

**“Then Dance, and That’ll Be a Miracle”:
The Cat and the Moon and Yeats in the 1920s**

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It is well known that William Butler Yeats's farce *The Cat and the Moon* is modeled on Japanese Kyogen. The play was written in 1917, first published in 1924, and first performed in 1926. The reason Yeats hesitated to stage the play until 1926 is because, as Richard Allen Cave notes, "Yeats described the text published in *The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems* by the Cuala Press in 1924 as 'probably unfinished'" because he was not sure how the characters should move (330). Yeats regarded the play as incomplete right until the first performance in 1926, though the text had been written nearly ten years before. The story of the play is quite simple. A Lame Beggar and a Blind Beggar search for "Saint Colman's holy well" to find a saint who can cure their lameness and blindness. When the beggars arrive at the well, the saint, who is invisible to both beggars throughout the play, appears. The saint offers them a choice between being cured or being "blessed". The Blind Beggar chooses to be cured and the Lame Beggar "blessed". The meaning of "blessed" remains uncertain until the invisible saint gets up on the Lame Beggar's back and enables him to dance without a walking stick.

The song sung in this play is, as the play's title suggests, about a cat and the moon. Shotaro Oshima writes that the combination of the cat and the moon implies the relationship between body and soul (188). Furthermore, the relationship between the cat and the moon is the same as the relationship between the Lame and the Blind Beggar. Many Yeatsian scholars agree with Oshima's interpretation. For instance, Anthony Bradley observes "The lame man on the blind man's back suggest soul and body, as Yeats acknowledged in his notes to the play" (171). However, what is the play's position in Yeats's career? How should the play be evaluated in relation to Yeats's development as an artist?

Before going to the main subject of my paper, there is a need to consider Yeats's situation in the 1920s, the time when he was writing *The Cat and the Moon*. Norman Jeffares writes, "In November 1924 Yeats had been ill, out of breath, with high blood pressure, and Mrs. Yeats brought him to Sicily where he saw the Byzantine mosaics" (253). Needless to say, this experience triggered one of Yeats's masterpieces "Sailing to Byzantium" included in *The Tower*, the volume which marked Yeats's notable transformation as a poet ("Yeats's change of style and his maturity were probably not generally recognized until the publication of *The Tower* in 1928" (Jeffares, 251)), The motif of the body started to play a key role from this

volume. The reason for the motif's emergence is, of course, due to the poet's consciousness of his aging body ("There was also the sharpened apprehension...of approaching conflagration in the world and, by approaching age, of ruin and decay. Yeats had become 'a smiling sixty year-old public man'" (Jeffares, 251)). In the second stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium", the conflict between the poet's body and soul is represented. In the stanza, the poet calls his aging body a "mortal dress":

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress (95)

In "The Tower", Yeats agonizes over the dilemma of body and soul, but, to use Jeffares's phrase, "his imagination grew stronger as his body decayed" (251):

What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?
 Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible— (95-96)

In both poems, the superiority of soul over body is expressed. For example, "the artifice of eternity" in "Sailing to Byzantium" can be read as the poet's longing for the perpetuation of his soul (95). Also, in "The Tower" Yeats states:

Now I shall make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come—
The death of friends, or death
Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath—
Seem but the clouds of the sky

When the horizon fades (100-101)

That the body was becoming the central theme of Yeats, as mentioned above, should not be forgotten. *The Cat and the Moon* was written when both the motif of the body and his actual physical problems started to haunt and to change Yeats. Not only the prominent poems from *The Tower* but also this play marks Yeats's transformation in the 1920s. The purpose of this paper is to show how significant the play is as a turning point for Yeats.

In Yeats's early years, the triumph of soul was a central theme for him. For instance, the 1892 play *The Countess Cathleen* is about the protagonist's sublime soul which overpowers earthly desire. In addition, Yeats's spiritual marriage to Maud Gonne suggests that Yeats's love for her was platonic, or had become less carnal. David Holdeman writes "she inspired far more than sexual desire. Because she shared many of his unorthodox religious interests, he quickly began to regard her as the embodiment of his spiritual beliefs" (13). There is a distance between the young Yeats of 1889 who wrote poems that celebrate the soul, like "Ephemera" ("our souls / Are love, and a continual farewell" (7)) and the poet of the 1933 "Crazy Jane" series who "sought a theme" in "lust and rage" ("A man if I but held him so / When my body was alive / Found all the pleasure that life gave" (140)). As stated above, the pieces written in the 1920s serve to bridge the gap between the early Yeats and the later Yeats. *The Cat and the Moon* is one of these pieces.

