

## The Unpopular Theatre of W.B. Yeats

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### Abstract

This paper deals with some of Yeats's later plays—known as **Plays for Dancers**. They are unique in their structure, theme and dramatic treatment. In writing them Yeats was much influenced by the Noh plays of Japan. All the features of this Japanese genre are quite clear in his later plays.

In these plays the poetry enriches and strengthens the drama, while the drama in its turn provides the basic action which is motivated by Yeats's vigorous verse. It is this inextricable combination which gives life and power to Yeats's drama.

Yeats's theatre was entirely opposed to the popular theatre. He had deep-rooted distrust in his contemporary theatre—a theatre of well-made plays, of superficial comedies, of domestic tragedies and of naturalistic melodramas. He meant his plays to be presented in a sort of an anti-commercial theatre; a theatre which was not to depend for its very existence on the moralities of the middle-class audience. In such a theatre Yeats meant his drama to be for the most part remote, spiritual and ideal. For him art is art because it is not nature. He advocated the creation of an extravagant, unreal, rhetorical, romantic art. He wanted to keep imaginative art at a distance which must be firmly held against a pushing world. He thus depended on verse, ritual, music, dance and action.

Yeats tried to create a theatre for himself and his friends and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what learned people understand from scholarship and thought. But twenty years later, Yeats could no longer believe in those few simple people and with a single stroke he got rid of the audience altogether.

In the Noh there is exactly what Yeats looked for. It is a theatre for the few and it has continued for hundreds of years as a special and secret art, whose aristocratic audience can be highly moved by a few drum-taps, a word or gesture adequately placed. There is also a reference to places considered holy through heroic events.

The challenge laid before Yeats was the search for an appropriate language and the transformation of ideas into dramatic action—action stylized through dance, gesture and staging. Yeats's indebtedness to Noh's stark structure, its economy of scenery, its minimum of actors and its underscoring of intense emotions by a few musical instruments for the development of a unique, indirect and symbolic form of drama, exemplified in his **Four Plays for Dancers** cannot be overlooked. In addition, his proscription of all unnecessary acting; his use of mask, song and dance; his delving into the life of the soul; and the images of his verse form are all Noh influences that can be easily felt.

**The Four Plays for Dancers** deal with archetypal themes which are at the same time vigorous dramatic themes—the meaning of heroism, the possibility of faith, the power of temptation and the conflict of ideas. There is unity between all these themes throughout the four plays. This unity has been created and justified by a series of consistent imagery (birds, fishermen, the moon, the bones and dreams); by the use of the super-natural, by similarity of language, and by the recurrent appearances of patterned screen, folded cloth and musicians.

These dramas are pure art, aiming at drawing the audience away from daily life and into deeper levels of contemplation and response.

Yeats highly believed in poetic drama. If it were properly approached by playwright and audience, it could bring about hidden and forgotten truths, and enlighten its audience to the dignity and great riches of the remote heroic world. Poetic drama, then, for Yeats, could renew a faith which his contemporary man has lost.

So much has been written about Yeats as poet and playwright. His contribution to both fields cannot be overlooked. Scholars and admirers of Yeats have given him his due as one of the great poets of modern time. But some critics deny him a proper place among contemporary dramatists. They consider his later theatre unpopular and dismiss his plays as unfit for the stage, believing them to be written for the elite. They even detract from his character delineation and deplore the lack of action in his dramas.

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on Yeats's later drama, and point out the objectives behind his unlagging efforts to establish the 'unpopular' theatre for an aristocratic audience. His indebtedness to the Noh plays of Japan will be referred to. In doing so, I hope I would help in a way to do some justice to a great playwright whose contribution to the modern theatre cannot be overstressed.

Without the risk of over-simplification, it would not be amiss to mention the main characteristics of the Noh Drama. If we examine a Noh play we find it unique owing to the fact that it has no scenery in harmony with Japanese paintings — a feature we are familiar with in modern drama. All the actors on the stage belong to the male sex, while nowadays the female players may overshadow the male ones and excel them in number. Moreover, these male players wear masks. The use of a mask is a means of escaping the human elements of a natural face, in order to produce that icy quality of passion. Masks also enhance the distanced and symbolic quality of actors. There is an orchestra of two drums and a flute, to which the actors dance. This dance is used to express emotion. There is also a chorus which has a basic function in the play. In some Noh plays there is the comic interlude known as Kyōgen.

