

## DISCERNING MYTHS IN YEATS' POETRY

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### **Abstract**

*Myths are an integral part of literature. It acts as a device in literature unfolding different aspects of life. Poets and artists from time immemorial have used myths and legends as tools or device to communicate and express their thought and also give it a universal appeal. The treatment of myth and philosophy is an integral part in Yeats's poetry. During the course of this essay, I will explore the mythological aspects of his poems. Further I would discuss the three categories of myths under which I found in his poems can be placed are Classical myths, Christian myths and Celtic myths. The detailed discussion of the selective poems and the implication of every myth and mythical symbols and also how they are related with the then socio-political and personal context of the poet, would be my final footage.*

**Keywords:** *Leda, Helen, post-colonial, feminism, Celtic, Classical, Christian,*

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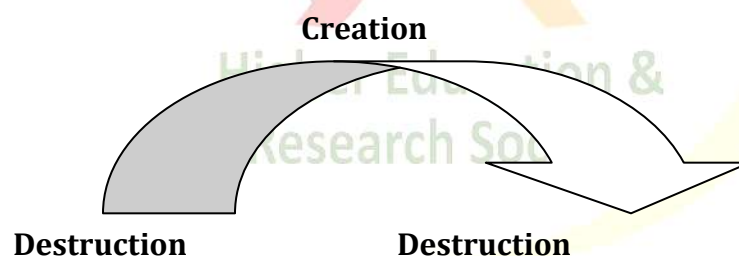
'A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence.' Poetry gives treasure more golden than gold. It is where human being may find all the colors and shades of life. This is because life feeds poetry. It can be said that life and poetry are made up of same components. Poetry heightens to the border dimension and makes cosmos out of anything. Be it leaf-fringed stories of heart rending sighs, deep human introspection of gleaming nature - poetry touches all. Great poets have been creating newer horizons eons since. These creations take its breath from elements of life and they illuminate the poetic revelation of the kind.

The contribution of myth in the poetry is luminous and eminent. Myths are stories, sagas, and legends from different culture. Every society, every civilization has their myths, which silhouettes the culture. Myths are traditional stories of gods and heroes in a level, either general or natural. It deals with both theories and individual praxes. Mythologies have been both the guide and the companion of human being. They deconstruct and reconstruct with changing ages and time. Myths serve as the chief component in the making of Epic. We find Epic owing its greater part partially or completely from Epic. Myths reflect the culture, style, society, politics, psychological truism of the civilization and its men. The poet incorporates the stories of the heroes, their vicissitudes, success and divinity, pain and glory in the most vibrant ways. The 'greats' are brought to the plain of a normal human and at times common person is elevated to their degree. However, myths are imaginations but the seed of reality is ingrained within. Even the supernatural incidence involved in the myths owes much to reality.

Yeatsian Myths can be categorized into three genres- the Classical myths, Christian myths and the Celtic myths. The Classical myths are used to denote the romantic fervor and creativity, the Christian myths depicts the religious sentiment, whereas, the Celtic myths imply the Irish nationalism deeply ingrained in Yeats's mind. The Rosicrucian symbols, occultism and also spirituality that are incorporated in his poetry are the expression of his deep insight of mythology.

### Classical Mythology

The first and the profoundest genre is the Classical mythology that is found in Yeats's poetry. The Greco-roman myths have been deftly introduced in his poems not only as reference but also as allusions. Yeats' poetry is both modernistic and romantic. The inclusion of mythology is an important feature in Romanticism. The pagan culture environs romance and imagination to the extent of infinity. Poems like 'Leda and the Swan', 'Men Improve with Years', 'The Second Coming', 'No Second Troy', 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Byzantium', are the finest examples of poetry that have mythological references. Let us take up 'Leda and the Swan' first as the fact of this poem is itself a popular Greek myth. The myth says, Zeus was deeply fascinated with the beauty of Leda the princess of Aeotolia, the queen of Sparta wife of Tyndareus. He in the guise of Swan came and seduced and raped her. On the same day she slept with Tyndareus. This impregnated her with two sets of twins. Helen and Clytemnestra the two daughters, Castor and Pollux are the two sons of these union. This poem describes the brutish rape of the lady leading to many suggestions. Leda becomes a symbol of the 'eternal oppressed' at times from feminist point of view at times from postcolonial perspective. Leda is the icon of the pan-woman who is time and time again tortured and molested physically and psychologically by the crude authoritative entity that may be men or may be society or the rituals and system. This is not all; beautiful Leda is not only the icon of feminine beauty, it also stands for 'nation' and 'national spirit' or Ireland that is tormented and raped by the 'royal colonial power' England is symbolized by the 'Swan'. Zeus disguised as a 'swan', 'the great wings beating' 'the feathered glory' - all these suggest the ruthless colonialism and its unpleasant domination and torment. This poem also strikes deep into the theory of procreation. A striking pattern is found in this poem.



