

**The Limits of the Mask, or “Woman Lost”:
William Butler Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well***

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William Butler Yeats's 1916 play *At the Hawk's Well* is his first play based on Japanese Noh-drama. In this play, an old man and a young man wait in vain for the water which will make them immortal. Many critics have interpreted this play as Yeats's longing for rejuvenation from old age. For instance, Terence Brown states that this play "can also be read as an expression of the poet's deep desire for personal renewal as the years began to advance on him"(224). Although this is true, the play also represents Yeats's frustrated relationships with women, Maud Gonne, for instance.

Before analyzing the text, there is a need to discuss what "mask" signifies in the Yeatsian context. *A Vision*, his greatest occult speculation, says *Is* means one's nature and *Ought* one's "mask," which is the figure one wants to be (90). Richard Ellmann observes that Yeats was quiet and passive by nature, while he always longed to be an active and spontaneous person. Therefore, his nature and his mask were always in conflict throughout his life. Ellmann states "Yeats's dilemma was that he was naturally dreamy, poetic, and self-conscious, and therefore unable to act with the spontaneity of the man of action" (83). Surely Yeats was always torn apart between two masks. For instance, he was a "self-conscious" poet who wrote some poems whose themes are private, while he was also an active Irish senator who made speeches in public. On the other hand, Yeats used the concept of the mask to face and to attract women because of his anxiety about love, but his attempt ended in failure. In this play, the Old Man and the Young Man represent Yeats's nature and mask. For the male characters, especially the Young Man, drinking the water from the well is strongly connected with dominating the hawk-like woman who is the guardian of the well and attracts them, but they fail to drink it. These two figures reflect Yeats's conviction that the concept of the mask was no longer effective to attract women. In practice, Yeats had used masks since he started writing plays and it is true of *At the Hawk's Well*, but in later plays such as *The Words upon the Window-pane* or *Purgatory*, Yeats renounced the usage of and the idea of masks, though the influence from Noh, the Japanese mask drama, can still be seen in these plays. This fact also suggests that Yeats was sure that the theory of mask limited his plays. By examining this play, the limits of Yeats's concept of the mask will be made clear. Furthermore, I will show that Yeats used his theatre for the sake of confessing his broken relationships with women.

Being influenced by William Blake's famous line "Without Contraries is no progression"

(97), the “contraries” between his nature and mask were necessary for Yeats to develop. In his love poems, the “contraries” are represented as the poet’s anxiety about love. “The Mask,” from the volume *The Green Helmet and Other Poems*, expresses anxiety about love, and gives the impression that nature and mask are in tense relationship:

‘Put off the mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes’
‘O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.’

‘I would but find what’s there to find,
Love or deceit.’
‘It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what’s behind.’ (44)

In this poem, the man who demands the woman to “Put off the mask of burning gold / With emerald eyes” is attracted by his beloved, not knowing that “it was the mask engaged” his mind. He is unconsciously aware of that masks have the effects to attract beloveds. At the same time, by doubting whether “deceit” can be hiding behind her mask, the man implies the presence of his own “deceit” which he unconsciously hides behind his mask. Ellmann observes that the Yeatsian mask is “defensive armour” for the sake of facing “both the world and the beloved”, but in this poem the man is afraid of that his mask cannot protect the “deceit” from his lover anymore (175-176). Therefore, the fear of his mask’s frailty can be read from his doubt. Nevertheless, when the idea of mask occurred to Yeats for the first time, as Ellmann argues, the mask of an active person was crucial for Yeats to attract Maud Gonne, one of Yeats’s muse figures:

To win her [Maud Gonne], he would have to be the man of action, organizing and building for Ireland....Maud Gonne was a public figure, and to meet her on her own ground he had to spend far more time on public activities, so that the dream life, even though reinforced with the support of occult love, became harder to keep intact. (83-86)

Norman Jeffares also states that Michael Robartes, one of Yeats’s persona, was generated out of Yeats’s longing for a character whose temperament and experience was opposite from his

own:

When Yeats created Robartes he was himself ill and disappointed in love. Robartes was strong, violent, romantic, and athletic, sun-tanned and weather-beaten, successful as lover and man of action. (160)

