

Yeats's Mythology and the Industrial Revolution

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Abstract

The Industrial Revolution took Europe by storm. There were those who were fine with the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, and of course there were others who were resistant. The Industrial Revolution is what forced people to conform to a new way of life. People were made to move from a slow paced, rural life style to a faster, city-like, constantly moving, factory- based way of life, and it came as a great shock and issue for many. William Butler Yeats was one of the people who became resistant to the Industrial Revolution. The changes moved Yeats to focus on bringing back the ideas of Irish nationalism and identity. Yeats used his literary works, such as his poem "The Stolen Child" to promote the feeling of Irish nationalism through the traditional mythology by foreshadowing what was to come from the modernization of society. While this poem appears to simply be a telling of evil faeries and stolen children, it is actually a representation of the Industrial Revolution stealing the traditional Irish way of life.

Keywords: Mythology, Industrial Revolution, Traditional Ireland

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats had a long and constantly changing career. His talents spread to many different genres and areas of his life. However, perhaps that most prominent area comes forward in his poetry. His poetry praises Ireland, the people, and their way of life. Through his poems "The Stolen Child", "To Ireland in the Coming Times", and "Under Ben Bulbin" he fights for Ireland's traditional way of life against the ever-growing, inescapable Industrial Revolution. He uses his poetry to speak for him and show the true promise of the Irish people.

This paper will focus on Yeats's attempt to revive the Irish spirit and identity through his writings. He spent his entire life trying to bring back the Irish feeling of pride by foreshadowing what was to come from the modernization of society and the loss of tradition. While Yeats demonstrated a wide variety of different genres, they all work towards the same goal- Irish pride and identity.

Ireland, as well as the rest of Europe, experienced the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. There were various reactions to the Industrial Revolution- those who accepted it and those who undoubtedly were against it. No matter which side of the spectrum a person fell in regard to the Industrial Revolution, there was no escaping the changes that were to come from it. It forced people to move from their slow paced, rural lifestyle to a faster, city-like, always moving, factory-based way of life. Yeats seemed frustrated by these changes and for him they were not an option. Thomas Flanagan states that, "Yeats's devotion to Ireland had, as its reverse, a detestation of urban, industrial civilization"¹. This furthers the argument that Yeats's poetry is a direct result of the love he holds for his country. Yeats states in a speech given in 1925 that "we [the Irish people] are one of the great stocks of Europe..."² and this belief is shown through his fight for the Irish way of life up until this point. Yeats spent his entire life trying to bring back the feeling of pride for being Irish and how they live.

2. Mythology

Yeats thought the best way to do this was to focus on the mythology of Ireland. He studied and interviewed the Irish people to find the closest interpretations to the original myths and legends as possible. As he did this he gained inspiration for his own works. His work “The Stolen Child” possesses both, his use of Irish mythology and his frustration with the Industrial Revolution, and through this poem he shows his readers that although the change may seem better in the end it is not. Yeats depicts the rural life as a lovely, fulfilling lifestyle: “the warm hillside/...Sing peace into his breast”³, that is ruined by the faeries who take the spirit of life away. These lines are a reminder at how beautiful the Irish way of life and surroundings are without a modernization of the society.

Yeats dedicated his life works to the idea of Irish mythology. Throughout his entire life he did many things to attribute to Ireland and their identity. He helped found the Irish Literary Theatre, or the Abbey Theatre, The Municipal Gallery of Art (now Hugh Lane), and he even supported his sister who opened a press that strictly published works of Irish interest. He studied the Irish and Celtic myths thoroughly and from them produced his own versions, but he also collected them into anthologies. He believed the “way of working for unity was to revive the ancient Irish language and publish translations of its myths, legends, and folklore”⁴. Through this process, Yeats began to develop a very personal interest in the mythology as well.

