

## THE VISIONARY PAST: YEATS'S TREATMENT OF HISTORY & MYTHS

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### ABSTRACT

History and Mythology plays a vital role to introduce human culture and legacy. The vastness of it takes a bold plunge in the world of Literature also. This paper pertinently deals with William Butler Yeats's treatment of history and myth. His observation and explanation of and implementation of the both in his poems. It opens up the contemporary and the ancient socio-political, economical and all other aspect. Yeats set a foot on the shore of Irish Isles and the other in the sea of Greco-Roman legends. His poems leave a deep impact on the readers as they are intense and realistic.

**KEYWORDS:** History, Myth, Legend, Christianity, Romantic, Creation, Destruction, Architecture

### INTRODUCTION

"We Pieced Our Thoughts into Philosophy

And planned to bring the world under a rule"

[LI-30-31, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND NINE]

History is an expansive section of Humanities .It is hard to define precisely, because the attempt to reveal past events involves a great deal of knowledge. It is to collect a record data about human past to illumine new facts, new vista. True history aims at realizing human life and reflecting them in a systematic structure. Yeats's perspective on history was different from all other poets. He viewed history as a cycle, an unending process. According to him, it is a spiral movement which includes the dead culture and dimmed civilization as basis and a binary to the present degradation of the society. His book "The Tower" contains reminiscent of past. History of both real life and fantasy plays upon his mind and poems. Mythological and folk legends occupy an important part in Yeatsian verses. Sometimes reality is reflected through pagan fancy and again ,old legends portray the then social moral and ethical condition of man.

Myths and legends had always been a vital enticement for the poets of different ages including Yeats. The rubicund tales of the legends, the verdurous world of myths is visible in many of his poems. In the poem "Leda and the Swan", the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda is promontory. The story being a legend is not merely based on fantasy, it is but a symbolic overtone. Leda is the lady who was exceedingly beautiful, was seduced by Zeus. Zeus disguised as a swan cruelly raped Leda. The eons old myth was used by Yeats as a historical message. Yeats painted the picture of the atrocious seduction in a way that it became a pathetic presentation of sexual violence. The story is more than fancy a realistic one with serious symbolic overtone. The Swan is Zeus. He is the symbol of authority, creativity and sexuality. It shows the deep insight of history in the poet. Many of his homosexual and heterosexual affairs are famous in Greek and Roman

legends. The Goddesses, such as Thetis, Aphrodite, Leto; Royal Ladies – Danae, Io and Europa including Leda are present in the old myths. Leda is the daughter of Tyndareus, the king of Sparta. Her fascinating beauty attracted Zeus so much that he disguised himself as a swan and molested Leda. Thus the creative power has also to take a form to fulfill desire; or, even spirits need a physical entity for their desire because sexuality is totally dependant on physical existence.

“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower

And Agamemnon dead.”

(ll-10-11, Leda and The Swan)

Agamemnon was the king of Mycenae and the husband of Clytemnestra.[1] He was killed after the Trojan War by his wife who was also Leda’s daughter. The cause of anger was the sacrifice that Agamemnon made for the war. He devoted nine years in the war away staying indifferent to his wife and state. Yeats’ insight of history and legends become clear by the way of presentation. Leda’s pregnancy owing to rape opens up another vista - the creative force goes side with the destructive one. Zeus was called the ‘All-Father’ who populated the heaven and earth. The seduction of Leda is undoubtedly pathetic, as per Yeats’s description. It is destructive no doubt but the aftermath is creative - that is the ‘birth’ of Helen, which again in the long run, proves to be destructive wholly for Troy and partially for Greece.