In “Rosa Alchemica,” one of Yeats’s prose pieces, Robartes as mask is emphasized:

When we had started and Michael Robartes had fallen asleep, as he soon did, his sleeping face, in which there was no sign of all that had so shaken me and that now kept me so wakeful, was to my excited mind more like a mask than a face. (Jeffares, 160)

Notable is that Yeats’s wish for transformation is apparent in his earliest poem. “Fergus and the Druid,” a dialogue poem in the 1893 volume *The Rose*, is about a king who is weary of his duty as a king and longs to be another man:

Druid. What would you, king of the proud Red Branch
Kings?
Fergus. A king and proud! And that is my despair... Be no more a king
But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours...
A king is but a foolish labourer
Who wastes his blood to be another’s dream. (13-14)

As Jeffares writes, “It is difficult to say precisely when he first formulated this thought” about “his opposite”(159). However, this poem confirms that Yeats had had the idea of the mask from when he was quite young.

As for the two characters in *At the Hawk’s Well*, they are depicted as symbols of Yeats’s nature and mask. The Old Man symbolizes Yeats’s nature. He is passive and lacks spontaneity. Like Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, he does nothing but wait in his case for the water of Immortality to bubble up. The Old Man says:

Old Man: I have lain in wait
For more than fifty years, to find it empty,
Or but to find the stupid wind of the sea
Drive round the perishable leaves. (117)

In contrast, The Young Man represents Yeats’s mask. He is confident and impulsive. His name

“Cuchulain,” the name of the Irish legendary figure, shows that he is a heroic person, whom Yeats wanted to be and who is similar to Michael Robartes. Harold Bloom notes Cuchulain is “the hero proper for Yeats” (295). In the 1890’s, Yeats started to believe that Irish heroic figures in ancient times, like Cuchulain, embody his mask. According to James W. Flannery, in *Autobiographies* Yeats writes “every passionate man is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imagery, which he alone finds images that rouse his energy” (Flannery, 16). The Young Man shows off his strength by saying that he will keep himself awake by piercing his foot so that he will not miss the water bubbling up:

Young Man: My luck is strong,
It will not leave me waiting, nor will they
That dance among the stones put me asleep;
If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot. (118)

Obviously the two characters are different. This difference has a close relationship with “the tension caused by the conflict” between the introvert “poet” and the “man of action” in Yeats, as Jeffares mentions (166). However, that their two different temperaments co-exist in Yeats should not be ignored. Regarding the characters in this play, Katharine Worth writes “the two masks are kept in a most delicate balance” (161). This conflict and co-existence are sung by the musician in this play. The heroic Cuchulain in Yeats wants to keep himself awake and to become spontaneous, while the passive Old Man in Yeats wishes for a restful life:

Second Musician [singing]:
The heart would be always awake,
The heart would turn to its rest. (114)

Flannery observes that Yeats’s “conception of tragedy was born out of the continuous dialectic between opposites that warred within his mind” (15). Yeats writes “We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric, out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (Flannery, 14). The “quarrel” between the two masks within the poet was a significant element to bear “tragedy”.

Now there is a need to consider the reason *At the Hawk’s Well* can be read in a sexual context. In the play, the well is guarded by a woman who has the attributes of a hawk. Being guarded by the woman, the well has sexual meanings. According to Andrew Parkin, the well is “a sexual symbol” (121). The water’s bubbling up is a metaphor of orgasm and ejaculation,

but the image of “A well long choked up and dry” suggests the impossibility of and the failure of sexual intimacy (113). Moreover, this play is set in a “barren” ancient Ireland. Parkin also observes that this “barren land” is “Yeats’s own sexual landscape, his lack of a wife and ‘children and dogs on the floor’” (121). The play’s landscape, in other words, represents Yeats’s own sexual autobiography, where the man waits for the woman to speak to him, but in vain. The Old Man, Yeats’s passive nature, complains to the hawk-like woman:

Old Man [speaking]: Why don’t you speak to me? Why don’t you
say:
‘Are you not weary gathering those sticks?
Are not your fingers cold?’...
Your eyes are dazed and heavy....
Why do you stare like that? (115-116)

