

HSC Advanced English

Assessment Task One: Research Essay

Module B: Critical Study of Text – W.B. Yeats.

'Yeats' involvement in the political turmoil of the early 20th century and his interest in diverse philosophies shaped the value inherent in his poetic work.'

W.B Yeats poetry arises not only from the political turmoil that surrounded him at the beginning of the twenty century but also from his appropriation of Irish mythology, an assortment of religious philosophies and various other mystical sources including Neoplatism, romanticism, theosophy and spiritualism. Richard Ellman says

'From 1917 until about 1933, there is a steady expansion of his world to include cosmic, public, political, religious and domestic themes.¹'

Closely linked to that expansion was the development of Yeats beliefs, which he eventually put to book (A Vision) in 1925. The beliefs that appear inside that text as well as his political views are closely linked to three of his more complex poems, "The Second Coming", "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium".

"The Second Coming" was written in 1919 but not published until 1920. It was written at a time when the world was in political turmoil. WWI had just ended and the human and economic cost was only just becoming evident. Yeats had also witnessed the Russian Revolution, and much closer to home, the Black and Tan violence. Yeats makes obvious his disapproval of violence, through not only this poem but also through earlier poems such as "Easter 1916" and his deep-seated belief that literature, not violence, would unite Ireland.

Yeats thought "The Second Coming" to be one of his most significant poems and in a letter in 1938 wrote that the poem was 'proof that he was not unaware or callous about the rise of fascism.' Early manuscripts of the poem suggest that, originally at least it was very much about the state of war in the world,

¹ Ellman, Richard 'the identity of Yeats' New York 1954 pg 146

The Germans are () now to Russia come
Though every day some innocent had died²

The poem was also clearly influenced by Theosophy, from which Yeats theory of each cycle having its own God owes some acknowledgment. In “A Vision” Yeats stated his belief that each cycle lasted two thousand years, at the end of which a new deity would arise and the old world would fall. This is closely linked to his ‘gyre’ symbolism of “The Second Coming”.

‘ When the new age approaches... the beginning of a new era... the antithetical East will beget upon the primary West and the child or era so born will be antithetical...a subjective era... where personality will be fully expressed instead of being downtrodden as now.’³

This is the passage which Orwell, in his 1943 essay pointed to, and shouted Fascist! The god described in this passage, however, is not at all like the one described in “The Second Coming” the Sphinx is a monster. Yeats described him once as

‘Always at my left side, just out of range of sight, a brazen winged beast that I associate with laughing, ecstatic destruction.’⁴

Even the title “The Second Coming”, drawn from both Pagan and biblical references, has a double meaning. If taken from a Christian point of view, it could represent either Matthew 14 which prophesies the second coming of Christ, or St. John’s prophecy of the coming of the beast, the ‘anti Christ’ and the apocalypse that would follow. It is in these opposites that Yeats delighted, Denis Donoghue writes

² W.B Yeats rough draft of “The Second Coming” 1917

³ W. B Yeats ‘A Vision and related writings’ ed. A. Norman Jeffares. London: Arena, 1990

⁴ W.B Yeats ‘The collected poems of W.B Yeats. London England, Macmillan 1955

‘The best way to read Yeats poems is to think of them dramatizing
a great dispute...always lending him self to the other side, but always
with misgivings⁵,

It is in this way that “The Second Coming” and the two “Byzantium” poems are linked.

The two Byzantium poems are augments about self vs. soul, about art vs. nature, about intellect vs. passion and although not so obvious, “The Second Coming” is too. If we look closely at what the sphinx represents, this argument arises. The second coming can be considered a brilliant illustration of Yeats theory of the ‘gyre’ as well as his uncertainties for the future of mankind.

‘Yeats saw Europe, his world, wracked by inhuman warfare, and he feared
that the beast was coming to claim his kingdom, right on time⁶,

Sailing to Byzantium was written in 1928; Ellman says “Sailing to Byzantium” represents the greatest example of the dispute that pursued Yeats throughout his entire life, that is self vs. soul. Denis Donoghue describes the difference between self and soul by

‘self being all those motives which tie one to earth and time, soul
being the freedom of imagination transcending and finite.⁷”

In both “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” it would appear that Yeats is opting for the soul. Yet even while arguing this there are reservations.

