

The duality of human nature in "the two trees"



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William Butler Yeats, the esteemed twentieth-century poet, was in love with the Irish nationalist Maud Gonne; his poem "The Two Trees" was originally written for her. Gonne was very devoted to rather uncompromising ideologies, but in this poem Yeats coaxes her to perceive the world with more grey areas and fewer patches of black-and-white. In "The Two Trees," Yeats uses Edenic imagery, enjambment, and phonetics to create reconciliation between the two seemingly disjunct stanzas, suggesting that life cannot be divided so starkly and that opposites like "good" and "evil" are actually linked.

Yeats employs Edenic imagery to highlight the duality of life; by comparing the Tree of Life with the Tree of Knowledge, he shows that "good" and "evil" are entwined. The poem starts off with the statement "Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,/The holy tree is growing there;"(1-2) a reference to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, the tree of ignorance and "inner truth." He goes on to illustrate this tree as one with "holy branches"(3) starting "[f]rom joy," and bearing "trembling flowers"(4). Even the "changing colours of its fruit/Have dowered the stars with merry light"(5-6). These images evoke a pleasant mood, but also seem fleeting; the frequent use of verbs ending in -ing gives the impression of constant motion. Nothing is static here, it seems, and this sensation proves true in the second stanza, when the poem drastically shifts in tone and imagery. Here, a "fatal image grows/That the stormy night receives"(25-26) in stark contrast to the "holy tree" of the first stanza. This tree, the Tree of Knowledge, has "[r]oots half hidden under snows,/Broken boughs and blackened leaves"(27-28). The disjunction between these two trees seems apparent from the contrasting descriptions,

but the structural parallels between the stanzas—for example, the first stanza is bookended by “ Beloved, gaze in thine own heart” while the second stanza is bookended by “ Gaze no more in the bitter glass”—ties the elements together. The parallels between the first and second stanza reflect the parallels between the Tree of Life and The Tree of Knowledge. In the Kabbalist view, these two trees are actually the same, and only differ in the perspectives from which they are seen. Through these Edenic images, Yeats is suggesting that nothing is truly purely “ good” or purely “ evil”; rather, even the most righteous ideals have reverse sides.

Yeats does not use enjambment often, and most lines in this poem are end-stopped; thus, he employs enjambment to inject stress in this poem. This is first seen in lines 5-6 (“ The changing colours of its fruit/Have dowered the stars with merry light”), when Yeats employs enjambment to create tension into a poem that otherwise flows very smoothly and pleasantly at this point. The reader is forced to move onto the next line; this tension is heightened by the word “ dowered” in line 6. While this word can mean simply “ a gift,” it can also be defined as “ property allotted to a widow after her husband’s death,” adding an undercurrent of sadness to a charming image that suggests vitality. This use of opposites creates tension in the poem early on. Later on, in the second stanza, Yeats uses enjambment again to avoid overwhelming the reader. Since the second stanza uses much more tense, negative language, enjambment serves to break up lines to avoid burdening a single line with too many undesirable words. For example, in lines 25-26 (“ For there a fatal image grows/That the stormy night receives”) the enjambment is used to prevent the language from overwhelming the reader.

If the words "fatal" and "stormy" were on the same line, the poem might lapse into melodrama. Thus, enjambment serves the opposite purpose here; instead of injecting more tension into the poem, as it does in the first stanza, it alleviates tension. Since Yeats uses enjambment sparingly throughout, the line structures are similar to each other, connecting the stanzas together. However, by using enjambment for contrasting purposes, he depicts the need for duality between opposites: without any tension, the pleasant first stanza would be too vapid, and without relief, the gloomy second stanza would be too cynical.

Yeats pays attention to the sound of the last word of each line not only to maintain a matching end rhyme, but also to emphasize certain phonosemantics throughout this entire poem in order to connect the stanzas together and offset the divide of the moods between the two. By using a rhyme scheme that matches every other line—for example, "heart" in line 1 rhymes with "start" in line 3, and "there" in line 2 rhymes with "bear" in line 4—Yeats moves the poem along at a brisk pace. In addition, he creates balance not only between the two stanzas, but between the lines in each stanza as well. This tactic recalls the idea of living a balanced life by reconciling opposites. Furthermore, throughout the first stanza, Yeats ends lines with hard "t" sounds; in contrast, he ends many lines in the second stanza with a soft "s" sound. For example, the last rhyme of the first stanza between "dart" and "heart" is phonetically much harsher than the last rhyme of the second stanza between "alas" and "glass." Even though the first stanza is more pleasant semantically, it ends on harsher tones. The second stanza is more unpleasant, but it ends on softer tones. This

technique is similar to Yeats's use of enjambment in that it both injects and relieves tension in the first and second stanza, respectively, and prevents the poem from overwhelming readers. It creates balance, reflecting the idea that seemingly contradictory notions may be intricately linked.

In "The Two Trees," Yeats creates the concept of reconciliation not only with imagery and biblical allusion, but also with structure and sound. He weaves together the lines structurally and phonetically the same way the Kabbalistic Tree is entwined. Through these techniques, he urges readers to find balance in life instead of dividing the world into two.