The hawk-woman does not respond and her mystical eyes represent her rejection of him. In Yeats’s poems and plays, the images of “dazed and heavy” eyes appear as the symbols of the discord between man and woman. For instance, in a poem called “Ephemera” from *Crossways*, his volume published in 1889, a man and a woman experience parting and the woman’s eyes imply her departure from the man. The man says:

‘Your eyes that once were never weary of mine
Are bowed in sorrow under pendulous lids,
Because our love is waning.’(6)

Beckett was one of the modern Irish playwrights who were strongly influenced by Yeats. As mentioned above, the motif of “waiting” is common to *At the Hawk’s Well* and *Waiting for Godot*. Moreover, the influence from Yeatsian plays on Beckett is apparent when Beckett writes in his play *Happy Days* “I call to the eye of the mind,” which is the first line of *At the Hawk’s Well* (58). ...*but the clouds...*, the TV drama whose title is quoted from Yeats’s poem “The Tower,” is undoubtedly Beckett’s homage to Yeats and *At the Hawk’s Well*. The close up of a woman’s eyes and the protagonist’s longing to be looked at by the woman in Beckett’s play are the same as the motif of *At the Hawk’s Well* and “Ephemera”:

V: With those unseeing eyes I so begged when alive to look at me...‘...clouds...but the clouds...of the sky...’...Look at me...Speak to me. (Beckett 420-421)

Miki Iwata writes about the similarity between Yeats's later plays and the theatre-of-the-absurd plays like Beckett in her book *The Lion and Hamlet: A Study of W.B. Yeats's Dramatic Works*. Iwata notes that the motif of failed communication between the characters is one of the most important characteristics of the theatre-of-the-absurd plays which is seen in the plays of Yeats (188-189). Furthermore, the collapsed relationship between the male and female characters is also an indispensable theme which is common to Yeats and Beckett's plays. Now I compare Yeats's 1930 play *The Words upon the Window-Pane*'s Swift and Stella with Beckett's 1963 play *Happy Days*'s Winnie and Willie. In these plays, the characters fail to communicate with their beloveds and their attempts to have a conversation with their companions end with one-sided monologues:

Mrs. Henderson [in Swift's voice]: Have I wronged you, beloved Stella? Are you unhappy? You have no children, you have no lover, you have no husband. A cross and ageing man for friend——nothing but that. But no, do not answer...O, you will live long after me, dear Stella, for you are still a young woman, but you will close my eyes. (Yeats, 319-320)

Winnie: Willie, look at me. [*Pause.*] Feast your old eyes, Willie. [*Pause.*] Does anything remain? [*Pause.*] No? [*Pause.*] I haven't been able to look after it, you know. [*He sinks his head.*] You are still recognizable, in a way. [*Pause.*] Are you thinking of coming to live this side now...for a bit maybe? [*Pause.*] No? [*Pause.*] Just a brief call? [*Pause.*] Have you gone deaf, Willie? [*Pause.*] Dumb? [*Pause.*] (Beckett, 62)

In *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, the spirit of Swift possesses the medium and confesses his anxiety about having sexual intimacy with women. Outwardly Swift seems to let Stella, his lover, not to say anything. However, in practice, by remaining silent Stella implies her perplexity about being the listener of Swift's anguished long talk. On the other hand, in *Happy Days* Winnie actively talks to her husband to receive a reply in spite of the difference between the situations in which both characters are put——Winnie is stuck in the hall and cannot move, while Willie is not and can——but she also fails to have a conversation with his husband. Although there is a big difference between Yeatsian and Beckettian monologues, both playwrights' dramaturgy has something in common in the sense that the motif of the broken relationship between man and woman plays the significant role and it is true of *At the Hawk's Well*, needless to say. The figure of the Old Man who could not be intimate with the

hawk-woman is similar to the characters in Beckett's plays. It's an exaggeration to say, but still the origin of the Beckettian theatre of the absurd lies in *At the Hawk's Well*.

To return to the images of eyes in *At the Hawk's Well*, the hawk-woman's eyes are destructive and in practice she causes the destruction of the Old Man and the Young Man. The woman has a close relationship with Balor, a legendary figure of Ireland. Since the 19th century, miscellaneous oral tales about Balor had been collected in Ireland and influenced many Irish writers. According to Bernhard Maier, Balor's eyes have mystical force to destroy his enemies (177).

