
RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of Aesthetic Modernity in Yeats' Poems

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ABSTRACT

When modern society marches toward post-modern society, people are still experiencing the same alienation and spiritual impoverishment as in Yeats' times. It's known that both modernity and aesthetic tradition are embodied in Yeats' poems. Previous studies, however, have tried to interpret each individually, usually combining theories convenient to their purposes, but seldom intend to include both when studying Yeats' poetry. Through an intensive reading of Yeats' poems, this thesis tries to analyze how Yeats exhibits his aesthetic modernity in the tension between his nationalism and aesthetic pursuits. With the help of pertaining theories on aesthetic modernity, it can be found that in Yeats' reflection and criticism of modern society, his efforts to establish the aesthetic space with the help of traditional Irish images, and his persistent pursuits for a spiritual homeland in eternal art, his aesthetic modernity is manifested and his concept of spiritual salvation for a nation is clarified. The analysis of Yeats' poems from the perspective of aesthetic modernity is therefore significant not only to the reinterpretation of Yeats' poetry but also to individuals or even nations who are still stuck in spiritual crisis.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic modernity, Yeats, Poem

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1. Introduction

As a nationalist poet who embraces both modernity and Irish aesthetic tradition, Yeats has been attracting considerable interest in different aspects though the decades passed after his death. Besides the specific interpretation of Yeats' poetry and credos, researchers mainly focus on three perspectives, that is, the employment of various thoughts from other fields in the context of comparative literature study, the intensive exploration of its literary value with the combination of different contemporary theories, and the interdisciplinary study on grounds of historicization and contextualization. Through keeping abreast of the times, pertaining studies are still developing and constantly burst out new vitality and inspiration. To delve into Yeats' poems from the perspective of aesthetic modernity can be significant to not only the understanding of Yeats' philosophy of creation but the value of his poetry in modern times as well. Due to the ambiguity of different definitions and the changing style of Yeats himself, several concepts will be clarified, and instead of including all of Yeats' works, the poems are selected for a better interpretation.

Yeats, first of all, is renowned for his identity as a national poet, which often leads to the incongruity between his nationalism and modernity. Different from modernist poets, Yeats concentrates more on the reinterpretation of traditional Irish images and mythology but seldom pursues novelty in the forms and structures of poetry. We may, therefore, say that Yeats is not a modernist. Nevertheless, it can't be denied that Yeats, whose life stretches over two centuries and whose style changes in different phrases, is modern. He Ning thinks that the modernity of Yeats is mainly displayed in three aspects, that is, the theory of mask and its impersonification inclination, the seeking of salvation for modern individuals living in a spiritual wasteland, Yeats' contacts with several main modernist poets and their mutual influence on creation. Modernity is not only the inheritance and subversion of literary tradition, according to He, but also the exploration and innovation of artistic concepts and practice. What can most reveal Yeats' modernity, therefore, is his integration of Western and Eastern philosophy and mythology in his later life of literary credo.

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Similarly, Denis Donoghue confirms Yeats' modernity on the grounds of Yeats' attitude towards modernist poetry in his compilation of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* for the period 1900-1935. It turns out that Yeats holds a dialectical opinion on the word "modern". On one hand, he admits that he has tried to be modern, but as Donoghue observes, when Yeats uses "modern", he is practicing an irony, and the word is his way of indicating "the emptiness of this movement in history" (2010, p.135 and Grossman, 1997); on the other hand, Yeats exhibits modernity with his notion of mask, self, and anti-self into aesthetic theory, his understanding of sincerity and authenticity and his clarification of two kinds of modern poetry. Thomas Rees starts from a more specific standpoint to prove Yeats' modernity, that is, the relationship between Yeats and Ezra Pound between 1908 and 1918. A close reading of Yeats' poems sees evident Poundian influence concerning diction, meters, and his theory of mask, but only slightly of rhythms. Therefore, the modernity of Yeats is undisputed, though he is not completely modernized in the development of modernism.

