Chapter 6

Sailing to the Unknown

6.1. Introduction

The prime objective of this chapter is to analyse and evaluate the progression of Yeats's symbolism with special emphasis on The Wild Swans at Coole, Michael Robartes and The Tower volumes. The poems of this phase mark great fluctuation in theme, quality and temperament. The chapter also examines the important factors that sustained Yeats's interest in spirituality. It also provides a schematic analysis of the major themes and symbols that unveil Yeats's Christian orientation.

6.2. The Lament over the Loss of Youth and Passion

The poems of this phase deals with are brilliant confessions of Yeats on his fast waning physical strength and stamina. The melancholy of "The Wild Swans at Coole" provides a close look at the poet, who grapples with the problems of aging, inexorable death and decay. The lively images in the poem - the trees, woodland paths, water-mirroring sky, the swans, the brimming lake - generate in him memories of his bygone past, vanishing vigour, the exhaustion of his imaginative faculty and the fast deterioration of his youthful charm and agility. The
image of the beautiful swans stands in sharp contrast to the lost youth and dwindling capacities of the speaker of the poem:

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time since on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread. ¹

The swans, the manifestation of harmony, youth, vitality, passion, and agelessness, evoke his lost potentials. The poem “Men Improve with Years” also records the strong desire to retain the burning intensity of youth:

When I had my burning youth!
But I grow old among dreams,
A weather-born marble triton
Among the streams. ²

In “The Living Beauty” the poet makes an open confession of his failure in satisfying the biological needs of his partner. He acknowledges the grim reality that only young men are entitled to enjoy beautiful women: “[...]O heart, we are old; / The living beauty is for younger men, / We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.”³ Similarly

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“Sailing to Byzantium” records the terrible flux of the poet's ebbing life:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.⁴

Thus we see that the poems extending from the “Wild Swans” to “The Tower” stand apart from the earlier ones. Yeats’s flagging interest in life and the waning of his vigour and creative talent are vital factors that precipitated in his mind a strong drive to sail to the dim and uncharted world of spirituality.

6.3. Georgie Hyde Lees and Automatic Writing

The marriage of Yeats with Georgie Hyde Lees made a lasting impact in the life and career of Yeats. His young life partner, by means of her kindness, tenderness, devotion and wisdom rescued Yeats from the tangled complexities of Irish politics and the disillusionment with Maud. Georgie indeed enriched and disciplined his life and the character Emer, in “The Only Jealousy of Emer” is more or less a true reflection of his devoted and caring new partner.
It is no exaggeration to say that Georgie moulded the visionary in Yeats. The affection and care she showered on her husband gave a new order to his turbulent mind, which could be discerned in the poems as well. Yeats's renewed interest in the occult and philosophical pursuits could be the result of the new insight he gained from Georgie. She initiated Yeats into automatic writing and inculcated more interest in spiritualism and religion.

Yeats's fellowship with his wife revived his entire personality and it finds eloquent expression in the disciplined poems composed during this period. "An Image from a Past Life" tells us of ideal love and marriage partnership. "On Woman" also records the happy committed life with his new partner:

May God be praised for woman
That gives us all her mind,
A man may find in no man
A friendship of her kind
That covers all he has brought.

Yeats becomes convinced of the earth-shaking power of love and sex. The pictures of ideal love as portrayed in poems "Solomon to Sheba", "Solomon and the Witch" and "Under the Round Tower" spring deep from the happy mind of Yeats rejuvenated by his wife.
Of golden king and silver lady
Bellowing up and bellowing round,
Till toes mastered a sweet measure,
Mouth mastered a sweet sound,
[............................]
That golden king and that wild lady
Sang till the stars began to fade
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together.6

Georgie, the strength and support of Yeats, initiated him to automatic writing that liberated him from depression. The supernatural instructors who spoke through her and gave her metaphors revived and nourished Yeats's interest in occult philosophy. This renewed interest culminated in many a philosophical poem of the later stage. We discern the operation of his mystical and esoteric pursuits in their full intensity in “Ego Dominus Iuus”, “The Phases of the Moon” and “All Soul's Night”. This new interest in the enigma of life is clearly mirrored in the dialogue of Michael Robartes and Aherne on the nature of soul and body:

All thought become an image and the soul
Becomes a body that body and soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
Too lovely for the traffic of the world;
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world.7

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The lines bring to light the philosopher in Yeats who delves deep into the mysterious recesses of soul and life beyond. Thus we see that Georgie, a bosom friend and the muse of Yeats's imagination, opens up a mysterious world for the poet.

