

VARIATIONS FOR A HERO:
CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS POINTING TOWARDS THE
ABSURD IN SOME DRAMAS OF W. B. YEATS

THESES

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Literary Studies Doctoral School
Modern English and American Literary History
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sarbu Aladár

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My dissertation examines the possibility that in certain works of William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) there are some elements pointing towards the absurd dramas written a couple of years or decades later or anticipate these plays. These elements were studied in five of Yeats's dramas: in the last three of them (*The Herne's Egg*, 1938; *Purgatory*, 1939; *The Death of Cuchulain*, 1939) and in two of the earlier ones (*The Green Helmet*, 1910; *The Player Queen*, 1922).

It is a point of discussion why these plays were analyzed concerning the point above. In the later works of Yeats even a careless reader might find certain elements which can be related to the absurd dramas, such as the symmetric patterns and arrangements. Nevertheless, if one considers all of the listed works there can be found some characteristics which not only anticipate the absurd but connect the dramas proper. The most crucial among these phenomena is the concept of the hero and heroism. In the plays, where this motif plays an important role, the basis is Nietzsche's tragic hero conception which is completed with other features. As early as in the *Helmet*, Yeats properly defines what makes a hero: apart from bravery, also gaiety, a kind of ecstasy is needed. The hero, smiling even in the shadow of death is the aim Cuchulain, the hero should reach and does reach it: to a certain extent, Yeats's last play, *The Death of Cuchulain* is centred around this motif.

In some writings the hero has a remarkable variation: the poet, the artist whom Yeats, on the basis of the romantic tradition, defines similarly to a hero like Cuchulain. Thus, for example, Seanchan in *The King's Threshold* (1904) can be paralleled with Cuchulain or the other tragic heroes and heroines like Deirdre.

In the analyzed dramas – with the exception of *Purgatory* – this basic hero-type occurs although it might bear certain modifications. The *Helmet* discusses purely the problem of heroism within the frames provided by the genre of farce therefore the author may even mock

his hero. Laegaire and Conall defeated by Cuchulain are rather travesties of the hero. The parodistic tendencies saturate also *The Player Queen* in whose main variations one can trace how Yeats's theories (about the drama or his System) were changing. The later variations of the work are clearly farces already, thus Yeats could present his hero in a distorted reality. Besides, he mocks his own self and anti-self theory and his conception based on the eternal recurrence.

The protagonists, especially Septimus and Decima are distorted variations of the heroes having appeared in the earlier tragedies and in the first attempts of *The Player Queen*. This becomes obvious if the two poet figures, Seanchan and Septimus are compared. Nevertheless, the result is that they do not seem so utterly different as they were in the dramatic context. Septimus is not a petty drunkard in a mythic world, just the contrary: we feel if the hero is put in a prosaic milieu, no matter how prophetic or romantic hero he is, he becomes ridiculous and isolated. Therefore, it is not advisory to examine the hero alone without the reality he actually appears in because not only the hero may change but also the milieu. Moreover, it might happen that mainly the milieu is what changes, for example in *The Player Queen*. In this play and in its previous version *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908) we are not in the legendary past, yet, what is more, the scene of *The Player Queen* is not even Ireland: it is a universal space symbolized by the provincial little town in which the senses do not function properly and in which Septimus is wandering alone. It is timeless, too: not the heroic past, rather a relative present, the end of one era and the beginning of another is presented. This transitional period is always chaotic according to Yeats's System. What is so typical in the last plays, the criticism of the reality appears already in *The Player Queen* and also in the absurd dramas.