“The last lines (of “Sailing to Byzantium”) seem to be turning-back to

⁵ Donoghue, D ‘the human image in Yeats’

⁶ M. Moyer ‘The Second Coming’ (on the web) www.secretdoors.com/weaversmoon/secondcoming.html

⁷ Donoghue, D ‘the human image in Yeats’

the world of time, joining up again, incompletely with the sensual music
of the first stanza⁸”

The symbolism used in the poem develops and furthers this argument. Essentially the poem's purpose is to create a symbol for both 'Self' and 'Soul'. The tension between self and soul is the essential dichotomy of Yeats' poetry. Self is represented in the first stanza by the various images of nature, reproduction and life cycles. The Soul is symbolized by the golden bird, the statues and the mosaics found in "Byzantium".

To Yeats, Byzantium represented a way of life where art was of central importance. A life where religion, aesthetical and practical lines were one and art represented a vision of the whole people. Yeats explains his use of Byzantium in a letter written after the poem's publication.

‘I chose to symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey
to that city because Byzantium was the centre of European civilization
and the source of its spiritual philosophy.’⁹

The poem can be read on other levels. Some language alludes to biblical counterparts, 'begotten, born and dies' for example as well as the holy fire and the goldsmiths which could also be taken as representations of creators, William Black, an earlier poet whom Yeats much admired, often used them thus. This poem and "Byzantium" have been linked to the religion Gnosticism, where it is believed that Christ will come and free the Christian world by freeing it from material bonds. Yet always the poem comes back to that fundamental argument, should one choose a life of temporary nature or permanent intellect? James Lovic Allen praises the poem saying

‘Consummate mastery of multiple-levelled symbolic structures that
demand reading on both the spiritual level and the aesthetic level

⁸ Donoghue, D 'the human image in Yeats'

⁹ 'T. Sturge More and W. B Yeats; Their correspondence 1901-1937' ed. Ursula Bridge London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953

simultaneously.¹⁰

Yeats 'Gyres' again feature in "Sailing to Byzantium" in the third stanza he says 'perne in a gyre', in this poem we see the 'gyres' used with the bobbin (perne). Yeats once described his view on death as 'an unwinding bobbin that sometimes winds up again during life'.

'The Gyres stand for the world of appearances, a world in which,
as he (Yeats) says, 'consciousness is conflict.'¹¹

Perhaps it was not only from Yeats personal theories that this poem was drawn, Archibald. A. Hill argues that Keats "Ode to a Nightingale" and 'Ode on Grecian urn' and the Han Christian Anderson story 'the Emperors Nightingale' were in fact sources that Yeats drew on in "Sailing to Byzantium".

"Byzantium" is thought to have arisen due to the criticism of T. Sturge More, a friend and critic of Yeats. In a letter in April 1930 he wrote

'Your 'sailing to Byzantium', magnificent as the first three stanzas are,
lets me down in the fourth, as such the goldsmith's birds is as much
nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and
Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to lords and ladies'¹²

It would seem that Yeats took these criticisms to heart, for in 1931 "Byzantium" was written. Many of the themes in "Byzantium" correlate with those found in "Sailing to Byzantium", which continues the argument of Self vs. Soul. In a note in Yeats 'collected poems' he wrote that he had written "Byzantium" to 'warm himself back to life'.

¹⁰ James Lovic Allen

¹¹ Ellman, Richard 'the identity of Yeats' New York 1954

¹² 'T. Sturge More and W. B Yeats; Their correspondence 1901-1937' ed. Ursula Bridge London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953

Because the two poems “Byzantium” and “Sailing to Byzantium” are companions, many of the sources that Yeats drew on as inspiration for these poems are the same. Many symbols are repeated, for example the smithies, the bobbin, the fire and most importantly the golden bird.

Despite the many similarities between the two poems, they are different. “Byzantium” looks more closely at death; it is, in many ways, darker. There is none of the ambivalence that can be found in “Sailing to Byzantium”; Faulkner suggests

The focus of the attention is no longer on the poignancy of the contrast between nature and art... but to establish the immense vitality of the dead, more alive than the living; still, but richer in movement that the endless agitation of becoming¹³.

