



The Theme of Time in Yeats's Symbolic Birds

YANG Shenghua^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, Nanchong, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 2 April 2015; accepted 9 June 2015

Published online 26 July 2015

Abstract

Yeats is one of the greatest poets in English and Irish literature. When discussing the rich content of Yeats's symbolism, his bird poems must be emphasized and investigated. It is noteworthy that the theme of time is contained in Yeats's symbolic birds. The theory of Gyre and the Great Wheel lays the foundation for the interpretation and evaluation of Yeats's complicated views of time, of history, and of life and death in his symbolic birds. Yeats is yearning for immortality of spirit, idealized Ireland and some kind of intellect and magic in his symbolic birds.

Key words: Symbolic birds; Theme of time; Yeats

Yang, S. H. (2015). The Theme of Time in Yeats's Symbolic Birds. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(1), 16-19. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7278>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7278>

INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), as the winner of Nobel Prize for literature in 1923, is the most widely admired and intensively studied poet of the twentieth century. Yeats makes important innovations in poetic writing. His poetic style is changeable, from romanticism in the early period, to realism and modernism in the middle period, to the symbolism and metaphysics in the last period of poetic creation. Being influenced by the studies of occultism, metaphysics and Indian religion, Yeats explores symbolism and investigates the theme of time in his

bird poems. It is noteworthy that time is one of the most significant laws to govern the symbolism of Yeats's lyrics. Yeats's bird poems are not the exception.

Symbolism arises in the stage of western literature, which is divided into early symbolism and late symbolism. The early symbolism refers to the poetic groups in France. The late symbolism refers to the symbolic poetry, which was popular from 1920s to 1940s. Yeats is famous for his symbolism, especially his symbolic birds in his lyrics. His symbolism is originated from mysticism, Irish culture and legends. The theory of Gyre is considered as Yeats' most typical philosophical achievement. Yeats's bird poems explain the theme of time and views about history and destiny which are based upon the mystical system in *A Vision*. The Gyres and the Great Wheel are the most important symbols. The Gyres are described as two cones, penetrating each other. The cones or gyres represent the opposites in the nature of each person, country or historical period. One gyre is the primary gyre, the other the antithetical gyre. One or the other becomes dominant through space and time. In this system, the past can be classified and the future predicted. The Great Wheel has twenty-eight spokes, representing a year in lunar months. Each spoke represents twenty-eight possible selves, twenty-eight phases of each person's life and the phases of each cycle of world history. Each cycle is about two thousand years long. Based upon the theory of Gyre and symbolism, this article is to go deep into Yeats's bird poems, to have a profound analysis of various bird images, and to explore Yeats's complicated views of time.

1. ARCHETYPAL MEANING OF BIRDS

Birds are always associated with divinity and spirituality. Birds and their ability to fly fascinate or scheme mankind, so in some religions they are associated with the dead. Meanwhile, others have equipped their god or goddess

with wings or bird heads, such as the Egyptian Horus and the Aztec Quetzalcoatl which are provided with the same supernatural qualities associated with falcons or quetzal birds. Christianity pictures the Holy Ghost, the most abstract part of the Trinity, as a white dove. Birds are associated with death transitions in Celtic mythology. According to archetypal analysis, Eagle, as the feared scavenger of Europe, is always related to death God. The Raven is deeply linked to death deities.

Birds are also the ancient images of the soul: "Often the soul has been conceived as a bird ready to take flight. This conception has probably left traces in most languages, and it lingers as a metaphor in poetry." (Frazer, 1998, p.181) Old beliefs among people all over the world emphasized different situations when the soul might take its chance and fly away from the body. In particular, some gifted individuals, like witches and shamans, were believed to be able to send out their souls on journeys to other worlds. Their souls were often in the shape of birds, and traveled without damage.