Yeats' insistence on not accepting "new poetry" completely and his hesitation over shaking off the influence of romanticism can be related to his nationalism, which usually manifests itself in anti-coloniality and the pursuit of national independence and cultural freedom. Javier Padilla contends that Yeats' ambivalence toward modernity mirrors his ambivalence toward the lasting presence of colonial structures (2018, p.109). Edward Said views Yeats as a national poet whose voice serves as the foundation of political and cultural independence (ibid.). Different from revolutionists who battle against the colonization of England with might and main, Yeats delves into the cultural legacy of the nation and integrates the essence extracted from mythology into his poetry, thus establishing an aesthetic space amid the invasion of capitalist culture and the collapse of the spiritual homeland of Irish people. As Padilla perceives, by arguing against the debasement of aristocratic "high laughter, loveliness, and ease," Yeats betrays a sensibility that is both skeptical of modernity and caught up in the structure of coloniality (ibid.: 112).

2. From "Modern" to "Aesthetic Modernity"

Can this nationalism or the resistance to colonization be regarded as the opposition to Modernity? Or, on the contrary, it is in the former we can crystallize Yeats' modernity? To better answer this question, we should first of all briefly differentiate several concepts, including "modern", "modernity", and "modernism".

The concept of "modern" dates back to the fifth century AD when it was used primarily to distinguish the Christian present from the pagan past. The year 1500 became a landmark. In the new era after that, modernity represented a paradigm shift at the social, cultural, and ideological levels, and novelty became the internal momentum of modernity. In the precipitation of history, the word "modern" gradually takes on the meaning of historical stages, referring to Western history since the Renaissance, especially since the Enlightenment in the 18th century.

As for the interpretation of modernity, scholars in different fields have their own views. The French poet Baudelaire was the first to put forward the widely accepted concept of modernity: modernity is transitional, transient, accidental, and is half of the art; the other half is eternal and unchanging. At the level of philosophical connotation, Albrecht Wilmer argues that "for us, modernity is an insuperable horizon with cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical-political significance" (1991, p.12). Siegmund Baumann emphasized the inherent contradiction of modernity and pointed out that "the history of modernity is a history full of tension between social existence and its culture. Modern existence forces its culture to be its antithesis. This disharmony is the harmony that modernity needs" (2003, p.10). Stuart Hall believes that modernity is a complex and interactive process, including at least four levels of political modernity, economic modernity, social modernity, and cultural modernity (1992, p.6). Foucault examines modernity from the point of view of its characteristics and reveals the significance of modernity as a worldview. Levfair emphasizes the reflexivity of modernity, while Baumann focuses on its contradiction. Hegel interprets modernity from the perspective of experience and the principle of subjectivity. Baudelaire believes that modernity is transient, perishable, and accidental. Simmel bluntly states that modernity is essentially a kind of psychologism.

Modernism is an ideological trend and a complex cultural phenomenon that emerged in the West from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. Baudelaire has pointed out that modernism is not a concept but a way of civilization in opposition to tradition. Modernism has no laws or theories, only features. It's a new tradition. The development of philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and other disciplines, as well as the crisis and change of Western society before and after the First World War, all catalyzed the development of modernism and deepened the sense of crisis and reform in modernist literature. Modernist literature is often used to refer to works of literature and art recognized as having very distinct ideas, feelings, forms, and styles since the First World War (Abrams, 1995, p.195). According to Liu Xiangyu, the general characteristics of modernist literature can be summarized into four aspects: pessimism and world-weariness due to the sense of crisis and disillusionment; the alienation of humans leads to the absurdity and deformation of literary form; the focus on creation and forms with the development of individual and the enhancement of self-consciousness; an inclination of literature that turns inward, attaches importance to subjectivity and forms the characteristics of the stream of consciousness (2002, p.7).

Therefore, we can say that Yeats, as a man living in modern society, exhibits his modernity through his consciousness of reflection and his attention to the existence of individuals and spiritual status in the context of domestic strife and foreign aggression. With the help of Pound and other modernist poets, Yeats, in his later life, turns into a poet of half-modernism and half-romanticism, which makes him a great poet with the sensibility of nationality and modernity. To be more specific, this sensibility can be interpreted as aesthetic modernity.