The rape of Leda is undoubtedly an act of destruction which leads to creation of life that is the birth of the two twins which leads to the annihilation in the later years. Helen becomes the cause of the destruction of Troy, and Clytemnestra for the death of Agamemnon which leads to the vengeance of their son Orestes. This 'rape' from a political aspect, also symbolizes the suppression of woman in this male-dominated society, and also the repression of lower and weaker class in the hands of the higher class people. Thus the

single legend of Zeus and Leda unleashes multidimensional perspectives and aspects. The beautiful expression 'Ledaen body' is termed for Maud Gonne, Yeats' love in the poem 'Among the Schoolchildren'. The word itself suggests the flawless beauty and eye-catching mythical beauty of Leda. Even the 'Swan' is an important mythological symbol. It symbolizes regality and immortality too. It undoubtedly makes us stunned as the number that Yeats has used in the poem *Wild Swans at Coole*. The poet sees fifty nine swans in Lady Gregory's Estate. The 'swans' in both the poems suggests immortality. If we focus on the number, it is-

$$59 \text{ --- } 5+9 = 14 \text{ --- } 1+4 = 5$$

$$5 = 3+2$$

According to numerical calculation we can derive 5 from 59 as shown in the box above. The number five stands for marriage; the union of three (denoting male) and two (denoting female). Ironically this odd number is suggestive of a 'singled' person suggesting the loneliness in the crowd of fifty-eight swans, together with signifying 'marriage' or 'unification'. Apart from Leda, Helen is also a symbol of beauty and destruction. Leda becomes the symbol of womb that gives birth to caustic force that results later in the socio-political aspect. In the poem 'No Second Troy', the expressions like 'beauty like a tightened bow' definitely hint at a spectacular beauty with destroying ability. This expression relates both Maud Gonne and Helen. The title itself speaks clearly about the epic Troy. The title suggests that as the beauty of Helen destroyed that legendary Troy, Maud possess the same height of beauty, but no Troy is there to burn for her. Maud is parable to Helen. A short poem 'When Helen Lived' also carries the mythological reference. We are reminded of the classical war and fall of Troy. The phrase 'with her boy' suggests Paris. The poem carries the hint about the men and women during and even after war. The pain of an utter downfall continues to linger after the war even.

In 'A Prayer for My Daughter', the poet while lulling his babe takes a reference from myths and legend. He refers to the ecstatic beauty of Helen and Venus both of whom were exceedingly beautiful but matched with undeserving people proves to be erratic and flighty. Added with courtesy, beauty becomes a positive aspect. In the poem 'Men Improve with Years', there is a reference of a weather-worn marble Triton. Triton is again a mythological Greek God, the messenger of Sea, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite. Triton is represented as a merman, upper portion like a man and lower portion like a fish. This poem is written in the context of the fascination for Iseult Gonne; the poet feels himself to be like the Triton. The term weather-worn suggests aged, marble suggests lack of passion

and sexually inert. The imagery of the Triton is very significant which can be considered as the inactive socio-political system which was once strong but now withered with time.

Thus, Classical mythology has been an important device for W.B. Yeats as is used to unleash many a dimensions of the then socio-political facet and his personal aspects too.

## **Christian Myths**

Yeats makes a rigorous use of Christian myths in his poetry. Deftly he makes use of the Christian symbols to convey his observation and realization experience. In the poem 'The Second Coming' the poet states the political turmoil and the chaotic contemporary culture. There are strong Christian symbols that carry deep social connotation. The phrase 'blood-dimmed tide' suggests a rampant destruction which brings the biblical legend of the Red Sea when Moses led the Israelites safe as the sea gave them the way and hurled on the soldiers sent by the Pharaoh. The poem declares the second arrival of the Messiah which hints the return of Christ. The image of the Messiah that Yeats introduces is similar to that of the Sphinx, 'the rough beast' and 'slouching towards Bethlehem' with a head of a man and body of a lion implying absolute power and dominance. The ghastly image stands contrary to that of the divine Christian image. The total presentation made by Yeats in this poem is a reversed one. The innocence is shown to be drowned in the 'blood-dimmed tide' and the image of the Messiah is portrayed in a bestial form. This poignantly conveys that as corruption has taken the life of purity and innocence, the social change can be brought through bestial power. Even the second arrival of Christ should be in the form of a ghastly creature.

A destruction of the decadent system is necessary for a proper construction. In Byzantium poem the Christian symbols are present poignantly. The "sages standing in God's holy fire", in 'Sailing to Byzantium' suggests the Christian idea of the penal fire that purges human soul after death. The word 'sage' denotes the purged souls who are the good spirits. The wish of the poet to 'consume' his "heart away; sick with desire" discreetly suggests his urge to purify his mundane spirit and the word 'consume' lexically says about destroying with fire which undoubtedly suggests the Christian concept of redemption of the spirit. After that Yeats proceeds to celebrate the immortality of art and its sole permanence. In the poem The Magi, the very reference of the Magi is a Christian myth. The Magi are the wise men from East who visited new-born Christ and bestowed him with precious gifts and blessings. Now, the Magi have been a distinguished symbol of 'hope turning into despair'.