The Noh dramatist places a central image on the stage as a focal point of the external action unifying the sensuous and emotional aspects of experience, in the manner of a cubist painting. He is not interested in Man as a distinct individual, complete with his physical and mental habits. This characterization would be an obstacle, as the purpose of the Noh drama is to intensify passion, something shared by everyone.

Between 1917 and his death in 1939, Yeats wrote several plays in the Noh tradition, starting with **At the Hawk's Well** (1917) and ending with **Purgatory** (1939) and the **Death of Cuchulain** (1939). In these plays Yeats adopted only some of the Noh elements, leaving space for his own imaginative ideas to roam freely; he knew no Japanese at all; his ignorance of that language made him free to innovate and modify the genre. He was also much fascinated by the aristocracy of the Noh. The whole of Yeats's innovations as a playwright started from this Japanese source. He struggled hard in the Irish theatre and was even dissatisfied with his own early work, which was more or less in the European tradition. So he found his only salvation in the technique of the Noh drama. There was also a certain correspondence between the material dealt with in the Noh and the material of Irish folk-tales which Yeats referred to more than once in writing of typical plots in the Noh:

The adventure itself is often the meeting with ghost, god or goddess at one holy place or much-legended tomb; and god, goddess or ghost reminds me at times of our Irish legends and beliefs, which once, it may be, differed from the Shinto worshipper." (1)  
Commenting on **At the Hawk's Well** in 1916 Yeats wrote:

I need a theatre; I believe myself to be a dramatist; I desire to show events and not merely tell of them; and two of my best friends were won for me by my plays, and I seem to myself most alive at the moment when a room full of people share the one lofty emotion. My blunder has been that I did not discover in my youth that my theatre must be the ancient theatre that can be made by unrolling a carpet or marking out a place with a stick, or setting a screen against the wall. Certainly who care for my poetry must be numerous enough, if I can bring them to pay half-a-dozen players who can bring all their properties in a cab and perform in their leisure time. (2)

Naturally contemporary realism could not satisfy the aspirations of the poet in him. The Noh was much nearer to his heart's desires. He felt a sharp contrast between the grubby little men in the plays of Jones and Pinero, Galsworthy and Shaw on one hand, and the priests and the choruses and tormented dead souls of the Noh plays on the other. In the Noh there was no hero who could dominate the whole situation. Instead, all the resources of dance, music and poetry were all present on the stage. Here is the theatre which Yeats refers to in "The Tragic Theatre."

"If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and in the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that haunt the edge of trance; and if we are painters, we shall express personal emotion through ideal form, a symbolism handed by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks, a style that remembers many masters, that it may be escape contemporary suggestion." (3)

In a note on **Four Plays for Dancers** (1921) when they were first produced, Yeats sheds more light on his new plays and the setting that befits them:

In writing these little plays I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilization very unlike ours. I think they would be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift in a new subtlety. All my life I have longed for such a country, and always found it quite impossible to write without having such a belief in its real existence as a child has in that of the wooden birds, beasts and persons of his toy Noah's Ark (4).

Yeats's later plays have never been staged for long periods anywhere. Even those who admired Yeats's poetry found the plays short of what they expected them to be from such a great artist. Some were just happy if they could extract any allegories from them. Others considered the plays to be written for a coterie theatre. A few scholars, especially interested in Yeats, made some serious attempts to see the close relationship between the poetry and the drama in Yeats's theatrical works: how the poetry enriches and strengthens the drama and how the drama in its turn provides the basic action which is motivated by Yeats's vigorous verse. It is this inextricable combination which gives life and power to Yeats's dramas: the poetry sustains and infiltrates into a thorough dramatic structure.

