



The Reflection of Mystical Elements in the Poetry of William Butler Yeats

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Abstract: The reflection of mystical elements presented by W.B. Yeats in his poetry is extraordinary and legendary. As an Irish poet, W.B. Yeats put mystical thoughts in to his poetry through which he discovered the truth about the universe. Therefore, the study in hand, analyzes Yeats' use of mystical symbols, imagery, and concepts, viz. fate, God, death, love, paradise, and hell among others. Correspondingly, this research reveals that Yeats' poetry reflects his interest in mysticism, and Theosophy. Furthermore, the current study employed qualitative research approach and utilized thematic analysis to achieve objectives of the study. For this purpose, W.B. Yeats numerous poems are analyzed as a primary source with special reference to authentic sources, research papers and websites etc. Likewise, this research hopes to contribute some meaningful insights to the existing literature, by offering different interpretations to W.B. Yeats' mystical and philosophical perspectives.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats; Mysticism; Poetry; Theosophy; Spirituality; Divine.

1. Introduction

Mysticism, a timeless and diverse concept as it captivates readers and researchers in the current era of science and technology as Evelyn Underhill (1912) claims that mysticism as the science of ultimate, and self-evident reality, which could not be reasoned about, because it is the object of pure reasons or perceptions. According to William Ralph Inge (1899) mysticism is "no word in our language – not even 'Socialism' – has been employed more loosely than 'Mysticism.'" Sometimes it is used as an equivalent for symbolism or allegorism, and in some cases it is used for theosophy or occult science; and sometimes it merely suggests the mental state of a dreamer, or vague and fantastic opinions about God and the world. Additionally, Al-Hallaj Mansoor statement "I am the truth. I am He whom I love and He, whom I Love is I. We are two spirits dwelling in one body. If you see me, you see Him, and if you see Him, you see us both" (Rabbani, 2005). In the same way, Al Ghazali said that "love is the central theme of the mystical path." Furthermore, Christopher M. Bader (2018) states that mysticism encompasses various forms of spiritual experiences, including visions, ecstasies, and unitive states, which transcend ordinary consciousness.

However, it implies that mysticism is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been explored by different researchers, debated by scholars, discovered by spiritual seekers, philosophers and poets across the world. Therefore, it is associated with spiritual practices, altered states of awareness, feelings of unity and rising above of ordinary consciousness.

Undeniably, the study is about the reflection of mystical elements in the poetry of W.B Yeats. As a well-known mystic poet who used different kinds of mystical elements in his poetry. This study reveals Theosophy's profound

impact on Yeats' spiritual perspectives and focuses on the analysis of mystic concepts, the basic concept of the Western mysticism. In the same line, it also reveals quests for truth of a mystic and his endeavor to discover truth. By exploring his work, readers can gain great insights into the profound relationships between human existence and the divine. Therefore, it intends to uncover novel understandings of the interconnectedness of all the things pertaining in the universe. In this regard selected poems of W.B Yeats have been studied to discover mystical elements; The concepts of fate, God, death, love, paradise and hell etc. However, this research contributes to the existing literature by offering new interpretations to W.B. Yeats metrical compositions.

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. To identify and analyze the mystical symbols and imagery employed by W.B. Yeats in his poetry.
- ii. To examine how W.B. Yeats' understanding of Theosophy shapes his view on spirituality and divinity.

1.2 Research Questions

The current research study intends to answer the following research questions:

- i. How does W.B. Yeats' poetry reflect his interest in mysticism?
- ii. What are the specific Theosophical concepts and symbols W.B. Yeats incorporated into his poetry?

2. Literature Review

Mysticism is a station of mind; an ingrained tendency of the mortal soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain to a direct experience of God, and which believes that it's possible for the mortal soul to be united with Ultimate Reality, when "God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience." — Margaret Smith, a preface to the History of Mysticism. Western mysticism can be defined, it involves contemplative practices like meditation, prayer, and silence (Katz, 2013 and Afaq et al.,2023). Similarly, McGinn (2006) commented on Western mysticism that it emphasizes a personal relationship with God, characterized by love and devotion. Additionally, Egan (2019) Western mysticism aims to transform the individual person, achieving spiritual growth and enlightenment.