Aesthetic modernity includes the modern concept of aesthetics, modern form, and function, as well as aesthetic or aesthetic modernity (Dong, 2022, p.9). Since the Age of Enlightenment, modernity has been presented as the scene of a contest between two different forces (Zhou, 2000, p.63). One is enlightenment modernity, manifested as the triumph of reason, and the other is the opposite, aesthetic modernity. Baumgarten named aesthetics after the Greek word "aesthetica", meaning feeling, instinct, or emotion. Kant contended that aesthetics was anti-utilitarian. Schiller thought aesthetics could help heal the schisms of modern humanity. Hegel believed that aesthetics was liberating, and Weber discovered a "salvation" function of aesthetics in modern society. In *The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch Art, Post-Modernism*, Carinescu pointed out that aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept containing three dialectical opposition -- opposition to tradition, bourgeois civilization (and its rational, utilitarian and progressive ideals), and to itself because it envisages itself as a new tradition or authority (2002, p.16-17).

In a word, aesthetic modernity, as a part of cultural modernity, stresses the spirit of reflection and criticism as its frame but pays more attention to the creation and the salvation function of art as an independent force in modern society. Yeats' poetry, with distinct artistic features and an abundance of cultural deposits, can thereby be analyzed from the perspective of aesthetic modernity. And it's necessary to get a more comprehensive understanding of Yeats' poetry from *The Collected Poems*.

3. Aesthetic Modernity in Yeats' Poems

3.1 Yeats' Poetic Reflection and Criticism of modern society

Yeats' aesthetic modernity is first of all in his poetic reflection and criticism of modern society concerning politics, religion, and spirituality.

Before the faint change of attitude towards politics in his twilight years, Yeats has been averse to its modernization, or, in other words, political modernity in Ireland during the period of industrialization, colonization, and cultural immersion from England.

Ireland, in reality, was inundated with violence, oppression, and turbulence, while the romantic and aesthetic Ireland was buried in the dust of history. The loss of cultural identity, together with the nonchalance to national consciousness, turned Irish people into wanderers tottering in the wasteland. In *September 1913* (2000, p.103), Yeats, in the first place, depicted the desperate individuals living in poverty both materially and spiritually. "But fumble in a greasy till/ And add the halfpence to the pence/ And prayer to shivering prayer, until/ You have dried the marrow from the bone?" In the wake of industrialization comes its ramifications, that is, wealth disparity, the philistine values with the core of utilitarianism, which cast a shadow on the nature of Irish spirits. As a result, Yeats sighed mournfully, "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave." O'Leary, along with other revolutionists who fought for the independence of Ireland with violence, is in Yeats' mind lost in their revolutionary passion and can not lead Irish people to reestablish the spiritual homeland like those legendary heroes who are possessed with both chivalry and the spirit of romance. However, the legacy of those heroes' spiritual values was dying in the efforts of anti-colonization. "The names that stilled your childish play,/ They have gone about the world like wind,/ But little time had they to pray/ For whom the hangman's rope was spun" In the nostalgic lament for those heroes, Yeats repeatedly bewailed the death of Ireland with the easy sacrifice of radical revolutionists.

Similarly, in the poem *Easter 1916* (2000, p.180-181), Yeats expressed his attitude toward the efforts to win independence from violence, described it as "a terrible beauty", and emphasized the significance of aesthetics as a life force in the continuation and refreshing of Irish civilization. For Yeats, the atrocity accompanied by the development of modern civilization has obliterated the nature of human beings, alienated individuals, and turned them into stones. "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart." With the triumph of warfare as the only aim, they can easily neglect the beauty around them, the aesthetic legacy of Ireland. "Hearts with one purpose alone/ Through summer and winter seem/ Enchanted to a stone/ To trouble the living stream." Yeats, therefore, was skeptical of the value of their sacrifice. "Was it needless death after all?" "And what if excess of love/ Bewildered them till they died?" From the view of Yeats, they were deceived by the perception that only radical fights other than anything else can save the country. Nevertheless, it's more significant for him to call on in people a conception with powerful aesthetic force than a monotonous political movement full of radical and tragic passion. The striking but scary death will be drowned in the advance of history, but the beauty and creativity of art and life can be eternal.

In his later poem *Politics* (2000, p.357-358), Yeats even more directly satirized the fruitlessness of politics and exclaimed the importance of sentiments and feelings of mortal humans. This little poem begins with Mann's remark, "In our time, the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." and ends with the lyric sentence inundating the aspiration for romantic love. The irony is thus reached by the contrast between Thomas Mann's affirmation and Yeats' objection.

