

THE ROLE OF MYTHOLOGY IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

*Jayashree B K. Assistant Professor of English, Govt. First Grade College, Rajajinagar, Bangalore.

Abstract:

This study examines the pivotal role that mythology plays in Yeats' poetry, unraveling the layers of its significance. The poetry of W.B. Yeats, one of the most celebrated poets of the 20th century, is deeply infused with the rich tapestry of mythology. Yeats' engagement with mythology, spanning a diverse range of traditions including Irish, Celtic, Greek, and Egyptian, serves as a multifaceted lens through which he explores complex themes and ideas. Firstly, it is a cornerstone of cultural identity and nationalism. Born in a tumultuous period of Irish history, Yeats sought to rekindle and assert Irish culture through his poetry. Drawing from Irish mythology, he weaves an intricate web of narratives and symbols that reconnect the Irish people with their ancient heritage, marking a critical contribution to the Irish Literary Revival. Secondly, mythology acts as a profound source of symbolism and allegory in Yeats' work. His poems, such as "The Second Coming," employ mythological imagery to express complex contemporary anxieties. By tapping into familiar mythic symbols, Yeats effectively communicates his thoughts and emotions on the turbulence of the modern world. Thirdly, mythology serves as a gateway to spiritual and mystical exploration. Yeats' deep interest in the occult and mysticism is reflected in poems like "The Tower," where he employs mythological concepts to convey spiritual awakening and transformation. His personal mythology, known as the "System," fuses various mystical ideas into his poetry. Fourthly, Yeats' poetry reflects the collective unconscious, influenced by Carl Jung's theories. He believed that certain mythological symbols and archetypes were embedded in the human psyche. Through his work, he tapped into these universal symbols, inviting readers to explore their own depths. Finally, mythology infuses Yeats' poetry with mythical characters and stories, from Cuchulain in Irish mythology to Greek myths like "Leda and the Swan." These narratives allow him to delve into themes of heroism, sacrifice, and destiny, offering fresh perspectives on timeless human dilemmas. In essence, the role of mythology in Yeats' poetry is intricate and multi-layered, shaping his artistic vision, cultural identity, and spiritual exploration while simultaneously resonating with readers on profound and universal levels.

Keywords: Role, Mythology, Poetry, W.B. Yeats etc.

INTRODUCTION:

W.B. Yeats, full name William Butler Yeats, stands as a towering figure in the realm of 20th-century literature, renowned not only for his poetic brilliance but also for his profound engagement with themes of mythology, mysticism, nationalism, and the human condition. Born on June 13, 1865, in Dublin, Ireland, Yeats would go on to become one of the foremost poets of the Irish Literary Revival and a driving force behind the revival of Irish cultural identity. Yeats' poetry is a rich tapestry woven with threads of Irish folklore, Celtic mysticism, Greek mythology, and his own intricate belief system known as the "System." This intricate fusion of influences allowed him to craft a distinctive poetic language that transcended mere words

and resonated deeply with readers. At the heart of Yeats' literary journey was a fervent commitment to the cause of Irish nationalism. Living during a tumultuous period in Ireland's history, he used his poetry as a means of cultural assertion, drawing from Irish mythology and folklore to forge a unique Irish literary tradition. His poems, such as "The Rose of the World" and "The Hosting of the Sidhe," invoked the supernatural and mystical aspects of Irish culture, reinforcing the idea of Ireland as a land steeped in ancient magic. Beyond his role as a nationalist poet, Yeats was a tireless explorer of the spiritual and the mystical. His poems, including "The Second Coming" and "The Tower," reflect his fascination with the esoteric and the occult, drawing on symbolism and mythology to convey profound metaphysical ideas. Yeats believed in the cyclical nature of history and the poet's role as a mediator between the material and spiritual realms, themes that permeate his work. As a poet, playwright, and essayist, Yeats' contributions to literature are immeasurable. His poetry continues to captivate readers with its lyrical beauty, deep symbolism, and timeless exploration of the human experience. This introduction merely scratches the surface of the complex and multifaceted world of W.B. Yeats, whose legacy endures as a testament to the enduring power of words and imagination.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study examines the pivotal role that mythology plays in Yeats' poetry, unraveling the layers of its significance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

