



## THE LITERARY ART AND FORTE OF W.B. YEATS AND T. S. ELIOT IN MODIFYING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY POETIC SENSIBILITY THROUGH USAGE OF SYMBOLS AND IMAGES IN THEIR POETRY: AN APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

*This research paper ingeniously affiliates the ornating rhetoric dexterity of two flamboyant laureates T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats whose literary craftsmanship reorients the twentieth century subtle poetic sensibility through the locution of symbols and images in their poetry. With respect to, this research paper fervently unearths discrete prodigious notions that W.B. Yeats as the spokesman of “liberal humanism”, where else T.S. Eliot as the exponent of “Christian humanism”. Synchronously, it perspicaciously manifests certain prevailing common characteristics of Eliot and Yeats in the usage of distinctive myths and images to enunciate their visions in their poetry. Collectively, this research paper leads to the following conclusion, that W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot brought forth the quintessence to their deep penetrating profound and intimate personal encounters through unstinting usage of symbols and images in their poetry.*

**Key Words:** *Literary art, poetic sensibility, symbols, images, liberal humanism, Christian humanism, myths, intimate, experiences.*

### INTRODUCTION

It is generally held that T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats modified the poetic sensibility of the twentieth century through their writings. No doubt, Eliot is remembered rather mainly for the enormous influence he wielded over the post-war generation of intellectuals. Having had his

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formal education at Harvard, Sorbonne and Oxford, he was fortunate enough to be under the influence of George Santayans, Irving Babbitt and F.H. Bradley. His studies are said to have given him a good grounding in literature, European philosophical tradition and Indian metaphysics. Acutely aware of the limitations of English poetry, he turned to Europe for inspiration and guidance. His first poetic creation, 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' appeared in 1914. His literary creations produced during his early period did neatly reflect the disillusionment and disgust of the post-war generation. Commenting on his poetic career as a ceaseless process of experiment, Helen Gardner writes: "he wrestled all his life with the material of his art, words and meanings, attempting to be as truthful as he could" (P37)

Reflecting a wide range of attitudes and style-from the youthful and dandified to the nature; semi-didactic, allusive and satiric to the lyrical, meditative and philosophic, each work of his was found to be "a Wholly new start", or "a fresh beginning" or a "raid on the inarticulate" and each time, he gave "new possibilities to poetry in a new stock of images from contemporary life" (Selected Essays 373). It is this devotion to his vocation as a poet, that had made Eliot the hero of many. Falling in line with Eliot's poetic sensibility, W.B. Yeats created poetry essentially modern by an intensification of qualities inherent in the English language itself. To quote John Wain, Yeats' life was a "search for poetry that would be invulnerable to irony, capacious and strong enough to deal with the welter of discord that was modern life, indestructible even by the 'Savage God' (P 363). Starting his poetic career as a Pre-Raphaelite, Yeats did obvious modern poets mostly French like Verlaine, Corbiere, Mallarme, Hopkins and Rimbaud and the second Anglo-American generation of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Despite the fact that he began writings in the Romantic vein of the pre-Raphaelites, he later triumphantly broke out of its small pasture and evolved a diction at once flexible and rigid as the vehicle for major statements. Irish background, rich personal relationships, political ideals and above all live interest in everything around contributed to the towering achievements of Yeats. These achievements made along with Eliot, Yeats occupy a focal points and place in modern poetic realm.

Both Yeats and Eliot are considered to be more dissimilar than similar in their poetic qualities. It is mere coincidence that England celebrated Yeats' birthday in the year of Eliot's death. The very times that they lived in were different. Yeats had already established himself as a poet and dramatist when Eliot made his appearance in the literary scene. For Eliot, newly initiated into the tradition of European poetry, Yeats was ornate and tradition of European poetry, Yeats was ornate and romantic, a protracted Pre-Raphaelite; while for Yeats, looking for wilderness and strangeness, Eliot was too plain, a belated Alexander Pope, making poetry resemble prose. Ezra Pound's attempt to unite them proved to be a miserable failure. For several years, Eliot thought of Yeats as a left over from the 'nineties, an out-of-way interest of Pound. But as years passed, Eliot's opinion of Yeats underwent a metamorphosis and he came to recognize the poetic genius of Yeats. In a memorial lecture after Yeat's death, he

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proclaimed that Yeats was “the greatest poet of our times, certainly the greatest in this language, and so far as I am able to judge, in any language” (Ellmann 54). However, Yeats’ opinion of Eliot remained unchanged up to his death.