Etymologically, the word "mystic" has been derived from the Greek word 'muo' which means to 'conceal' and referred to the hidden or secret dimensions of ritualistic activities. In the Hellenistic word mystical referred to secret religious rituals. A mystikos was an initiate of a mystery religion. Louis Bouyer (1980) notes that the early Church fathers established the link between mysticism and vision of the Divine. Underhill (1912) further says mysticism has two branches, first the process of remaking his personality. It is called the mystic way in which self passes through different stages of development called as purgation and illumination of soul. Secondly, the mystical perception; how he was enabled to contemplate the reality.

Furthermore, (Kandi, 2013 & Afaq et al.,2022) stated that mystical experience is always deal with wonder and has been observed in all ages and in all religions of the world. This concept is further elaborated by (Bilques, 2014 and Khan et al., 2024) who defines mysticism as progress of a person or devotee from the first stage of Iman (Belief) to the final stage of Ihsan (Favor). James (2002) explores that mysticism is a part of sensation rather conceptual thought. He believes in the power of intuition rather mere knowledge which is sometimes misleading.

However, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was a renowned Irish poet, playwright, and politician, widely regarded as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. His father's name was John Butler Yeats (1839-1922). Yeats grew up in Sligo, in north Western Ireland. He began writing poetry at age seventeen and published his first widely distributed book of poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín and other Poems*, in 1889, when he was twenty-four. In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Different researchers have conducted different research on the poetry of Yeats. Herper (1974) have investigated Yeats' interest in mysticism and spirituality, analyzing how his poetry reflects his engagement with Theosophy and Irish folklore. Vendler (2007) have explored Yeats' use of symbolism and imagery, examined how he employs symbols to convey complex ideas and emotions. Wanderinde (2017) said that the Yeas style of initial poems closer to romanticism, however in the later poems, he gives attention to modernism. Furthermore, different researchers observed different aspects as Pearse (1916) claims that Yeats is the greatest poet of our time, and one of the greatest poets of all time. He has done more for Irish nationalism than any other man. Ezra Pound (1913) said that Yeats is the only living poet who has done anything to keep the nationalist movement in Ireland alive.

3. Methodological Framework

The current research study is carried out through qualitative research approach. The researchers have selected thematic analysis method in data analysis. While collecting the data, close reading technique is used as a tool for data collection. Furthermore, the data has been collected from the following various selected mystical poems of W.B Yeats as a primary source.

- “Leda and the Swan”
- “The Second Coming”
- “The Indian Upon God”
- “Sailing to Byzantium”
- “The Clothes of Heaven”
- “Death”
- “No Second Troy”
- “Running to Paradise”
- “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”

In addition to this, data is also collected from the authentic sources, research papers, and websites in order to make interpretations more authentic and valuable. The approach involves to identify and understand mystical symbols and ideas. The research uses theories from Western mysticism and Theosophy, based on the works of scholars such as William Ralph Inge, Underhill, and Al Ghazali, to help explain these mystical elements. By examining how Yeats explores concepts like fate, God, death, love, paradise, and hell in his poetry, the study aims to show how his mystical interests influence his writing. The findings are systematically documented and reported, contributing to the existing literature on mysticism in poetry and offering a nuanced understanding of how Yeats' spiritual and philosophical interests influence his literary output. Overall, this analysis helps deepen our understanding of mysticism in poetry and sheds light on Yeats' spiritual and philosophical views.

4. Analysis and Discussions

The researchers have analyzed the selected poems of W.B. Yeats through the lens of mysticism. The collected data is analyzed on the basis of the themes of this research. The researchers have studied thoroughly the famous poems of W.B. Yeats to extract some mystical elements.

4.1 Fate

Yeats in his poem (Sonnet) “Leda and the Swan” has clearly mentioned his belief in fate. He connects every event to the Trojan war. The seduction of Leda (mother of Helen) by Zeus (God in Greek mythology) who appeared to her in the form of swan. He seduces or rapes her and by that seduction Helen and her sister Clytemnestra were born. Helen was beautiful than Clytemnestra. Furthermore, she was abducted by the Trojans, which became the reason of war. The war, which destroyed the Troy. He depicts all these events in these lines:

“A shudder in the lions engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.”

He connects the meetup of Zeus and Leda with the destruction of Troy. The imagery used in these lines “broken wall” and “burning roof”, depicts the image of the destruction of Trojan War, which destroyed Troy. It all started with seduction of Leda by Zeus and ended with the death of Agamemnon. He believes it was all fated and has to be happened to bring historical change.

