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Self and Soul in W. B. Yeats' poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

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Abstract

W. B. Yeats' poem The Lake Isle of Innisfree is a dialogue between his deviant self and resolute soul for being and becoming while thinking about his maternal cravings and spiritual ecstasy that led him to the beautiful island of Innisfree, a symbol of tension free life in the lap of Nature. The present paper is an attempt to explore a beautiful blend of realism and romantic escapism.

Keywords: Innisfree; deviant self; resolute soul

Among the stalwarts of twentieth century English literature like T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden, William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939) stands in front of them. He was a great poet who brought Irish literature to its pinnacle. His life as a poet was much longer than that of John Keats and P. B. Shelley so as much more complex, passionate and interesting than that of William Wordsworth. Born in Dublin, Ireland, on June 13, 1865, William Butler Yeats was the son of a well-known Irish painter, John Butler Yeats. He spent his childhood in County Sligo, situated in the west of Ireland. He returned to Dublin at the age of fifteen to continue his education and to study painting, but quickly discovered that he should give preference to poetry. Born into the Anglo-Irish landowning class, Yeats became involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland during the Victorian period, which sought to promote the spirit of Ireland's native heritage. He grew up admiring English poets like Spenser, P. B. Shelley and William Blake and was deeply inspired and influenced by Irish nationalism, Irish mythology and folklore. He with the help of Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn tried his best efforts to build Irish Literary Movement. He founded Irish literary societies in London in 1891 and in Dublin in 1892. He collected, translated and published legends and folk tales of Ireland. It was in the year of 1904 that he established the National Irish Theatre which was housed in Abbey Theatre. Appointed as the senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, he is remembered as an important cultural leader, as a



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major playwright, and as one of the very greatest poets in any language of the century. W. B. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 and died on January 28, 1939 at the age of seventy-three.

W. B. Yeats always wrote about the prevailing evils in the society by using various myths, symbols and images. Post war frustration, alienation, isolation, fear, corruption and impending danger of the Second World War cast a gloomy shadow on his poetic career. Moreover, he was deceived by the Hellenic beauty, Maud Gonne. That's why in his many of poems, the Hellenic image of Maud Gonne can be found showing how much he loved her throughout his life. Actually, he was a dreamer who was fascinated by folk songs, ballads and superstitions of Irish peasantry. He tried to bring back the simplicity of the earlier ages and to blend it with the modern ideas of good and evil. He was of the view that true singer was one who told the most ancient story so that it would be applied to the people of his age. Thus, almost all of his poems deal with ancient Ireland and mythology. But it does not mean that he kept his arms' length from the contemporaries as well as the ancients. Thus, Maud Gonne becomes Helen of Troy in *No Second Troy* and Leda in *Leda and Swan*. *The Stolen Child*, *The Tower* and *A Prayer for my Daughter* are the most powerful poems which are full of Irish features. At the same time, he made himself a good literary person and a fine artist. Though he was traditional in his views and having typical Irish mind-set yet, he was a romantic poet. He was influenced by Spenser, John Keats, P. B. Shelley and Pre- Raphaelite brotherhood. He was a modernistic as well as romantic poet whose poems are full of Irish traditions, culture, fairies, ghosts, myths, magic, mystic and mysterious worlds. He transformed and modified old myths as per his insight and created incredible and indelible impression on the readers. For him, Ireland is something extraordinary and special. Being born and brought up in a land where mythical figures were considered to be integral parts of the society, he made Irish mythology and folklore a source of inspiration for his innovative poetry. He became upset whenever he found Irish people indulged in useless material pursuits. He criticized them particularly the younger generation for not having feelings, respect and love to the Irish values, culture, traditions and elder persons. What special about him was that instead of going for strange experiences for his own sake, he wanted exact and steak knowledge. This provides for his poetry a set of symbols with real and universal validity. He hoped to reach directly to the supernatural reality from where the poet' images were derived. W. B. Yeats put them together and expressed them in a united form. That's why his poems represent the whole area of English literature. From the magic world, he transforms his poetry to the real world. His literary career can be divided into four phases:



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- First phase : 1885-1902 Celtic Twilight Period
Second phase : 1903-1913 Transition or Realistic Period
Third phase : 1914-1928 Poetic Maturity
Fourth phase : 1928-1939 Old Man in Tragic Joy

The Lake Isle of Innisfree falls in the category of W. B. Yeats' first phase of poetic career. It is a twelve-line poem composed of three quatrains written by him in 1888 and was first published in the *National Observer* in 1890. It was reprinted in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* in 1892. It exemplifies the style of the Celtic Revival. It is an attempt to create a form of poetry that was Irish in origin rather than one that adhered to the standards set by English poets and critics. It received critical acclaim not only in United Kingdom but also in France.

The Isle of Innisfree is a little island on the lake of Lough Gill near the poet's home County Sligo, Ireland where W. B. Yeats spent his summers as a child. Yeats describes the inspiration for the poem coming from a sudden memory of his childhood while walking down Fleet Street in London in the year of 1888. Before writing this poem, W.B. Yeats remembered how he had still the ambition, formed in Sligo during his teen age, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick, he used to hear a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window and lake water. From the sudden remembrance, he decided to create a lyric of his own rhythmic mood on Innisfree. He started losing rhythm with the materialistic crowd by escaping to create and understand the dialogue between self and soul which is ringing continuously inside him. It initiates a beautiful blend of realism and romantic escapism. Here his physical self is compared to the material world while living in the city of London. His physical self seems to be dissatisfied in the crowded modern town. It is fed up with the din and bustle of life. His soul wants to run away to such a place where he can find peace, solace, relief and satisfaction. His Irish way of life attracts his soul to go to the lap of nature. It is in this battle of head and heart, he decides to go to the secluded, safe, secure and simple place by the name of Innisfree where he can have eternal piece of life. Here, it seems that W. B. Yeats' soul is on the driving seat that leads his material self to the ideal place of Innisfree. That's why in the very opening line of the poem, the poet criticizes his physical self by saying that he, in no time, wants to go to the island of Innisfree. For him, Innisfree is the ideal place whereas London a temporary. He does no longer want to live in the unreal city of London. Now he wants to dive into the lap of nature where he will find joy and peace in the simple life of the island by living all alone. There he wants to build up his own small house with clay and wattles while leaving behind his palatial and magnificent buildings of



