

Harmonization of Mythology into the Poetry of the Modern Poets: A Study on the Selected Poems of Yeats, Eliot and Auden

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Abstract

This research is an endeavour to explore the poetry of the three prevalent modern poets William Butler Yeats, Thomas Sterns Eliot and Wystan Hugh Auden, through the lenses of their harmonization of mythology. Though they belong to the modern period in English literature, they reference different types of myths as they teach us moral lessons and profound purpose, explain historical events and add creativity to literary pieces. This study searches for the reason why and how the poets incorporate the usage of mythology into their poetry. In this paper, the writer will allude to some of the lines of different poems of the three poets above. Through the reference of these poems, the reader will come to understand with what purpose the poets integrate the representation of mythology into their poems. Specifically, this research will focus on the poetry of the modern poets. These three poet depict their poems with mythology in their own way. They always try to deploy different myths into their poems as these are very meaningful and purposeful to our life still. Our selected three poets more or less experience both the WWI and WWII and the after effects of these two massive war make them to contemplate for the people, the country and the world. They ruminate on the contemporary devastating circumstances of the world. Through exhibiting various mythical allusions into their poetry, they attempt to rekindle peace and complacency all over the world. The researcher captures evidence from textual reference to support her opinion regarding the related issues. This paper attempts to expose the related reasons why and how the modern poets delineate mythology into their poetry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word 'mythology' comes from two words; one is 'mythos', a Greek word that refers to 'a narrative', and another is 'logos', which refers to 'speech or argument'. In classical Greek, "mythos" signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in mythology. It is a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin that were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and explain the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings. Why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, providing a rationale for social customs and observances and

establishing the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths relate to social rituals that set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies [1].

Mythology is the study of myths that have been used since the fifteenth century. Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as “a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces or creatures, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon [11].” Myths exist in every culture, and the characters in myths are usually gods, goddesses, heroes and warriors who are connected to creation and maintenance. In general, a myth is a story that is not true and involves supernatural beings - or at any rate, supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation [5].

The topic of our discussion is how the 20th-century modern poets represent mythological references in their poetry. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) started publishing in the 1880s, and he focused on Irish myths, love, nationalism, politics, history, nature, solitude and so on. His early poetry is romantic, but as time passes, he turns realistic both in theme and treatment. His early poems give romantic revive like love for nature, imagination, escapist nature, dreamy atmosphere. But through time, he becomes conscious about reality, his people, and his country. He is a symbolist poet as his poetry is full of allusive imagery and symbolic pattern. The Swan, the town, and the gyre are the symbols used in his poems. These are employed to reveal his inner visions, which are highly evocative and meaningful.

Thomas Sterns Eliot (1888-1965) is a modern poet as his poems are impregnated with the modern elements of poetry. He experienced both WWI and WWII. These two destructive wars greatly impacted his poetic works. His poetry shows us the disintegrated life of modern people, mental instability, lack of spirituality, loss of faith, loneliness, pessimism, characters having multiple personalities, hollowness, existential crisis, nothingness and so on. Eliot observes the after-effects of WWI, spiritual barrenness in people, frustration, and moral degradation. These have been reflected in Eliot's poetry.

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), an English poet, playwright, and critic, has a major influence on the poetry of the 20th century. His first book, Poems, was published in 1930, and then he migrated from Birmingham to United States when WWII broke out. The demolishing of WWII mostly influences Auden's poetry. The major themes in Auden's poetry are love, reality, modern horrors, sufferings, death, dehumanization of modern life, the indifference of modern people, identity crisis, no sense of guilt etc. In a heavily industrial section of northern

England, Auden was born. His father was a physician with a vast knowledge of mythology and folklore. When he got a scholarship to Oxford University, he joined a group named “Oxford Group”, a group of writers. Auden’s poems are terse and fragmentary. His colloquial language reveals his social, political and psychological concern about his people.

2. The Way of Harmonizing Myths into the Poetry of the Selected Three Poets

2.1. Myths in Yeats’s Poetry:

Ameer, S. A. (2010) explains that W B Yeats used his poetry as a medium to rekindle the Irish people about their heritage and culture in terms of uplifting Irish nationalism. For this purpose, he frequently took references from Irish myth and folklore to enrich his poetry [2]. Mythical use in Yeats’s poetry reflects his aspect, national views and Irish Renaissance. His poetry is abundant with profound philosophic and mythic visions. Through incorporating mythology, he attempts to revive cultural and social consciousness. He wants to return to past glory by alluding to myths in his poetry. From the classical era, using myths was a common technique in poetry, and Yeats was encouraged by William Blake. In most of his poetry, he uses references from classical myths. At the same time, he renovates myths in his way.