W.B. Yeats has written a poem “The second coming” in 1918 and published in “The Dial” in 1920. The time of this masterpiece writing was chaotic destructive. The theme of this poem also revolves around “fate”. Here are few lines,

“Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the second coming is at hand
Surely, the revelation of the new age is near and the birth of Christ is coming.

Turning and Turning in the widening gyre
The world is turning into a chaotic atmosphere. The humanity is facing an unavoidable fate.
The blood dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.”

The innocence of humanity is devastated. It destroys everything. Evil and social problem arises from this chaos. Thus, it spread the uncontrollable violence in the world.

4.2 The Concept of God

“My spirit rocked in sleep and sighs; and saw the moorfowl pace
All dripping on a grassy slope, and saw them cease to chase
Each other round in circles, and heard the eldest speak:
Who holds the world between His bill and made us strong or weak
Is an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond the sky.

The rains are from His dripping wing, the moonbeams from His eye.”

In the above lines, Yeats clearly mentioned the concept of God. He uses a bird, moorfowl, metaphorically to explain the concept of God. He is of the opinion that God created everything and He is the sustainer. He lives beyond the sky and is not physically accessible. The reason of the rain, and day and night are Him.

“I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk:
Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide.”

In the above lines (from the poem “The Indian Upon God”), an Indian is witnessing a lotus talking about God. God has created everything and He is the supreme leader. “He hangeth on a stalk”. This imagery clearly portrays that everything is the reflection of divine. “All this tinkling tide” is metaphorically describes that it is “a sliding drop of rain” in his universe. God created the universe of considerable size and the flowers are just the drop of water in the sea.

4.3 Death

W.B. Yeats has a unique idea about death. He sees death as something created by human beings. He believes that there is something eternal which exists in human body, which can outlast the physical death. There are lines from his poem death,

“NOR dread nor hope attend
A dying animal;
A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times rose again.
A great man in his pride
Confronting murderous men
Casts derision upon
Supersession of breath;
He knows death to the bone —
Man has created death.”

He is certain about the creation of death by human beings. He says man has ups and downs in his life but a gentleman knows how to live life as a gentleman. Many hardships come in life upon man but he knows what to do and how to be remembered. There is only physical death which is created by human beings. Human has command over his consciousness and unlike animals. Despite all these hardships and despair, there is a flicker of hope, he can be remembered by legacy and work leave behind.

After reading W.B. Yeats’s poetry, the reader would think he was afraid from death. To all intents and purposes, he was focused on eternal life and soul. He was frustrated of the world’s life and death cycle. He wanted to do something beyond the limitations of physical body. He mentions in his poem “Sailing to Byzantium”,

“And therefore, I have sailed the seas and come
To the Holy city of Byzantium.”

In these lines, he says I have suffered from many hardships to reach the Holy city if Byzantium (modern day Istanbul) where he wanted an escape from humanly flesh and bones and achieve eternal existence. Therefore, for him, the true escape lies in achieving the eternal existence through art and wisdom and the body dies but soul can achieve greatness and immortality.

4.4 Love

The concept of love in W.B. Yeats's poetry is remarkable. For some, love is delicate, humbleness, and spiritual. For others, it is turmoil, hardship, and physical. Yeats has both kinds of concepts about love. In some poems, he has shown love as spiritual like the poems "Sailing to Byzantium", and "The clothes of Heaven" but in "When you are old" and "No Second Troy" he has shown love as physical or something material. In "The Clothes of Heaven" he sees love as,

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams."

Here Yeats portrays love as something spiritual. "Cloths of heaven" which is the symbol of divine love and embroidered with gold and silver. The different colors represent the different times of a day (day, evening, night). He connects all the colors with love. He says love is present in all the stages, understanding (Light), ignorance (darkness), and half-light(in-between). He has shown himself materialistically poor, but he has something more valuable, his dreams and love. He has another view of the word love which is discussed below;

"Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways"

In the above lines, Yeats says about her beloved Maud Gonne that why should I blame her for the pain she has given me. She is engaged in the political movement which inspired many common men against the ruling class or the great. Common man has never done this before she taught them to be violent against the greats.

"With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?"

In the above lines (from No Second Troy), Yeats uses simile "a tightened bow" which shows the two sides of his beloved. Her beauty is delicate, full of energy but at the same time her beauty is dangerous enough to left a man in turmoil. He says she is in the wrong age where delicacy, beauty and more heroic were appreciated. She has all the qualities such as heroic and strict. Although Maud is beautiful and delicate, she could have been different what she is now, who causes chaos and turmoil. At the end of the poem, Yeats mentions, should there be another troy to achieve love?