Not only the hawk-woman's dazed eyes but her speechlessness widens the distance between her and the male characters. Her silence suggests that this mystical woman is sacred and untouchable. The woman can be regarded as a Sphinx symbolizing enigma. The Old Man speaks to the woman, but she does not respond to him:

Old Man: To-day you are stupid as a fish,
No, worse, worse, being less lively and as dumb....
It is enough to drive an old man crazy
To look all day upon these broken rocks,
And ragged thorns, and that one stupidface,
And speak and get no answer. (116)

The woman's speechlessness originated from the casting of Michio Ito as the hawk woman. Ito was a Japanese dancer who was not a native speaker of English. Iwata reports that Ito did not speak English at all and so the role of the hawk woman had to remain silent (124). Iwata also notes that in the first performance of this play Ito was directed to cry "Taka," the Japanese noun which means "hawk," instead of shrieking as if mimicking a real hawk (124). His cry in Japanese also emphasizes the distance between the Japanese hawk woman and the Irish male characters.

In spite of the hawk woman's destructiveness, the heroic young man stares at her eyes and dares to face her:

Old Man: Ah, you have looked at her;
She has felt your gaze and turned her eyes on us;
I cannot bear her eyes, they are not of this world,
Nor moist, nor faltering; they are no girl's eyes. (120)

For the Young Man, to drink the water of immortality and to gain the woman are the same:

Young Man: Why do you fix those eyes of a hawk upon me?
I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch....
Grey bird, you shall be perched upon my wrist.
Some were called queens and yet have been perched there. (120-121)

The hawk-woman begins to dance and eroticism and allurement can be read from her dance. By dancing sensually, the woman insists on her femininity. Although she was called a “girl” by the Old Man, in this scene the “girl” transforms into a “woman” (120). Her transformation might have a relationship with Yeats’s experience with Iseult Gonne, who is the daughter of Maud Gonne. According to Terence Brown, Yeats was being attracted by Iseult before he wrote *At the Hawk’s Well*, because Yeats felt that Iseult was growing into a “woman.” Brown writes “he [Yeats] remained obsessed by the erotic magnetism of women, their lives entangled with his own. Gonne’s daughter Iseult, now twenty-one, had begun to seem more than a ‘child’”(222). In 1917, Yeats made a proposal to Iseult, but he was rejected.

After the hawk-woman flees, both men miss the water bubbling up. The two characters’ failure is similar to Yeats, who failed to win a woman. To make matters worse, the Young Man is destined to face another woman called Aoife who controls his fate:

[The Musicians cry ‘Aoife!’ ‘Aoife!’ and strike gong.]
Young Man: What are those cries?
What is the sound that runs along the hill?
Who are they that beat a sword upon a shield?
Old Man: She has roused up the fierce women of the hills,
Aoife, and all her troop, to take your life (121)

The story of *At the Hawk’s Well* is linked with another of Yeats’s plays called *On Baile’s Strand*, in which the young man, Cuchulain, is attacked by Aoife and kills her son not knowing he is Cuchulain’s own son. Although 1904 play *On Baile’s Strand* was written before *At the Hawk’s Well*, this piece plays the role of a sequel to *At the Hawk’s Well*. Cuchulain is still young in *At the Hawk’s Well*, while in *On Baile’s Strand* he has grown into a mature man. In the last scene of *At the Hawk’s Well*, the young man decides to face Aoife, but in *On Baile’s Strand*, his life will be ruined by her. Therefore, as Harold Bloom observes, the fate of the two men who represent Yeats’s masks is to have “no salvation” (298).

Yeats used two masks to confront his anxiety about women in his actual life and *At the*

Hawk's Well reflects his sexual autobiography in which his two characters who represent Yeats's masks struggle to win a woman, but in vain. One of Yeats's masks, the Old Man, symbolizes Yeats's passive and dreamy persona and the other, the Young Man, his active and heroic one. However, the failure of these two characters can be read from the text of this play and it is also the failure of Yeats's attempt to face women. Through the medium of this play, Yeats confessed that he could not overcome his anxiety about love by using the mask to conceal his nature. *At the Hawk's Well* is the play in which the limits of the Yeatsian mask is represented.

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