6.4. Departure of Friends and the Brutalities of Civil War

Yeats's political comrades, Parnell, Swift, Lionel Johnson and Roger Casement haunted his memories and the demise of his bosom friends cast a pall of gloom in his life. The tragedy that befell his friends sparked a new insight. A preoccupation with the complexities of life, death and life beyond, is seen in the poems of this phase. “Shepherd and Goatherd”, a pastoral elegy, is a classic instance that marks his evolution as a mystic and spiritualist. The poem is set in a pastoral land and we hear the monologue of a soul passing beyond the mortal world into heavenly bliss. Robert Gregory is portrayed as a spirit that moves into oblivion losing the human identity:

Like the specked bird that steers
Thousands of leagues over sea,
And runs on a while half - flies
On his yellow legs through our meadows,
He stayed for a while and we
Had scarcely accustomed our ears
The images of the specked bird, and shadows delineate the bodiless state of the soul on its way to the untravelled world of the dead. The poem offers a clear indication of Yeats's shift to spiritual themes.

The poem "Broken Dreams" is another instance to substantiate Yeats's preoccupation with spiritual issues. In 'Sailing to Byzantium' Yeats the visionary and sage voices his strong desire to drift into the spiritual realm of the saints, immune from decay and death. It is a brilliant manifesto of Yeats's undaunted faith in the spirit and Eternity. He contrasts the temporal world of sensual music to the holy city of Byzantium, the world of art, spirit and eternity. We get the image of man's soul its journey towards the far heavenly abode of God and the blessed souls. Thus we see that the demise of Yeats's political comrades made him think more about the enigma and complexities of life and life beyond.

The Irish Civil war and the Easter Rebellion supplied innumerable themes and characters to Yeats. They changed and transfigured his political outlook. The poetic compositions during this phase are saturated with his contempt and disgust for the degenerated
Irish political scenario. The poem “The People” mirrors Yeats’s contempt and disgust for public life:

For all that I have done at my own change,
The daily spite of this unmannerly town,
Where who has served most is most defamed
The reputation of his lifetime lost
Between the 'night and morning'.

The lines reflect the spite and bitterness Yeats experienced from the barbarous Irish during his tenure as senator and public man. The poet expresses his downright contempt for fake politicians and ‘pilferers of the public fund’ in “On Being Asked for a War Poem”. The erosion in political ideals and values and the violence and bloodshed of the Irish rebellion made the poet gloomy and brought about a sudden transition in his outlook. In “Easter 1916” Yeats broods over the irreparable loss of the bygone political heritage of Ireland and the agonizing death of her promising leaders. The martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their motherland attain heroic stature:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The image of the stone placed in the midst of the flowing stream represents the steadfast loyalty of Yeats for his motherland.

Yeats successfully delineates the horror and harshness of Irish politics in a matter of fact and pungent style in “The Road at my Door”. He narrates how the base politics of Ireland destroyed the noble dreams of art. Again “The Stare’s Nest at my Window” offers a true depiction of the Irish mind stricken by the brutalities and horrors of politics and war. In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” Yeats exposes the sad plight of Ireland, the inhuman terrorism and brutality of the military forces:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep, a drunken soldiery
Can live the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free.11

Thus we see that the political scene of Ireland and the civil wars that raged there made Yeats write in a more intense, vigorous and powerful style that is different from his early poems and contributed to his conversion into a mystic and visionary. So in this phase, we discern Yeats's delving deep into the spiritual truths that lie behind the surface of day-to-day life and reality. He thinks about soul, God, Eternity and a wide variety of philosophical concepts and mysterious doctrines beyond the comprehension of the ordinary man. “The Phases of the Moon”, the
complex poem that mirrors Yeats's visionary world, stands supreme in this thematic shift. Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes engage in a discourse on the mysterious wisdom of soul and body:

All thoughts become an image and the soul
Becomes a body, that body and soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world.  