Furthermore, he uses Celtic and Gaelic myths to exhibit unexposed rural Ireland and attempts to bring out the peasants, fairy stories and legends. Amos, M. (2016) points out that there is an apparent relationship between mythology and colonization in Yeats’s poetry, where he always tries to make a balance [3]. In his poem “Leda and the Swan”, we see the use of sexual mystery and the oppression of one force over another. To explain this dominance and oppressive condition, he uses versatile imagery and symbols. ‘The Swan’ in this poem is not a general swan that we usually see. It came from Mount Olympus with a mission to be accomplished on earth. It is the Greek god Zeus in the guise of ‘the swan’. Through the symbol of ‘the swan’, Yeats tries to show Leda's instinctual, animalistic behaviour and savagery actions. Leda’s passivity and powerlessness symbolize Ireland’s social and political colonized condition of the contemporary time. In the poem,

“A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,

He holds her helpless breast upon his breast” (Line: 1-4).

In this poem, “Leda and the Swan”, W B Yeats retells the classic Greek myth in which Leda, a human woman, has been shown as helpless and has no power to fight against the swan in

disguise of the Greek god Zeus. First stanza of the poem shows us Zeus's sudden attack on Leda and this incident results in the birth of Helen of Troy who causes the legendary Trojan war in the Greko-Roman history. This also suggests that history is made by powerful forces and keeps its footsteps on human fate.

Moreover, Yeats was very much inspired by the Greek myths as his poems are abundant with references to the mythology of Greece. With the consequence of Zeus and Leda, another story started to create. Helen, the world-famous beautiful woman, was born and caused the destructive Trojan war. Yeats's poem "No Second Troy" implicates this reference in which he tries to find a relationship between his beloved Maud Gonne and Helen. Yeats published "No Second Troy" in 1916 in the collection *Responsibilities and Other Poems*. Yeats was obsessed with her and dedicated numerous of his poems to her. At one point, he was frustrated at Maud Gonne's repeated rejections. He was impressed by her powerful personality and how she influenced the man of Ireland and their struggle for independence. He compares Maud Gonne's beauty with that of Helen. But Gonne's beauty was filled with bravery and patriotism. In the last two lines, Yeats throws two rhetorical questions,

"Why, what could she have done, being what she is?

Was there another Troy for her to burn" (Line: 11-12)?

Here the poet tries to make a conspicuous comparison between Helen of Troy and Maud Gonne. But Ireland was not like Troy; that would be burnt for Gonne. Rather Maud Gonne's leadership and instruction would encourage the soldiers to fight against their country's independence. Yeats always wants to represent her from the corner of respect and power. He doubts whether the middle-class Irish people would be able to show her proper respect and value. From another perspective, Yeats attempts to reveal the real condition of his broken mind after having rejecting by Maud Gonne again and again. He compares his psychological situation with the burning of Troy. With the reference of this poem, here we find a connection between his personal life with his use of mythology as well.

In his other poem "The Second Coming", we find some mythical allusions. According to him, history revolves around a cyclical order. The title itself suggests that 'this coming' indicates Jesus Christ's coming. The poem was written just after the ending of the WWI war. The devastating after-effects of this massive war were prevailing in the whole world. There was

anarchy and violence everywhere. The world is falling apart, and a new reality is going to arise. Yeats says,

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Line: 1-4),

These lines suggest the changing nature of the world. The world has been compared to a widening gyre revolving and expanding. This makes human beings to be disillusioned and be united from the centre. Pokharel, B. P. (2018) states that Yeats develops his theory regarding the rise and fall of civilization changes every two thousand years. The first stanza indicates the loss of civilization. On the other hand, the second stanza implies the hope of Christ’s second coming or the rise of humankind. He tries to show that the world will experience a new phase using the word ‘second’ [10].

Bagdane, S. T. (2015) describes about Yeats’s another poem “The Stolen Child”, which was written based on a Celtic myth where a fairy tempted the child away to a different world using her spell from the world of sadness and miseries. Here we find a repercussion of Romantic literature as this incident resembles escapism and imagination. “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” is also an example of this period [4].

