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W. B. Yeats: Modernist Fashioning of Tradition in his Poetic and Dramatic Output

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Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.

(Pope II, lines 255 - 256)

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Abstract

The resonant reputation of William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 Jan.1939) lies in his indisputable literary position as a prominent Modernist Irish poet and dramatist. Yet, Yeats formulated in his writings a new innovative literary trend; he mixed both traditional and modernist elements in them. The past and the present are juxtaposed professionally together. The Irish historical heritage, myths, legends, and folklore were inexhaustible fountain for him in order to write his Modernist masterpieces. He achieved many important targets by reviving all these ancient sources. He aimed to unite all the Irish people, strengthening their patriotism and nationalism, to attract the world's attention to the Irish dilemma, and to resist peacefully the British colonization. Other psychological motives directed him towards the mystery and the strangeness of these traditional sources as his occultism, mysticism, and spiritualism. This research paper tries to trace how Yeats presented a modernist fashioning of tradition in his poetic and dramatic writings or how he moulded a traditional essence within a modernist structure. An overview of some of Yeats' famous poetic and dramatic works is provided in a thematic and/or analytic study regarding the limits of the research paper; though some samples are inspected as detailed proved examples.

Key Words: Modernism – Tradition – Poetry – Drama – Output - Themes – Technique – Irish heritage – Mythology – Folklore – Revival – Fashion.

دبليو بي بيتس: الصياغة العصرية للتقاليد في نتاجه الشعري والدرامي الملخص

امتطى وليم بتلر بيتس (28 Jan. 1939 – 13 June 1865) – والمعروف اختصاراً بدبليو بي بيتس – جواد الحداثة بفروسية بالغة و بمهارة فائقة، ليصبح أحد أهم الشعراء والدراميين في العصر الحديث، والذي اتفق النقاد الأدبيون على أنه يمتد ليغطي الفترة ما بين الأعوام الأخيرة من القرن التاسع عشر وحتى تقريبا منتصف القرن العشرين. وقد تميز نتاج بيتس الشعري والدرامي بسمات من الأصالة واصطبغ بصبغة من التقاليد القديمة، حيث غاص بيتس في عمق موطنه وبدافع من وطنيته وحب لبلده إيرلندا، وعاد بحفنة من الأساطير والحكايات الشعبية فجعلها مادة ثرية لنتاجه الشعري والدرامي كما صال وجال في فجر التاريخ بحثاً عن لغته السلتيّة المندثرة، فسطر نوعاً جذاباً من الشعر والدراما تشمخ هامته كالنثريا في سماء الحداثة وتنتشبت أطرافه بجذورهما الضاربة في أعماق التاريخ وترفع يدها نبراساً ينير الطريق لمن يتبعه من الأدباء الأيرلنديين، فكان بيتس كمن أعاد التراث والتقاليد للحياة ثم ألبسهما حلة الحداثة دون أن يشعر القارئ بتنافر أو بصدع بين الأزمان.

وعليه فقد سعت الورقة البحثية لإبراز وإقفاء أثر التقاليد الأدبية في نتاج بيتس الشعري والدرامي الحديث، وكيف أن براعته الأدبية دمجت بين الأصالة والمعاصرة أو بين التقاليد القديمة والملاحح الحديثة. وبالتالي فقد قدمت احياناً نظرة عامة لبعض أعماله الشعرية والدرامية، و احياناً أخرى توقفت عند بعض الأمثلة لتتناولها بالشرح والتعليق والنقد والتحليل، وكل ذلك في إطار نظري من المناقشة والتحليل وتعقب مشوار بيتس الأدبي. كما تاقت الورقة البحثية أيضاً لتحقيق عدة أهداف ثانوية لتكامل الخبر والمعينة مثل: إبراز بعض السمات العامة لأعمال بيتس الشعرية والدرامية، تبيين وتقدير جهوده في إحياء التراث الأيرلندي واللغة السلتيّة القديمة، وكيف أنه لفت أنظار العالم لذلك التراث وبالتالي لقضية أيرلندا ووضعها السياسي والديني والإجتماعي الحرج فقدم بذلك صورة رائعة للمقاومة السلمية ضد الإستعمار البريطاني وضد خناجر القمع والتهميش والإهمال وطمس الهوية المسددة في قلب أيرلندا، كما أنه خلق تناغماً عاماً بين الأجيال واستنساخاً وطنياً لروح الأبطال الأسطوريين، فضرب بذلك مثلاً رائعاً لأتباعه ومريديه للأديب الذي يشكل وعي أمتهم للخيميائي البارع الذي يمزج في بوتقة الشعر والدراما نثر الأصالة والتراث والتقاليد ببريق وتقنيات المعاصرة وليبراليات الحداثة صابغاً الخليط بميتافزيقيته الروحية وتعاويذه السحرية، فينتج نصاً رأسه من الحكمة وجسده من التراث وقلبه من الوهج وروحه من الأدب ولسانه من البلاغة ورداءه من الحداثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحداثة – التقاليد – الشعر – الدراما – الإنتاج – الأفكار – التقنية الفنية (المعالجة) – التراث الأيرلندي – علم الأساطير (الميثولوجيا) - فلكلور - إعادة إحياء- الصياغة.

W. B. Yeats: Modernist Fashioning of Tradition in his Poetic and Dramatic Output

Casting the Victorian literary tradition and the precedent traditions is the essence and the goal of Modernist literature. In its search for finding a new and a different identity, Modernist literature has been clothed with a fresh technical, aesthetic, psychological, philosophical, social, political, and/or economic tinge. Various literary movements, trends and inclinations have appeared under its umbrella; such as: Imagism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Futurism, Structuralism, and others. Obviously, Modernist literature has witnessed two ferocious World Wars, devastating economic depression, global social and humanistic changes, new psychological and philosophical theories, amazing scientific and technological revolutions, and intense fear of an outbreak of a nuclear war; all of them have either overshadowed or remoulded it.

Historically and chronologically, Modernist literature may represent the literary works written from the late years of the nineteenth century till approximately the mid-years of the twentieth century. However, it is hard to pinpoint the exact date of its emergence; as it differs from one country to another. Generally, the main features of the Modernist literature are: (1) Individualism: The outer world is seen as “a challenge to the integrity” of the “characters”; (2) Experimentation: the writers broke down the conventional literary elements and traditions; (3) Absurdity: the global circumstances in the Modern age led the writers to consider the world as “an absurd place”; (4) Symbolism: writers used symbols in an innovative way, leaving “much more to the reader’s imagination than earlier writers”; (5) Formalism: Writers’ view of literature as a “craft” led them to “originality”, poetry included “foreign languages, dense vocabulary and invented words”; (6) Disillusionment, little care for nature, interest in deeper reality, regarding society with irony and satire, caring for the inner self and adopting the technique of the stream of consciousness, writing in free verse, and considering modernism as a decline of civilization are also among the features (Ali 1 - 3). Notably, the pioneers of Modernist English literature are Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, William Faulkner, H. D., W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and others (“Literary Modernism”).

Yet, this new literary surge found much of its aims crystalized in the imperative sentence of Ezra Pound (30 Oct. 1885 – 1 Nov. 1972), “Make It New”, appeared in 1928 and published in his collection of essays, which was entitled with the same sentence, in 1934. As the apparent denotative meaning of this imperative, it called the modernist literary men to write in a “new”, novel, and innovative way. The Modernists “considered” this “injunction” as “a professional, almost a sacred obligation” (Gay 106). They gathered under its umbrella; and it became their slogan. They swept in a revolutionary way in order to break down the literary conventions and the traditional restrictions, to destroy the boundaries between the literary genres, and to create new strategies, techniques, and styles. Consequently,

This slogan compels the writer to create out of the material of art work that is distinctively innovative. The artist must break with the formal and contextual standards of their contemporaries in making works fundamentally individual. These ‘new’ modern works cannot be wholly autonomous, however, as they must consider the aesthetics of *the past* in the context of *the present* moment.