The agony of ardent hope for a radical positive transition in a vast periphery considering the birth of Christ (The Son of God) turning into utter futility and despair is what the poet communicates. The same tune is found in the poem 'Journey of the Magi' by



T. S. Eliot. The journey of the three 'almost otherworldly' wise men denotes the same as the 'sailing' to the Byzantium with an expectation of positive change. The birth of Christ generates a hope among people that there would be an entire socio-political change.

The word 'unsatisfied' appears twice stressing the despair. The underlying meaning of the poem points at the thought that 'humanity' has not discovered real meaning and fulfillment even after the first coming of Christ. Thus the Magi 'appear and disappear' suggests the flickering hope that is left over after experiencing the social downfall which started with high hopes. The poem Adam's Curse deals with another aspect of Christianity. The title introduces us with the first human and Biblical character Adam. The very title Adam's Curse signifies the unending human labour that is destined to Man for producing things noble and beautiful. Therefore, says Yeats, a man should labour hard to keep the process on as it is the command of God. In the poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', a mild biblical reference is found in the pen picture of the 'a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made'. Amidst the beautiful picturesque nature, the cabin built is a hint to the biblical Adam's 'bower' of the Garden of Eden. The Christian myths also play an important role in the poems of W.B. Yeats. While reading the lines closely, I felt that the concept of Christianity is somewhat associated with a kind of broken hope or unfulfilled wish; as if something deep is expected but not acquired thus a void prevails in this sphere.

### **Celtic Myth:**

The purpose why Yeats used the Celtic myths is very specific. Yeats wanted to draw the readers closer to the Irish history and culture. The British rule, Yeats felt, posed a negative influence on Ireland. Thus, Yeats felt that the folkloric tradition would save the Irish culture and history which has been suppressed by the British culture. The poem 'The Stolen Child' brings out the sense perfectly.

This poem is framed on a popular Irish folklore of a changeling, who was believed to have been exchanged by the fairies for the parents' true child whose lifeless body remains with the parents for some day and dies, but his spirit lives eternally in Fairyland. In this poem, Yeats speaks through the voice of the fairies alluring a child and beckoning him to the world of beauty and wonder.

There lies a leafy island  
Where flapping herons wake  
The drowsy water rats;  
There we've hid our faery vats,  
Full of berrys  
And of reddest stolen cherries.  
Come away, O human child!

The romantic and picturesque nature is painted to create a strong demarcation between the world of rude reality and the world of imaginative beauty. This way, perhaps, the poet complains about the eroding modern world. The fairyland symbolizes innocence and purity or the ideal world. The call to the fairyland is nothing but paving a way away from the busy urban life that has wiped the sense of age-old customs and culture with the British rule. The two worlds are separated by water, which denotes a mental journey of the child as the 'water' symbolizes subconscious and also that something wild has separated the physical world(modern world) and the psychological world (fairyland storing imagination and idealism). As if, through the fairy voice, the poet gives a clarion call to all to return to their origin and ideals. Somewhere it recalls the poem 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' hinting a comeback to original Ireland from the colonizing British suppression. The Irish hero Cuchulain in the Yeats's poem 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea' serves a role beyond what he is. He represents the Irish nationality. His fight with the 'sea' is highly symbolical as the sea represents Cuchulian's subconscious.

The fight is actually within himself vanquishing the inner demons. This poem, somewhere deep hints the disorder or the socio-political anarchy going within Ireland and the fight for preserving nationality and freedom is a matter of strong determination and power. Cuchulain, I felt, represents every Irish countryman who has an immense task to fight within the periphery of self and society to preserve the sovereignty and freedom of Ireland. Mystic numbers ten and three are repeated emphasizing their individual mythological implications. In the poem 'The Old Age of Queen Maeve', Yeats tries to exhume the forgotten ancient culture intending to propagate them among the contemporary Irish mentality that have become distanced from the root. Queen Maeve or Medb or Meadb is considered as the Goddess of Sovereignty which is associated with the invincible sovereignty of Ireland even under the threats of British rule. In the poetry 'The Song of Wandering Aengus', the Irish God of Love is set in a fanciful environment and an unrequited love story is painted hereby to allude his personal love for Maud. Here Maeve and Maud merge symbolically and the wandering becomes the quest for the attainable and the impossible.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused only on the mythological allusions of broad category that are found entwined in the poems of Yeats. Lot more areas like, the mythological signs, Rosicrucian symbols, Vedic philosophy, occult and Irish folktales struts a broad area of his poetry. They carry personal as well as universal overtones. With the striking images Yeats, entwines his individual perspective, antique romance and modern realism into a perfect poetic blend. W.B. Yeats's poems are undoubtedly rich in myths which set a unique

tradition in the early modern period. Mythology has been undoubtedly a chief ingredient of Yeats's poetry. The three types of myths are discussed in this paper; all the three have individual and different set of purpose or interpretation for the poet. The Classical and the Celtic is close to an extent and the purpose of incorporating Christian myth is different. When he selects the subject matter from the Classical and Celtic tradition, his objective is to motivate the contemporary Irish people about their neglected tradition. Whereas, the Christian myth symbolizes the nihilism that rises from despair and incompleteness, comes from religion.

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