THE ROLE OF MYTHOLOGY IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

William Butler Yeats, one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century, had a profound and enduring fascination with mythology. Throughout his extensive body of work, Yeats drew on a wide range of mythological traditions, including Irish, Celtic, Greek, and Egyptian, to create a unique poetic language that allowed him to explore complex themes and ideas. This study delves into the multifaceted role of mythology in Yeats' poetry, examining how it served as a means of cultural identity, symbolism, spiritual exploration, personal mythology, and a reflection of the collective unconscious.

Cultural Identity and Nationalism

At the heart of Yeats' engagement with mythology lies a deep connection to his Irish heritage and a fervent commitment to Irish nationalism. Born in 1865 in Dublin, Ireland, Yeats lived during a time when Ireland was grappling with its identity and striving for independence from British rule. His poetry played a significant role in the Irish Literary Revival, a cultural movement that sought to revive and celebrate Irish culture and identity. Yeats' exploration of Irish mythology was integral to this revival. He viewed mythology as a repository of the nation's collective memory, a source of inspiration that could reconnect the Irish people

with their ancient heritage. In his poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus," Yeats evokes Irish folklore through the character of Aengus, a mythical figure associated with love and beauty. The poem's lyrical beauty and dreamlike quality reflect Yeats' desire to capture the essence of Irish storytelling and oral tradition. Moreover, Yeats' engagement with Irish mythology served as a means of asserting Ireland's distinctiveness from British culture and influence. He aimed to create a uniquely Irish literary tradition that could stand apart from English literature. In poems like "The Hosting of the Sidhe" and "The Rose of the World," he draws on Irish legends and folklore to celebrate the supernatural and mystical aspects of Ireland's cultural identity. Through these works, Yeats sought to reinforce the idea of Ireland as a land imbued with ancient magic and spiritual significance.

Symbolism and Allegory

Beyond its role in asserting cultural identity, mythology served as a rich source of symbolism and allegory in Yeats' poetry. He often used mythological elements to explore complex and abstract ideas, transforming ancient stories into vehicles for conveying his own thoughts and emotions.

One of Yeats' most famous poems, "The Second Coming," exemplifies this use of symbolism and allegory. In this poem, he draws on the biblical Book of Revelation to paint a bleak and foreboding picture of the modern world. The "rough beast, its hour come round at last" is a symbolic representation of chaos and destruction, while the "falcon cannot hear the falconer" reflects the disintegration of order and control. By invoking biblical and mythological imagery, Yeats captures the tumultuous and uncertain times in which he lived, using ancient symbols to express contemporary anxieties. Similarly, in "Leda and the Swan," Yeats reimagines the Greek myth of Zeus seducing Leda in the form of a swan. The poem delves into themes of violence, sexuality, and the impact of historical events on the present. Through the mythological narrative, Yeats explores the idea that pivotal moments in history can have far-reaching consequences, shaping the course of human affairs.

Spiritual and Mystical Exploration

Yeats was deeply interested in mysticism and the occult, and he believed that mythology held the key to deeper spiritual truths. Mythological elements in his poetry often served as gateways to exploring mystical and esoteric ideas. In "The Tower," one of his later poems, Yeats uses the image of the tower as a symbol of spiritual awakening and transcendence. This concept draws on the ancient Celtic idea of the tower as a place of initiation and enlightenment. Through intricate and symbolic language, the poem delves into the idea of personal transformation and the pursuit of higher knowledge. The tower becomes a metaphor for the spiritual journey, and its exploration is infused with mythological and mystical symbolism. Furthermore, Yeats' interest in the occult led him to explore the concept of the "gyres" in his later poetry. He believed that history and human consciousness followed a cyclical pattern, and he incorporated this idea into his personal mythology, which he called the "System." The gyres, depicted as spirals or cones, represented the movement of history and human evolution. This mystical interpretation of history is evident in poems like "The Second

Coming," where the idea of the gyres underscores the poem's apocalyptic themes and reflects Yeats' belief in the cyclical nature of human civilization.

