

Greek Mythological Elements in Yeats' Poems

Take a Woman Homer Sung and among School Children as an Example

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Abstract—The ancient Greek culture can be a chief origin of the European culture. Yeats showed a strong interest in the myth, especially the tragedies of Ancient Greece. He derived a lot from them to compose symbols and images in literary creation. This paper aims at a research in Yeats' application of the Greek elements in his poems by interpreting *A Woman Homer Sung* and *Among School Children*, to give a better understanding of Yeats' philosophy of arts.

Keywords—Yeats; Irish; Greece; mythology; epic

I. INTRODUCTION

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1864—1937) has provided a great number of revolutionary works in literary history, among them poetry and play are the gyre's mainstream. Beyond all question, poetry is his greatest achievement. On an overlook of Yeats' creative writing, the legends of ancient Greece have been a continuous resource of quotation, intellectual enquiries and philosophical images. By extracting and adapting them to his literary composition, Yeats shed his poetry an everlasting artistic charm.

The civilization of ancient Greece has been an important origin of European world. In a sense, the Renaissance is the renaissance of literature and art in ancient Rome. From then on, every time the ideological trend takes change, there will always be someone calling for "back to the ancient Greek" in the realm of arts and literature. Celebrities in the western world invariably recalled to the ancient Greece as their spiritual home, where they can find mental freshness and moral support. This can be seen as sort of Oedipus complex in culture.

Yeats devoted all his life to national liberation movement in Ireland. He innovated boldly in his literary creation and applied a lot of representative elements in the legends of ancient Greece, thus enlightened his poetry with a perpetual magic. He combined the Irish civilization and ancient Greek culture, thus created a magnificent historical viewpoint and literary effect, making his poetry immortal. By interpreting the literary work, we can have a better understanding of Yeats' application of legendary elements in ancient Greece and experience his mastery writing skills in a cultural integration, and also the aesthetics in his literary creation. Meanwhile, the analysis of Yeats' work will be more specific and comprehensive.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE LEGENDS IN ANCIENT GREECE

Bertrand Russell, the author of *A History of Western Philosophy* said in the preface of the book "Without some knowledge of the centuries between the fall of Rome and the rise of the medieval Papacy, the intellectual atmosphere of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can hardly be understood" (Russell, 1967). Greek civilization has a strong connection with the European continent genealogically. The former made so many accomplishments both in ideology and art within a short period, therefore, successfully it supported the view that Europe was the center of human civilization. The arguments are powerful and affluent. Traditionally speaking, ration is a given as a gift to the ideology of the Greeks. Brilliant culture is given birth to such a nation thanks to the geography. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel put forward a classic statement: "Among the Greeks we feel ourselves immediately at home, for we are in the region of Spirit; and though the origin of the nation, as also its philological peculiarities, may be traced farther—even to India—the proper Emergence, the true Palingenesis of Spirit must be looked for in Greece first." (Hegel, 1956)

The first Greek image arose in the poet's heart was the Homeric Youth of the Trojan, which was also the element the Greek world lives on. It was applied to Yeats' poems creatively as a bountiful resource of imagination, especially in his latter period of creation. At that time, he can adapt these legends and icons freely and effortlessly to expression of his philosophical controversy using binary oppositions. In addition to historical and emotional elements, Yeats' personality, such as sensitiveness, sentimentality, imagination and passion, contributed greatly to the novelty in his writing.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE LEGENDARY ELEMENTS IN YEATS' POEMS

A. *Troy and Helen in A Woman Homer Sung*

In his twenties, Yeats got acquainted with Maud Gonne, a famous actress. He started his lifelong affection and begun to pursue her from then on. He took part in political and revolutionary activities with her. In Yeats' mind, she is a pilgrim to ideality and can sacrifice anything to reach the enlightened destination. She possessed unparalleled beauty and impeccable grace. As a matter of fact, before meeting her, Yeats had tried several times to blend Greek legendary