(Bledsoe)

The amalgamation of the “past” and “present” in the above quotation of Eric Bledsoe is surprising. In the core of the Modernists’ revolutionary slogan, the ‘roots’ or “the aesthetics of the past” should be taken into consideration. Additionally, Pound’s above slogan was not new in itself. It was a final product of a process of reviving and modifying a medieval Chinese phrase; “But Pound clearly felt that he had found in this ancient text a model of novelty that was itself ancient and even foundational” (North). Hence, the intended connotative meaning of the motto is in itself a call for “historical recycling” or a “resuscitation of antiquity” (North). This latter quotation is resonant of another modernist, but retrospective, point of view published in 1919 by the prominent Modernist writer Thomas Stearns Eliot [T. S. Eliot (26 Sep. 1888 – 4 Jan. 1965)] in his famous critical essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. In this essay, Eliot presented a new critical concept; that was the “historical sense”; in which, the ‘new’ literary works assimilate and modify the ‘past’ works which in their turn form “tradition”. He wrote that:

Not only the *best*, but the *most individual parts* of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, *his ancestors*, assert their immortality most vigorously.... [*Tradition*] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the *historical sense*, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond...; and the historical sense involves a *perception*, not only of the pastness of the *past*, but of its *presence*; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that *the whole of the literature of Europe* from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of *his own country* has a *simultaneous existence* and composes a *simultaneous order*. This *historical sense*, which is a sense of the *timeless* as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer *traditional*. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. [Italics added to important words]

(36 – 37)

Eliot shows, in the first line of the above quotation, that the Modernists can achieve 'individualism' by following the steps of their ancestors and regarding their writings. Then, he introduces directly, to the Modernist literary men, for whom the word 'tradition' is not liked at that time, a new concept of the 'fusion' of the 'past' with the 'present' in order to produce a "timeless" literature. This formula is what makes the writer "traditional". Consequently, to achieve novelty and innovation, the writer should assimilate and resurrect the "past" and mix it with the "present" surroundings. This distinctive methodology of the Modernist literature was adopted also by William Butler Yeats [W. B. Yeats (13 June 1865 – 28 Jan. 1939)] as one of the prominent Modernist writers. However, there were some factors that made his adoption of this methodology unique.

There are some effective factors that produced Yeats' literary output (especially the poetic and the dramatic) out of tradition and conventions to Modernism, then mixed both of them together. Born as one of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy, his writings sprang from Irish folklore then turned to current events, and from national patriotic feelings to enthusiasm and poignant politics. He was aware of the fact that to be Irish at that time is to

be in a critical threatening oppressing position, so he tried to cling to his roots. By the passing of time, he realized that to be Protestant in a revolutionary Catholic place colonized by Protestants is to be endangered also, so he should to deal with his present surroundings alertly. Additionally, living his childhood period atMerville, Sligo inspired young Yeats, forming his juvenile Romantic muse. Then, living in London formed his urban consciousness. Moreover, the development of his critical talents created a conscious expert in his Modernist literary environment. The period in which his literary activity fired was a transitional period between Victorian literature and Modernism; he didn't stand frozen in the past, but kept swimming with the stream of the present.

When Yeats reached the beach of Modernism, he kept with him some literary conventions and traditions. It is true that he has become one of the key figures of Modernist literature and has been on an equal footing with T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and the other prominent Modernists, but he was mesmerized by tradition. His poetic and dramatic output was consistently updated with the Modernist surroundings; yet it was also pregnant with inherent features of literary conventions and traditions. Consequently,Conor C. O'Brien describes him in his essay, "Passion and Cunning", saying that:"he was a Link with the Past" (208).Thus, his writings retained this distinguished dichotomy with variable degrees along his literary journey; and herein lay their uniqueness.

Hence, the major objective of this research paper is to investigate the use of tradition in William Butler Yeats' modernist poetic and dramatic works; how tradition was modernized professionally in them; and how he was "traditional" as in the denotation of Eliot's critical theory, how he made "It New" as in the connotation of Pound's slogan, and how he was distinctive as an Irish Protestant mystic occult literary man. A brief discussion of the main features of Modernism in Yeats' poetic and dramatic works is juxtaposed, though the main focus of the research paper will be on the traditional elements of them.

Other minor objectives of this research paper are: (1) tracing briefly Yeats' literary journey as one of the prominent figures of the Modernist English literature; (2) presenting a general overview of some of the main characteristics of Yeats' poetic and dramatic works; (3) evaluating Yeats' great efforts in reviving the Celtic cultural heritage and convincing the world to take it into consideration. By this process of reviving, Yeats defied peacefully the

British marginalization and the world's negligence; (4) showing how Yeats assimilated the Irish past and reproduced it in his Modernist writings in order to create new passions and sympathies towards present Ireland; (5) revealing how he created a good sort of communication and solidarity between the Irish generations throughout the ages; (6) pointing how can the word be a tool of peaceful resistance having the same effect of the weapon; and finally (7) demonstrating how the literary men have a principle effect on constituting the consciousness of the people whenever and wherever they are. This research paper tries to achieve these objectives through an overview and a general thematic and analytic study for some of Yeats' poetic and dramatic works, though technical aspects are never ignored. Thus, the research paper attempts to follow the methodology of explaining and discussing; sometimes it slows down and then stops for illustrating, analyzing, and commenting.

In the 'Introduction' of his edition of the poetry anthology, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (1936), W. B. Yeats stated that: "I ... have tried to be modern" (XXXVI). At the same time, "critics link Yeats to European Modernists" (Trotter 24). But, the readers may also be surprised and think that there is a contradiction when they find him writing in the last stanza of his autobiographical poem, "Coole Park And Ballylee, 1931" the following:

We were the last romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poet's name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme ...

45

(Selected Poems 94, lines 41 – 45)

Yeats' above poem, "Coole Park And Ballylee, 1931" was published in his volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1934). It was written as an "elegy for Gregory three months before her death in May 1932" ("Coole Park"). It relates the two writers together in a direct clear way. They had a lifelong friendship. She was his literary patron and encouraged him greatly to write drama. She saw him as "a talented young man who desperately needed her help" (Holdeman 37). With her, Yeats established Abbey Theater. She was also a leading figure in establishing the Irish Literary

Revival Movement. Correspondingly, *Coole* (1931) was the last book published by Lady Gregory. The Coole Park of the poem refers to Gregory's house and estate in Coole Park; while Ballylee is the place of Yeats' house. This house was a Norman tower in county Galway. Yeats bought it and called it with a Gaelic name, 'ThoorBallylee Castle'. So, he lived as if he were surrounded by history and Celtic tradition on a very beloved place, about which he wrote the following lines in the same poem:

A spot whereon the founders lived and died
Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees,
Or gardens rich in memory glorified 35
Marriages, alliances and families,
And every bride's ambition satisfied.