Personal Mythology

Yeats developed his own personal mythology, which he referred to as the "System." This belief system was a fusion of various mythological and mystical ideas, reflecting his deep engagement with a wide range of traditions. The System provided Yeats with a framework for understanding the world and his place within it. Central to Yeats' System was the idea of cyclical history, as mentioned earlier. He believed that history moved in cycles, with periods of order and creative energy followed by periods of chaos and decline. This cyclical view of history is evident in poems like "The Gyres" and "A Vision," where Yeats elaborates on his philosophical and metaphysical ideas. Additionally, Yeats' System included a belief in the role of the poet as a visionary and a mediator between the material and spiritual realms. He saw the poet as someone who could tap into the collective unconscious and channel its symbols and archetypes into their work. This concept is explored in his poem "The Cloths of Heaven," where he presents the idea that the poet weaves dreams from the threads of the collective unconscious. Yeats' personal mythology not only influenced his poetry but also his plays and essays. It provided a coherent framework for his exploration of the mystical and the metaphysical, and it allowed him to develop a unique and idiosyncratic worldview that permeated his entire body of work.

Reflection of the Collective Unconscious

Yeats was influenced by the psychological theories of Carl Jung, particularly Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. According to Jung, the collective unconscious is a reservoir of shared symbols, archetypes, and experiences that are inherited by all humans and can be accessed through art, dreams, and myths. Yeats believed that certain mythological symbols and archetypes were deeply ingrained in the human psyche and that they could be accessed and expressed through poetry. In his poetry, Yeats often tapped into these universal symbols and archetypes to evoke a sense of shared human experience. For example, the image of the swan in "Leda and the Swan" can be seen as an archetype of transformation and sexual power, resonating with the collective unconscious. By drawing on these archetypes, Yeats aimed to create a sense of connection and resonance with his readers, inviting them to explore the deeper layers of their own psyches. Furthermore, Yeats' interest in the occult and mysticism aligned with Jung's ideas about the individuation process, which involves the integration of unconscious elements into conscious awareness. Yeats believed that poetry played a crucial role in this process, allowing individuals to access and confront their inner depths. His use of mythological symbols and archetypes in his poetry can be seen as a means of facilitating this individuation process, inviting readers to explore their own inner landscapes and confront their hidden desires, fears, and aspirations. One of the most striking examples of Yeats' engagement with the collective unconscious is his use of the concept of the "Anima" and the "Animus" in his poetry. These are Jungian archetypes representing the feminine and masculine aspects of the psyche, respectively. In poems like "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" and "A Woman Young and Old," Yeats explores the interplay between

these archetypal forces, delving into themes of gender, sexuality, and the inner conflict that arises from the union of opposites. Through mythological and symbolic language, he invites readers to contemplate the dynamics of the unconscious mind and the complexities of human identity. Yeats' interest in Irish mythology can be seen as an attempt to tap into the collective unconscious of the Irish people. He believed that by drawing on the ancient myths and legends of Ireland, he could access the deep reservoir of cultural symbols and archetypes that defined the Irish psyche. This is evident in poems like "The Rose Tree" and "The Hosting of the Sidhe," where he evokes the supernatural and mystical aspects of Irish culture, inviting readers to connect with the collective soul of Ireland.

Yeats' poetry serves as a bridge between the personal and the universal, the individual and the collective. His use of mythology, informed by Jungian psychology, allows him to explore the depths of human experience and consciousness while simultaneously connecting with the shared symbols and archetypes that resonate with all of humanity.