Yeats blends together Christianity and Paganism with unique dexterity. He portrays the then socio political tumult in “The Second Coming”(1919). The title suggests the reincarnation of Christ. Messiah, in every religion come after a big crisis. The longing of the second coming is the hope for advent out of the social situation. The second arrival that the poet expects is not of any divine image but a monster - a beast having lion’s body and human head. The image of the beast recalls the Sphinx of the past in Thebes. Deliberately Yeats surges back in the pages of Sophocles and recalls the Sphinx[2] in Oedipus’ time. The sphinx there and the monster in the poet’s imagination are the same. Both signify the destructive force. The phrase “twenty centuries of stony sleep” is an innuendo towards the transformation of the Sphinx into stone. The monster wakes up from its centuries’ - old sleep to take another birth, to become the Messiah. The “twenty centuries of stony sleep” also suggests a long duration which have been passed aeons ago. As Seiden says that Yeats conveys:

“A warning that the Second Coming of Western tradition is to be not the expected return of Christ, but the Second Coming of the Anti Christ. When the new age at last emerges out of our Twentieth—century violence, a beast—probably the Sphinx, although it is not named—will appear”

(235)

W.B Yeats wanted to convey the dominant and desperate antithetical phase of history through “The Second Coming”.

“No Second Troy” is written on Maud Gonne, whom Yeats complemented as an exceedingly beautiful feminine creation by verse. This poem is multidimensional - personal and historical, mythical and nostalgic. ‘She’ is compared to Helen only for her beauty but also for the socio-political change she brought as Helen brought in both Greece and Troy. The poem is a kind of continuation or a kind of second part of “Leda and the Swan”. The power of Zeus created the seed of love and war in Leda’s womb. Helen and Clytemnestra, both are inversely proportionate with love and war. Yeats skillfully

introduces the Trojan war and the character Agamemnon in "Leda and the Swan" and names this poem "No Second Troy".

"With beauty like a tightened bow"

(ll-8, No Second Troy)

Carries in it a sexual symbol. It denotes physical beauty and is related to an attractive feature in a woman. But Yeats used all the phrases very carefully and the word 'bow' has another meaning despite of the sexual symbol. 'Bow' is closely associated with war. Thus the same word becomes the symbol of violence and warfare. The expression somewhere deep in the heart recalls the "femme-fatale" and prepare us for the final and concrete image - the downfall of Troy.

"Was there another Troy for her to burn?" (ll-12, I bid.)

The last line is not a mere question but the poet's expression of proud exclamation that brings forth the comparative approach between Maud Gonne and Helen. The personal past is mingled with the historical past.

The poem "An Acre of Grass" starts with a somber mood. The poem falls under Yeats's last poems, so it bears the pain, solitude and ideologies of old age. When Yeats, in this poem, ask for "old man's frenzy" he became nostalgic. The yellow pages of history opens before our eyes with Timon, Lear, Blake, and Michelangelo.

"Grant me an old man's frenzy

Myself must I remake" (ll-13-14, An Acre of grass)

'Remake' suggest a 'reconstruction'; that which is not organized at the present but was organized in the past. The perfection of past is recollected when the present proves to be imperfect. Yeats, in this poem wants to remake himself as the four men named before. The first two characters are Shakespearean. Timon became a misanthrope for his friend's deception and King Lear who apparently betrayed by his daughters - Goneril and Regan and actually by his own 'self' Timon and Lear took long but bold step in their prime time so Yeats refer to them. The boldness, the capacity for taking decision is glorified by the examples. William Blake is different from the two characters discussed. He is the great mystic poet who falls in Romantic genre. The similarity between the three characters are that all the three characters denote maturity and individual quality. Timon, Lear and Blake, all of them owes much to the nostalgia of the poet.

It can be determined that history is inseparable with personal memories. This is also because 'memories' spring from past, and past is nothing but history---may it be global or individual. The phrase "old man's frenzy" takes a bold plunge in history and recalls Michelangelo, the great sculptor and artist. The very name intensifies, Yeats's longing for the mature creativity in his prime years. He is only suppressed by the freight of years. He creative vigor, deep-delved in his mind asks for a vent. He longs to have a creativity that can enliven even a corpse. Timon and Lear stands for their outrageous emotions; on the contrary, Blake and Michelangelo denote creativity. All the four men are different from each other in various dimensions, but put together, they intensify the strong presence of history and nostalgia. Eric Salmon says,

"It was Aristotle who first posited the proposition that there was something interesting and challenging to be said about the difference between what the poet write and what a historian writes." (473)

And after discussing what the difference is, he states the actual difference in a nutshell –

"poetry, therefore, is more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal,

history the particular.” (473)

In case of Yeats, it can be safely said that he is both .The romanticism, the imagination, the range of thought and the perfection of involving them in a verse makes him a poet. Simultaneously, the knowledge , the minute detail, the sense of architecture makes him a historian. When Yeats mingles his personal feelings and loss with the history of man and nature , the poems become as if tangible to all the sense organs.