element in his writing and insert influence to the local literature in Ireland. Then, Yeats wrote more splendid works which far surpassed his former ones in both popularity and artistic taste. Unfortunately, Maud turned him down all her life. She married a military officer who was also a nationalist in Ireland Independence Movement in 1903. Yeats' affection didn't diminish for this. He suffered a lot till 15 years later. He got married to George Hadleys. Nevertheless, the love for Maud Gonne influenced Yeats profoundly. From then on, Maud Gonne became a constant inspiration for Yeats creation. In his sub consciousness, he believed that Helen and Maud Gonne are two presentations of the same conception. In political belief, Maud Gonne and Yeats are all nationalists. But as to the form of revolution, they had different opinions and propositions. She approved of violation through which the independence and autonomy can be achieved. On the other hand, in Homer's Epic, Helen is the immediate cause of Troy's destruction. Therefore, in Yeats' creation, he compared Maud Gonne to Helen constantly, thus generated a unique and colorful literary effect. In *A Woman Homer Sung*, Helen symbolized Maud Gonne and enlightened the work a unique style of its own.

In Greek legends, the war of Troy was triggered by the elopement of Prince Paris and Helen, the queen of Sparta and the wife of Menelaus. To take the revenge, the brother of Menelaus, the king of Mycenaean, Agamemnon led a united army of Greece to attack Troy. The cause of the war is Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. It seems ridiculous and unbelievable. Therefore, Helen's identification has to be clarified. As a matter of fact, Helen maintains close ties with Aphrodite, the Goddess of fertility in Greek legends. The war was given rise due to a conflict among three Goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. They contended for a golden apple on which was written: to the most beautiful. At that time, Paris was called on to make the arbitration. Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman on the earth. Eventually, she won the golden apple. In a way, Helen belongs to Aphrodite. Helen is the most beautiful woman on the earth while Aphrodite is the most beautiful eternal. In fact, Helen's identity is nothing but an embodiment of Aphrodite. The Goddess probably came from Asia Minor Peninsula (Vernant, 1988). Therefore, she helps the Trojans in the war since they came from there, too. In Homer's Epic, she was described Cyprian. In the very beginning, she was a primitive goddess in charge of farm work. Her power involves everything in the nature. Because farming has a strong characteristic of reproduction worship, she became the embodiment of sexual sensation and the guardian of the prostitutes. She was leveled up to the Goddess of Affection till the classical period, and then evolved to the representative of love. In legends of former times, Helen was the goddess of plant and farm work, too. As to the division of power, she confronted with Aphrodite. The latter one became better-known, comparatively Helen became pettier and lesser, till at last she was totally replaced. In Homer's Epic, Helen was the daughter of Zeus. She did have some character of goddess. Her turn from a goddess to a woman implies a destiny of cycling and everlasting. Since plant follows the regulation of nature and grows according to the seasons, the goddess in charge of farming has the grantee of good harvest, even the productivity of life. Now, we can interpret the reason

why the united army of Greece would conquer Troy and get Helen back at any price. Their fundamental objective was to revive the economy of Mycenaean and make it an affluent society again. Helen is nothing but a symbol. To have enough to eat and wear is the ultimate objective in an agricultural society, which corresponded exactly to Yeats' desire to revive Irish local culture (Vernant, 1988). In the late 19th century, Yeats took part in the Irish Independence activities passionately, but ended up withdrawing from political platform due to a disagreement with the organizers. Later, he shifted the focus to the cultural aspects, hoping to rebuild Irish spiritual and cultural core. To express, Yeats chose Helen to be his image conveying the meaning in the legend. She differs from those beauties in Chinese history who wrecked the country and brought ruin to people. Helen is not an ordinary people. She is immortal. We need to input her in a legendary verbal system for a better understanding. She is a mythological figure. Through Helen, we can see the truth of history in the language of mythology.

Helen corresponded perfectly to Maud Gonne. For one part, it exemplified the outstanding imagination and cognitive style of the poet. On the other hand, it deepened the connotation of the poem from an outside world to an inner one, therefore created an atmosphere of merciless loyalty and strong infection. At the end of the poem, Yeats wrote: "That life and letters seem/ But a heroic dream." It reminds the reader of Li Bai, an ancient Chinese poet. He led his whole life just like a swordsman. Even after his death, the heroic spirit between his lines lasted. Yeats did share similar experience. He wanted to be a hero in the Irish Independence movement to realize his ideal in literature and art. He wanted to gain international fame and win a place in the literary arena. Before the "heroic dream", there are "seem but". The two words showed us his opinion. In his eyes, both Helen and Maud Gonne are immortal, thus any comment would be unnecessary and even disrespectful. At the same time, it revealed the poet's loneliness and solitary inner world. The sadness overwhelmed the brilliant success of the poet and made the heroic dream valueless, nothing but "a word and a jest".