Faulkner suggests that it wasn't Yeats philosophical values, or his political position or any aspect other than simple fact that Yeats was mortal, and aware of it, which shaped this poem.

The ‘image’ that Yeats describes is linked to one of his spiritually related beliefs, The Spiritus Mundi. This is also mentioned in “The Second Coming”. Yeats believed that the Spiritus Mundi was the great store bank of imagery. He believed that through Spiritus Mundi he had at his disposal all the images, stories and imagination that make up this word. The images or shades that Yeats describes are visions from Spiritus Mundi therefore they are ‘death in life and life in death’. Ellman explains

Byzantium is a dramatic example of Yeats’ handling of an image, and a difficult one ... such images seem at first to be far removed from life since they are identifiable with neither living man nor his ghostly substitute ... but everyday we escape ourselves and conjure up deathless, lifeless images ... from the point of view of life, they are

¹³ Faulkner, P The tower and The winding stair’ Open University press England 1987

dead but from a more detached point of view they are immortal, and the living have no genuine lives.¹⁴

Understanding the literary values of Yeats supposes an understanding the symbolism he used. Two symbols which need further analysis are; the golden bird which appears both in “Byzantium” and “Sailing to Byzantium”, and the Sphinx in “The Second Coming”.

In “Sailing to Byzantium” the poem ends with the little bird singing or ‘what is past, what is passing and what is to come.’ The golden bird described in “Sailing to Byzantium” is a representation of the ‘Soul’ it does not interact with the ‘lords and ladies’, only sings to them. Yeats has chosen Soul over Self. However, the Golden bird described in “Byzantium” appears in the third stanza, suggesting that the poem moves on and away from the Golden bird. This bird can interact with the natural world, it scorns the moon for its cycles, this shows that this bird is not completely liberated from the natural world. This poem is;

‘a marvelously contrived emblem of what Yeats took a work of art to be¹⁵,

The bird contains elements of fleeting character (take for example its song) but at the same time is an eternal work of art. Only through imagination can raw materials be made into something eternal. .

The classic symbol of the poet is the singing bird. In this way Yeats golden bird could be seen as a representative of that problematic position between the natural world and the spiritual world that the intellectual possessed, for only through imagination can you exist in both.

Birds are used often in Yeats’ work and can be seen again in his text “The Second Coming” In this poem there are two types of birds. The poem opens with a falcon that

¹⁴ Ellman, Richard. ‘the identity of Yeats’ New York 1954 pg 220

¹⁵ Frank Kermode

can no longer hear its master. The falcon can be taken as representing the head, the intellect, and the falconer representing the heart, this image is reinforced with the image of the sphinx (Human intellect, body of an animal) however this figure is not broken. This is a representation of Yeats' 'Gyres'. The desert birds mentioned later in the poem are very different again from both the falcon and the golden bird. The wakening of the beast has disturbed them, and end up flying around him in broken circles, again a representation of the 'gyres'.

The Sphinx itself is threatening, a monster. In this way "The Second Coming" can be seen as a representation of Yeats fundamental argument, intellect vs. nature. Differing from the Byzantium poems it would appear that in this case Yeats is arguing for the nature over the intellect. Yeats' Sphinx is a representation of a terrible new world order.

'The god of the era, who rises from the desert sands in the poem
"The Second Coming" is no beneficent Dioynesus but a monster...
the poets vision of horror surmounts his vision of cycles.'¹⁶

Yeats poetry drew from all aspects of the poets life. From his views on politics through to his religious beliefs, from the places he lived and the people that inspired him, but more then anything, his work arose from his own personal philosophy. This philosophy, which grew from various religions, cults and mystical sources, found their way by design into his work. The symbols he used arose from his own unique philosophy, experiences and those literary sources, which he chose to place value on. Above and beyond these beliefs, Yeats delighted in conflict. The quarrels about moral questions plague his work and bring his poetry to life.

¹⁶ Ellman, Richard 'the identity of Yeats' New York 1954

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