Yeats knew that his drama was quite different from Naturalism which was the principal dramatic type of his own time. He also hoped that his audiences could be coaxed into a type other than naturalistic drama. The new theatre he had in mind was entirely opposed to the popular theatre. The great motive behind all this was his deep-rooted distrust of his contemporary theatre — a theatre of well-made plays, of superficial comedies, of domestic tragedies and of naturalistic melodramas. On the other hand, he meant his plays to be presented in a sort of an anti-commercial theatre, a theatre which was not to depend for its very existence on the moralities of the middle-class audience. In such a theatre, Yeats meant his drama to be "for the most part remote, spiritual and ideal."<sup>(5)</sup> The plays were to be anti-naturalistic. Following in Goethe's footsteps, he used to say that art is art because it is not nature. So he advocated the creation of an extravagant, unreal rhetorical, romantic art.

These anti-commercial, remote, spiritual, ideal, anti-naturalistic plays would be played before unrealistic settings:

I see in my imagination a stage where there shall be both scenery and costumes, but scenery and costumes which will draw little attention to themselves and cost little money. I have noticed at a rehearsal how the modern coats and the litter on the stage draw one's attention, and baffle the evocation, which needs all one's thought that it may call before one's eyes lovers escaping through a forest, or men in armour upon a mountain side ... I would have such costumes as would not disturb my imagination by staring anachronism or irrelevant splendour, and such scenery as would be forgotten the moment a good actor had said, "The dew is falling," or "I can hear the wind among the leaves" ... Such scenery might come when its makers had mastered its

mysteries, to have a severe beauty, such as one finds in Egyptian wall paintings, and it would be more beautiful, even at the beginning, than the expensive scenery of the modern theatre, even when Mr. Tree has put into the boughs in the forest those memorable birds that sing by machinery.(6)

Yeats thought highly of the audience for whom he wrote his plays. It was an aristocratic audience, one that had a taste for the symbolic richness of art, "all that high breeding of poetical style where there is nothing ostentatious, nothing crude, no breath of parvenu or journalist."(7) The problem with Yeats was that he would write the plays, but where could he get the select audience to watch them? Yet he hungered for such an audience: "I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre", Yeats wrote, "an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many. I want an audience of fifty, a room worthy of it (some great dining-room or drawing-room); half a dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither." (8)

Yeats truly believed that Ireland — the last European country to free itself from feudalism—could welcome and nourish the theatre Muses. For the Ireland of his time was well-prepared for a great artistic efflorescence — an efflorescence that could not and would not exist in any highly unbanished and modernised country. By the turn of the century, Ireland was very like Elizabethan England, or Norway in the time of Ibsen or even the Athens of Pericles. It was at the crossroads of two civilizations, the feudal and the industrial and commercial. Moreover, it was also at the peak of its struggle for independence, and the destiny of a nation was hanging in the air. The tools were ready at hand: its speech was most refined; its idiom was free from the corruptions of the press and the pedagogue. In addition, Ireland's mythology, with its remote memories and dear heroic values, was still alive, and its people still had that power of communal participation which is basic to dramatic art, feeling themselves involved in the action on the stage.

And so Yeats, with one stroke, announced the doom of the English realistic and naturalistic drama and declared the birth of a new poetic drama. In doing so, he turned his back on the very theatre he had helped to establish — the National Theatre — and wrote to Lady Gregory in 1919:

...I want to make, or help some man some day to make a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people . . . I seek not a theatre, but the theatre's anti-self, an art that can appease all within us that

becomes uneasy as the curtain falls and the house breaks into applause.<sup>(9)</sup>

In his essay, "The Cutting of An Agate", he expounds his views about imaginative art:

All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance once chosen, must be firmly held against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music, and dance in association with action require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangements must help in keeping the door. Our unimaginative arts are content to set a piece of the world as we know it in a place by itself, to put their photographs as it were in a plush or a plain frame, but the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation. As a deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism and loud noise.<sup>(10)</sup>

As early as 1899 Yeats wrote that he aimed at creating a theatre "for ourselves and our friends and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought".<sup>(10)</sup> But this nutshell formula made him feel uneasy about the future, and his forebodings turned to be true when twenty years later he could no longer believe even in those "few simple people."