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London. His hut will be made of clay and interlaced small branches of a tree for making walls of the hut. There he will develop a small vegetable garden. He wants to taste the natural vegetables and honey while hearing the buzzing sounds of bees on a grassy area in a forest. For him, this will be the ideal time he can experience on the peaceful island of Innisfree. It will come down slowly to him in the form of dew and mist. Here it seems that W.B. Yeats criticizes the modern wastelanders by saying that they have no eye and time to experience such an ecstatic realm of life in the lap of nature. Here we are reminded of William Wordsworth who criticizes the modern human beings for having an indifferent attitude towards nature in his sonnet *The World is too much with Us*:

"The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:

Little we see in nature, that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" (395)

Here W. B. Yeats seems to criticize the material approach of the modern people who believe in grand and glorious life. He considers city values and life artificial, material and boring. Because they have missed many beautiful sights and scenes in the island of Innisfree while living in the urban setting. In the island of Innisfree, the soul of the poet will experience natural, simple and satisfied life. He would like to welcome the sun in every morning. He wants to hear the musical chirping of cricket. He wants to observe the purple light of the sun. In the evening time, he wants to see the beautiful linnets creating music while returning to their nests. He wants to spy the glimmer in the faint lights of stars shining at night. He wants to feel soft and gentle sounds produced by the blowing of wind on the sea shore. This is how W.B. Yeats was being attracted by these beautiful scenes of Nature. This fills his mood elated. We are reminded of the same freshness and thrilling atmosphere created by William Wordsworth in his poem *Lines Written in Early Spring*:

"The birds around me hopped and played,

Their thoughts I cannot measure-

But the least motion which they made,

It seemed a thrill of pleasure." (22)

Now it is hundred percent sure that W. B. Yeats will no longer remain in the crowd and will find shelter in the simple living on the island. There he wants to hear the soft and sweet sound of lake water on the edge of the sea. It may be in harmony with the peaceful and joyful atmosphere of the place. The poet wants to keep these memories in his mind for the rest of his life. W. B. Yeats



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criticized the people of London Street for having traffic crowd full of noisy atmosphere and appreciated the gentle sound and vibrant images of nature in the island of Innisfree. Here lies the basic difference between his self and soul. His conscious self belongs to material life of London whereas soul, sub-conscience refers to the mystic and romantic island of Innisfree. His soul is so much craved for aesthetic and spiritual solitude that it provokes the conscious self to think, learn and understand the mystic and mysterious ways of Nature that is still uninhabited by the modern wastelanders. Thus, the soul, the dominant factor in W. B. Yeats, creates such an atmosphere where the self of the poet demands to have experience of being and becoming. Though the poet is living in London yet half of the self is following what his soul reacts. This half is so strong that it the other half self to delve into the soul by becoming One. This New Being is not a normal being. There is sea change between New Being and older one. This New Being demands calm, peace, tranquility and contentment which is possible for him only in the Island of Innisfree. Thus, Innisfree becomes Ideal. Here, it seems that the poet wants to leave behind the grand and glorious as well as artificial and material London life where rat race and cut throat competition are going on. All the time, they are running after useless material pursuits of life. Here William Wordsworth in his sonnet *The World is too much with Us* has under the powerful influence of soul criticized his immature self to oust the modern materialistic world and for having relaxed and satisfied life in the lap of Nature:

"Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight at Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn." (395)

Same feelings of the soul have also been expressed by W. B. Yeats in his one of the best poems *Sailing to Byzantium* where the old man reveals:

"O sages standing in God's holy fire



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As in the gold mosaic of a wall, come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,

And be the singing masters of my soul.

Consume my heart away; sick with desire

And fasten to a dying animal

It knows not what it is; and gather me

Into the artifice of eternity.” (57)

Thus, W. B. Yeats like John Keats by escaping from the harsh realities of the modern wastelanders to the realm of solitude and satisfaction. This proves possible only by his strong will power and determined soul that led his deviant self to follow the right path and perfection. That's why his self becomes so much determined that starts following what his soul demands. Now it is sure that his soul is on the decisive mode like that of Robert Frost in his poem Road not Taken:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.” (58)

Though it may a difficult time to many to go outside from the easy life style to tough one at material level yet it was very easy at that stage for W.B. Yeats to select the island of Innisfree where he will make a perfect balance between his self and soul. Perhaps, he was much influenced by what H. W. Longfellow revealed in his beloved poem *A Psalm of Life*:

“Tell me not, in mournful numbers,

Life is but an empty dream!-

For the soul is dead that slumbers,

And thing are not what they seem.” (23)

That's why W. B. Yeats used by the end of the poem some phrases like ‘night and day’, ‘low sounds’ and ‘deep heart's core’ to experience ecstasy of a complete human being on The Lake Isle of Innisfree. Thus, we can say that W. B. Yeats was passing through the journey from darkness to light; ignorance to knowledge; materialism to spiritualism; glamour to solitude, from Maud Gonne to Georgie and from deviant self to resolute soul.



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