4.5 Paradise

The researchers have found the view of W.B. Yeats about Paradise. According to him, paradise is a place where a man lives peacefully, where no disturbing sounds of this world exist. He seems tired of this world and longing for peace. There is a visible longing for peace in his poems "Sailing to Byzantium", "Running to paradise and "The lake Isle of Innisfree". He resembles paradise with peace and serenity.

As I came over Windy Gap
They threw a halfpenny into my cap.
For I am running to paradise;
And all that I need do is to wish
And somebody puts his hand in the dish
To throw me a bit of salted fish:
And there the king is but as the beggar."
"Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

Of hammered gold and gold enameling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”
“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 honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.”

4.6 Hell

As per W.B. Yeats, hell is not a place where a man can live peacefully. Therefore, there is no difference between Hell and the world. That is why he is longing and searching for peace and peaceful life. The theme in the following lines, is clearly visible. In his poem “Sailing to Byzantium”, he longs for peace that’s why he departed for Byzantium, a Holy place, where a man can live peacefully. Consequently, hell is not less than the world.

“An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore, I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.”
“Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.”

5. Conclusion

The concluding remarks sum up all the questions raised by the researchers and provided answers to those questions. The researchers provided significance and implications of the research as well. The researchers have qualitatively analyzed the selected poems of W B Yeats as a research tool to find the answers of the raised questions. The first question raised by the researchers is that how does W.B. Yeats’ poetry reflect his interest in mysticism? After the deep study of the poems of William Butler Yeats, the researchers concluded that the poet used some of the symbols and imageries which reflect his interest in mysticism. Further, these symbols and imageries are used in the poem “Sailing to Byzantium”, “The Second Coming” and some others. He described Byzantium as a Holy place or that could be paradise where a man ignores all the chaos, and off courses of the world and he finds a peaceful place to live. In the poem "The Second Coming", he announces that all the turmoil of the present time in the world would be diminished with the birth of Christ again.

The second question is that what are the specific Theosophical concepts and symbols W.B. Yeats incorporated into his poetry? The theosophical concepts in his poetry are God, fate, death, paradise and hell. He has used these concepts and symbols by the help of symbols. The concept of God is explained by the imageries such as “he hangeth on a stalk”, “all this tinkling tide” and “a sliding drop of rain”. The fate is as “Broken wall” and “burning roof”. This imagery depicts the history of fall of Troy and Agamemnon death. These all were written and had to happened. The concept of death is articulated by Yeats in his poems as “Man has created death”. There is no spiritual death to the man but physical and the spiritual is created by man. A person can be remembered by the work he has done in his life. Paradise is a place where humans live peacefully and find interest in living. Paradise is a serene place for W B Yeats. On the other side, hell is a place where no one is happy and cannot be despite trying to live in peace. Hell is a place of chaos for W B Yeats.

Furthermore, the significance of Yeats’ mystical poetry extends beyond literary analysis, contributing to our understandings of mysticism and spirituality. His works offer a unique perspective on the human conditions and nature of reality, making a valuable addition to the literary canon. This study contributes to existing literature on mysticism in poetry by highlighting the importance of considering Yeats’ mystical themes in understandings of his

work. Future research could further explore Yeats' later works, comparative analysis with other mystical poets, and the implications of his mystical worldview on contemporary spirituality.

Moreover, the Implications of this study are far-reaching, with potential applications in literary studies, mysticism and spirituality, and cultural studies. However, this study is limited by its focus on selected poems and qualitative methodology, suggesting opportunities for future research. A comparative analysis of Yeats' mystical themes with those of other poets, the examination of his later poetry, and an investigation into the influence of mysticism on contemporary spirituality are all potential areas for further exploration. By exploring Yeats' mystical poetry, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of his works and the significance of mysticism in literature alike.

5.1 Recommendations

It is suggested to explore Yeats' later works to uncover evolving mystical themes and influences. A comparative analysis with other mystical poets, such as T.S. Eliot or Walt Whitman, would provide valuable insights. Investigating the impact of Yeats' mystical worldview on contemporary spirituality and literature is also warranted. Furthermore, examining the intersection of mysticism and nationalism in Yeats' works would offer a nuanced understanding of his poetry. Additionally, while analyzing the role of feminine and masculine principles in his mystical poetry would provide a deeper understanding of Yeats' spiritual vision. These directions will enrich our comprehension of Yeats' mystical poetry in future.

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