The principles which these two poets cherished were also widely different. Yeats advocated liberty of the individual, but Eliot was against it, for he believed that man should subject himself to tradition in all walks of life. One can take note of Yeats’ beliefs as “Romanticism in literature, Aristocracy in politics and Mysticism in religion”. Eliot on the other hand declared that he was “an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a Royalist in politics”. If Yeats was called the spokesman of ‘liberal humanism’, Eliot was considered the exponent of ‘Christian humanism’. This apparent dichotomy in their beliefs was reflected in their works also. Eliot’s works were essentially experimental. He was deliberately trying to break new grounds by adopting daring subject matter and diction. Yeats’ poems were mostly lyrical whereas Eliot’s poems were dramatic. It follows naturally that Yeats’ approach was subjective while Eliot’s approach was objective. While Yeats thought of himself as one of the last Romantics trying to give a new form and meaning to poetry, Eliot stood for the importance of tradition in poetry and argued that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (English critical Texts 297).

Truly speaking, intensity of vision and flexibility of diction stand out as the salient qualities of Yeats’ poetry. The topics of his poems were mostly his personal affairs – friendship, sufferings, patriotism. etc., He reinforced the fibre of his poetry by uniting realism with his subjective visions. He is said to have shown a sustained and continuous development as a perfect artist upto his doom’s day without making significant changes in his choice of words, imagery or meter. In spite of his giving voice to his tortured consciousness in his poetry, he did not like the personal note coming into his poetry and so he took an objective stand. The narrator in Eliot’s poems is the poet himself. His poems are a series of indirect confessions of a man burdened by the awareness of sin and they also trace the progression – through suffering-from belief to doubt and from doubt to faith. In the later poems, the conflict resolves itself in the positive grief-in-joy and joy-in-grief of Christianity. A change in style corresponds to this change in Eliot’s vision. It is now clear that Yeats and Eliot stood at opposite poles as poets. Yet, they showed certain common characteristics, for both rejected the obsolete methods of the Victorian poets like Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, thereby creating a new kind of poetry in the place of the Romantic poetic tradition.

The early poems of Yeats and Eliot, written in tune with the symbolist tradition, won them great critical acclaim. Overcoming their creative problems in their own inimitable way, both of them registered a resurgence of greater genius after a point of exhaustion. To quote Alvarez, “there is a massive purposiveness in.. (their) poetic progress which is almost

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Milonic; a control and certainty in the writing ...” (P18). Both Yeats and Eliot have used distinctive myths and images to express their visions though there are similarities and dissimilarities in their choice of images and their treatment.

The very purpose behind the use of images is to concretise abstract notions. They relate the unconscious world of the poet’s mind to external reality- the world of the senses. So, usually, images are suggestive and intense word pictures associated with sense impressions making links between objects and objects, objects and emotions. Essentially, it is an attempt at a recreation of reality. The force of an image lies in its suggestive power - the power to call to the mind a host of associations and its function is to universalize the individual. Eliot maintained that it is not a single image, but a unified pattern of images that contribute to the effect in literature. Images hold in tension opposites, suggesting the opposition of forces that our civilization comprehends. Eliot also held that in “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought” ideas acquire the quality of an image. A systematic patterning of images make up the symbolic structure in the work of a poet. In his essay “symbolism in Painting” Yeats states:

*“... all that is not mere story-telling,  
or mere portraiture is symbolic” (P 148).*

Yeats believed that people of vision see symbols in their trances; “for religious and visionary thought is thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection” (Yeats 148). Yeats’ view of the use of symbols got matured with his poetic art. What has to be understood is that images concretise abstractions in terms of sense perceptions. A symbolic way is thus a way in which the human mind operates in order to create the world of its experience. For Ernst Casirer, “the mind knows the phenomenal world only as the forms shape it; and the forms are called symbolic precisely because their functioning produces the symbols whereby the phenomenal is apprehended” (P 53). The sea image, which did not have any profound emotional significance for Elizabethan or Augustan writers, took an a fresh import in the Romantic epoch. Blake, Coleridge, Tennyson, Arnold and Rimband found in the sea a symbol of death, of immensity and of eternity. The most beautiful reference to sea in all Romantic literature occurs in Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’. Both Yeats and Eliot saw in the multitudinous grandeur of the sea the immensity of life itself and it is interesting to examine some of their poems where the image occurs. Reference to water, especially the river and the sea figure in many of the poems of Yeats. In ‘Easter 1916’, the stream symbolizes life itself, ‘troubled’ by people living it:

*“Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seam*



*Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream” (Easter 41-44).*

The lines “A shadow of cloud on the stream /changes minute by minute’ is reminiscent of Eliot’s”. Then a cloud passed and the pool was empty” (Burnt Norton 439). The different activities of life that go on in spite of the revolutionaries’ single minded devotion and purpose is beautifully portrayed in the image of a stream:

*“A horse- hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it  
The long-legged moor-hens drive,  
And hens to moor cocks call;  
Minute by minute they live,  
The stone is in the midst of all”* (Easter 52-57)

The sea in Yeats represents the immensity of life itself. In ‘Sailing to Byzantium’,

*“The salmon-falls, the mackerel crowded seas  
Fish, Flesh and Fowl”*

stand for the material life from which the poet is trying to escape. In the final lines of ‘Byzantium’,

*“Fresh images beget  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented seas”*

Yeats gives a description of the platonic sea, the sea of life. The sea is at “the drifting indefinite bitterness of life’. It is torn by the twin forces of sex and religion; because the dolphin is also the love-beast. “The dolphin break the flood; the flood symbolizes the irrational, the confusion, the pattern, perhaps a consequence of the ‘Galilean turbulence’; against this the formal ceremonious art of Byzantium, the art of the goldsmith, hammered work linked with the idea breaking, complete the paradox of that opposition of fire and water” (The Lonely Tower 235).

Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is a dramatic poetic expression of the spiritual anarchy and futility of the twentieth century world. It is a cosmic vision expressing the horror existing at the base of all human experience. The central conception is of sexual impotence as a symbol for spiritual sterility. In this poem, the land is barren because the people lack faith, because they suffer from spiritual sterility. The image of water dominates the poem. Water, the availability or non-availability of it, acquires a metaphorical meaning standing for that divine grace that will cleanse the people of their impurities, both of mind and body and redeem them. The spiritual and material life of the wastelanders will undergo ‘a sea change/into something rich and

strange' if they accept divine grace. In this context, it is worth remembering that water is one of the five elements. Water is considered to be a universal solvent. Its primary function is purification. The reverberation of thunder bringing rain promises to wash away the blood, sweat and tears of the land, recurring symbols in the poem. It also quenches the thirst of living beings. It makes plant life possible. Thus, it is the symbol of cosmic creativity. According to the Veda, there was water even before all creations began. The image of water and qualities associated with it give the poem its artistic unity. It should be noted that Eliot uses different forms of water for this effect.

Thus, we have rain, snow, fog, frost, spring, pool, sea-water, river water, hot water, sweat, tar, spit, tears, blood etc. In addition, we have turning tides, brisk swells, rippled waters, whirl pools, exhausted wells, decayed holes and the like. Generally, images of impure forms of water like sweat, spit, tar etc are used to emphasise the defiling and defiled nature of life in the waste land. Only rain signifying divine grace can pure the land of dirt. The most memorable reference to water in the 'Burnt Norton' is the passage, signifying the moment of divine grace:

*"So we move, and they, in a formal pattern,  
Along the empty alley, into the box circle,  
To look down into the drained pool  
Dry the pool was filled with water out of sin light  
And the lotus rose quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool,  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty"*

*(Burnt Norton 32-39).*

This description of a point of stillness in eternity is comparable to the mid-winter spring of 'Little Gidding'. The Dry Salvages' begins with a picture of the river, "the strong brown god". It is "sullen, untamed and intractable/ Patient to some degree, at first recognized as a frontier/ useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of, commerce". Images relating to sea abound in the poem, 'beaches', 'Star-fish', horse-shoe crab', 'the whale's backbone', 'the delicate algore', 'sea animore', 'sea gull', 'fishermen' etc. are some of them. There are the different voices of the sea like 'the sea howl', 'the sea yelp', 'the sea shout'.

The fascinating similarity in the manipulation of certain symbol in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot may be accounted for by their archetypal nature. Fire is one of the four elements that sustain life. As per Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from Heaven for men. In the Bible, fire is an oft symbol standing for the wrath of God. Thunder, another form of fire was used to overcome the rebelling angels. Light dispels darkness; leads us from ignorance to knowledge. Fire also aids creativity. The most composite expression of the symbolic values



of fire occur in *Byzantium*. Yeats gives in a picture of the purified soul, "... an image, man or shade/shade more than man, more image than a shade" before he proceeds to show the workings of the purgatorial process.

*"At midnight on the emperor's pavement flit  
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel trees lit  
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame"*

According to Wilson, 'flames begotten of flame' has a platonic reminiscence (P 241). As per platonic theories, there were the two forms of 'uncreated flame' the higher and the lower fire. These were described by Yeats as 'the bright and beautiful fire of inspiration and the holy spirit' and 'the dark fire of the fierce impersonal energy, or wrath of God! The higher fire is the symbol of beatitude; it is 'God's Holy, fire' in which the sages of 'sailing to Byzantium' stand. The lower fire is the symbol of purgation and the evil dead dream sometimes of being consumed by this flame". This, then, is why Yeats' flames, unlike those of an earthy martyrdom need no faggot to feed them or steal to light them: they feed on their own dark energy, though they do so at the discretion of the emperor whom I take therefore to be Yeats' symbol for God.