6.5. Major Symbols

The key symbols are examined in their Christian perspective.

6.5.1. Water

Water, the origin of life is regarded as elixir if life and a symbol of vitality. Water that dissolves many things is deemed as an agent of purification. It occupies supreme importance in all the religious ceremonies as the prime origin of all forms of life. The Christian religion confers great value upon water; it is used in the baptismal ceremony and regarded as the seat of the Holy Spirit. It is an agent sanctifying the body and curing the soul. Water symbolizes purity and regeneration; immersion in water is equivalent to dissolution and degeneration. It also represents a reentry into a new life.
Yeats also makes use of many symbols from the aquatic realm. In the early poems water builds up the background of the oasis islands. In “The Indian upon God” water is used as the medium of reflection. The images of the child and the sea in “To a Child Dancing in the Wind” bring the innocence and purity of a child's world: "Dance there upon the shore, / What need have you to care / For wind or water's roar?" The roaring water is also an apt symbol that stands for the violence and tumult of life. The water symbol suggests abundance and vitality in “The Wild Swans at Coole”. The mounting swans drifting on the still water become the symbol of immortality. The ever-flowing pool becomes an emblem of immortality that surpasses the racks and ruins of time:

Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I wake some day
To find they have flown away? 

In “The Collar-Bone of a Hare” water represents the ideal Eden or Paradise, which is later conjured up in “Byzantium”. The images of the 'untroubled waters' homely trees and the lawn provide a close image of the Christian Paradise. The water image in “Colonus Praise” stands for fullness and exuberant beauty. In “Broken Dreams”, the brimming lake purges the flaws of Maud and makes her endearing. The symbol of sea
in “A Prayer on going into my House” gains in mystical overtone. The seabed becomes the place where evil is destroyed. The lines also bring close association of the sad plight that befell the tyrants of King Pharaoh, who chased the Israelites across the Red Sea and the ‘sea of glass’ in Revelation that represents the transparency and destruction of all evils. Similarly the blood-dimmed tide in “The Second Coming” is used as a symbol of total annihilation. It also conjures up the end of the world in deluge in “Byzantium” the sea becomes a vast background of timelessness and the medium through which souls are carried to the predestined dancing floor as described in the Books of Genesis and Revelation. In “Coole and Ballylee” water is equated with the generated soul and it assumes spiritual overtones. Thus Yeats uses water as an agent of purification and cleansing. It is used as the abode of the blessed souls. In the later poems he assigns the same spiritual dimension to water as in the Holy Scriptures.

6.5.2. The Tower

Tower is a symbol of power and a sign denoting height soaring above the common level. It also signifies ascent and spiritual elevation. Tower is a link between heaven and earth. As a fortified structure, cut off from the world it is regarded as a symbol of philosophical meditation. In representations of Christian art a tower is often a symbol
of vigilance and it is the eternal goal towards which the ship of life steers on the waves. The windowless, closed space of the tower is often regarded as a sign of virginity. Virgin Mary is called the tower of David in Laurentian litany.

Yeats uses the symbol of the tower to represent the rich heritage of Ireland. The Anglo-Norman tower at Thoor Ballylee he purchased figures in many of his later poems. In “Memory of Major Robert Gregory” the tower becomes the venue where all his deceased friends meet. It gains a spiritualistic dimension as a seat of secret wisdom. In “Ego Dominus Tuus”, the wind beaten tower stands for Yeats’s ideal of fairyland, where one can have dreams and delusions. In “The Phases of the Moon” it becomes the seat of mysterious wisdom and contemplation. The ‘winding stair’ of the tower implies spirituality and asceticism in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”. It is the exit point of the world of eternity and spiritual darkness that liberates the soul from the cycle of birth and death: “I summon to the winding ancient stair; / Set all your mind upon the steep ascent / Upon the broken, crumbling battlement.” The tower becomes the gateway to spiritual world and divinity.