There is a constant transition of personal past to history and vice versa. In his poem “Among School children” the same thing happens. Yeats shows the general importance of body than soul in human mind. Here, Yeats introduces himself as a “sixty – year – old smiling public man” who came for a visit to a school. He recalls Maud Gonne in her teenage. He presumes that Maud Gonne, in the early age had been as beautiful as legendary beauty, Leda. ‘Leda’ become an important symbol of beauty and devastation in Yeats’s poem. Several times, he compared Maud with Leda. Maud becomes the symbol of quasi-divine beauty and war too. Maud was one of the important figures in the Irish Revolution and Abbey theatres. She, exemplified with Leda, also brings out the image that she has a quasi – divine power too. The reference of egg reminds us of the rape of Leda by the Swan or the molestation of human by the God or even the best. The “daughters of the Swan” refers to that of the offspring of Leda and Zeus - Helen and Clytemnestra. There is a minute difference between “Ledaen body” and “Ledaen kind”. The former is already explained and the later is a comparison with Helen. Maud is often compared with the two. In “No Second Troy” also there is a comparison between Helen and Maud. Both Helen and Leda symbolizes beauty of a strange kind. One allured the king of the Gods by her beauty and the other infuriated the two great cities to fight till The “Quattro cento finger” conjures up the specified symbol of classical beauty; it is another history conscious imagery of Yeats. The word is related to fifteenth century, Italian genre of and art. Yeats also involves great philosophers of past - Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras. Plato was the great thinker who explained the world as a silhouette of ideas in more or less all the branches of studies, was also the tutor of Alexander and thrashed him to teach. These characters open up the golden leaves of history, the great kings and their greater tutors. He also refers to Pythagoras, the great musician, and philosopher and mathematician. It is admitted that Yeats accepts the predominance of death upon these great men. But it can be also stated, that the victory of soul on body is deftly established by the poet through their identities have already been wiped away but their contributions are still now so lively that readers, long after, can identify and repute these philosophers till date.

Quest for past is a kind of search for relief -sometimes in the sylvan way of personal past, sometimes in the golden array of history and legends. This quest is actually escapism in the part of a poet. The very sylvan environment , the lush of woods, intensifies the peace of Innisfree which is a little island on the lake Lough Gill near Yeats’s home in Sligo. The name “Innisfree” mostly calls forth the personal past of the poet but the streaks of intervening myth cannot be denied. The description of the place recalls the picture of the ‘Garden of Eden’. The “ small cabin build there, of clay and wattles” reminds the bower of Adam and Eve. So the classical past through the biblical imagery is dimly present in addition to the personal recollection and desire to glide away from the city life.

In the poem titled “Men Improve with the Years,” Yeats says many things. This short poem reveal the depth of Yeatsian mind. His personal incapability and unfruitful love conjures up a stunning mythical figure.

“But I grow old among dreams”. ( ll- 16, Men Improve With Years)

Dreams and thinking suggests a kind of inactivity. Yeats compares himself with 'a weather-worn marble triton'. The word 'Triton' suddenly opens before us the verdurous world of Pagan mythology where nature was all-pervading, most potential. 'Triton' is a Greek deity holding a trumpet made of conch shell.[3] He is known as the son of Poseidon, The sea God and Amphitrite. But, despite of the image, the whole expression rouses a range of overtones. If 'weather' is considered as the vicissitudes of life, or more specifically time and age—then the 'triton' here, is old, weary and inert. 'Marble' again, suggests inactivity, coldness and lifelessness. 'Triton' in Greek myths are drawn as a merman whose upper portion of the body is like a man and the lower part like fish. The figure and the whole expression suggests a trenchant imagery of sexual incapability. The azure realm of Greek mythology plays a vital symphony through this poem. Myth becomes both a device and historical legend in this verse.