Apart from the antipathy toward political modernity, Yeats also subverted the conviction and promise of Christianity, and this subversion is exhibited especially in *The Second Coming* (2000, p.186-187). "The falcon cannot hear the falconer" metaphorically reveals the disillusion of Christianity's Heilslehre, where Jesus would come again for the salvation of the world. The reality at the turn of centuries is depicted as "Things fall apart;/ the center cannot hold" and "The ceremony of innocence is drowned;/ The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate." The world is in turmoil after the first world war, and the social order was falling apart. The good ones could not get a foothold, while the vicious ones were enjoying their prime in their passionate intensity. Before the second coming of Jesus, there's still an imminent possibility of the appearance of Anti-Christ, the beast, "A shape with lion body and the head of a man". The modern world is suffering from the disasters and destruction incurred by wars and other cruelties and miseries as a result of the advancement in modern technology and the degradation of human morality. An apocalyptic note is running through the whole poem, that is, the end of the world before salvation.

For Yeats, modern civilization with rational cognition as its guide and industrialization as assistance was weighing heavily on the spirits of humans and sooner or later would lead to chaos and destruction. Given this, he tried to seek a spiritual homeland for modern people based on the Irish cultural legacy.

3.2 Yeats' Exploration of Aesthetic Space

Another aspect where Yeats' aesthetic modernity is displayed lies in his exploration of aesthetic space with efforts, including the reinterpretation of traditional Irish images, legends, and mythology and the pursuit of cultural independence and aesthetic freedom as the foundation of national resurrection.

Rose, a symbol of beauty, love, and freedom and Ireland the nation, is one of the traditional Irish images that frequently appeared in Yeats' poetry. In the volume *The Rose*, Yeats attached Roses with the essence of Irish national values, thus revealing the existence of Irish people and encouraging them to find faith in Irish aesthetic and cultural legacy. In *To The Rose Upon the Rood of Time* (2000, p.26), Yeats saw eternal beauty wandering on the way and exclaimed, "Come near; I would, before my time to go,/ Sing of Old Eire and the ancient ways;/ Red rose, proud rose, sad rose of all my days." In this poem, the rose symbolizes the essence of Irish culture, with beauty, dignity, and trauma at the same time. "Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;/ The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,/ who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;/ And thine own sadness, where of stars, grown old/ In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,/ Sing in their high and lonely melody." Through mythological figures, Yeats attempted to encourage Irish people to brave the wind and the waves, to be linked with nature, and to find solace in beauty. Rooted in the depth of Irish aesthetics is the worship and imitation of natural peacefulness. In *The Rose of the World* (ibid.: 31), Yeats pitifully wrote that in the wasteland of imagination and aesthetics, "no new wonders may betide". Political conflicts and warfare exploited the pursuit of beauty, and the whole world is an utter shambles. In *The Rose of Peace* (ibid.: 31-32), Yeats emphasized that peace and beauty are the core of Irish spirits.

As the same token, in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* (ibid.: 34), Yeats presented the longing for peace and beauty. "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,/ And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:/ Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;/ And live alone in the bee-loud glade." In this poem, Yeats' aspiration for nature is innocent, without any trace of his complicated myths. A get-away-from-it-all attitude is implied but the auxiliary verb "will" seems to suggest that the desired result of escaping from the tensions of the industrialized society is only an unattained ambition. With anguish and depression in his mind, Yeats depicted the ideal life in Innisfree. "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,/ Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;/ There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,/ And evening full of the linnet's wings." The country life here displays Irish people's reliance on land, thus building a strong sense of homeland and belonging. The connection between nature and humans here is the source of peace and beauty, as opposed to the chaos and atrocity of industrialized society. "I hear it in the deep heart's score." suggests that not only the harmony in nature but the inner peace and purity as well are inspired. Such a Shangri-la, therefore, constitutes a spiritual homeland rather than an elusion for Irish people.