3. “To Ireland in the Coming Times”

John Moore says in his book, *Masks of Love and Death*, “Mythology was that universe for Yeats, for in myths peoples and nations had embodied their vision of themselves and poets had been the custodians of the myths”⁵. Moore’s book makes the possibility of awakening the Irish heart a reality. Through the use of mythology people were able to come together and envisioned themselves as a nation with the possibilities of what could be. Mythology gave him a way to show what he truly desired for the Irish people. It becomes clear through his works that Yeats believed, if possible, his poetry could show people what the Industrial Revolution could do, and if he could achieve that- he could achieve awakening the heart of the Irish nation. In his poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times” he says, “When time began to rant and rage/ The measure of her flying feet/ Made Ireland’s heart begin to beat”⁶. Each of these lines gives us three distinct ideas from Yeats. The first line, “When time began to rant and rage” shows the interruption of rural country life from the uprising of cities, factories, and hourly wages. Next comes “The measure of her flying feet.” This line tells us about Yeats’s opinion of the current way of life for the English people (and its not a very good one). The fast-paced lifestyle they had grown accustomed to would never compare to that of rural Ireland’s living patterns and their traditional way of life. The following line is quite possibly the most important of the three lines. It tells readers that there is an awakening of Irish nationalism. A ‘Romantic Ireland’ [the term coined for Yeats’s attempt to revive the Irish sense of self], can now be understood in part as the name given to the attempts to realize the full self-consciousness of the Irish people. In the cultural and historical practice of collecting and recording folk tales, this takes the form of establishing a tradition in which common (in all senses) tales express a national identity.⁷ This section of the poem advocates for Ireland and its people to come alive once again. “To Ireland in the Coming Times” is only one instance in which Yeats is using his poetry to show the harm that can come from the Industrial Revolution.

4. The Industrial Revolution and “The Stolen Child”

Yeats was concerned with what was to come from the Industrial Revolution. It appears through his writing that he believed the Industrial Revolution to be a false promise of wealth, luxury, and good times. The poem “The Stolen Child” is a representation of this belief.

In connection with “The Stolen Child” one must know that in Irish mythology faeries were seen as mischievous, evil creatures. They played on human desires and would attempt to entice them with the promise of gifts and fantasy to trick people into acting as the faeries wished and come away with them to their land. “The faeries kidnap us into their world, and do their best to keep us there by the allure of their beauty. Many have argued that the Romantic images that we have typically come to associate with the faery world are merely lies by which the faeries attempt to convince us to come away with them”⁸. These same tactics were used by those who promoted the Industrial Revolution. They promised excess happiness and pleasure through a new approach and understanding to life. In many of the stories children were told by their parents faeries were involved to remind them to behave accordingly. Although; for Yeats,

“His Fairyland, is a dangerous liminal space as well as a wellspring of poetic inspiration”⁹. Yeats also goes against the normal approach and rather than a fairytale that is a comedy, he designed fairy tales that were “at best amoral”⁹.

Many people are unable to look past the idea of “The Stolen Child” being a scary bedtime story for children. However, if read closely, there is a much deeper underlying message to be taken from the poem- the Industrial Revolution has caused harm to the traditional Irish way of life. This message can be seen if one understands the faeries in “The Stolen Child” to represent the Industrial Revolution while the child can be seen as traditional Ireland. The poem is still a sort of warning but not in the same sense as it was before. Yeats is letting us see the faeries try to convince the child to go with them because his “world’s more full of weeping than you/ can understand”³. The faeries (Industrial Revolution) offer ideas of pleasure and leisure.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses

The dim grey sands with light

Far off by the rosses

We foot it all the night.³

Readers can see the good life that is being expressed and promoted by the faeries.. These lines represent what the promise for a better way of life that being involved with the Industrial Revolution can give a person, or a nation in this case. Shortly after, the lines “While the world is full of troubles/ and is anxious in its sleep”³ prove that the Industrial Revolution is attempting to entice people with the ideas of dancing, social life, and extravagant parties because that is what the world wants now. The world has moved away from being content with the farm hand, simple, everyday way of life. They dream of more for themselves as they are sleeping. At the same time though, if one does give into the promise of the Industrial Revolution they are leaving behind the way of life they have always known.

The poem shows the Industrial Revolution as a predator who seeks out those who are desperate for a change or a new means of living: “And whispering in their ears/ Give them unquiet dreams”³. The idea is to bring in new people who are more open minded and willing to accept the changes that are coming. The Industrial Revolution attracts those people who are perhaps in a situation in which they have no choice other than to accept these new ideas about human ways of life in order to survive, but it also attracts people who are searching for something new in their lives. The next lines, “Leaning softly out/ From the ferns that drop their tears/ Over the young streams”³ show a difference in thought amongst the people of the time the ferns that appear to be dropping their tears represent those who advocate for the traditional way of life while the young streams are those people who have begun to give in to the Industrial Revolution. The ferns are showing their concern for those who have pulled away from traditional Ireland.