(93, lines 33–37)

The poet expresses that the enchanting natural scenery of Coole Park and Ballylee is related symbolically to the "Romantics". When it is endangered, chaos is predicted. Consequently, it is the end of the "romantics" nowadays; to whom the speaker of the poem, that is Yeats himself, declares that he and Lady Gregory belong: "We were the last romantics" (line 41). Yeats adds that they chose "Traditional sanctity and loveliness" as their writings' main themes. But, these themes became valueless in the modern age: "But all is changed, that high horse riderless," (line 46). According to the date of publication, Yeats confession to be one of the last Romantics came about 8 years before his death. His obligation and connection with the Romantic tradition continued nearly all his life.

Yeats' belonging to the Romantics appeared from the beginning of his literary life. Early in his juvenile poetry, Yeats followed the great Romantic poets (Shelley, Keats, Blake ...etc.) as his leaders and as his main source of inspiration. The place, Sligo, in which he lived his childhood added to this Romantic inspiration. Moreover, Romanticism might be a refuge for Yeats. He rejected and wanted to escape from the materialism and the utilitarianism of the modern world, and from the industrialization imposed by Britain on Ireland. In one of his first poems, "The Island of Statues", published in the *Dublin University Review* in 1885, for example, the effect of P. B. Shelley is apparent clearly. He

himself states that: “the first attempt at serious poetry I made was when I was about seventeen and much under the influence of Shelley” (Interview 220). Yeats also followed the steps of William Blake and the latter had a great effect on Yeats’ works; even Blake’s “use of original and arcane symbols greatly inspired Yeats’ own poetic method” (Hintz 9). Yeats writes in his poem, “An Acre of Grass”, written in 1936 when he was 71 and published in his posthumous book *Last poems* (1939), the following: “Myself must I remake / Till I am Timon and Lear / Or that William Blake” (*Collected Poems* 316, lines 14 - 16). Additionally, Yeats spent three years analyzing and editing Blake’s works for publication. Many critical essays handled the apparent influence of Blake on Yeats as, for example, those collected in *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W. B. Yeats* by Kathleen Raine(1986). In this book, she states: “Blake was not only one of the earliest, but perhaps the most enduring of all the influences which formed Yeats’s imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual life” (82). Generally, by these characteristics, Yeats’ writings were like a bridge between the Romantic tradition and the Modernism.

Romantic dream-like poems of young Yeats were not only inspired by his birth-place and the works of the Romantic ancestors, but also by his strange mysticism and spiritualism. Yeats stated that: “The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write” (Ellman 97). This mysticism led Yeats to join the ‘Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn’ in 1890. It was “a secret society devoted to the study and practice of and paranormal activities” (“W. B. Yeats”). Then, he became a member of The Ghost Club in 1911. He was also fond of the occult, metaphysics, magic and astrology. Moreover, he studied interestingly Hinduism and Theosophy (“W. B. Yeats”). These supernatural interests gave his writings an aura of privacy and spirituality unattainable to many Modernists and enabled him to use special traditional tools (as it will be discussed in the following pages).

From 1889 on, Yeats’ love for Maud Gonne imparted him with a new Romantic Muse whose presence was dominant on his writings; he “had a lifelong obsession with Gonne” (Karim 5). His Romantic feelings towards her were either apparent clearly or latent deeply in many (or nearly all) of his poetic and dramatic writings. As a blame for her rejection of his marriage proposal, he wrote his poem, “When you are Old” (1891), which was

published in his collection *The Rose* (1893). He repeated this proposal many times; and she also refused in every one. Moreover, Gonne, as a nationalist campaigner, was also responsible, to a great extent, for “deepening” Yeats’ political involvement (O’Brien 221). For him, she symbolized the unattainable female beloved and the unattainable free Ireland. Because of her, he became a member of the “Fenian Brotherhood”, which was an ‘Irish Republican Organisation’ (O’Brien 215); and for her he wrote such political and nationalistic works as his one-act play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in 1902, in which she played the title-role (221).

The subject of Yeats’ play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, was the 1798 Irish Rising. Although this event was a past one, the play sends implicitly many present and future messages to the Irish people. The play is also highly symbolic and allegoric. Cathleen, the heroine, is an old but influential woman asking the help of young Irish men in order to set free her house and her “four beautiful green fields” from the “strangers” (*Major Works* 215, lines 140 & 146). Suddenly, she is turned to be a “young girl” having “the walk of a queen” after convincing “Michael Gillane” to sacrifice his soul and go to war for her sake (220, lines 302 – 303). Cathleen symbolizes Ireland and her need for the help of her young men to put an end to the British colonization. Her transformation into a young beautiful queen is a supernatural symbolic element in the play. Remarkably, the play depends on Irish mythology and Christian tradition. The character of Cathleen Ni Houlihan is a mythological Irish figure. The elevated meaning of self-sacrifice, martyrdom and casting the materialistic mundane benefits for the sake of spiritual goals is derived from the Christian tradition and the sacrifices of the Christ. Yeats’ main aim in writing this play as nearly all of his works was to prompt patriotism and nationalistic pride of the Irish people.

Consequently, Yeats’ political involvement turned more and more to be nationalistic and patriotic. His nationalistic affiliation appeared clearly in his close connection with his native land, Ireland. This close connection urged him to revive the Celtic myths, the Gaelic language, and the ancient Irish legends and Folklore. His fascination with the Celtic myths urged him to collect and edit them in one book, *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (1888), whose introduction he wrote himself. He was also, at the beginning of his literary journey, a member in the Pre-Raphaelite group, which encouraged Celtic revival. His book, *The Celtic*

Twilight, (1893) came as a fruit springing out of his Irish identity and self-esteem. He became one of the most important pioneers of the Celtic Revival. In his poem, “To Ireland in the Coming Times” published in his volume, *The Rose* (1893), Yeats stated his national achievement in reviving the Irish identity and tradition, in healing the Irish injuries, and in dealing with the Irish dilemma. He counts his writings as vital as the heroic actions of the Irish revolutionary heroes. He writes the following:

Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong
.....
Made Ireland’s heart begin to beat ...

(*Collected Poems* 45, lines 1 -12)

Yeats considers himself as one of the effective figures on the history of Ireland. He can “sweeten Ireland’s wrong”; and he can revive it, making its “heart begin to beat”. The personification, here, implies that “Yeats is writing of the awaking of an Irish literary tradition” (Al-Husseini 5). The last two lines of the second stanza of the same poem, “To Ireland”, crown his dream-like description of Ireland: “Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon, / A Druid land, a Druid tune!” (46, lines 31 - 32). These two lyrical lines depict the “faeries” of the Irish myths “dancing under the moon”. The moonlight envelops the picture with Romantic passions and fascination. Then, the poet refers to Ireland as “A Druid land, a Druid tune” pointing to its past paganism at the time of these myths. The poem relates Ireland’s past with its present and future neatly.

For Yeats, this Celtic revival was cleverly achieved mainly by the help of his spiritual, mystical, and magical perspectives. All the above discussed factors, including his following of the Romantic tradition, his spirituality and mysticism, his inaccessible love for Maud Gonne, and his revival of the Irish heritage out of his patriotism and nationalism, created in him a special intuition towards tradition; and consequently they had an extreme effect on his poetic and dramatic writings. They also dyed his symbols with special traditional tinge unattainable to any modern writer. As a result, his “ambition to create a new Irish poetry – nationalist but with occult perspectives, Celtic but written in English –

reflected his need to root himself imaginatively in Ireland, despite the fact that he spent much of his early life in London” (Drake 12).