Such a sense of mission is more comprehensively illustrated in *To the Ireland in the Coming Times* (2000, p.45-46). "Know, that I would accounted be/ True brother of a company/ That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong, / Ballad and story, ran and song;" To begin with, Yeats said that he's under the same umbrella as those revolutionists who strove for the independence of Ireland. Yeats himself, who tried to save the country in the eternal art, was also a loyal nationalist but in a more significant way. "My rhymes more than their rhyming tell/ Of things discovered in the deep, where only body's laid asleep." He stressed the importance of his

exploration into the depth of Irish culture, which the radical nationalists with their violence can not reach. "I cast my heart into my rhymes,/ That you, in the dim coming days,/ May know how my heart went with them/ After the red-rose-bordered hem." At the end of the poem, Yeats exhibits his devotion to Ireland, the dignified lady with the red-rose-bordered hem, in his poetry, and when she's ultimately free and independent, she would understand and think highly of his good intentions and endeavors.

3.3 Spirituality Salvation in Eternal Beauty

In his later life, Yeats' aesthetic modernity manifests itself mainly through seeking eternal beauty for the betterment of spirituality, and Byzantium is the spiritual homeland.

Byzantium is the city of eternal art, symbolizing both the peak of immortal Greco-Roman art and the habitat where life and death can be transcended in an aesthetic sense. In *Sailing to Byzantium* (2000, p.193), Yeats first pointed out that "That is no country for old men." With the resignation to his senility, he criticized "Those dying generations" who cared more about sensual enjoyment than immortal art, "monuments of unageing intellect". The forlorn aged man, therefore, decided to sail to the holy city Byzantium, where a sense of integration was unfolded in "the gold mosaic". In Byzantium, the heart with worldly and animalistic desires would be scoured off by art at its highest level and be gathered "into the artifice of eternity", a golden bird singing "what is past, or passing, or to come". Here, Yeats metaphorically presents the theme of spirituality, which centers more on the study of artworks that elevate the intellectual capacity of the soul. Old age, from Yeats' view, is all about how one utilizes one's wisdom for the betterment of the soul. As the culture was dying, he talked about the unshakable role of classical art and its magnificence where souls can rejoice.

If *Sailing to Byzantium* depicts Yeats' journey to Byzantium, then the poem *Byzantium* (ibid.: 251-252) is his experience in the holy city. The major theme in *Byzantium* can be analyzed as human imperfection versus the perfectness of art. The poet thought of human life as nothing and momentous while the man-made arts remain forever. By confirming the important role of humans in art creation, Yeats here emphasized humans' subjectivity amid the nihilism in modern society. Therefore, he encouraged Irish people to establish their spiritual homeland in the pursuit and creation of beauty, the cultural legacy of Ireland, and at the same time, to find inspiration for salvation in other civilizations, especially Greek culture.

Furthermore, education and eugenics are also included in Yeats' ideal of salvation. As Terence Brown observes, Yeatsian cultural nationalism was an inclusive movement that would prove a spiritual resource in which the divisions of Irish society could be made nugatory in a rich harmony of independent, freedom-loving, national self-assurance (1999, p.88-89). On the other hand, Bernard McKenna claims that in *On the Boiler*, Yeats depicts the collapse of his paradigm for Ireland's renewal through culture and discerns the seeds for a new cultural movement rooted in education and eugenics (2012, p.73). This new cultural nationalism can redeem the Irish nation, heal the society, and restore the soul.

4. Conclusion

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this thesis, it's now possible to state that Yeats' nationalism is not the antithesis of his modernity, but the former can crystallize the latter in the poet's exploration of national aesthetics as the basis of independence from the atrocity of colonization, industrialization and the decay of Irish civilization.

In the reflection and criticism of modern society regarding politics, religion, and spirituality, we can see Yeats' meditation on modern civilization. In his exploration of aesthetic space from Irish cultural legacy, Yeats' responsibility and homeland consciousness are revealed in poetic rhymes. The seeking of salvation for Ireland in eternal art and the integration of civilizations further manifests his aesthetic modernity in view of combining nationalism and internationalism. Even though Yeats himself admitted the collapse of his cultural paradigm in his twilight years, his endeavors for Ireland's independence are still significant to the country's resurrection and enlightening to other civilizations under colonization. The analysis of Yeats' poem from the perspective of aesthetic modernity is therefore able to provide a different insight into Yeats' contribution to both Ireland and the world despite limitations. Future studies are expected to study Yeats more comprehensively based on aesthetic modernity or other interdisciplinary theories and meanwhile without overlooking the close reading of poetry.

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