water in pairs, thus indicating that their power of love making remains intact. Wherever they go at their own sweet will, ‘passion’ or ‘conquest’ always attends upon them. Thus, it is crystal clear that the



sight of the ever-young swans serves to intensify the pangs of loss and regret in the poet by way of contrast. It is equally important to note that the mood of loss is also accentuated by the concluding stanza of the poem. The present poem ends with the poet's apprehension that the swans will fly away and build their nests somewhere else to delight other people's eyes. That he is going to lose the sight and company of the birds is clearly suggested in the closing lines. Hence, one has every reason to assert that the whole poem is dominated by a strong mood of loss, regret and mourning.

"Easter 1916" is unquestionably one of the finest poems by W. B. Yeats. The poet here pays homage to those revolutionaries who laid down their lives in the Easter Uprising of 1916 for the sake of the freedom of Ireland. It will not be wrong to point out that the present poem demonstrates Yeats' ambivalent attitude towards the Easter Rebellion that took place in 1916. The poem is replete with the pangs resulting from the loss of many lives in the rebellion. Yeats begins by recollecting the days which preceded the Easter Uprising. He lets us know that the Irishmen were living a simple and casual life before the rebellion. At the end of the day, they would come back home "with vivid faces". The poet would either nod his head or utter a few "polite meaningless words" to those common people. While exchanging some casual words with them, Yeats felt that he and his fellow countrymen were living in a land "where motley is worn". In other words, the English men looked upon the Irish people as mere clowns. But all of a sudden, a sea-change took place in the hearts of the Irishmen, as a result of which they rose in revolt against the British rulers. They even laid down their lives for the sake of their county. Thus "a terrible beauty is born" out of the self-sacrifice of the revolutionaries. The mood of loss and regret is quite unmistakable even in the opening stanza of the poem. The Easter uprising, no doubt, led to the loss of "vivid faces" and "polite meaningless words". The feeling of this loss can hardly escape the attention of an alert reader. In the second stanza of the poem, Yeats talks about some revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of the country. The poet laments that a woman lost her sweet voice as she continued to spend her nights in 'arguments'. Her voice gradually grew shrill and harsh as she kept motivating others and delivering lectures. Of course, the woman referred to here is Constance Markiewicz. Yeats goes on to talk about Patrick Pearse who used to run a school and also wrote some poems. The poet mourns the loss of MacDonagh who was both a poet and a critic. He is described as the "helper and friend" of Patrick Pearse. Moreover, Yeats pays a glowing tribute to



John MacBride, “a drunken, vainglorious lout”. He did wrong to Yeats by marrying the latter’s one-time beloved Maud Gonne. Thus, the second stanza is equally dominated by a strong mood of loss and regret. In the third stanza, Yeats mourns the loss of flux on account of the fixity of the revolutionaries’ purpose. Each and every object on earth was subjected to change and flux. But their hearts remained fixed on a single purpose. In the last stanza, the poet makes it abundantly clear that “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart”. The poet questions the necessity of their self-sacrifice, for he hopes that “England may keep faith”. However, the loss of some innocent lives is mourned time and again in the poem:

We know their dream; enough

To know they dreamed and are dead. (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 153)

Thus, a mood of loss, regret and mourning runs through the entire poem.

“Sailing to Byzantium” is another beautiful and notable poem by Yeats. It demonstrates the dichotomy between the sensual world of the young people and the eternal world of art. Here the poet laments that Ireland is no land for the old people, since it has been caught in the sensual music of love and love-making. Young lovers are found engrossed in the embrace of each other. The birds are enjoying their love-making in the trees. Different kinds of fish are also engaged in copulating. As a result, old people have no place in Ireland. Indeed, the country has lost its artistic temperament and spiritual concerns. All the young people are so engrossed in the sensual pleasures that they continue to neglect the “monuments of unaging intellect”. In the second stanza, Yeats goes to the extent of comparing an aged man to a scare-crow:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Soul clasp its hands and sing and louder sing.

(*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 163)

The aged poet feels and believes that the soul of an old man must clasp its hands despite the decline in his ‘mortal dress’. But he laments that there is no singing school in his country where the soul can learn the art of singing aloud. Again, it is a pity that the existing singing schools are busy studying the “monuments of its own magnificence.” This is the reason why the poet has sailed the



seas and arrived at “the holy city of Byzantium.” In Byzantium, the poet addresses the sages who are “standing in God’s holy fire”. He prays to them to come down and teach his soul the right kind of songs. Moreover, he appeals to the sages to ‘consume’ his heart away so that it may be purged of the animal desires. He further implores them to gather him into “the artifice of eternity”. Actually, he wants to merge with the world of art. Yeats goes on to say that once he is “out of nature”, he will never take any bodily form. Rather, he will choose a form which can be made by the Grecian goldsmiths out of hammered gold and gold enamelling. He longs to be a golden bird which will be able to keep a drowsy emperor awake. Another possibility is that he will be transformed into a golden bird which will keep singing from a golden bough “to lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come”. Needless to say, the poem is steeped in heartrending pathos. The poem may well be considered to be a lament over Ireland’s loss of spiritual and artistic values and concerns. Thus, there is no denying the fact that the poem is strongly dominated by a mood of loss, regret and mourning.