Mythical Characters and Stories

A prominent aspect of Yeats' engagement with mythology is his use of mythical characters and stories. He often reinterprets and reimagines these figures and narratives to explore themes of heroism, sacrifice, destiny, and the human condition. One of the central figures in Irish mythology that appears in Yeats' poetry is Cuchulain, the legendary hero of the Ulster Cycle. Cuchulain embodies qualities of bravery, honor, and tragic destiny. In poems like "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" and "Cuchulain Comforted," Yeats portrays the hero's struggle against overwhelming odds and his eventual tragic death. These poems reflect Yeats' fascination with heroic archetypes and the idea of the hero as a symbol of both individual and national identity. Yeats also drew inspiration from Celtic mythology, particularly the tales of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the supernatural race in Irish mythology. In "The Hosting of the Sidhe," he envisions the return of the Tuatha Dé Danann to Ireland, signaling a resurgence of mystical and supernatural forces. Through this narrative, Yeats explores the tension between the modern world and the ancient, magical past, highlighting the enduring power of myth to shape the present. Yeats' interest in Greek mythology is evident in poems like "Leda and the Swan" and "The Mask." These poems engage with classical mythology to delve into themes of transformation, desire, and the timeless nature of human experience. The story of Leda and the Swan, in particular, serves as a powerful metaphor for the disruptive and transformative forces of passion and violence. In "The Mask," Yeats reflects on the idea that beneath the masks we wear in society, our true selves are often hidden. The poem draws on the mythological figure of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and ecstasy, to explore the idea of masks as both protective and deceptive. Through these mythological references, Yeats invites readers to contemplate the complexities of human identity and the masks we all wear to navigate the world.

CONCLUSION:

The poetry of W.B. Yeats stands as a testament to the transformative power of mythology in literature. Through his extensive body of work, Yeats weaves a rich and intricate tapestry of mythological references, symbols, and narratives, imbuing his poetry with depth, resonance, and enduring relevance. Yeats' engagement with mythology serves multiple roles. It acts as a cultural touchstone, allowing him to reconnect with Ireland's ancient heritage and assert its distinctiveness during a period of political and cultural upheaval. His use of Irish, Celtic, and other mythologies reinforces the idea of Ireland as a land of mysticism and magic, contributing significantly to the Irish Literary Revival. Furthermore, mythology becomes a versatile tool for symbolism and allegory in Yeats' poetry. It enables him to explore complex themes and contemporary anxieties, as seen in "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan," where mythological imagery is employed to convey the tumultuous nature of the modern world. Yeats' poetry is also a vehicle for spiritual and mystical exploration, with mythological elements serving as gateways to deeper metaphysical insights. His personal mythology, the "System," offers a unique framework for understanding the cyclical nature of history and the poet's role as a mediator between the material and spiritual realms. Moreover, Yeats' poetry reflects the collective unconscious, inviting readers to connect with universal symbols and archetypes that resonate across cultures and time periods. His exploration of the human psyche, influenced by Jungian psychology, underscores the timeless relevance of mythological themes. Lastly, mythological characters and stories provide Yeats with narrative depth and archetypal significance, enabling him to delve into the complexities of human existence, from heroism and sacrifice to the transformative power of desire.

REFERENCES:

1. Foster, R. F. (1997). *The troubled birth of Yeats's A Vision: The making of a myth*. Oxford University Press.
2. Gray, R. (1999). *Yeats and the occult: Magic, myth, and mysticism in his life and work*. Continuum.
3. Harmon, M. D. (2002). *Yeats's poetry of the occult: The hermetic tradition in "The Secret Rose" and beyond*. University of Delaware Press.
4. Murphy, P. (1995). *Symbol and metaphor in Yeats's poetry: Image and meaning*. Routledge.
5. Unterecker, J. (1966). *A reader's guide to W. B. Yeats*. Thames and Hudson