For example, Yeats poem, “The Song of Wandering Aengus” (1897), which is included in his volume *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), is a good example for depending on the Celtic mythology, spirituality, magic, unattainable love and mixing the Irish tradition with Modernism. Yeats stated that: “I certainly thought, when I wrote it, of Ireland, and of the spirits that are in Ireland” (Qtd. in Psoni 38). “Aengus” is the Irish god of love, according to the Irish mythology. He is described as “a young, handsome god that had four birds flying around his head. These birds symbolized kisses and inspired love in all who heard them sing” (Karim 2). The poem depends on the Celtic myth, “the Dream of Oengus”. It tells the myth of Oengus who fell in love with a beautiful girl whom he saw in a dream. On waking up, he became troubled in his mind as he couldn’t find her (Gantz 60). The poem is narrated by “Aengus” in a form of a dramatic monologue. He tells that one day he “went out to the hazel wood” (*Collected Poems* 53, line 1). On fishing in its pole, he caught a fish which suddenly turned into a beautiful girl and called his name; then she disappeared at dawn. He was haunted by her image. He searched for her for many years till he became old, but in vain. Celtic myth “associates hazel (the wood of his fishing pole) with inspiration and divination” (Allen). This choice is suitable for the inspiration and divination related to the original myth of “Aengus”. The poem culminates when Aengus returns his home, he tells the following:

When I had laid it on the floor
 I went to blow the fire a-flame, 10
 But something rustled on the floor,
 And someone called me by my name:
 It had become a glimmering girl
 With apple blossom in her hair
 Who called me by my name and ran 15
 And faded through the brightening air.

(*Collected Poems* 53 - 54, lines 9-16)

May be “Aengus” symbolizes Yeats himself, while the beautiful girl is Maud Gonne. Also, “Aengus” may symbolize the Irish people and the beautiful girl is free Ireland. Thus, Yeats incorporated his current personal experience and/or his patriotic feelings into tradition. Clearly, the poem depends on mythology, magic, and an unattainable romantic love as traditional elements; whereas it stands for current subjects (rejection of Gonne, colonization of Britain to Ireland, and the pain and the dilemma of the Irish people and of Yeats himself). Its melancholy and its sad depressive tone are related to the Romantic tradition. Also, its imagination, easy diction, individualism, subjectivity, personal feelings, the mysterious setting of the wood, the amazing natural scenery, and the wanderer lover/poet are integral characteristics of Romanticism. Moreover, the use of the technical devices of the poem is traditional; such as: the regular iambic tetrameter, the flowing uninterrupted rhythm (as it is a song), the run-on-line technique which relates the recitation and the events of the story, and the regular rhyme scheme (abcbdefe ...that is the second and the fourth lines are rhymed together).

Additionally, other poetic devices add to the traditional evaluation of the poem; for example: metaphor; as for instance: “a fire was in my head” (tenor: fire, vehicle: passion or anger, and the ground of comparison: troublesome and irritability); simile, as in: “moth-like stars”; alliteration as in: (“went”/“wood”/“wand”, “hazel”/“head”/“hooked”, “when”/ “white”/ “were”, “fire”/ “flame”, “me”/ “my”, “glimmering girl”, “her hair”, “hollow”/ “hilly”, and “her hands”); consonance as in: “went”/ “out”, “And”/ “peeled”/ “wand”/ “thread”, “caught”/ “trout”, “had”/ “laid”, “kiss”/ “lips”, and “among”/ “long”. Repetition, assonance and anaphora, scattered here and there along the poem, orchestrate with the other poetic devices and impart an enchanted musical effect to the poem.

The poem, “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, consists of three tightly related stanzas. It can be classified as a dramatic one; because it has some elements of drama. It has characters: the narrator / the hero that is Aengus himself, and the magical beautiful girl who was a fish before catching her under the effect of magic and her transformation again. The poem has also a setting; which is the hazel wood, the narrator’s home, then the whole of Ireland or the world where he wanders in searching for her. The tale begins at one night: “And moth-like stars were flickering out” (line 6); then it extends for years till

Aengus becomes an old man. It has been tackled in a pictorial recitation; and visual, tactile and audible images help the readers to imagine its spectacle and to make out its themes. Furthermore, there is a plot which advances in a building way, then culminates in the moment of the turning of the fish into a beautiful girl and Aengus' infatuation by her; its end (or denouement) is tragic and moving, leaving the readers with sorrowful and sympathizing feelings towards the mad lover, Aengus. The poet writes the following in its last stanza:

Though I am old with wandering
 Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
 I will find out where she has gone,
 And kiss her lips and take her hands; 20
 And walk among long dappled grass,
 And pluck till time and times are done,
 The silver apples of the moon,
 The golden apples of the sun.

(*Collected Poems* 54, lines 17-24)

Yet, in spite of sticking to the Celtic mythology and the Irish heritage because of his patriotism, Yeats depended also on other European myths as a rich traditional material for his poetic works; as myths generally have magical and spiritual effect on the recipient. By doing this, he succeeded professionally to achieve Eliot's concept of tradition in which "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within" exists in his writings ("Tradition" 36). This variation of the sources of his raw materials has created a new multi-national tradition or a new multi-cultural and ideological tradition in his Modernist poems. For example, Yeats' poem, "Leda and the Swan" (1924), published in his volume *The Cat and the Moon* (1924), depends on the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda. Another example is his poem, "A Prayer for my Daughter" (1921), in which 'Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty', and 'Helen of Troy' were referred to.

Markedly, Yeats mixed the material of the past or the tradition with the data of the present or the Modernism and added his mystic spiritual intuition as a catalyst; this formula produced a distinctive apocalyptic view in his writings. For example, Yeats' apocalyptic

views and inclinations appeared in his poetic volume, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921); which mainly was inspired by Easter Rising of 1916 and the execution of its leaders. But, these inclinations were culminated in his modernist milestone poem, “The Second Coming” (1920). It was written in 1919, after the end of the Irish Easter Rising (1916), the WWI (1914 – 1918), the 1918-1919 Flu pandemic, and at the beginning of the Irish War of Independence (1919 – 1921). Hence, this poem has represented an anomalous offspring of deformed parental circumstances suffered from frenzy, tension, stress, loss, devastation, and pain of the Modern age. Instead of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, as foreseen in the Biblical Book of Revelation, the hideous deeds of human beings, at the present time, awaken a deformed beast whose “shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” (*Collected Poems* 187, lines 14 – 15). It is like the Sphinx; which is a traditional image in itself. The sphinx is a legendary creature in the ancient Egyptian civilization. It has a massive statue in the Western Desert of Egypt. It is also an image from the Greek mythology, used in Sophocles’ play, *Oedipus the King*. Sorrowfully, it is also dreadful and ruthless. So, “The Second Coming, here, is a punishment to the sinful society” (Abdul-Razzaq 94). The poet predicts another grim future destiny for humanity instead of the traditional one foreseen in the Bible.

The traditional role of religion became out of action, as seen by the poet: “The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (lines 2 - 3). The word “centre” refers to the traditional hierarchal control of religion and moralities. Yeats’ mysticism and spiritualism are expressed in his Latin phrase “spiritus mundi”; which means ‘the spirit of the world’. The prophecy of the ‘Second Coming’ of Jesus Christ is a traditional belief. Yeats has modernized it in a fearful warning of a coming of a deformed beast. This monster began to move on the “sands” of the modern world: “somewhere in sands of the desert” (line 13); a picture which depicts the devastation and the sterility of the modern life and reminds the readers of T. S. Eliot’s famous masterpiece, “the Waste Land” (1922), in spite of its precedent publication. Yeats ends the poem, “The Second Coming”, with a traditional “myth” which “says that the antichrist will be born in the same birth place of the Christ” (Gaboussa 54); so, this monster “Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born” (line 22).