2.2.Myths in Eliot’s Poetry

The use of myths in Thomas Sterns Eliot’s poetry is deliberate and vivid. Dar, G. A. (2019) points out that Eliot brings novelty in his poem *The Waste Land* by alluding to different myths like Greek, Roman, Medieval, Indian, etc. He uses a mythic method to provide inner meaning and revitalize the present with the past [6]. The whole poem exhibits the spiritual death of contemporary time. The first parts of the poem start with the myth of vegetation based on the cyclical nature of the season,

“April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers” (Line: 1-7).

The poet takes the reference of Tiresias, a seven-year blind son of a shepherd. Here he represents bisexuality as he got the power of prophecy and immortality. Ziater, W. A. (2018) clarifies that the allusion to this Greek tragedy represented by Tiresias is a symbol of foreboding of what will happen as a bad indication [12]. The epigraph of the poem prognosticates its' dramatic progression. It has been extracted from Petronius' Satyricon and indicates Roman connection and its importance in the context of what should be followed. It shows evidence of the fall of civilization after WWI. All five parts of the poem are related to the theme of the futile modern age and the disillusionment of the then generation towards a new dimension. Hasan, M. (2019) states that the poem mirrors the scattered condition of the urbanized soul and the spiritual malady of the modern people after WWI [7]. Eliot expressed his anxiety and tried to make people hopeful and optimistic. Through using mythology, the poet tries to reflect the shattered image of the modern world and at the same time, he endeavours to make them aware and disillusioned from this false world.

Kundu (2018) explains that the myth of 'Fisher King', which he uses indirectly like 'man with three staves', has been injured in his genital organ and became impotent and turns his kingdom into a barren land [9]. He had nothing to do to get rid of this situation except to search for the Holy Grail to regain fertility for his country. It is a sacred and miraculous vessel which was used by Jesus Christ at his supper. And then gave to Joseph of Arimathea who brought it to England in 64 AD. After lots of barriers in questing, Knights found it and rescued the Fisher King. Then the kingdom becomes fertile newly. The Fisher King's wound serves as the central image of the poem. In the poem, the reference of the king appears three times:

“Here is the man with three staves, and here
the Wheel” (Line: 51),

“While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him” (Line: 189-192).

“I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I set my lands in order” (Line: 423-425)?

The wounded king’s barren and desolate kingdom vividly reflects the scenario of the modern world or the after-effects of WWI. Apart from that, the poem concludes with the words of the thunder, “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata.” And the last word, “Shantih”, with which the Hindu scriptures end. Eliot offers a solution to the predicament of the modern man through these three words in the last part, which symbolize “give, sympathize and control.” Only these things can bring peace and order amidst despair and spiritual barrenness. In the last word, ‘Shantih’ from the Indian religion, Eliot seems to exhibit to us the way through which human beings can bring a mood of hopefulness and optimism ultimately.

2.3. Myths in Auden’s Poetry

Representation of mythology in Auden’s poetry is very resplendent. Like the other modern poets, Auden’s poetry reflects the meaninglessness and futile condition of his contemporary times. These poetry mirrors the torn and destabilized culture and tradition ruined by the massive WWII. Auden was deeply perturbed about the sequel of WWII. He tries to exhibit some forethoughts regarding the unpredictable scenario of the world. This condition has been sprung in his poetry through the use of mythology.

In his poem, “The Shield of Achilles”, Auden mingles the classical world with the modern world in which Thetis, the goddess and mother of Achilles, the armour-god Hephaestus and Greek warrior Achilles represent the classical world. On the other side, the newly made shield made by Hephaestus symbolizes a modern world which is filled with violence and bloodshed. The ‘shield’ of Achilles is a canvas on which Auden paints the reality of the modern world. Thetis was seen as depressed as she was worried about her son’s safety. But she found the shield is full of barrenness and emptiness. Her worry symbolizes the worry about the safety of humankind. Her voice stands for the modern conscience, fighting against all the violence and war. Mother Thetis expects the ‘shield’ would be drawn like her desire, but as the opening lines proceed, the reader can observe her disheartened tone of voice. Auden starts the poem,

“She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
.....
An artificial wilderness
And a sky-like lead (Line: 1-8).

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
.....
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign” (Line: 9-14).