B. Leda and the Sage in among School Children

In Yeats' later period of production, mainly from 1926 to 1939, he also extracted diversified subjects from Greek legends. The only difference is that he wasn't furious or depressed by aging and wasn't frustrated by undesirable love affairs any more. In his mind, art and time would help him regain the lost beauty.

In 1926, Yeats visited a local convent school as a parliament member. Seeing the youthful faces, he immediately thought of his everlasting love, Maud Gonne, who once belonged to the school, too. Her beautiful image floated into his mind irresistibly. Then he composed this poem. In this work, the poet paddled a boat in the river of memory and returned to his youth. We all meditated with him as the reflection in the river were, Helen or Maud Gonne. When we read at the end of the poem "How can we know the dancer from the dance", we could help wondering, in Yeats' mind, did he really know the difference between the two conceptions? To make Maud Gonne resemble the legendary figure more, he

created a new word “Ledaean”. In his eyes, Maud Gonne is the only one that can load the word except Leda and her daughter.

In the poem, “Into the yolk and white of the one shell” ambiguously expressed some secret thoughts in the poet’s inner world. In “Plato’s parable”, the primitive condition of human being is androgynous. It resembles exactly a ball. Later, Zeus divided it into two parts and sex is an attempt to regain the unity. In fact, creationism like this can be seen in the legends of various nations. In the Greek mythology, Zeus is in charge of fire. Poseidon is in charge of water, while Hades is in charge of air. They take charge of the earth together. The four elements are abstracted by Empedocles as the fundamentals constructing the world. They floated and interacted constantly and evolved in two forces: love and hatred. Undoubtedly, the universe is also the outcome of the two forces (Vernant, 1988). Using the power of love to explain the world is common in primitive thoughts. First and foremost, we experience the world from our sensation. Then we conclude that everything is brought forth by love and sex. According to the theory of catharsis by Empedocles, the difference between man and God are caused by the level of knowledge. Gods are those who have got abundant and holy knowledge, while the common people only have obscure thoughts of the Gods. In “I dream of a Ledaean body” and “Plato’s parable”, the poet expressed ambiguously his willing to be combined with Maud Gonne, just “into the yolk and white of the one shell”, which means by the way of sex as Zeus and Leda did, Maud Gonne can borrow his power and knowledge. Here, the element of Greek myth became a carrier of his powerful emotion again.

In this poem, Yeats abstracted symbols from legends and applied them to philosophical meditations. He unified the life and everything in the world and made good use of the trinity to create an image group—the celebrated, the lover and the poet. The lover, the nun and the mother symbolized love, loyalty and affection respectively. Among the philosophers in ancient Greece, there were different views upon reality, too. Plato saw the truth through illusion. For him, the secular world is an imitation of idea. Aristotle found the truth in nature. He emphasized analysis and conclusion of former experience. Pythagoras believes that the harmonious tune of the universe should be played on “fiddle-stick or strings”, which means to find truth in an artistic form. In this poem, the poet unified flowers and trees, the dancer and the dance, the material and spiritual. When human (dancer) corresponds with art (dance), the art touches actual life, too. Eternity begins at this moment.

IV. CONCLUSION

To Yeats the artist and his art bore a crucial relationship to the ancient Greek civilization. Certainly, Yeats did feel that culture was a corrupting influence. It was certainly necessary for the artist to fly by the nets of myth and religion. (Ellmann, 1978) Even during the early years of his career, he thought that Greek culture should arise spontaneously out of different civilization as the expression of soul and poetry, just as it had in the European continent.

Greek culture is a priceless treasure to the world. Its artistic influence can be far and everlasting. Yeats, as a poet and

nationalist, had devoted all his life to the Irish Independence movement. Also, he had found a restless fountain from the Greek mythology. Legends revived the poetry and the artistic value got strengthened, too. They gave rise to a heroic sensation and enriched the lines with colorful images. Therefore, Yeats’ poetry gained immortality thanks to the innovation.

In 1923, Yeats won the Nobel Prize in literature. He was valued by “inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form that gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation”. Through interpreting his works, we’ve got a better understanding of Yeats’ application and development of the Greek mythological elements in his production. They gave the poems endless beauty and everlasting artistic charm.

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