Yeats makes rigorous use of 'History'-of both kind of fact and fiction in his poems. The history of reality, the social changes, the real life characters are perfectly juxtaposed with the history of fiction. To be more specific, the world of legend, lore, mythologies epics and bibles also can be categorized as the historical sections. This is because, all of these serve a great part in human history.

The very little of the poem "The Municipal Gallery "Revisited" brings the faded sound of history. W .B Yeats gives an account of his personal feeling when he surges thirty years back. He visits the Art gallery in Ireland and sees the portraits of the museum. His personal grief mingles with the history- consciousness as the people for whom Yeats feels sad are of historical importance. He introduces, to the readers the great men and women who owed much to Irish history.

"Griffith staring in hysterical pride

Kevin O'Higgins' countenance"

(ll-4-5, Municipal Gallery Revisited)

Arthur Griffith the patriot, Kevin O'Higgins the great intellect and unpopular soldier to whom he pays his respect. He addresses the unidentified soldier as "revolutionary soldier." The picture of Higgins was painted by Lavery. Yeats refers to a woman's portrait of who is too a lady of historical importance. She is, according to Arland Ussher, lady Charles Beresford wife of William de la Poer. Yeats says that he met her 'fifty years ago'. Robert Gregory and Hugh Lane is also introduced. Major Robert Gregory was the son of Augusta Gregory who died in an air crash. Hugh Lane is another young man who is lady Gregory's nephew. Yeats also refers to lady Gregory who had played an important role in his life. Her portrait was painted by Mancini. He refers to her even in the fifth stanza as "...that woman in that household...". Yeats refers to the estate of lady Gregory at Coole Park where he had stayed and visited often. From the factual history he shifts to the fictional past; Yeats refers to Antaeus to symbolizes power and strength Antaeus is the son of Poseidon and Earth. According to the legend when he was attacked by Hercules, drew new strength from his mother whenever he touched the ground. This is also Yeats's patriotism and the word 'contact' specially with earth, is a concept of patriotism and love for Ireland.

In the last poems of Yeats we find his deep insight to history. In "Lapis Lazuli", Yeats records the glimpses of war-prone world. His poem starts with reference to First world war. He addresses the hysteric womenfolk who are mad with the fear of the dangers of war. To explain the philosophy, that life is tragic, Yeats involves the Shakespearean characters Hamlet, Lear, Ophelia and Cordelia is also the blaze of past literature. Ophelia and Cordelia stand as a contrast

to the hysteric women who are pale with fear. The two ladies represent the calmness and patience. By introducing these characters, Yeats sails back in the azure world of Elizabethan literature.

“Easter 1916” projects the great historical revolution in Ireland. Yeats wrote the poem five months after tragic disaster in which a group of revolutionaries died. It was his reaction to the Easter Rising in Dublin. The Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday, 24th of April. The center of Dublin was occupied by the Republicans. They were the Irish volunteers of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and probably about 700 in all. They held out until April 29. From 3rd to 12th of May, fifteen of the leaders were executed after a series of court martial. This poem is a tribute to the revolutionaries and it was considered as a landmark in his poetic career. After “Easter 1916”, Yeats wrote another poem on the same topic. “Death” was different from “Easter 1916” in the basic thought and presentation. In “Easter 1916”, Yeats paid his respect for all the revolutionaries of the Easter Rising. By “this man”, “this other”, “that woman” he apparently attempts to generalize the patriots. But in “Death”, Yeats paid tribute to Kevin O’ Higgins. This poem was written in memory of him as a great patriot and brave soldier. The poet is not only confident but also highly emotional when he says –

“Man has created death”. (ll – 12, Death)

Yeats became nostalgic and poured all his reverence for Higgins who was a great human being. The poet also tried to establish the potential of life on death. Vikramaditya Rai says,

“The mortality of man, after all,

Is the stigma of his fallen condition,

Which man can wash away by

Scorning the earth.” (134)

The depth of Yeats’s history consciousness can be speculated by the close reading of the Byzantium poems. Yeats selected the place for his poem because he wanted to unfold multiple layers of meaning. Byzantium is the old name of Istanbul or Constantinople, the capital of Roman Empire. Byzantium was enriched with unique school of art and culture popularly known as Byzantine Art. This famous historical city for its past and old heritage became an icon to Yeats, for art and its importance. It also symbolizes the spiritual sojourn for those who had retired from the world of sensuous glee. Yeats contrasts Ireland with Byzantium and Ireland becomes the representative of the common world. This is the place where old men are neglected and “fish, flesh and fowl” are more important. Old men stands for the spiritual traveler in the world of art. Whereas, “fish, flesh and fowl” represent the human senses related to the organs. The lustative, tactile and visual imageries are given. These three words also constitute the avian, terrestrial and aquatic animals which carry a Biblical echo deep hidden in it.