The play opens with the song about the cat and the moon:

First Musician: The Cat went here and there
And the moon spun round like a top
And the nearest kin of the moon,
The Creeping cat, looked up.
Black Minnaloushe stared at the moon,
For, wander and wail as he would,
The pure cold light in the sky
Troubled his animal blood. (289)

"The pure cold light" of the moon makes the cat, Minnaloushe, go "here and there". According to Oshima, this song is about the body which is controlled by the soul. The body, the cat, is not conscious of being dominated by the soul, the moon (186). The kinship between the cat and the moon relates to the connection between the Lame and the Blind Beggar. The stage

direction says “a blind man with a lame man on his back” (289). They depend on each other and, as Bradley states, symbolize “the duality of body and soul”. This duality is the antithesis to Christian thought. Bradley also writes “for the Christian, spiritual joy can be achieved by the denial of body” (170). However, in the play Yeats emphasizes the inseparability of body and soul and opposes the Christian idea. Moreover, Yeats caricatures Christianity by making the Christian saint utter absurdities. In the text of the play the Saint’s words are designated to the ‘First Musician’:

First Musician: Are you happy?
Lame Beggar: I would be if I was right sure I was blessed.
First Musician: Haven’t you got me for a friend?
Lame Beggar: I have so.
First Musician: Then you’re blessed. (295)

In this scene of the play, the Saint offers a choice to the two beggars whether they would like to be “cured” or “blessed”. The Blind Beggar chooses to “be cured of” his “blindness”, while the Lame Beggar chooses to “stay lame” and to be “blessed” (293).

The idea of uniting body with soul is related to Yeats’s concept of “The Unity of Being”. “The Unity of Being” is a philosophy about uniting the opposites, such as man and woman, day and night, and life and death. Although the poem “The Phases of the Moon” was included in the 1919 volume *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the line from the poem embodies the concept of “The Unity of Being” and foretells the emergence of the motifs of the body in the 1920s: “All thought becomes an image and the soul / becomes a body” (76).

As for *The Cat and the Moon*, in the last scene the Lame Beggar is ordered to dance by the saint:

First Musician: That’s no good.
Lame Beggar: No good, Holy Man?
First Musician: No good at all. You must dance.
Lame Beggar: But how can I dance? Ain’t I a lame man?
First Musician: Aren’t you blessed?
Lame Beggar: Maybe so.
First Musician: Aren’t you a miracle?
Lame Beggar: I am, Holy Man.
First Musician: Then dance, and that’ll be a miracle. (296)

After the dialogue, the Lame Beggar begins to dance without a walking stick. As Bradley mentions, his dance signifies a “Yeatsian image of a joyful union of body and soul” (171). Moreover, Bradley writes:

The spectacle of the Lame Beggar dancing with the invisible saint on his back recalls that other, brilliant image in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ of the soul singing all the louder “for every tatter in its mortal dress” (that is, its scarecrow-like body). (171)

Regarding “The Phases of the Moon”, Terri A. Mester explains the meaning of Yeatsian dance in the context of “The Unity of Being”:

In dance, there is no disunity of being because it is impossible to dissociate, split, or distinguish between the dancer’s body and soul, the dancer and the dance, or sense and spirit in general. (32)

Yeats’s idea of dance as the “union of body and soul” is similar to the French symbolists’ idea of dance. In Paul Valéry’s dialogue piece “The Soul and the Dance”, the dance as the mutuality between body and soul is represented:

Socrates: The great “dance” means, ah, my friend, the liberation from our overall bodies which were strongly possessed by the fake soul and music and were intoxicated with the vain denial of reality, doesn’t it?...See how it [the body] fights against the soul! Can’t you see the body attempt to compete with the soul for speed and variation?—The body considers that the soul owns freedom and omnipresence and the body is envious of it [the soul]! (Valéry, 173)

However, there is a need to notice that the dance in Yeats’s early poems represents the union of the Irish race, not only of body and soul. For the young Yeats, the dance as the Irish race’s union was more significant than the dance as body and soul’s union. By depicting the image of the Irish people dancing in harmony, in a way Yeats attempted to encourage Irish nationalism. The patriotic dance is seen in “The Stolen Child”, one of Yeats’s most famous poems, included in the 1889 volume *Crossways*:

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,

Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep. (10)

The meaning of Yeats's dance transformed as the years passed. Perhaps his encounter with Japanese Noh drama changed Yeats's ideas about dance. It is possible to say that Yeats regarded Noh's symbolic dance equally with French symbolists' dance.

At the very end of the play, the image of the full moon is depicted by the musician:

First Musician: Does Minnaloushe know that his pupils
Will pass from change to change,
And that from round to crescent,
From crescent to round they range? (296)

According to Yeats's occult compendium *A Vision*, the person who belongs to the phase fifteen that embodies the full moon owns the most beautiful body (165-167). Yeats came to glorify the beauty of the body after contemplation of his own corporeal form. The song has major significance in the sense that it clearly shows Yeats turning his eyes to the theme of the body.

The Cat and the Moon was a milestone for Yeats's transformation into the artist who fought against the dilemma of body and soul. The story and the motifs of the play should be read as Yeats's awakening to the theme of the body. It is not an exaggeration to say that Yeats started to develop as an artist when the motifs of the body emerged not only in his poems but also in his plays.

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