As a modernist poem, Yeats' "The Second Coming", is short, consisting of two stanzas only. It is written in free verse with loose meter, irregular rhythm, and repetitions. There is no rhyme-scheme. This technique may be suitable for the state of chaos handled in the poem; where "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," (*Collected Poems* 186, lines 3 - 4). The poet tackles a modernist subject which is the loss of the religious beliefs, moralities and social conventions that have led to chaotic consequences. The main theme of the first stanza is: the chaos of the modern age, whereas the main theme of the second is: Yeats' prophetic expectation of the hideous end of the world. The poet presents a pessimistic shocking vision of the Modern world expressing his rejection of it; this pessimism and rejection are also one of the characteristics of the Modernist poetry. The startling visual image of the deformed beast of the second stanza is the focus of the poem attracting the attention of the readers and sending the poet's apocalyptic warning message. Moreover, the poem's diction is easy. Mono- and disyllabic words are the norm. Ominous and sinister vocabularies are used, imparting pessimism and fear. Hence, this poem "is viewed as an artful culmination of modernist verse" (Mohammed & Hasan 144).

Notably, Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming", is opened in the first line by the word "gyre" as a symbol of the repetition of the historical events and the natural cycle of the world: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (line 1). The first words: "Turning and turning" are references to the succession of the times. The word, "gyre", in its denotative meaning, as it is known, refers to the circular or spiral movement. Thus, the word "gyre", here, is "a nod to Yeats's mystical belief that history repeats itself in cycles" (Tearle). He wants to pave the way to his central idea that is the second coming of Jesus Christ, and the repetition of the events of the history. But, implicitly, the quick constant rolling movement in such a modern poem inspired by hard circumstances may connote the instability, misery and the uncomfortable conditions of humanity in the modern age. Human beings are turning in vicious endless circles. It also paves the way to the following idea that is losing the gravity of the "centre" of this circle: "the centre cannot hold" (line 3). "Yeats' use of *gyre* in a poem that describes the breakdown of traditional patterns of order has not only

popularized the word with writers, but also imbued it with a connotation of postmodern social dysfunction” (Maddox).

The word “gyre” appeared again, after six years, in Yeats’ famous poem, “Sailing to Byzantium” (1926), which was published in his volume, *The Tower* (1928). Then, it appeared strongly in one of his last poems entitled with the same plural form of the word, “the Gyres” (1938); which was published in his volume *Last Poems* (1939). It also represented his theory of history and how he divided it in his book *A Vision* (1925). Its repetition may be significant in showing Yeats’ inherent point of view and philosophy about life and history. It, thus, symbolizes the circular canon of human life from weakness to strength, then to weakness again, or from childhood to adulthood to old age. Additionally, its connotative relation to the natural cycle of birth and death can’t be disregarded. Moreover, it refers to the circular movement of times, the recurrence of ancient events and the resurrection of the past. Accordingly, the past can be reproduced in the present. The old can be revived. The souls of the dead can be resurrected in living persons. Consequently, Yeats claimed in one of the séances on 9 May 1912 that a spirit of a north-African Christian person from the 16th century called “Leo Africanus” became his “antiself or daemon, an objectively existing spirit figure which came to replace his earlier concept of mask” (Hennessey). This may also justify the recurrence of his early themes and techniques in his last works. It also clarifies the most important cause of the revival of the Celtic myths, legends, and folklore into his modernist poetic and dramatic output. As a result, the tradition can be modernized; and Yeats became a traditionalist writing in the era of the literary Modernism. Consequently, a close inspection to the whole content and essence of his writings reveals that:

Yeats, like any *traditionalist*, anticipated that the crisis of the modern world would inevitably lead to the final destruction of civilization, and he was prepared for the coming of the Antichrist so that he could subsequently cross the threshold and find himself in a new cycle of a renewed world. This belief did not leave him until the end of his creative journey, even when there were hardly any like-minded people left. Hence Yeats was honorably called *the last knight of Tradition* in the Irish literary canon.

(Kiselev)

Yeats as a “*Knight of Tradition*” tied it also to his spirituality and mysticism. To look closely to his poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”, the word “gyre” has a mystical reference in it: “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...” (*Collected Poems* 193 III, lines 17-19). The diction in these verses refers to the traditional implications of sacredness. Furthermore, in such a modern poem, the poet declares from the very beginning of the poem his wish to make a spiritual imaginary journey to the ancient city of ‘Byzantium’ (Constantinople, now Istanbul) after getting rid of his mortal human body. This traditional city which was the capital of the Roman Empire and the centre of art, architecture, culture, and civilization in the 5th and 6th centuries is brought again to life by Yeats. He uses also a traditional means of transportation in order to reach Byzantium; which is ‘sailing’. The poet’s choice of Byzantium shows his spirituality, ideality and mysticism. He described it as “holy” (II, line 16). Additionally, there, in Byzantium, he would be far away from chaos and “anarchy” of the modern world, as he stated in line 4 of his poem “The Second Coming”: “Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (186). The same spiritual and mystical journey appeared in other poems as “Who Goes with Fergus” (1892), published in his volume *The Rose* (1893). Through Fergus’ journey, Yeats revived the Celtic tradition, and called the Irish people to contemplate their mythical past rather than their painful present.

From the first line of Yeats’ poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”, Yeats declares that there is no place for him, as an old man, in this country (Ireland): “That is no country for old men....” By proceeding reading the first section of the poem, the readers can catch its hidden implications of casting the description to the whole modern world which is materialistic, utilitarian and sensual. The only way out is to escape to the past. It is true that the poet refused the natural cycle of life and that of birth and death: “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” (I, line 6), and he also wished to achieve immortality. He realized at the time of writing this poem the approaching of his end, as he was about 60 years old. He wanted to express his physical and mental pain and agony of being old. But, he had also rejected the modern world and did not want to achieve immortality in it; the first word of the poem, the demonstrative pronoun “That”, refers to the long distance (psychologically) between the poet and that “country”. This is a proof of his internal rejection of the modern world, as a Modernist writer, and he wanted to sail “metaphorically away from this

unsuitable world to a better one” (Abbas 2281). For Yeats, this better world is that of “holy” Byzantium, where he could achieve eternity.

Visual, tactile and audible images help the poet in drawing his mystical picture. Traditional and spiritual diction as: “Monuments of unageing intellect” (I, line 8), “Monuments of its own magnificence” (II, line 14), “holy city of Byzantium” (II, line 16), “O sages...God’s holy fire” (III, line 17), “gold mosaic” (line 18), “holy fire, perne in a gyre” (line 19), “my soul” (line 20), “my heart” (194 III, line 21), “artifice of eternity” (line 24), “Grecian goldsmiths” (IV, line 27), “Emperor” (line 29), and “Lords and Ladies of Byzantium” (line 31). At the end of the poem and of his imaginary spiritual journey, Yeats thinks that he could achieve his aim of immortality by transforming into a work of art (a golden bird) singing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium. The words “gold” and “golden” are repeated recurrently in the last two stanzas of the poem; as ‘gold’ is known for its preciousness and its resistance for time. It is also a traditional material for manufacturing the kings’ and the emperors’ belongings. Consequently, it is suitable for achieving Yeats’ aim of immortality. However, Yeats disregarded the fact that he would achieve immortality by his literary works. W. H. Auden (1907 -1973) in part II of his elegy, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939), addresses Yeats after his death in a touching apostrophe, saying that: “your gift survived it all: / The parish of rich women, physical decay, / Yourself.” (lines 32 - 34). Auden addresses Yeats directly using the second person possessive adjective, “your”, as if Yeats is still alive. Also, the past tense, “survived”, gives authenticity. The run-on-line sentence as a whole emphasizes the intended meaning that Yeats achieved immortality by his literary works which have outlived his mortal body.