Lastly, the poem shows the change and the absolute loss of Irish tradition when the faeries succeed in convincing the child to go away with them.

Away with us he’s going,

The solemn-eyed:

He’ll hear no more the lowing

Of calves on the warm hillside

Or the kettle on the hob

Sing peace into his breast,

Or see the brown mice bob

Round and round the oatmeal chest.³

The lines above show Yeats’s readers what they will lose if they decide to join in on the ‘fantasy’ idea that the Industrial Revolution represents. The Irish people would no longer experience certain aspects of the traditional Irish life such as the wildlife, the pastures and landscapes, or even just something as simple as the sounds that occur all

around a person on any given day. And while “the world’s more full of weeping” the homely details of the real world seem rather attractive with its warm hillsides, making it just as enticing for those who believe in an awakening of the Irish heart.

5. “Under Ben Bulbin”

The next poem to focus on is “Under Ben Bulbin”. It is not only connected to his views towards the Industrial Revolution, but also his supernatural and spiritual beliefs. It is apparent that Yeats had a belief that if a person’s body passes on, but a soul is immortal. Yeats expresses this idea in so many of his works. He ties this idea of traditional Ireland dying as well and being taken over by the new age and the Industrial Revolution. In “Under Ben Bulbin” it says,

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all... ¹⁰

The lines sum up Yeats’s idea of body and soul. The lines also show the changing of Ireland. “Many times man lives and dies” shows the dying of traditional Ireland as the new age begins to take over. While traditional Ireland is dying, Yeats focused on bringing back a feeling of Irish pride. These lines and his belief in an immortal soul all tie into this.

Furthermore, in “Under Ben Bulbin” Yeats once again shows his distaste for a new way of doing things:

Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard- riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers’ randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay... ¹⁰

Here he is showing his readers of the ways of the past. He also writes “Scorn the sort now growing up/ All out of shape from toe to top./ Their unremembering hearts and heads”⁸. This moment in the poem is a reflection of the young people. Here they are being disrespectful and ignorant to the ways of the past. Yeats is praising traditional Ireland while simultaneously showing that younger generations will not appreciate it unless they learn its worth. This is a crucial aspect when looking at the idea of the Industrial Revolution within his works. The younger generation is who will ultimately decide the future of Ireland; therefore, if they are flippant towards a more traditional way of life, then they will be consumed by the images the Industrial Revolution presents for them.

6. Conclusion

Yeats was passionate throughout his entire life to the cause of Irish identity and pride. His relationship with his nation was his “most temptuous love affair”². He uses his work to present his ideas of an ideal society for the Irish people. In Yeats’s ideal society, the Irish people hold on to their Irish traditions and refrain from the current influences pressing upon them. “To Ireland in the Coming Times” shows his readers that he wants there to be an awakening of the Irish heart- this awakening would be a response, a result of the fight against the Industrial Revolution. It shows that if there

is a momentary weakness to give in to the 'faeries' or the 'new way of life' that he still believes Ireland as a nation will find her way back home. Through "The Stolen Child" Yeats conveys his distaste with the modern world that is taking over. He wants people to know that even though modernization seems like a beautiful, fantasy, futuristic type of idea; there will be downsides as well and that the Irish people cannot forget their Irish identity and tradition during those times. In "Under Ben Bulbin" he says,

Through seven heroic centuries;

Cast your mind on other days

That we in coming days may be

Still the indomitable Irishry.¹⁰

This is representation of his ideas of body and soul and that he is looking for the day that traditional Ireland remembers that they are unable to be defeated, conquered, and eventually forced into a new way of life. Ultimately, Yeats shows he believes that traditional Ireland is dying, but as long as he is confident that the soul is immortal (and the soul represents the 'Irish heart') then he can always be optimistic that there will be an awakening of the Irish people despite these changes. Yeats's life's work was meant for a nation to find and remember themselves again.

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