In the Noh there is exactly what Yeats looked for. It is a theatre for the few and it has continued for hundreds of years as a special and secret art, whose aristocratic audience can be highly moved by a few drum-taps, a word or gesture adequately placed. There is also a reference to places considered holy through heroic events, the belief that the ghosts of those who lived there are ever present, awaiting evocation, and the coming of somebody who can release them from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Yeats knew that in order to present the Irish legends and beliefs and archetypal ideas, he had to keep away from the mimetic tradition.

So, naturalism in drama should be replaced by a certain stylization which helps to focus upon the words and which will eventually lead to ritual:

The theatre of art, when it comes to exist, must therefore discover grave and decorative gestures ...and grave and decorative scenery that will be forgotten the moment an actor has said, "It is

dawn” . . .and dresses of so little irrelevant significance that the mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the immortal people of romance. The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty.(12)

The challenge laid before Yeats was the search for an appropriate language and the transformation of ideas into dramatic action — action stylized through dance, gesture and staging: Yeats's indebtedness to Noh's stark structure, its economy of scenery, its minimum of actors, and its underscoring of intense emotions by a few musical instruments for the development of a unique, indirect and symbolic form of drama, exemplified in his **Four Plays for Dancers** cannot be overlooked. In addition, his proscription of all unnecessary acting; his use of mask, song and dance; his delving into the life of the soul, and the images of his verse form are all Noh influences that can be easily noticed.

Yeats compares the role of the artist to that of the priest and believes that their methods should be the same. He felt that creating a work of art, implies spiritual value and seriousness, and even heroism. Myth for Yeats is a basic source of power for art as literature may be reduced to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is enriched with the passions and the beliefs of the remote past. He deplores the absence of true faith in our world and this loss makes art almost impossible. The 'lost faith,' then, is not only art itself but also the "half-mythological, half-psychological folk-beliefs" which can bring about symbolic power and relevance into art.

For Yeats action in itself, in life or on the stage, is of no importance, and personality is insignificant. The emotion of love, the feeling of beauty, is to Yeats the direct reflection of the inner life he values. Here I quote P. Thouless:

Yeats is not trying to create action or human beings; his drama is the drama of mood which is poetically significant. The fantasy of his own mind and the fantasy of the race is valued and changed into drama, because Yeats regards them as symbolical of fundamental emotions in human beings. He hopes to arouse these emotions in his audience and transform their conflict into harmony by plunging them into a drama of mood, in which all elements are formed into a pattern. Imagery, songs, myth, and dream are woven together, and as the audience sees and hears the play, it becomes submerged by its mood and loses its own being in that of the work of art.(13)

The **Four Plays for Dancers** deal with archetypal themes which are at the same time vigorous dramatic themes — the meaning of heroism, the possibility of faith, the power of temptation and the conflict of ideas. There is unity between all these themes throughout the four plays. This unity has been created and fortified by a series of consistent imagery (birds, fisherman, the moon, the bones, and dreams), by the use of the supernatural, by similarity of language, and by the recurrent appearance of patterned screen, folded cloth and musicians. Unity is also felt in the persistent attempt to answer one single question: How does man find value in life? It is obvious that these plays are not moral, philosophical, or religious propaganda. Even if the supernatural element were skilfully interwoven with the human, these dramas are purely art, aiming at drawing the audience away from daily life and into deeper levels of contemplation and response.

To Yeats a "symbol" is something that belongs to the world of illusion; its main function is to enable the mind to conceive the Absolute:

"All art is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic, and has the purpose of those symbolic talismans which medieval magicians made with complex colours and focus, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence" (14)

He believes that all symbols are closely associated with a universal harmony. So he built up an intellectual order and made it a source of these symbols as well as a framework to organize them. His use of symbols brings about religious faith, especially one that belongs to the occult philosophy. His conception of symbolic drama is clearly put in his autobiographies:

"I wish my writings, and those of the school I hope to found, to have a secret symbolical relation to those mysteries (of the Irish mystical order), for in this way I thought there would be a greater claim upon the love of the soul, devotion without exhortation or rhetoric, should not religion hide within the work of art as God is within His world and how can the interpreter do more than whisper." (15)

In stating his theory of symbolic drama, Yeats insists on fulfilling two requirements: the first is to express doctrinal belief, and the second is to express it by suggestion. In his plays for dancers he expresses abstractions by means of images and these images, in their turn, fuse the

concrete and the abstract. He usually begins with a certain idea which forms the central theme of a play and then clothes up this idea by a character and the relationship between the two is not necessarily intrinsic to the mind of the ordinary man.