There are numerous birds in Yeats' lyrics: swans, falcons, peacock, cocks, doves, and even a phoenix. In "The White Birds", the birds are assimilated to be lovers, flying over the seas. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", the images of the birds appear to be more spiritual. In "The Hawk", the "yellow-eyed hawk of the mind seems to signify the spirited intellect." (Jeffares, 1984, p.80) In "The Second Coming", the falcon losing his connection with the falconer signifies that man losing his communication with Lord God exists in a turbulent world. In "Leda and the Swan", Zeus disguised as the swan to seduce Leda. Swan symbolizes the divine, a terrible and irresistible power which seizes human beings. In "Sailing to Byzantium" the speaker chooses to be in the shape of the golden bird for his existence. The symbolic birds are Yeats's interest and they effectively support Yeats's recurring views of time, of history, and of life and death.

2. IMAGE OF SWAN

There are various sorts of birds in Yeats's lyrics, from eagle to owl and to parrot. Swan is very common in Yeats's lyrics and appears to be the most frequently bird image and represents some kind of mystery and passion, which also reveal the theme of time deeply.

Swan is often used to depict idealized nature. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", the swan is the symbol of youth, of "passion or conquest" (Jeffares, 1984, p.65). There is something immortal beyond mortality, remaining constant and passing down from generation to generation. The main feature of the swans is their beauty and untouchability. It is the observer who reels from their sudden mount, and eventual disappearance. Swans are unchanged.

Yeats rewrites the myth of Leda and Swan to comment on time's destructive force, mysterious and divine fate, and historical inevitability in the poem "Leda and Swan".

The swan is violent and passionate. The poet has his special exploration to the relationship between man's sexual love and time's circular movement:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
(Yeats, 2008, p.182)

Yeats's fancy in this poem comes from the Greek myth of Zeus, disguising as a swan and impregnating the mortal Leda, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. She bore the twins Castor, symbol of war, and Pollux and Helen, symbol of sexual love. In the first two stanzas of this poem, the sexual love between the body of Leda and swan is depicted circumstantially and implies some significant events associated with time's destruction. The eggs of Leda, as a result of the rape, give rise to the fall of Troy. This link between sexual love and time's destruction is convinced in the quotes of Todhunter's *Helena in Troas*:

O pitiless mischief! Thee no woman bore
Wooed by the billing of the amorous swan.
Yea, Leda bore thee not but Nemesis
To be the doom of Troy and Priam's house.
(Jeffares, 1984, p.248)

Based upon this link, Yeats gives his prophecy boldly that the old civilization is at end and a new civilization will rise as a result of sexual love and war. Thus, time's destruction and its circular movement are closely linked with the symbolic meaning of swan. The Greek era began with the sexual union between Zeus and Leda:

I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda, remembering that they show in a Spartan Temple, strung up to the roof as a holy relic, an unhitched egg of hers; and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War. (Yeats, 1937, p.181)

It is noted that the first edition of *Leda and the Swan* appeared during the Irish Civil War. Yeats's homeland is full of violence and chaos during that time. The history of Ireland has been one of struggle for independence and home rule in the twentieth century. When Yeats wrote "Leda and the Swan" in 1923, Ireland was in the bloody civil war resulting from the Anglo-Irish conflict and the opposition between the largely Catholic south and the Protestant north. Yeats holds that each era is led by an act of violence. If Ireland wants to gain its new era of history, it must experience violence and destruction. A set of opposites occur in "Leda and the Swan", reflecting Yeats's view that a synthesis of antithetical forces are necessary in order to establish permanence and a sense of harmony in life. Yeats also explores oppositions between art and reality, imagination and moral responsibility, intellect and passion.