The last three plays are rich in this motif: all of them criticize the world the figures are placed in – this alone is not an absurd feature yet – but the way Yeats presents the reality may

anticipate it already. In the works, which Yeats wrote in his last decade, the new problems the Irish had to face frequently occur. In the 1930s Yeats often meditated about that his country chose not the way he had considered ideal (the non-democratic relationship between the leader and his people described by Castiglione). His views about civilization, human history frequently recur, for example in the *Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty* (1944) and in his other writings: poems, essays, not to mention his pamphlet titled *On the Boiler* (1938) which is completely subordinated to discussing the typical Irish and universal human problems in his own age. Such an aching problem is the *Unity of Culture*, more precisely the lack of it whose consequence is that there is no connection between past and present any more, the legendary heroes or the hero in general has become negligible. The poets are not surrounded by understanding, accepting audience therefore they have lost their function – all in all, the world is very far from the one detailed in *Il Cortegiano*.

When he is searching for a pattern to be followed Yeats frequently refers to the Anglo-Irish 18th century. This is why Jonathan Swift (1667–1754) becomes an utterly important figure in Yeats's works in his last decade:

When I think of Swift, of Burke, of Coleridge, or Mallarmé, I remember that they spoke as it were sword in hand, that they played their part in a unique drama, but played it, as a politician cannot though he stands in the same ranks, with the whole soul.¹

The philosopher artist with a sword in his hand or a fighter who is an artist as well, is the real hero according to Yeats, the hero who might reach the *Unity of Being*, the ideal state of being in Yeats's System. Apart from Swift and Burke, his favourite example is Bishop George Berkely (1685–1753) about whom Yeats composed an essay.

Similar thoughts are reflected by the dramas. *The Herne's Egg* like *The Player Queen* puts the plot in an uncertain world and it becomes obvious that the hero, king Congal faces a power he is unable to measure thus he and his friend-and-enemy, Aedh move and are moved

¹ Yeats W. B., *Explorations* = Yeats 1962, 301.

like marionette puppets. Congal is yet another version of the previous hero-type, or perhaps he is not even a version: not he is distorted, only the rules of his reality are alien and absurd and the *Unity of Culture* disappeared.

The absence of the *Unity of Culture* is the basis of *The Death of Cuchulain*. The motionless, dying Cuchulain tightened to a pillar is utterly lonely, alienated from his reality. Yeats achieves this in the following way: the hero, who was defined in the *Helmet*, and whom Cuchulain now really embodies, is taken out of the legend and placed into a milieu which is mythic only on the surface, however, in fact, reminds us rather of Yeats's own present. In the play, Yeats introduces a device which he has not used previously in his works: he starts it with a long prologue. The speaker, the Old Man (more or less Yeats himself) utters the same feelings reflected also by the fate of Cuchulain: the feeling of being obsolete, the feeling that the world has changed and he is alien in it.

The contrast between past and present, the critical attitude to the present, the feeling of alienation – these are all typical in the writings of the last years including *Purgatory*. In this work the hero is absent, neither the distorted version of him is presented since nobody could be a parody of the hero. Instead, Yeats chooses figures in accordance with the described milieu: the Boy stands for the present but the Old Man's case is more complex. The drama would be simplified if the Old Man were identified only with the past: this is rather the case of Cuchulain presented now as an aged figure. In *Purgatory*, the Old Man is a transition between past and present, more precisely he symbolises the degradation. The heroes of the past occur only in the dialogues, in the Old Man's nostalgic reminiscences.

Already in his early studies², Yeats took serious efforts to define the dramatic genres and to differentiate between them. Beside tragedy and comedy, he introduces a third category which is the fusion of them, for example in his essay titled *The Tragic Theatre* (1910). He

² For example, his writings published in the periodical *Samhain*, certain pieces of essay-volumes (*Cutting of an Agate, Essays and Introductions*) or even his letters contain some of these issues.

applies this form in the later versions of *The Player Queen* which originally was meant to be a tragedy but later Yeats transformed it into a tragicomedy, moreover, a farce. This is the source of one typical feature of the play: its comic is always grotesque, absurd and the heroes seemingly become distorted, similar to caricatures. In the drama, Yeats tried to present some of his concepts which were being formed that time and later were included in his *A Vision* (1925, 1937). He mentions it in one of his letters (1908) referred to by Jeffares and Knowland in their commentary to the play:

I wasted the best working months of several years in an attempt to write a poetical play where every character became an example of the finding or the not finding of what I have called The Antithetical Self; and because passion and not thought makes tragedy, what I had made had neither simplicity nor life. I knew precisely what was wrong and yet could neither escape from thought nor give up my play. At last it came into my head all of a sudden that I could get rid of the play if I turned it into a farce.³

It is worth adding that also *The Green Helmet* is a farce, heroic farce and in this play Yeats elaborates on another important theory of his: he defines the hero which has a central role in the dramas analyzed in my dissertation. The farce was used by the absurd playwrights too – this issue was dealt with by Márton Mesterházi in a study with the following title: *És még nem értünk a végére: Honnan vette Beckett a bohózáti technikáját?* He meditates about a situation and character type which are so typical in Beckett's plays and are still up-to-date but were the same for Yeats, too, since he also used the possibilities provided by the farce to express degradation:

there are more kinds of farce, and the gay-anecdotic does not have a special world view. The farce pointing towards Beckett is the one whose figures are suffering in a trap: a trap created by fights, lethal threats or their own manias and obsessions. Only the trap-farce has an opinion about the world.⁴

Yeats adapts this kind of farce and its traces can be found in the otherwise gay-anecdotic *The Green Helmet*, but the later plays, especially *The Player Queen* and *The*

³ Jeffares, A Normann – Knowland, A. S., *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* = Jeffares–Knowland 1975, 141

⁴ Mesterházi Márton, *És még nem értünk a végére: Honnan vette Beckett a bohózáti technikáját?* = Mesterházi 2004. 62. My translation.

Herne's Egg are trap-farces or contain some of characteristics of the trap-farce, such as the *Purgatory* and *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Yeats always considered important that the drama and its stage presentation should be in harmony with each other: he longed for a total theatre. Beside the possibilities provided by the hero and his reality, one may find some features pointing towards the theatre of absurd, another total theatre, also at the level of the stage performance. These features, to a certain extent, are present in the early works but the most examples can be found in the last three of Yeats's dramas.

The mere fact that Yeats's stage is more and more empty is not an absurd element on its own because the total theatres often rely on a few but symbolic props or these can be absent completely. Instead, what is worth mentioning is that the stages of the *Purgatory* and *The Death of Cuchulain* evoke the same feeling of alienation like those of Beckett. There can be seen another, even more important feature which may also be associated with the absurd: the emptiness behind the forms or the forms for the sake of nothingness. This is present in *The Herne's Egg* which, apart from the hero-reality problem contains the most elements anticipating the theatre of absurd, such as the symmetric arrangements, movements and the fact that certain phenomena of the reality are empty shells without any content. These are the tendencies in Yeats's works which support the statement that he belongs to those who were the forerunners of the theatre of absurd.

In this dissertation, examining whether Yeats's dramas contain certain elements anticipating the absurd, I focused on the hero and his reality. In addition, some of his experiments with the genres, structures and forms were included. These issues were built up in the following way: in the first chapter, apart from some general thoughts, such as the typicalities of the dialogue in Yeats's works, I concentrated on the question of hero: what makes him a hero in Yeats's plays and what sources were used by the playwright when he

formed his hero. Since self-irony and self-parody are also mentioned in the dissertation I described the main characteristics of the Yeatsian drama in the same chapter.

In the second chapter an analysis of two earlier dramas, *The Green Helmet* and *The Player Queen* is given. In the first case, the definition of the hero was the central concern, whereas in the second there were more, interrelating problems, for example the changes of the world surrounding the hero and how these changes contributed to the definition of the hero. Besides, the self-parody was mentioned including the discussion of the question of the genres, especially the farce.

In the third chapter, the last three dramas were interpreted since the problem of the hero and his world is essential in each of them. On the other hand, *The Herne's Egg* and *The Death of Cuchulain* are good examples for the self-parody or self-irony. One might find other elements anticipating the absurd dramas in these plays therefore I this section includes how the Yeatsian drama, which was discussed in the first chapter, changed in the 1930s.

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