Nevertheless, the theme of trying to achieve immortality was a dominating one in Yeats’ writings; and in his life also. He was always obsessed with the idea and the feelings of growing old and deceasing. When he turned 69, he had an “operation” in order to be “rejuvenated”; he attempted to prove that he was still youthful by having “intimate relations with younger women” (“W. B. Yeats”). In his Poetic and dramatic output, this theme was a recurrent one. In addition to the above example poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”, there is his title poem “The Tower” (1927). Moreover, his one-act Noh play,

At the Hawks Well (1917), for example, tackles this theme from another perspective. The main character, which is a mythological Celtic figure, Young Cuchulain seeks a “Well” where he can find “life-giving waters” or ‘immortality’. There he meets two persons: an “Old Man” and a “mysterious girl / witch / hawk”; who is revealed as the “Guardian of the Well”. The Old Man plays the role of a narrator and implicitly appears as “an image of what Yeats fears to become”, the “degrading” mask of age (Bloom 297). The “Well” is hidden within three hazels. In Irish mythology, hazelnuts symbolize wisdom, inspiration, divination, and knowledge. As a recurrent element of tradition, it is reminiscent of the hazel wood of his poem, “The Song of Wandering Aengus”. Additionally, the traditional impact of P. B. Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” appears in the use of the symbolism of the spiritual rebirth of the “wind” and the inevitable end of the life of “withered leaves”. The technique of the play presented imaginary natural scenery, music, pantomime, gestures, dance, and supernatural elements, and the characters were wearing masks: this technique helped to create a sense of “simplicity, impersonality, and profundity in symbolism” (Hakutani 17). Yet, generally, the used traditional elements and techniques helped Yeats greatly in drawing the pictures and in sending the intended messages of this play (and his other plays) as exactly of his poems.

Even in his later years, Yeats continued to use the traditional elements and to reproduce strongly his early traditional themes and techniques; although the Modernist literature was at its climax at that time. In his poem, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1933), published in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), for example, the impact of “Platonism, Plotinus philosophy, and Eastern Philosophy” was apparent clearly. He had also derived a traditional Christian form for the poem; which is “the dramatic poetic debate between the Soul (or heart) and the Self (or body), reversing the usual Christian message of works in which the Soul laments what the body has done” (“A Dialogue”). The poem is also fraught with traditional technical elements as: personification, imagery, iambic pentameter, and regular rhyme scheme: it is “abbacddc, a modification of ottava rima” (“A Dialogue”).

Likewise, the tradition modernized by Yeats the poet is the same modernized by Yeats the dramatist. Skillfully, he mixed the same poetic formula of his romanticism, occultism,

spiritualism, mysticism, unattainable romantic love for Gonne, patriotism, nationalistic pride, Celtic myths, and the Irish heritage with his current Modernist surroundings in his plays. Thus, the stage became another literary domain, in which Yeats outshone as a distinctive Modernist playwright by his innovative formula of the modernist fashioning of tradition or of modernizing the tradition; achieving professionally the denotation of Eliot's phrase: the "historical sense" and the connotation of Pound's slogan: "Make It New".

Modern English Drama "is commonly believed to have started in Dublin, Ireland with the foundation of the 'Irish Literary Theater' by William B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and John Millington Synge" (Greenblatt and Abrams 1843). Then, they founded 'Abbey Theater' on 27 Dec. 1904. However, the Irish Theater was a Modern forerunner; it continued to be distinguished from its British and European counterparts. It was used as a tool of peaceful resistance against British colonization and marginalization of Ireland and also a tool of confirming the Irish identity and nationalism. Furthermore, it gave Ireland some sort of literary and spiritual independence; things that were lost in the real political Irish stance. Those founders: Yeats, Lady Gregory, Martyn, Synge and others aimed at representing "a body of Irish drama that would combine Ireland's rich cultural legacy with the latest European theatrical methods" (Trotter 1). This was to a great extent a form of the modernist fashioning of tradition on the stage. Consequently, they tried to portray "Irish peasant life" by using "poetic realism" and other devices (Bilotti et al.). Every common Irish man should have a place on the stage; all the slices of the Irish society could be represented. Briefly, these founders tried to make this theatre local and national with all the meanings of the words; Irish plays of Irish themes discussing Irish problems and written by Irish playwrights.

But, Yeats was far more distinctive in his plays than his other Irish co-founder dramatists by reviving the Gaelic language and the Celtic cultural heritage in his Modernist plays. As a result, he is considered "to be among the first dramatists to illuminate the Irish past by applying back to the ancient Celtic material and the Gaelic language expressions" (Kitishat 226). He used myths, folktales, masks, and dances in a trial to go "back to the roots" of the Irish identity. He "asserted the necessity of the

revival of the Gaelic language and culture as a way of declaring a distinctive Irish identity” (Kitishat 222). He never gave up clinging tightly to these “roots” of his “ancestral trees” as he said in his poem, “Coole Park And Ballylee, 1931” (*Selected Poems* 93, line 34). He kept “digging with” his pen; as in the inspirational meaning of the poem “Digging” of the famous Irish poet Seamus Heaney (13 April 1939 - 30 Aug. 2013): “Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.” (lines 29 - 31). He never felt that his “origin” was “like water”, as the modern Irish poet Eavan Boland (24 Sep. 1944 – 27 April 2020) thought. She wrote in her poem, “The Journey”, that: “I have brought you here so you will know forever / the silences in which are our beginnings, / in which we have an origin like water” (184); and titled her famous book of poetry, which includes this poem, with the same phrase, *An Origin Like Water* (1996).

By writing modernist plays depending on traditional Gaelic raw material, Yeats “attempted to achieve twofold goals: first, to revive Irish Gaelic culture and heritage and to make it familiar among Irish people since they have a distinctive culture and language different from the English. The second goal was to foster the Irish people sense of nationalism” (Kitishat 224). He, thus, targeted to create a new Irish culture out of the ashes of the ancient one, free from the influences of the British.

Consequently, Yeats presented a new Modernist dramatic fashion. This fashion was formed in poetic drama. He revived the fashion of this traditional form on the stage of Abbey Theatre. As they were poetic, they were enhanced by the poetic qualities, such as passion; emotion; imagination; evocative language; significant thoughts; sincere feelings; metrical, rhythmical and/or rhymed language; lofty diction; poetic devices; figures of speech; images...etc. These poetic plays depended on Irish myths, legends, fairy-tales, and folklore. Spirituality imparted by these sources and materials strengthened the imaginary force and the freedom of Yeats’ poetic plays. By reviving this form, “the poetic drama”, Yeats shared in one of the “great achievements of the modern age”; because:

It is a mixture of high seriousness and colloquial element. It is the combination of the *tradition* and the experiment and of the *ancient* and the *new*. It is

symbolic and difficult. Its verse form is blank verse or free verse. In short, its vehicle is verse, its mechanism is imagery, its substance is myth and its binding force is musical pattern.