As for the cyclical movement of world history, Yeats offers the conception of The Great Year. Yeats also uses Cicero's definition, based upon Pierre Duhem:

But when the whole of the constellations shall return to the position from which they once set forth, thus after a long interval re-making the first map of the heavens, that may indeed be called the Great Year wherein I scarce dare say how many are the generations of men. (Jeffares, 1984, p.232)

Meanwhile, Yeats adds his own comment on the Great Year:

Sometimes divided into lesser periods by the return of the sun and moon to some original position, by the return of a planet or of all planets to some original position, or by their making an astrological aspect with that position; and sometimes it was dissociated from the actual position of the stars and divided into twelve months, each month a brightening and a darkening fortnight, and at the same time perhaps a year with its four seasons. (Jeffares, 1984, p.232)

Swans' sail in circles in "The Wild Swans at Coole" is a transformed wheel in Yeats's symbolic nature depictions.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.
(Yeats, 2008, p.107)

The above lines indicate the cyclical sail of the wild swans at Coole. The wheel, suggesting the broken reality, is in a broken state. Obviously, Yeats is very disappointed with the chaotic reality and hopes to end the chaos with the circular movement of time symbolized by the wild swan's wheeling sail.

3. IMAGE OF FALCON

The gyres are emphasized in Yeats's special systematic mysticism in *A Vision*. "Gyre is the essential element of growth and life, representing the cyclical nature of the Ultimate Reality with the recurrent pattern of growth and decay, ebb and flow, just like in the Upanishads." (Izzo, 2009, p.98) The gyres not only reflect the course of a single life from birth to death, but also record the rise and fall of civilizations. The Gyres existed in Yeats's mystical system have the corresponding forms in his symbolic birds. Yeats makes intentionally the original gyres and the transformed gyres complement and elucidate each other in his bird poems so as to promote his thought of time to a higher level.

The falcon's turning in the widening gyres is a transformed movement of gyres in Yeats's bird poems.
Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
(Yeats, 2008, p.158)

Generally, the falcon flies in ever-widening circles away from its trainer and returns when called back. But

in the poem, the falcon can no longer hear the falconer's call. Yeats's falcon travels in gyres and is lost from its return. This suggests a slackening of communication and a widening of distance between Lord God and human beings. This thought may derive from Dante's description of how he and Virgil reach the right circle of Hell seated on Geryon's back. Geryon moves in wheeling gyres:

Of ample circuit, easy thy descent...
As falcon that hath long been on the wing
But lure nor bird hath seen, while in despair
The falconer cries "Ah me! thou stoop'st to earth".
(Jeffares, 1984, p.203)

It is clearly illustrated that Geryon emerges from the Abyss with his body shaping like the path of a gyre on a cone. The falcon signifies man or civilization, losing touch with Christ, whose birth declares the beginning of the two thousand years of Christianity. Falcon's turning in the widening gyre in Yeats's poem predicts that an old age is at end and a new era is coming.

In "Sailing to Byzantium", "Things fall apart" because the centre cannot hold them together. Government loses its controlling power, and people are killed by bloody revolution. The speaker in this poem observes that "the best lack of all conviction, while the worst is full of passionate intensity." (Jeffares, 1984, p.99) The separation of falcon and falconer offers a striking image of social and cultural disintegration, not from a simple loss of communication. It implies Yeats's disappointment at the corruption of the present modern world and the expectation for the ideal society he admired so much.

When Yeats wrote "The Second Coming", Europe and much of the rest of the world were in chaos. Great social troubles appeared all around the poet. Most people were shocked at the disaster during the war. In "The Second Coming", Yeats describes how one world meets its horrified last days and a new world is coming. In Yeats' eyes, history well repeats itself, which is predicted in the movement of the gyres.

4. IMAGE OF PEACOCK AND COCK

Peacock in Yeats's lyrics has the same function of prophecy as beast in desert when it is concerned with the theme of time. The aristocratic bird in aristocratic garden is often depicted with Juno, wife of Jupiter and the goddess of women, controlling all important moments of female life. "The peacock was sacred to Juno as a symbol of immortality." (Jeffares, 1984, p.227) Peacock associates closely with the circulation of time and history. Juno's peacock has taken important position in the fourth stanza of "Ancestral Houses".