The ‘winding stair’ of the tower becomes the symbol of the hazardous ascent to Heaven, marked by hurdles at every step. In
“Symbols” (*Winding Stair*), the weather-beaten tower is the abode of the saint, the seat of spirituality and ascetic meditation. In “Blood and the Moon” (*Winding Stair*) the symbol of the tower assumes more complexity and stands for the trodden path of the great minds of the bygone tradition. The ‘blood-stained’ stair and the odour of blood give it the implication of violence and bloodshed. It also evokes the haunting memory of Ireland’s murderous past and revolutions. Yeats revives the Christian implications of the tower of Babylon, when he makes it the standing monument of the arrogance, brutality and disorder of the modern generation. It is a reminder of the dangerous consequence of overconfidence. It also represents confusion, arrogance and lack of imagination of the modern man.18

6.5.3. Fire

The meticulous use of the fire symbol in the poems of this phase shows Yeats’s Christian temperament. In “Sailing to Byzantium”, Yeats revives the religious implication of fire as an agent cleansing all impurities. It also symbolizes the spiritual transformation and salvation. Fire also denotes the realization of God by burning up all material things.

O sages standing in God’s holy fire
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.19
Fire used as an emblem of spirituality finds parallels in the Holy Bible. The burning cloud and the fire become the seat of divinity and the guiding light for the Israelites. In *Revelation*, the dazzling glory of Christ is described in terms of fire: “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire.”

6.5.4. The Beast and the Desert

The image of the beast suggests bare animality in man. It represents the base desires and lust in man. The beast image in “Demon and Beast” is a paradigm for the sexual desire in man. The beast reflects the serious flaws in man; the loss of consciousness and sacrifice- that make him worse than animals. It thus projects the barbarous nature behind the mask of man’s culture and civilization. The beast in “The Second Coming” substantiates Yeats’s fundamental belief and interest in Christian themes. The beast foreshadows the advent of a new terror-inspiring ruler as envisaged in the *Revelation*. The slow movement of the beast generates a wide association of meanings. It warns of the second coming of Christ as the mighty Judge. It is the picture of the grim reality, the troubles and tribulations that await human race at the end of the millennium. It is the agent of anarchy and violence and the executioner of the inexorable destiny of man. The
beast has close resemblance to the apocalyptic vision of the terrible
monster described in the Book of Revelation:

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And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise
up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and
upon his heads the name of blasphemy. And the beast
which I was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the
feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and
the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great
authority. 21
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The colossal beast that appears in the desert ‘moving its slow thighs’
and pitiless gaze, is the symbolic representation of violence, aridity,
disintegration and man's distance from God. Thus we find that Yeats
restores some central symbols from the Christian tradition and this
reinforces his allegiance to Christian faith.

6.5.5. The Gyre

The poet uses the image of gyre in the “The Second Coming”,
written in 1919. Related poems of the same period turn up a frequent
use of ‘gyre’. 19 It assumes complex shades in the “Last Poems”. Gyre, a
three dimensional symbol, depicts movements of expansion, inter-
penetration and contraction:

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
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The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold,
Mere anarchy is loose upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The best lack all conviction, while the worst;

The inexorable movement of the widely rotating gyre symbolizes loss of control. It foreshadows the total annihilation of the present civilization, the wide expansion of knowledge, man's distance from God envisaged as the signs of the second coming of Christ. It points to the periodic pattern of life and hence the coming of a new phase of history at the closing of the millennium. It also stands for the clash of opposites and sexual intercourse. The spiral rotation of the gyre represents the never-ending quest of man for the Ultimate. The sweeping motion covers all angles and directions yet remain at the centre in a disciplined manner.

The spirally rotating gyre, exhausts all directions. The different radii of the spirals conceal the fixed centre hidden to the onlookers. It stands for the subtle, concealed faith of Yeats in the Christian religion. As the spiral exhausts all angles the poet too undergoes various changes and shifts, assimilates various philosophies but without moving away from the centre which is the Christian faith. As the centre of the gyre
cannot be seen, this vein of Christian faith in Yeats is not transparent to the outer world that labels him as a non-Christian.

