



Short Review Paper

The theme of violence in Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract

The modern age in literature was grounded in achievements that are amazing in their potential for both emancipation and destruction. The literature of the 20th century focuses on human freedom. William Butler Yeats, the Nobel laureate has regret for post-war modern world which is now in a disorder. He is a prominent poet in modern time for his sense of moral wholeness of humanity and history. Yeats uses distinct, concrete imagery to symbolize complex ideas about the modern world. The concept of Violence is understood as, 'Great destructive force or energy'. We find the theme of violence in modern poets like, W. B. Yeats, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blundell, etc... They were influenced by World Wars and some other literary movements to write such poems with the theme of Violence. The focus of this paper is to analyse Violence in Yeats's Poetry with a special reference to two poems: "Leda and the Swan" and "The Second Coming". i. Leda and the Swan: In this poem, the bird is fearsome and destructive, and it possesses a divine power that violates Leda. ii. The Second Coming: "THE GREAT BEAST" - a horrific, violent animal, it represents evil and darkness. In "The Second Coming," the great beast emerges from the Spiritus Mundi. Yeats makes an abstract fear become tangible and real.

Keywords: Violence, Imagery, Disorder, Modern, War.

Introduction

The modern age in literature was grounded in achievements that are amazing in their potential for both emancipation and destruction¹. The 'modern' as a literary period is heralded in much of the writings of the last decades of the 19th century. Many writers do experiments with the form, language and style in the works of the early 20th century¹. The literature of the 20th century focuses on human freedom².

Modern Poetry

Modern poetry in England was influenced by French symbolism, the American imagists and the other several writings.

The poets are concerned with the fast disappearing values of 'old England' in the age of modernization and war². The 1920s and 1930s are often described as the period of 'high modernism'².

Poets with the trauma of the First World War engaged with the experience of the trenches, wounds and death³. Thus, in this period the war poetry was also written by the poets³.

Features of Modern Poetry: i. Use of allusion and myth, often from non-western traditions¹. ii. Use of rich symbolism¹. iii. Influences of various movements⁴. iv. Often questioned the need for war. v. A universal humanism⁵. vi. Injury – mental and physical – is a central theme⁵.

W.B. Yeats as a Modern Poet

The Nobel laureate, William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet occupies a different position between a 20th century Romanticism and Modernism⁶. He is surely Ireland's modern poet. He was particularly influenced by the French symbolists. He was adapted from celtic mythology and various mystic traditions⁶. He was also a deeply political poet. His engagement with Ireland's struggles with England produced some exceptionally fine poems. He was especially unhappy that his beloved Maud Gonne preferred to take the line of the revolutionaries. Later poems like 'Meditations in Times of Civil War' are Yeats' responses to the traumatic events of his time. Many of these poems deal with Yeats' anguish that he was not an active participant in the events of the Irish rebellions. We can see the influence of Freudian Theory in modern writings that the mind has many layers, one of which is the unconscious⁵. But Yeats was exploring his own fragmented personality where the mind is not just male or female. His poems often expressed anxiety about the body, mortality and death.

The Theme of Violence

The concept of Violence is understood as, 'Great destructive force or energy'. We find the theme of violence in Yeats' poetry. He was influenced by World Wars and some other literary movements to write such poems with the theme of Violence. The focus of this paper is to analyse Violence in Yeats's Poetry with a special reference to two poems: 'Leda and the Swan' and 'The Second Coming'.

Leda and the Swan

Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan' is a picturesque and action oriented poem. It is a sonnet with traditional 14 lines. In the first line of the poem;

"A SUD/DEN blow/: the great/ wings beat/ing still"

We can see that first syllable of each foot is soft when the second syllable is stressed. It is clear that Yeats has used Iambic Pentameter in the poem. As we know the Italian sonnet has two divisions of octave and sestet, this poem also has two same divisions of octave and sestet. Actually in a sonnet, the two divisions represent the divisions of thoughts or it might pose a problem in octave and a solution in the sestet. There is volta in the sonnet where the octave moves into the sestet.