O what if gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else all Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities;
O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways

Where slipped Contemplation find his ease
And Childhood a delight for every sense,
But take our greatness with our violence?
(Yeats, 2008, p.170)

"Ancestral Houses" was written at Thoor Ballylee in 1922, during Irish civil war. Yeats makes his note of this poem particularly: "Before they were finished the Republicans blew up our 'ancient bridge' one midnight. They forbade us to leave the house, but were otherwise polite, even saying at last 'Good-night, thank you', as though we had given them the bridge." (Jeffares, 1984, p.223) In this poem, the poet expresses his disappointment and anger of the reality by intentional depicting of Juno's peacock. Yeats claims that "But take our greatness with our violence?" In the eyes of Yeats, Ireland in a state of civil war is an old world full of pains and chaos. Yeats is expecting to hear the scream of Juno's peacock, signifying the end of the chaotic world, and to witness a new Ireland.

Yeats depicts "Juno's peacock screamed" directly in "My Table". The scream of Juno's peacock symbolizes the loss of self-control and predicts the end of one civilization and the beginning of the next. Yeats explores this idea in *A Vision*:

A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some great tragic person, some Niobe who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes towards the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation. (Conner, 1998, p.96)

Time's circulation is revealed clearly with the scream of Juno's peacock. When Juno's peacock makes its irrational cry, the darkness of the old world is revealed so clearly that the end of this world is unavoidable and the arising of the next new world is reasonable.

Very similar to peacock, cock in Yeats's lyrics also predicts a new beginning. The image of cock is deep-rooted in British literary tradition. Cock announces the coming of dawn. "Simonides once called them 'day-sounding'. Theocritus concludes his epithalamion to Helen by promising to return when 'the first singer' crows, perhaps a decorative phrase for cock." (Ferber, 1999, p.45) Chaucer and Spenser described cock as the herald of dawn in their works. Chaucer held "The kok, that orloge is of thorpes lyte" and Spenser declared "chearefull Chaunticleare with his note shrill" warns of dawn. Comprehending cock's announcing of the end of night and sounding of the coming of day, Yeats enhances cock's symbolic meanings in his lyrics to a higher level in "Byzantium".

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,

Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.
(Yeats, 2008, p.211)

As the above lines elaborate, "Byzantium" centers on the cycle of life and death and the purifications of soul. In the above lines, the cocks of Hades sing the common strain of the continuing cycle of human lives, announce a new life or a new beginning in the cycle of human life and death, and predict a kind of eternity after the last purification of soul. In this sense, the cocks of Hades are holy guides for the common to break away from time's destruction and bring about life's regeneration.

CONCLUSION

Fascinated by the spiritual world and the artistic dreamland, Yeats spiritualizes literature. He is a central figure of Symbolism, who advocates symbols in combination with magic and intellect. *A Vision* is a storehouse of symbolism, which has evoked the existence of the mixture of romanticism and modernism in Yeats's lyrics. The theory of Gyres, imbued with the Great Wheel in *A Vision* has laid the foundation for symbolism in Yeats's bird poems. The symbolic birds in Yeats's lyrics are closely associated with the poet's complicated views of time, of history, and of life and death. These analyses make it clear that Yeats is yearning for immortality of spirit, idealized Ireland and some kind of intellect and magic in his symbolic birds.

REFERENCES

- Conner, L. I. (1998). *A Yeats dictionary: Persons and places in the poetry of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Ferber, M. (1999). *A dictionary of literary symbols*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Frazer, J. G. (1998). *The Golden Bough: A study of magic and religion*. London: Macmillan Company.
- Izzo, D. G. (2009). *The Influence of Mysticism on 20th Century British and American Literature*. New York: Manufactured & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Jeffares, A. N. (1984). *A new commentary on the poems of W. B. Yeats*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Yeats, W. B. (1937). *A vision*. London: Macmillan Company.
- Yeats, W. B. (2008). *The collected poems of W. B. Yeats*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition Limited.