

# Literary traditions in yeats' work



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When writers use quotations, allusions, or traditions, they are referring to a piece of work or an event that has occurred prior to the moment of their writing. They use the past to help shape the work that they are crafting in the present. T. S. Eliot, in his landmark essay “ Tradition and the Individual Talent”, makes the point that “ the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” In reflecting on the present by using different traditions and quotations, the writer, perhaps inadvertently, also reflects upon and reshapes the past. Eliot insists that the poet must have a full knowledge of literature dating back to Homer, and that he must use this knowledge when producing a new piece of work. This usage of past works is evident in the writings of W. B. Yeats, who throughout his career made references to the past in order to make sense of the post-war world. In “ Leda and the Swan”, Yeats tells the tale of the fall of Troy. This tale takes the form of a sonnet, but feels rather forced at times. In this way, the form reflects the subject, as sonnets are traditionally about love, not rape. The title too is misleading, in that it sounds like a fairy-tale, but actually describes an event in which Leda is raped by the god Zeus in the form of a swan. As a result, Leda bears Clytemnestra, who will become the wife of Agamemnon, and Helen, who is the instigator of the Trojan War. Zeus is described in his “ feathered glory”, thus encapsulating the dual image of a bird and a god. Leda, with her “ helpless breast”, is the victim of this crime. Interestingly, here it is possible to see the past being altered by the present: Zeus is portrayed as a rapist (an evildoer according to our modern values), but in the past his actions were those of a glorious, all-powerful god. Yeats refers to him as “ the brute blood of the air” who has quite clearly taken advantage of a “ staggering girl”, thus emphasizing further the extent of his

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crime. The swan is traditionally a bird of grace and beauty, and the color white often connotes innocence and purity, but these images are subverted in the poem. Furthermore, the fact that copulation occurs between two different species, human and bird, is a perversion of the natural order. For the Greeks, however, this union had a positive result, marking the beginning of one of the most superior civilizations of the ancient world. This exact moment when this great era begins appears to be during Zeus' climax: " a shudder in the loins". The shudder is obviously an orgasm, but also speaks to the historical events to come. The poem causes the reader, as well, to shudder in awareness of the impact of this moment. " I imagine the annunciation that founded Greece as made to Leda...and that from one of her eggs came Love and from the other War." It is interesting to examine Leda's experience with Zeus in comparison to Mary's encounter with the Lord. Both incidents can be seen as " annunciations" marking the inception of two different societies. In the Roman Catholic tradition, at least, the annunciation is a feast day on which Catholics are obliged to go to church. The case of Leda, however, is less of an annunciation; it is violation of a woman that ultimately results in a war. In the Bible, it says that God asked Mary for her permission to bear His child, and she consented. Yeats viewed history as occurring in cycles of two thousand years; " Leda and the Swan" thus retells the birth of Greek civilization, while " The Second Coming" foretells the death of Christianity (which itself was the end of Greek civilisation). This is in direct opposition to the Victorian conception of a progressive society in which history is viewed as linear. George Orwell himself saw Yeats' analysis as fascist: "...the theory that civilization moves in recurring cycles is one way out for people who hate the concept of human

equality...It does not matter if the lower orders are getting above themselves, for, after all, we shall soon be returning to as age of tyranny." "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" gives the image that whatever is turning will fall out soon, that is, the present civilisation will collapse on itself. Stan Smith remarks on this symbiotic relationship in his work on Yeats: "Things fall apart because the centre cannot hold; the centre cannot hold because things fall apart." Yeats articulated his ideas of history using the traditional symbol of a wheel: "One must bear in mind that the Christian era, like the two thousand years, let us say, that went before it, is an entire wheel." This idea of the wheel links into the notion of Fortune, which is often portrayed as a turning wheel. This is rather apt considering Yeats' idea of rotations between barbarism and civilisation. Another indication of this cyclical view of time is in the line "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last." The word "round" clearly indicates something that is circular, and therefore cyclical, but "come round at last" implies that the event was an inevitable part of the cycle of history. The poem was written in 1919, during which time Yeats had become fearful of a Russian socialist revolution in post-war Europe. He felt that this revolution would bring chaos to the civilised world: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." He makes scatological claims: "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand." The repetition of "is at hand" links "the Second Coming" and "revelation", underscoring his reference to the Book of Revelations. Yeats is expounding upon the tradition of Revelations: the recording of a prophetic vision of the Armageddon. Whereas in the Bible the Second Coming is when Christ will return to earth to defeat Satan, in Yeats' poem this view is subverted, and the emphasis is on the Antichrist, the "