'Leda and the Swan' is the structure of Italian sonnet. Yeats has done some experiments in the sonnet. In the sestet, It seems like seven lines but actually he was tried to fracture the third line. The sonnet opens violently with the use of a colon which is Ceasurae. Yeats creates an oxymoron between the form and content. There is a presence of a speaker in the poem, He tells a story from Greek mythology in a different way. It is the story of a violent attack by the God Zeus to a beautiful girl, Leda. As God can take any form, here Zeus had taken the form of a swan. 'A SUDDEN blow' is spelt by Leda, who is perhaps closed to some waterbody. The great wings of the swan beat above Leda. Her thighs are caressed by the dark webs. The nape of the girl is caught in the bird's bill.

Myth in the poem: Yeats uses Greek myth in the poem. Leda, in Greek legend, usually believed to be the daughter of Thestius, who was the king of Aetolia. She married with the king of Lacedaemon named Tyndareus. She was the mother by Tyndareus of twins: Clytemnestra and Castor. Castor was one of the heavenly twins and Clytemnestra married with Agememnon. She was also believed to have the mother (by Zeus, who had approached and seduced her in the form of swan) of the other twins: Pollux and Helen, both of whom hatched from eggs⁷.

Helen was the wife of the Greek king Menelaus, but eloped with young Prince of Troy, named Paris⁷. Menelaus took help of another, more powerful, Greek king Agamemnon, 'to sack' Troy. After a hard-fought battle the Greeks completely destroyed Troy. However, when Agamemnon returned home, he was murdered by his own wife Clytemnestra, who fall in love with another in the absence of Agamemnon.

All the destructions mentioned in the poem of 'The broken wall' and 'The burning roof and tower' of Troy and the 'death of Agamemnon' are only because of Helen; whose birth is the result of the seduction of Leda by God Zeus in the form of Swan.

Thus, I would like to conclude this poem that the basic difference between Indian Vedic culture and Greek or western

culture is; In that culture the poet wrote about the seduction done by God, which can create God fearing mentality in people of the society. When in Indian Vedic culture or literature never showed such things like this. Vedic culture says that God is with me and within me, which can create God loving mentality in people.

The Second Coming

Background: The First World War ended in November, 1918. Russia had civil war and revolution of 1917³. Not only have that, Yeats' owned country Ireland was facing a civil war⁸. All these wars resulted into blood-shed, disorder and anarchy made Yeats think about the end of Christ's period⁸. Christ's period started some 2000 years before. According to Yeats, when one historical period (Christ period) ends, there is violence and disorder.

The second coming means there will be a new era having opposite features of Christianity. The poet imagines this new era. The title of the poem is suggestive of a new form of God. The world war and civil wars indicate the violent future – the rise of mob, tyrannies, the effect of dark forces and evil as observed in the pre-Christian period.

The Poem: The poem is divided into two sections. The first section is octave. It gives up the poet's understanding of the present time. It shows the end of the Christian era and the picture of the present is very terrifying. Poet uses gyre in the poem, which is very symbolic presentation. The opening of the poem carries another symbol of the falcon. Poet, in the beginning, says that the world has lost its unity, coherence and order.

The mere anarchy, disorder seen in the world. When the poet speaks about the drowning of innocence, it is suggestive of an explosion of violence⁹. The closing lines of the section presents the irony of situation. The poet depicts disorder and violence of modern times in a highly symbolic manner⁹.

The second section of the poem has 14 lines, a sonnet. As we have observed in the first part things have become very difficult and there is much violence, so one historical period would end and a new era would begin. The second part of the poem presents the VISION of the poet¹⁰. The second part presents a vast image of 'The Second Coming'. This image comes from 'SPIRITUS MUNDI'.

'The shape with lion body and head of a man' of the second coming is more dangerous and violent¹⁰. This shape does not have pity or love in its eyes.

Thus, I would like to conclude this poem with presenting the difference between Vedic Culture and Western Culture. In this poem, poet presents that the second coming will be violent, when Vedic culture believed in AVATAR, but never said that God will take birth and, it will be horrible.

Conclusion

Thus, I would like to conclude that the difference between both the poems of Yeats and the Ancient Indian Vedic literature is that the theme of violence with reference to God affects the society. People's mentality becomes God fearing, when Vedic literature teaches to have the God loving mentality.

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