“Whatever is begotten, born and dies”.

(ll –6, Sailing To Byzantium)

‘Sailed the seas’ denotes a voyage by sea and perhaps a long route. ‘Water’ imagery is very important in mysticism and philosophy. It is the symbol of bodily passion and sex. But it also carries with it dominantly the symbol of chaos. The Hindu mythology, Babylonian mythology, Bible and many other great culture says that ‘water’ is the symbol

of chaos and human torment. From the vast realm of water the world is created to make it habitable or but with the same water God has punished humankind creating 'flood' for their sin. Simultaneously, 'fire' signifies 'divinity' and 'Divine grace'. Thus Yeats refers to the journey from chaos to cosmos. In this context, He, constantly, throughout the poem, intertwines the historical fragments. The 'Grecian goldsmiths' 'Emperor' and 'lords and ladies' of Byzantium'. Yeats refers to a concrete past when he refers to 'Grecian goldsmiths'; invariably Yeats was much fascinated with Greece and Rome. 'Emperor' opens before us the image of legendary king.

'Byzantium' too focuses on history. This can be called a 'second part' to "sailing to Byzantium". The reference to the St. Sophia church makes the historical perspective of W.B. Yeats prominent to the readers. Seiden rightly comments:

"Historical moments like classical  
Greece, ancient or medieval Byzantium,  
And renaissance Italy provide him  
With symbols of what men, if they  
Are regenerated, can always achieve."  
(254)

A poet owes much to art. The poetic genius reaches its zenith when it mingles with art. As Yeats, was more fascinated with old culture and legends, bygone myths and creations, his poems involve art mainly archaic in nature. In these contexts, Seiden can be rightly quoted,

"His subject matter became more richly varied than it had been,  
more subtle, and more profound: and his metrics, symbols and  
architectonics were brought closer to perfection". (147)

The integration of body and soul, the vexing of the physical and psychological entity continually remained an important concern of Yeats till his last years. This fundamental issue became the source of the involvement of art in his poetry. Yeats induced classical and archaic art in his poems which gave them a newer and a more refined dimension. Though art, it was become easier for Yeats to convey his thought and progress of mind. Even the Yeatsian symbols — gyre, rose, tower, all belonged to the tradition of art. Art, in Yeats's poems, brings out multidimensional impressions of his creative mind —

Creativity, sense of art.  
Old age and desolation.  
Psychological manifestation.  
Sexual orgy of youth and old age.  
Salutation to the artists.  
Contradictory to the modern world of declining goodness.



Yeats was deeply fascinated by past legends and art. Thus he made appropriate use of Greek art and aesthetics. The archetypal beauty in Yeats's view became real in Maud Gonne. As an aesthete with subtle point of view he was fascinated by Maud's well-chiseled beauty which is according to Yeats 'beauty like a tightened bow' and 'Quattro cento finger'. This is another technical term used in "Among School Children". This term denotes a style in Italian painting that was popularized in the early Renaissance period. This was the then modern style of painting that liberated Italian art from the two – dimensional Byzantine art. The themes of this school of painting was biblical or mythological and allegorical. This genre of painting bestowed vivid reality to the figures linked with the incredible and the supernal. The pioneer of the school was Giotto. The minute details of archaic art and its perfect usage shows the Yeatsian sense and love for classical art.