(Roy)

Additionally, the setting of most of Yeats' plays was Ireland, adding a more patriotic perspective to them and differentiating them from the British plays presented on London's theatres: "A spot whereon the founders lived and died / Seemed once more dear than life" (Yeats "Coole Park" 93, lines 33 - 34). The setting of his play, *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), for example, is Sligo where he was born.

The above characteristics of Yeats' drama helped him also to defy the limitation of time, creating "timeless and ... temporal" drama; this "is what makes a writer *traditional*" (Eliot 37). Therefore, the formula of the Modernist fashioning of tradition of Yeats' dramatic output was identical to that of his poetic one. It was as the following: traditional poetic plays sprang from and inspired by traditional mythological and folkloric sources, yet tackled current events; and were ripened by Modernist features and represented on the stage of a twentieth-century Theatre.

Yeats' revival of the mythological Irish tradition can be illustrated in his verse one-act play, *On Baile's Strand* (1903). It was acted in the opening of the Abbey Theatre on 27 Dec. 1904. It had two different versions: the first in his volume, *In the Seven Woods* published in 1903; the second in *Poems 1899* published in 1906. It depends on the myth of the Irish hero, Cuchulain ("On Baile's Strand"). "Cuchulain is the hero most identified with Ireland and represents both positive and negative aspects of the Irish people and their struggle" (Al-Husseini 8). This Irish myth constituted the raw material of many poetic and dramatic works written by Yeats; all of them shared also ritualistic scenes, supernatural forces, and symbolic objects. Example poems are such as: "The Death of Cuchulain," (1892); re-written in 1925 as "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea". Additionally, Example plays are as the following: *The Golden Helmet*, a prose drama published in 1908, re-written in 1910 as *The Green Helmet*; *At the Hawk's Well*, a Noh play (1916); Originally called *The Well of Immortality* and *The Waters of Immortality*;

fifthly, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, a Noh play (1919) [this form will be explained briefly in the following pages], re-written in a 1928 prose-version and called *Fighting the Waves*; and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), a verse dance one-act play of three scenes. Then, his poem, "Cuchulain Comforted", was published in 1939 (Wedin "Chronology").

Yeats' last play, *The Death of Cuchulain* represents the last phase of his hero's life. The courageous warrior with his symbolic ideality is killed by a Blind Man in return of 12 pennies. This killer symbolizes the human blindness, meanness, and greed. But, Yeats rewarded his hero by reincarnating him again after his death in a form of a bird: "a soft feathery shape / And is not that a strange shape for the soul / Of a great fighting man" (*Collected Plays* 444). This transforming resolution of the hero's tragic end may be inspired by the playwright's fear of perishing, his dominating or haunting idea of immortality, and his belief of the reincarnation of the souls according to his Hermitic believes. The recurrent theme of either transformation or reincarnation of the hero into a bird, as also in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium", has implication and symbolization of freedom, tenderness, purity and innocence.

No wonder then that many of Yeats' dramatic characters, as Cuchulain, and stories are drawn from *The Ulster Cycle*, which contains medieval Irish heroic legends, tales and sagas, mixing legendry and mythological elements together. It became a rich source for much of his dramatic raw materials. For example, his poetic play, *Deirdre* (1907) also depends on an ancient Irish myth. It was called so after its main character and heroine, "Deirdre". She is as beautiful as "Helen of Troy". The myth deals with the themes of love and loyalty.

The theme of loyalty is related in most cases or nearly all of Yeats' plays with Ireland. In his poetic play, *The Countess Cathleen* (1899), he tackled this theme in an elevated style. A traditional subject of sacrifice for the sake of one's homeland was inspired by an Irish folktale revealing a lofty picture of patriotic and nationalistic idealism. The title character / heroine of the play sells her soul to the devil in return of money for saving her people during the Great Famine of the 1840s, which is one of the most great tragic incidents of the Irish history. Although the Irish Catholic class criticized this play as

“anti-Catholic” and “heretical”, it set an example of the rulers’ care and sacrifices for their subjects. The Catholic attack on Yeats increased; the “students of the Catholic University College” signed “a petition” to “condemn it”. This attack was one of the “difficulties” faced him as a descendant of an Irish Protestant Ascendancy family and an occult believer (Mulcahey 20).

The vague traditional world of the occultism and supernatural creatures as faeries hovers repeatedly in Yeats’ writings. The faeries in his one-act poetic play, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, performed firstly in 1894, steal away a newly married bride on “May Eve”. Out of her boredom of the house and her mother-in-law, “Marie Bruin” calls the faeries to take her with them away from “this dull world” to “have all the freedom” that she has “lost”, she says also the following:

Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,
For I would ride with you upon the wind,
Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,
And dance upon the mountains like a flame!

(*Little Blue Book* 10)

The spoken language of the cast of the play, *The Land*, is supposed to be Gaelic as it is written in the stage directions in the first page of the text of the play. The time is at the end of the 18th century. The setting is county Sligo. The play is written in blank verse. All these traditional elements are woven together in the play. Soon, after her above call, “Marie” is tempted by a faery child. He takes her with him on the wind, then, she perishes. The faery child says the following to Marie:

You shall go with me, newly-married bride,
And gaze upon a merrier multitude:
White-armed Nuala and Ardroe the Wise,
Feacra of the hurtling foam, and him
Who is the ruler of the western host,
Finvarra, and their Land of Heart's Desire,

Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
 But joy is wisdom, Time an endless song.
 I kiss you and the world begins to fade.

(36 – 37)

“White-armed Nuala”, “Ardroe the Wise”, “Feacra”, and “Finvarra” are traditional mythological Celtic references. They have pagan pre-historic implications. The fairy child tempts Marie to take her to “the Land of Heart’s Desire” where no one grows old (“beauty has no ebb”), or dies (“decay no flood”); and time can’t be counted (“Time an endless song”). The used metaphors enrich the meaning greatly. This “Land” is the imaginary “Land” of achieving Yeats’ recurrent dream of endless youth and immortality, like “Byzantium” of his poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”. Considerably, in order to achieve this dream, the main persona of the literary work should go to the past: either by sailing to Byzantium of the 5th and the 6th centuries, or by flying with the faeries to a pre-historic pagan mythological world.

Similarly, the traditional idea of stealing a human being by the faeries, quoted from the folktales, appeared also in Yeats’ early poem, “The Stolen Child” (1896). This dramatic poem was published in his first collection *Crossways* (1889) and in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889). The faeries deceive a child and steal him to their faery island, leaving the reader with a melancholic feeling. This faery island is void of tears, misery, and suffering; in contrast to the real modernist world of the child which is “full of weeping”. This sentence which constitutes the last line of each stanza is a recurrent refrain emphasizing the hideousness of the modern world and the poet’s deep rejection of it. The faeries call the child saying the following:

Come away, O human child!
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.

25

(*Collected Poems* 53, lines 24 - 27)

Thus, as a way of escapism from the modern world, Yeats stuck to the traditional pre-historic pagan world of mythology and folklore – even far extensively more than the traditional Christian one; perhaps because of the sectarian separation and the religious conflict between the Catholic and the Protestant in Ireland. T. S. Eliot stated in his essay, “Ulysses, Order, and Myth”, the same meaning of escapism and the significance of using the myths in order to make:

a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by *Mr. Yeats*, and of the need for which I believe *Mr. Yeats* to have been *the first contemporary to be conscious*.