These lines imply that post-war Europe is barren where there is no grass or sign of neighbourhood. A million eyes and boots of the soldiers stand unruffled, and they might be waiting for an upcoming fortunate sign in their life, in the world as well. Hasain, M. A. (2013) states that throughout the poem, Hephaestus is seen as silent and pays no attention to making the shield. Perhaps, it implies his pessimism about the future of the world, whether it would be sound or chaotic [8].

Auden’s other poem “Musee Des Beaux Arts, ” is deeply abundant with mythical allusions. Here we find the tragedy of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the fall of Icarus from the sky. The main theme implies that mankind is ignorant to the suffering of others. Throughout the poem, the speaker tries to focus on human suffering, hardships and pains. Here he reflects a contrasting view regarding the plight of those who suffer and those who do not. In the last stanza, the speaker firmly emphasizes on the indifference of human nature. He mentions,

“In Breughel’s *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on” (Line: 16-23).

When Icarus dramatically falls from the sky into the sea, there is crossing a ship, the ploughman was engaged in their daily work. Though they heard the splash and grievous cry, they did not give any significance. The birth of Jesus Christ, his crucifixion and the fall of Icarus utter no sympathy and meaningfulness to the people. Auden expresses his moral point of view regarding sufferings. But people were not least concerned how terrible or momentous the incidents are. Rather they showed their callousness and inhuman attitude to the sufferings of others or to a disaster like the fall of Icarus. In all respects, here is an indication of the indifference of modern people in the guise of a satire.

3. Final Discussion:

Three of our above-discussed poets are unique and versatile in their own writings. One common similarity among them what the researcher searches for is their treatment of mythology in their poetry. Each of them assume that the inclusion of mythical elements into their poetry makes them enriched as well as gives a vision about their own culture and tradition. Sometimes it seems that myths are considered as a moral guide through some stories. Simultaneously these can warn the people about their upcoming future. These elements can also create chance to take lesson from the past. Ameer, S. A. (2010) states that Yeats's writing is an example of the tradition of Ireland and he possesses his own unique style. His poetry implies that these are Irish in subject matter and tone at the same time he attempts to reawaken his people to discover their lost glory and legendary ancient times [2]. With the assistance of vast range of symbols, he includes mythical allusions very vividly.

Eliot's poetry uncovers his power of versatility. His readers or critics find his poetry realistic, mythological, allegorical and symbolic at once. Eliot realizes the aftermaths of the blood-ridden WWI and projects on social instability, disintegrated situation, spiritual barrenness, and existential and identity crisis in his poetry. Zaiter(2018) opines that Eliot uses a new way to connect the past with the present by employing symbols and mythical and allegorical allusions [12]. He wants to educate, warn, and entertain his readers by using myths in his poems.

Like the other two poets, Auden is also a significant poet in modern times. The allusion to myths in his poetry is a pivotal theme. In his poetry, the mythic world symbolizes the spiritual world contrariwise. The modern world symbolizes the physical world. Auden's sense of spirituality is mostly connected with the representation of myths. Mythological personae are the prime character in many of his poems. Those serve as his way of depicting the ruined modern world.

4. Conclusion

Exploring some selected poems of the three modern poets, Yeats, Eliot and Auden, the researcher finds every one of them shows their uniqueness, versatility and popularity as their approach. W B Yeats was always concerned about the value of Irish history and culture, Irish independence, old folklore poems, his vision, escape from history, elements from Romantic literature, and avoiding encountering the hard realities of the contemporary world. With the curtail of mythical allusions, these elements have been meticulously recapitulated in his poetry. Like Yeats, T S Eliot also amalgamates various allusions such as literary, mythical, religious, cultural etc. Incorporating these allusions, he endeavours to mirror the spiritual barrenness, disintegration, cruelty, sexual perversion, existential crisis, violence, and bloodshed of the decaying modern world. His representation of mythology carries a heavy significance and deeper underlying meaning, which achieves vast popularity. As mentioned above, two prominent poets, W H Auden, also possess the power of myth-making art as we analyze his poetry. Mythical characters play a central role in many of his poems. His poetry delineates the modern fractured and futile world and shows his pessimistic tone about the future condition of the world.

Above all discussion, we find W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden are the most representative poets of modern British poetry. They all have employed mythical allusions in their poetry in their own way. This inclusion of myths creates an inner and deeper meaning as well as enriches their poetry as well.

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