Despite of this, Yeats's poem comprises the figures of classical and mythical creatures and their description shows the vigilance of the poet in archaic art. The Triton in the poem 'Men Improve with Years' is a figure of art. The Triton is a trumpeter and son of Poseidon. He is a sea monster, a merman with a human Torso and the tail of a fish. According to Greek myth, he had the ability to raise and quieten the waves with his sea shell. He saved the Argonauts when a storm drove their ship to the Lybian shore. The pen-picture that can be seen in the poem is

"A weather - worn, marble triton

Among the streams;

(ll-2-3 , Men Improve With Years )

The figure of the 'Triton' suggests the potency of nature and power. Thus it symbolizes the physical power , to be more specific the sexual vigor. On the other hand the two phrase "weather – worn" and "marble" symbolizes the interest cause by time and life and the sexual incapability. The figure is pictorial representation of the wiped away sexual vigor and physical power the figure of the Triton is undoubtedly a piece of archaic art. Another monster, that is introduced by W.B. Yeats is the sphinx in "The second coming". Yeats hope for a second reincarnation for the decadent civilization. The image of "Spiritual Mundi"[3] stands contrary to the holy image of the son of God or the Divine power. The beast is described as a figure with lion's body and the head of a man. It symbolizes the approaching antithetical influx of regress. The messiah incarnating in the degenerated socio political system can be only as a slouching beast. This can be the perfect aftermath of the blood-dimmed anarchy. The most evident aspect of this image is that, the image is mostly like the 'Sphinx' in Oedipus Tyrannus. If it is closely analyzed, the image falls in the Pagan genre which according to Yeats would recur after Christ. The 'iou' sound appears four times in the last two lines:

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches

towards Bethlehem to be born?"

(ll- 21-22, The Second Coming )

The reiterative 'ou' sound points at the slow movement of the creature and the readers get a clear picture of the creature and the readers get a clear picture of the Egyptian Sphinx in the desert. The archaic and bygone mode of art is proportionately involved in Yeats's poem.

The love for historic and archaic art and artifacts in Yeats is noteworthy in "Lapis Lazuli". Lapis lazuli is an azure



stone. The word here refers to the medallion of a Chinaware. Before describing the chinaware, the poet refers to Callimachus, the Athenian sculptor who created beautiful designs on marble so prominent as if it were made of bronze. But neither the sculptor nor the art exists. In this context, Vikramaditya Rai says:

“Historians of art have pointed out that the  
 formal convention of art originated in  
 Egypt and was carried by Ionian traders  
 Of Greece and flowered in the sculpture of  
 Callimachus, of 5th century B.C., who  
 Imparted motion to sculpture and made  
 Draperies seem to rise and swell as if  
 Under the force of the sea winds. But his  
 Marvelous handiwork, the golden lamp  
 Surmounted by the palm – tree of brass,  
 could stand only for a short line.  
 And was then swept away into oblivion. (171)

Yeats describe the chinaware with such a perfection that as if the picture comes to life. There existed human figures of three distinctive status two Chinamen, an ascetic with his disciple and their servant carrying a musical instrument. Above them are present three long-legged birds that indicates their long life. The watercourse is prominently made on it and the Chinamen are seen climbing plum and cherry branches. The brightness of their eyes and the wrinkles of their face is poignantly focused. The poet's deep insight to philosophy carefully depicts the three aspects of matter respectively 'Tamah', 'Rajas' and 'Satva' by the systematic sequel of references, significant is that all the complex cyclic order is portrayed through art, that too the archaic, the bygone. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Yeats has immortalized art, but it is also true that he has immortalized and enlivened archaic art.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a nutshell, it may be said the W. B. Yeats was not only a poet who knew history but he was a poet – historian. History and art came into life through his poems. Vikramaditya Rai says,

“If we contemplate the history of mankind,  
 we can easily visualize a cavalcade of  
 old and grand civilizations, Babylonian,  
 Egyptian, Greek and Roman, marching with  
 All their glory and wisdom and after

Their days are over, falling into the jaws

of destruction, their wisdom and glory

fading into nothingness.” (171)

Thus history is no less significant. W.B. Yeats with his poetic quality and creativity assimilates the faded world of human art and civilization.

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2. Sphinx- The rough beast in Oedipus Tyrannus who was the devourer of the people of Thebes . He asked a question which was answered by Oedipus and it turned into stone.
3. Spiritus Mundi – A general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit.
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