(483)

Eliot considered Yeats as “the first” Modernist literary man who had estimated the value of using myth, folklore, legends or tradition in general. Surprisingly, after 1916, Yeats, the “*Knight of Tradition*” (Kiselev), adopted a traditional fourteenth-and-fifteenth century Japanese dramatic form called, ‘Noh’. By this adoption, Yeats defies, as usual, the boundaries of space, time and nationality. Yet, the original Japanese form takes its origin from religion; while this of Yeats takes it from the myths and the occult. He wove these traditional Irish sources with this traditional Japanese form skillfully. Additionally, Yeats employed poetry, music, and dance; meanwhile the original Noh form depends on music, dance and mimicry of the enchanting text, more than poetry (Bays 1-2). The Japanese Plays were full of spirits and masks, and that the crises in the plays usually occurred when a character who had appeared to “be an ordinary mortal was suddenly revealed to be a God or spirit” (Ellmann, 216). In this way, this form helped Yeats to tie up the imaginary, the supernatural, and the mystical world with the real, materialistic, and mundane one. Consequently, Yeats didn’t copy this traditional Noh form, but he created a new form out of it.

The language of these Noh plays is evocative to a great extend in order to spur the imagination of the audience. The employed accompanying music was as the soundtrack

of films or series. Rhythmic music accompanies rhythmic motions of the characters or pivotal events of the plot. Then the action is culminated in a final symbolic dance: "... the music, and the beauty of the voice all come to climax in pantomimic dance" (Yeats Introduction *Certain Noble Plays* I). Consequently, this kind of drama imparted Yeats with new dramatic tools unattainable for their European Modernist counterparts in the beginning to the middle years of the twentieth century. Thus, by using this form:

Yeats aimed at eliminating all traces of naturalistic or imitative acting and claimed the actor to be a depersonalized symbol pointing through the gestures and the movements of the body to a meaning beyond what was visible on the stage. In the Noh drama, he found certain proof of his own theory of drama and a clue to more meaningful coherence not available through the European theatrical tradition.

(Senchuk 74)

The aimed "depersonalization" and "symbolism" had been achieved by using one of the traditional techniques of the 'Noh' plays; that is 'the masks'. Although the readers and the critics can classify a great deal of Yeats' poetic output as autobiographical, they can also notice that he used 'the masks' in his Noh plays achieving "depersonalization". All his actors were male only, changing the tone of their voices according to the character played; whether it is a woman or an old man ...etc. the conflict of the plays is inner more than between the characters as in the European plays. Consequently, adopting this form was in its essence a call of the reformation of the theatre at that time, especially its naturalism and realism. Yeats declared this goal clearly, for example, in his essay, "The Reform of the Theatre"; published in *Freeman's Journal* on 16 March 1903, a decade before his revolutionary venture in 'Noh' form. Thus, he made a Modernist theatrical revolution by this traditional Japanese form.

Yeats' *Four Plays for Dancers* (1921) contained his four Noh plays: *At the Hawks' Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and *Calvary*. They were written in a poetic language using music, dancing and masks, as traditional technical elements of the Noh form. They also show implicitly the contrast between the spiritual sides of the human beings and the material ones. The first two plays were referred to

before in this research paper (pp.18 & 21). Then, his play, *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) startled the audience with its traditional legendary and supernatural use of ghosts which were able to wander, talk, and dream: “Young Man: I have heard of angry ghosts / Who wander in a willful solitude” (*Two Plays* 10). The fourth play, *Calvary* (1921) is a ritual on-act play tells a traditional Christian subject which is the crucifixion of the Christ. These Noh plays “inspired later Irish playwrights such as Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* and *Play set in barrels* show Yeats's influence” (Wedin “Strange Intimacy”).

Notably, this Japanese form of Noh plays helped Yeats to a far extent to use traditional and supernatural elements in his modernist plays. He was an expert playwright when he adopted this form and then adapted it professionally to the needs of the Irish Modernist theatre. Thus, “this noble form” (I) achieved “beauty and emotional subtlety” of “traditions” (IV), as Yeats expressed in his “Introduction” to Ezra Pound’s book, *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (1916). He also stated that:

In fact with the help of these Japanese plays ‘translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound,’ I have *invented* a form of drama distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way—an *aristocratic* form.

(I)

Hence, Yeats as an innovative playwright presented to the Modernist theatre a formula of traditional Japanese Noh plays sprang from Irish mythological and legendary sources creating a new hybrid drama. However, generally speaking, from the two main types of drama, tragedy and comedy, Yeats chose to write tragic plays using “dramatic” poetry for them. This sort of poetry was highly suitable for the emotional tension and the “strong passions” of these tragic plays. So, his drama was poetic; and their poetic language was dramatic. In these poetic plays, Yeats “desired to avoid the over use of iambic but he used some alliteration” (Dahami 1206). He tried to deviate from the “blank verse of the Elizabethan age”. He tended to use a “flexible” appropriate verse in order to “express the pettiness of everyday talk” (Dahami 1206). By producing these poetic plays, Yeats dissented from the usual norm of prose drama of his time, restoring the tradition of poetic

drama to the Modernist theatre. He wrote about 26 verse plays. As a consequence, Yeats was selective in his audience. He wanted cultured audience who can understand and evaluate his use of poetry on the stage and his “aristocratic” plays, as he himself said. This feature made his plays distinctive from commercial British theaters of his day. His verse plays retrieved the picture of the great Roman and Greek classical plays. Verse dialogue or monologue urged Yeats also to depend professionally on stage directions and body language to help him in showing his themes. As drama written to be acted, Yeats employed it as an expressive visual medium.

In conclusion, W. B. Yeats is considered one of the key figures of the Modernist literature. As a Modernist pioneer, he produced poetic and dramatic masterpieces. Yet, he gave a new flavour to the Modernist literature different from his contemporaries. He followed the steps of the Romantic tradition, guided by its poets and enthralled by its themes and symbols. Additionally, his poetic and dramatic output was fraught with an orchestra of Irish, Roman, Greek, and Japanese Traditions.

Irish tradition, particularly, was the main source and the raw material of Yeats’ poetic and dramatic output. Out of his patriotism, he revived the ancient Celtic tradition to the extent that he convinced the Modern reader to take the Irish cultural heritage into consideration. He became a leader of an Irish literary renaissance depending on the revival of Irish tradition. For him, the solution of the present social and political Irish dilemmas was returning to the past and clinging to the roots. Consequently, he set an example by his writings for the peaceful resistance. He wanted also to unite the Irish people under the banner of their nationality and identity. By fulfilling these goals, he tried to create a new sort of intergenerational integrity. He innovated, too, a new modernist literature purely Irish in essence, in content, and in spirit springing from the Irish tradition. Thus, his writings reflected his deep patriotism and intense fondness of his homeland.

Other factors had an effect on Yeats’ psyche and consequently on his writings as his deep unattainable love for Maud Gonne and her continuous refusal for his marriage proposal. Furthermore, his occultism, mysticism, and belief in supernaturalism dyed his poetry and drama with special spirituality urging him to resort to tradition for the sake of its

vagueness and mystery. Yeats' rejection to the terrible conditions, the religious and the political conflicts and the utilitarianism of the modern world pressed him to adhere to tradition. He revived many technical conventions and traditions in his poetry and drama. He was a creative poet, innovative poet-playwright and a professional alchemist formulating a modernist poetic and dramatic fashion out of ancient traditions. Hence, all these factors were mixed in Yeats' poetic and dramatic output producing a modernist fashioning of tradition in it.

This research paper tried to trace this fashioning. It attempted to give an overview of some of Yeats' poetic and dramatic works. Some example poems and plays are discussed thematically and / or analytically.

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