It is obvious that Yeats was much influenced by certain values that belonged to the Symbolist movement of the 'fin de siècle.' He believed that the artist is highly gifted with unique imaginative power, that this gift should be given the utmost freedom and that the uniqueness of his vision should be expressed through exclusive and secret means.

Yeats describes the qualities of his new dance-plays:

"In fact with the help of these new plays (the No plays).. I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and have no need of mob or press to pay its way — an aristocratic form" (16)

A play for Yeats was a kind of a symbolic poem that expresses thought and emotion in the light of a special pattern of knowledge. For him a play should bring about a certain religious conception by using a metaphorical situation and language. The Noh plays helped Yeats to turn from symbol in verse to symbol in action, thereby enabling him to achieve a certain unity in the later plays which was not to be found in his early poetic drama. In **At the Hawk's Well** Cuchulain, the national as well as the mythological hero, transcends his own individuality and attains the exclusive status of a symbol by which a universal emotion is highly expressed. Although we can find a narrative element in Yeats's action, there lies beneath it a symbolic content, associated with the well, the hawk, the Old Man and Cuchulain. In **At the Hawk's Well** Yeats achieved with great success what he was aiming at. He wrote to Lady Gregory, "I believe I have at last found a dramatic form that suits me." And to Quinn:

"I hope to create a form of drama which may delight the best minds of my time, and all the most because it can pay its way without the others ... I shall have a success that would have pleased Sophocles. No press, no photographs, no crowd. I shall be happier than Sophocles. I shall be as lucky as a Japanese poet at the court of Shogun." (17)

O'Casey was not happy about Yeats's explorations in these remote areas of art. Having seen the first private performance of **At the Hawk's Well**, he wrote:

“And so with the folding and unfolding of cloth, music from a zither and flute, and taps from a drum, Yeats’s idea of a Noh play blossomed for a brief moment, then the artificial petals faded and dropped lonely to the floor, because a Japanese spirit had failed to climb into the soul of a Kelt.”

He goes on:

“No. The people’s theatre can never be successfully turned into a poetical conventicle. A play poetical to be worthy of the theatre must be able to withstand the terror of Ta RaRa Boom Dee, Ay, as a blue sky, or an apple tree in bloom, withstand any ugliness around or beneath them.”<sup>(18)</sup>

Yeats’s characters are just the images of certain ideas; these characters — or rather these ideas — “think” and “feel” independent of our way of reasoning and emotion. In **At the Hawk’s Well** the well stands for the image of the fountain of life. It is a symbol of an integrated vision, a unity of Self and Mask. We may say that the well and Hawkwoman reflect the different internal states of the Old Man and Cuchulain. As long as the Hawkwoman assumes a lifeless image of the sterile mind of the Old Man, the well remains dry. This play, like Yeats’s other dance plays, represents a belief, based on the relationship between a specific image and a certain idea. The dancer impersonifies Yeats’s central idea of art; she is the embodiment of living Beauty, in which we feel no division between body and spirit, and through which we enjoy the collaboration between Yeats’s craftsmanship and his Imagination. Both the visual and the literary images are skilfully and simultaneously handled and they are inseparable within the context of the play. The dance itself should be received emotionally and understood intellectually in order to be powerfully experienced by the audience.