rough beast.” In the Bible, there is a sense of certainty that the victory belongs to God, but Yeats’ poem ends with a question. If the beast is in charge, civilisation will be replaced by barbarism, and the wheel will have made another rotation. Yeats’ work is infused with a definite sense of egotism; it appears he saw himself as a prophet, if not as a messiah figure. In “ The Second Coming” he says how “...a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi / Troubles my sight.” He saw this Spiritus Mundi as the universal unconscious into which he was privileged to look. The use of the personal pronouns “ my” and “ I” (in “ but now I know”) show how he viewed himself as a seer, elevated above the common man. This harks back to the Romantic idea of the poet as a prophetic figure, but instead of seeing nature Yeats is using the past to convey ideas about the present shape of the world. Yeats’ sense of self-importance can also be seen in one of his more patriotic poems, “ September 1913”, in which he calls for a return to Ireland’s heroic past. This he refers to as “ Romantic Ireland” – which is, of course, a utopian ideal, as there was much violence in “ Romantic Ireland”. In this way he is using past traditions to reflect on the present, but these images of the past are reshaped and idealised in his mind. Yeats is critical of a society that is moving towards capitalism, trying to make money whenever possible. The line “ But fumble in a greasy till” brings to mind the image of a slimy businessman with dirty hands who is more concerned with making an extra halfpence than fighting for Irish freedom. He says that if this continues it will be the death of Ireland’s greatness; all that will be left will be skeletons of what used to be. The nurturing source, “ the marrow”, will have been sucked out by capitalism. Past heroic figures of Irish nationalism such as Fitzgerald and Tone have become characters in a “ childish play”. This description

almost mythologizes them; they have no place in the reality of modernist Ireland except in play-acting. They do, however, permeate the poem in the refrain “ Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave.” This is repeated three times, and when combined with the adverb “ yet” in the last stanza gives the impression that they are not completely gone. At the same time, however, they are not much more than an echo of the past. In the third stanza, Yeats despairs about the present mood in Ireland: “ Was it for this... / that all that blood was shed” This is one of Yeats’ earlier poems, written at a time when he was still greatly influenced by Romanticism. Just as Romantics sought a return to nature, Yeats appears to have desired a return to the Romantic past. Unlike other Modernists, Yeats appears to have believed in the possibility of transcendence to a unified spiritual realm. This place, for Yeats, is the ancient civilisation of Byzantium. It is an escape from the chaos and crisis of the modern world not unlike Innisfree, although in the Byzantium poems he goes further, and escapes a time, not just a place. Byzantium is the time and place where the mind is in harmony with its world. These allusions to the ancient world show that Yeats’ mind is not in harmony with the modern world. He regards Byzantium as a great people and culture, but is only able to do this because it is unlike what he is experiencing at present. The people of Byzantium would have faced trials and tribulations just as the people of Ireland faced them in September 1913, or during Easter in 1916. Yeats’ penchant for this ancient society alters how it is viewed by his readers, thus rendering the past even more nostalgic. For Yeats, symbols are a way of reflecting on the present, but they can also be seen as a distraction from it. He has to invent systems of thought and fantasize about other worlds in order to cope with the modern world as he sees it. “ For the

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Modernists...the point of using myth was to be compensate for the dissatisfying fragmentation of the modern world: to create a controlling narrative that could be mapped onto, and make sense of the rapid social changes of modernity." Fragmentariness was the general sentiment of the Modern period, and this was reflected in the works produced. Byzantium was a place where Yeats felt these fragments could be unified and made sense of, but it often seems as though this too is just another fragment. The past can be modified to comfort or to give reassurance, in contrast to the future, which is still unknown. This is most evident at the end of "The Second Coming", when the future is questioned. In the Modernist world, reassurance that crises could be resolved and that chaos would cease was needed, hence allusions to a somewhat fantastic past helped writers reflect on and deal with the present.

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