6.6. Christian Overtones

The Christian overtones of the dominant themes and symbols in the poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* and *The Tower* are analyzed here and the thematic analysis reveals the proximity of Yeats’s Christian faith.

"The Collar-Bone of a Hare" is a short meditative poem reflecting the concept of Eden, an ideal place of bliss, substantiating the poet’s belief in Heaven. His vision of Paradise has close resemblance to the Christian Heaven filled with the music of the dead souls. The poet contrasts the serene Eden to the bitter world of unrest and tussles.

The philosophical meditation on the futility of the fleeting temporal world in "Two Songs from a Play" invites comparison with the reflections of Solomon in Ecclesiastes. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" also the fleeting temporal world is delineated: "But is there any comfort to be found? / Man is in love and loves what vanishes, / What is more there to say? [...]"
Yeats's belief in the soul and life beyond is clearly evident in “Shepherd and Goatherd”, an elegy that commemorates the deceased Robert Gregory. He portrays his departed friend's spiritual transcendence; the soul unwinds and returns to the spiritual darkness:

They say that on your barren ridge
You have measured out the road that soul treads
When it has vanished from our natural eyes;
That you have talked with apparitions.²⁴

The lines remind us of the writings of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross who describe the bodiless state of the soul after death. In 'Broken Dreams' also the poet celebrates the spirit's timeless trance and the eternal life in the grave. The speaker in the poem has the strong conviction to see his partner in the 'mysterious brimming lake' without any physical change: "Vague memories, nothing but memories, / But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed."²⁵ The great promise of Eternity and the renewal of life expressed here are no doubt built along the Christian tradition.

The poems “Her Courage” and “The End of Day”, written to commemorate the sudden demise of Mabel Beardsley - the sister of Aubrey Beardsley, Yeats's friend at the Rhymer's Club- offer brilliant clues to Yeats's philosophy of life coloured by his Christian religiosity.
In “The End of Day”, Mabel is portrayed as a young child, who abandons her play on being called home:

Because the end of day
Shows her that someone soon
Will come from the house, and say-
Though play is but half done-
‘Come in and leave the play’

Mabel who embraces death without fear at the great call from Heaven reveals a good deal of Yeats’s belief in the Christian Heaven. “All Souls, Night”, a poetic monument to the memory of Yeats’s deceased friends, throws ample light on the Christian temperament of the poet. The very title itself takes its origin from the Catholic faith. Catholics observe November 2nd as the day of the departed souls. The poem also declares his silent faith in Resurrection and Heaven.

The saint in “The Saint and the Hunchback” looks upon each man as a noble and matchless creation of God. "God tries each man / According to a different plan" The concept of the nobility of creation propounded by the saint echoes Christian perspective. In the Scriptures man is regarded as the roof and crown of God’s creation. The concept of the beast and the Second Coming, the central tenets of the Christian religion, become the core of his subject in “The Second Coming”. The prediction of the second coming of Messiah and the bizarre image of
anti-Christ owe their origin to the Scriptures. The Apocalyptic vision of the terrible monster in the Revelation has close similarity to the beast image in Yeats.\textsuperscript{28} "Two Songs from a Play", the poem in two parts that opens and closes the Resurrection, discloses Yeats's preoccupation with the mystery of the Incarnation and the divinity of Christ.

Christian religion and the Anglo Irish background have influenced Yeats's thoughts and philosophy. The poems of this phase are noted for the poet's fleeting emotions - pride, wonder, pity, forgiveness, hope and resignation - and his reaction to old age. They provide occasional glimpses into his Christian temperament and his affinity to Christian faith.

Works Cited


15 *Exodus*, 14:28-29, Good News Bible.

16 *Revelation*, 16: 4, Good News Bible.


18 *Genesis*, 11: 1-6, Good News Bible.

20, 21 Revelation, 1: 14, 13: 1-2. Good News Bible


23 Ecclesiastes, 1: 2, Good News Bible.