Water, air and earth are merely transformations of fire. By a curious paradox, water and fire are one, i-e., water is just fire in another form. Fire is the agent of Divine Law. Fire for Eliot is destructive since it is the underlying cause of the transformation and constructive since it keeps the flux going.

The dance is the most obvious archetypal image of Yeats' poetry. It may be interesting to note that the Dance and the Dancer appear in no less than forty-one poems in the 'Varioum Edition' and in thirty-one in the 'Collected Poems' (Parish 180-81) The dancer in Yeats' poetry is a symbol of organic same sense as Dante used it, to symbolic beauty by a perfectly proportioned body. Dance was a ritual of transcendence and promoted, as it were "unearthly ecstasy" At first, it also appeared to be a source of mystical knowledge when Yeats! claimed that his geometrical symbol had emerged from the secret markings of an ancient ritual dance in the first version of *A vision* (9-11). The simile of the dancer conveys Yeats' conception of inner fusion of primitive feeling and intuition with modern intellectual awareness. In his dance also symbolized the fusion, balance and harmony of extraordinary beauty, insight and knowledge:

*"Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O! Chestnut – tree, great-rooted blossomer,*

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*Are you the leaf, the blossom or the hole?  
O! body swayed to music, O! brightening glance.  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?  
(The collected Poems 244-45)*

The image of the dance takes on a ritual meaning in several poems. In 'under the Round Tower' the legendary figure of Billy Byrne of 'The Three O! Byrnes and the Evil Facies' in Yeats' Celtic twilight sees his golden king and silver lady in a ritual dance, dancing the night out to become for Billy omen of good luck:

*"Bellowing up and bellowing round,  
Till toes mastered a sweet measure,  
Mouth mastered a sweet sound,  
Prancing round and prancing up  
Until they pranced upon the top" (P 154).*

In 'Somonon to Sheba', the king and the lady have gone "round and round/ In the narrow theme of love", in the manner of a dance. From "Shadowless Moon", to nightfall, the journey is like one long dance enacting the ritual death of the day. In 'A Prayer for My Daughter', a threatening dismal future resembles the ritual dance of death to frenzied drums:

*"Imagining in exciting reverie  
That the future years had come,  
Dancing to frenzied drum  
out of the murderous innocence of  
the sea" (Collected Poems 212).*

Symbols gave Yeats a sense of secrecy and security. It was possible for him to hide his own insecurity behind them, as it were, outside himself. He fully released his imagination in creating and combining these symbols which reflected his inner consciousness. "A symbol", he wrote in an essay on Blake, "is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence" (Jeffares 15). Through the symbol of the tree as that of the dancer, Yeats sought to represent the 'Image', standing for the reconciliation of the opposites of action and contemplation. It is "without simple intellectual content, bearing the same relationship to thought as the dancer bears to the dance. As in the dance, there is no disunity of being; the body is the soul" (Kermode 48). Thus, the tree in Yeats' imagination represented the culmination of his life long search for the unity of being. The dancer in Yeats' system reconciles antithetical movements, containing in itself motion and stillness, action and contemplation, form and matter, body and soul, life and death. The tree complements Yeats' image of the dance "since it so powerfully reinforces the idea of integrity" (102).

The tree was not purely personal symbol to Yeats. Yeats' manipulation of the several qualities of the image of the tree shows how traditional symbolism could be used in modern poetry. Whenever the sunny side of life is presented as in 'Among School Children' or 'Vacillation', Yeats employs the figure of the green tree in full leaf:

*A tree there is that from its top most bough  
is half all glittering flame and half all green  
Abounding foliage moistered with the dew;  
And half is half and yet is all the same;  
And half and half consume whey they renew;  
And he that Attis image hangs between  
That staring fury and the blind lush leaf  
May know not what he knows, but knows not grief" (P 282-83)*

In 'A Prayer for my Daughter', the tree epitomizes all the qualities that he would wish his daughter to possess. As in Yeats, the dry sterile tree with its broken branches symbolize a state of hopeless despair in Eliot. In *The Waste Land*, the tree is the most important visual embodiment of the barrenness of the land. To conclude, it may be said that both Yeats and Eliot gave expression to their intense and personal experiences through rich usage of symbol and images in their poetry.

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