“Among School Children” is another beautiful poem in which Yeats has expressed his pangs occasioned by the loss of his youth and beauty. At the same time, his grief at the loss of his one-time beloved Maud Gonne is quite evident here. One day he visited a school at the age of sixty and the school girls reminded him of his one-time beloved Maud Gonne. While walking through a long school room, he asked a number of questions and a “kind old nun” answered them one by one. The nun pointed out that the children were being taught different subjects and various skills “in the best modern way”. The aged poet noticed that the children were staring at him “in momentary wonder”. The sight of these school girls made him recall the school days of Maud Gonne. He recollected how she had once told him “of a hash reproof, or trivial event/ That changed some childish day to tragedy”. At that time, he sympathised with her in the best possible way. Now the aged poet started looking at the children one by one to find out if any of them resembled Maud Gonne in her school life. He finally discovered a girl who gradually seemed to transform into his one-time beloved before his mind’s eye. Again the poet’s regret at the loss of his youth and beauty is boldly expressed in the following lines:

And I though never of Ledaean kind

Had pretty plumage once – enough of that. (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 184)



The poet goes on to point out that if a mother could see her son in his old age, she would find it difficult to decide whether she would take the trouble to bring her child into the world. Now he comforts himself with the thought that each and everybody on earth is bound to fall victim to old age. Great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras had much knowledge and wisdom. Despite that, they lost their youth and vigour, and finally grew old: “old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird”. Thus, the poet seeks to drive home the point that old age is a common lot to all people. However, Yeats introduces another argument in the penultimate stanza. He points out that both nuns and mothers worship images. Both of them fall victim to disappointment despite the difference in the nature of their respective images. The last stanza deals with the dichotomy between the body and the soul. The poet uses the images of a chestnut tree and a dancer to accentuate the point that the body and the soul are inseparable from each other. The poem is thus concerned with a number of issues. The dominant mood is, however, that of loss and regret.

A mood of loss, disappointment and mourning reigns supreme in Yeats’ another important poem “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”. The poem not only depicts the sad state of affairs in Ireland but also exposes the horrors and pity of war. It also foregrounds the degeneration of human nature. Violence seems to be the chief focus of the poem. The poem begins with a lament for the loss of “many ingenious lovely things”. The mood of loss and regret is thus established at the very outset of the poem. Yeats suggests that some “rogues and rascals” still survive to plague the world. He now depicts the horrible picture of warfare and its aftermath:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare

Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery

Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,

To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free. (*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 176)

Thus, it goes without saying that a sense of loss and disenchantment prevails in these lines. The poet cannot help lamenting the sorry state of affairs occasioned by the brutal warfare. Complete violence and chaos have gripped the country. Moreover, everybody has been subjected to violence, torture and exploitation. The present poem treats a number of issues and ends by summing up the difficult situation which has sprung from the terrible war. In the concluding part of the poem, Yeats



sheds ample light on the reign of violence in the country. For instance, the roads are being dominated by violence. One can also see the violence of horses. Having been exhausted, the horses “break and vanish”. In a word, “evil gathers head”. It appears that Herodias’ daughters, who were emblematic of cruelty and anarchy, have returned to the country. Hence, one may feel compelled to point out that the poem mourns the loss of peace, joy and happiness in Ireland as well as in the world owing to the hellish affair called war. The mood of loss, regret and mourning in the poem is, therefore, prominent to one and all.

Yeats’ “The Second Coming” is indubitably one of the best-known poems the world has ever produced. It brings to the fore the aftermath of the First World War and the loss of traditional values and morals in the post-war era. The poem may be seen as a lament over the loss of balance, values, rules and disciplines in the post-war world. Thus, it goes without saying that the poem is dominated by a mood of loss, regret and mourning. The first stanza gives a precise picture of the horrors, anarchy and lawlessness that reign supreme in the world after the First World War:

Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 158)

It is thus evident from these lines that the world is in a state of chaos and the civilisation is on the verge of destruction. Things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold the surroundings. Absolute anarchy has emerged as the dominant force in the world. As a result, profuse bloodshed is taking place frequently and the “ceremony of innocence” is being drowned. The best people are not certain of themselves while the worst ones are “full of passionate intensity”. In this way, the poet mourns the loss of integrity, discipline, rules, innocence and peace. In the second and final stanza, the poet sees a vision in which the image of a beast with the body of a lion and head of a man comes out of ‘Spiritus Mundi’. The poet understands that a Second Coming is about to take place. This terrible beast or shape has a gaze which is as “blank and pitiless” as the sun. It is moving its thighs slowly while the shadows of desert birds fall upon it. At this moment, the vision comes to an end. Yeats, however, feels convinced that a Second Coming is round the corner. While the First Coming consisted of the arrival of Christ, the Second Coming will bring a ‘rough beast’ and all the destructive forces with it. There is no denying that fact that the poem is a lament over the loss of



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balance, law, innocence and rules in the post-war world. Hence, a mood of loss, regret and mourning is quite unmistakable here.

Conclusion

To sum up, one can point out that Yeats' poetry not only treats the Irish legend and folk tales but also centres round his personal feelings, emotions and thoughts. Different poems have dealt with the loss of different things. Some of his beautiful lyrics focus on his loss of youth and beauty. Some others have described his pangs stemming from the loss of his one-time beloved Maud Gonne. There are some other poems which lament the loss of spirituality and artistic sensibility in Ireland. The readers also come across a number of poems where Yeats has mourned the loss of peace, happiness and joy occasioned by violent wars. Some of his poems have depicted in unequivocal terms the loss of discipline, law, balance and even humanity. However, all these poems have one thing in common – that is, the mood of loss, regret and mourning. Despite the difference in the subject matter, these poems are strongly pervaded by the aforesaid mood.

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