In **At the Hawk’s Well** the opening imagery of poetry brings about the atmosphere in which the action is to take place. The images that appear in the description of the landscape expressionistically reveal the emotional tone of the play. As we see more of the play and the action progresses, the images from the landscape merge with the characters, so that not only does the poetic image become action, but the landscape is also transformed into action through the same process. In the figure of the dancer form and emotion are almost equated, and in integrating his final plays around the dance, Yeats created the opposite of the conventional theatre — a theatre in which action revealed not character, but mere emotion.

Yeats's aim then was to discover a form which could integrate the essential element in drama — action — and what Yeats considered to be the basic ingredient of lyric poetry — a well-balanced imagery. All his efforts as a dramatist were directed towards putting these elements together in perfect harmony. He believed that articulate plays would never come out as long as the poetry and its necessary images were superimposed on the action; they should come out logically and spontaneously from the fundamental action.

After he rejected the superfluous imagery of his early plays, Yeats thought of completely abandoning all figurative language. As early as the first decade of this century Yeats came to realise what sort of drama would satisfy his ambition. It is true that this characterization has been sharpened and his verse has been simplified, but the plays he wrote during this period were a true expression of his early idea of the new theatre which was to be at opposite poles with the popular natural theatre of his time.

The harmony between a central imagery and a passionate action is at the root of his later play **Purgatory** (1939). The action of **Purgatory** has been reduced to elemental conflicts, for the duration of this play is hardly twenty minutes. As a result the plot should move very rapidly, which it actually does. During the play's very limited time on the stage the audience can watch the meeting of two ghosts, a betrayal and a murder — as well as an earlier betrayal and an earlier murder. To enable the audience to concentrate on the basic conflicts, Yeats reduces the cast to two speaking characters: a violent old man and his sixteen-year-old bastard son; they obviously represent youth and old age as well as past and present.

The action is woven into two dominant images: the house and a bare tree. The symbolic importance of these two images cannot be overlooked as the play begins and ends with them. The house is the symbol of Ireland's fallen aristocracy; so it comes first and is the subject of the Old Man's first speech. He interrupts the boy who has been complaining and shouts: "Study that house". Then he gives more information about it:

I think about its jokes and stories;  
I try to remember what the butler  
Said to a drunken gamekeeper  
In mid-October, but I cannot.  
If I cannot, none living can.  
Where are the jokes and stories of a house,  
Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?(1 .)

He adds that the house is to be taken for a symbol:

The moonlight falls upon the path,  
The shadow of a cloud upon the house,  
And that's symbolical . . .<sup>(20)</sup>

It is a symbol of the ruthless destruction of a nation's heritage:

Great people lived and died in this house;  
Magistrates, colonels, members of parliament,  
Captains and Governors, and long ago  
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.  
Some that had gone on Government work  
To London or to India came home to die,  
Or came from London every spring  
To look at the May-blossom in the park.

But he killed a house; to kill a house  
Where great men grew up, married, died,  
I here declare a capital offence.<sup>(21)</sup>

In the stage directions Yeats draws our attention to the fact that the whole scene consists of nothing but the tree and the house. The tree is also important as a symbol. It represents both one thing and many:

Old Man: . . .study that tree,  
what is it like?

Boy: A silly old man.

Old Man: It is like — no matter what's like.  
I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now,  
So I chose a better trade.  
I saw it fifty years ago.  
Before the thunderbolt had riven it,  
Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,  
Fat greasy life. <sup>(22)</sup>

Here the tree stands for the whole of Man; his youth and his old age, his time of ripeness — of "fat greasy life" — and his time of barrenness and sterility. It is part of the symbolism of all Yeats's trees, a symbolism always associated with life and death. When the tree and the burnt out house are brought together, they can easily be symbolic of the fall of Ireland and furthermore the decline of the Western civilisation. But

towards the end of the play, the tree represents something different as it is in full blaze of white light. The Old Man speaks again as if addressing himself and the audience at the same time:

Study that tree.  
It stands there like a purified soul,  
All cold, sweet, glistening lights.  
Dear mother, the window is dark again,  
But you are in the light because  
I finished all that consequence. (23)

The sea is the dominant symbol in **The Only Jealousy of Emer**. It is closely associated with character portrayal, the setting and the action. The sea symbol is first introduced when the Musicians unfold the cloth and sing:

A woman's beauty is like a white  
Frail bird, like a white sea-bird alone  
At daybreak after stormy night  
Between two furrows upon the ploughed land:  
A sudden storm, and it was thrown  
Between dark furrows upon the ploughed land. (24)

In the above lines we enjoy the fragile beauty of the "white bird" soaring above the sea. In sharp contrast to it there is another image from the sea when the musicians sing:

A strange, unserviceable thing,  
A fragile, exquisite, pale shell  
That the vast troubled waters bring  
To the loud sands before day has broken.  
The storm arose and suddenly fell  
Amid the dark before day had broken.  
What death? What discipline?  
What bonds no man could unbind,  
Being imagined within  
The labyrinth of the mind,  
What pursuing or fleeing,  
What wounds, what bloody press,  
Dragged into being  
This loveliness? (24)

This 'unserviceable thing', the brittle pale shell is symbolic of Eithne Inguba. Eithne Inguba, mistress of Cuchulain, is associated with all that is perilous in the sea, the "vast troubled waters", the "loud sands", "the storm in the black night." So the opening lyric brings in two contradictory images in which the characters of Emer and Eithne Inguba are contrasted explicitly and artistically.

The setting, too, is integrally related to the sea:

I call before the eyes a roof  
With cross-beams darkened by smoke;  
A fisher's net hangs from a beam,  
A long oar lies against the wall.  
I call up a poor fisher's house;  
A man lies dead or swooning,  
That amorous man,  
That amorous, violent man, renowned Cuchulain,  
Queen Emer at his side. (25)

Here Cuchulain lies close to death, and the sea's ultimate meaning is revealed to be a death image.

The action takes place against the background of the murderous sea:

But now one comes on hesitating feet,  
Young Eithne Inguba, Cuchulain's mistress  
She stands a moment in the open door  
Beyond the open door the bitter sea,  
The shining, bitter sea, is crying out,  
(singing) White Shell, white wing!  
I will not choose for my friend  
A frail, unserviceable thing  
That drifts and dreams, but knows  
That waters are without end  
And that wind blows. (27)

The two images of the useless shell and the white sea-bird are repeated to emphasize the contrasting characteristics of Eithne Inguba and Emer. The sea is the only force against which the warrior Cuchulain is powerless:

The kings looked on  
And not a king dared stretch out an arm, or even  
Dared call his name, but all stood wondering  
In that dumb stupor like cattle in a gale,  
Until at last, as though he had fixed his eyes  
On a new enemy, he waded out  
Until the water had swept over him;  
But the waves washed his senseless image up  
And laid it at this door. (28)

From the above we notice that the sea is the only jealousy of Emer; against all other forces there is hope. Emer reminds Eithne Inguba that they are two women "struggling with the sea." (28)

At the end of the play Emer renounces her love forever and Eithne Inguba claims ironically:

And it is I that won him from the sea,  
That brought him back to life. (30)

In **The Only Jealousy of Emer** the sea image is unique in integrating action and setting as well as in functioning in characterization. It is a good example of Yeats's skill in utilising language in poetic drama. By uniting his imagery with his action, we come to Yeats's great achievement: a drama which entertains us with its pregnant images — images which we might interpret on one level, but on another level they are inextricably woven into an indefinable experience.

In his essay on the Noh, Yeats talks about 'distance' in his drama:

All imaginative art keeps at a distance and this distance once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music and dance in association with action require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangement must help in keeping the door. Our unimagined arts are content to set a piece of the world as we know it in a place by itself, to put their photographs as it were in a plush or a plain frame, but the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images, symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation. As a deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism, and loud noise. (31)

Distance then means a complete turning away from experience, into that world of images and beliefs. Still, "distance from life" might sound a dangerous catchphrase, and the replacing of a face by a mask is even more dangerous. In his preface to **Four Plays for Dancers**, Yeats even suggested the possibility of writing plays for certain masks; for

A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art; nor shall we lose by stilling the movement of the features, for deep feeling is expressed by a movement of the whole body. In poetical painting and in sculpture the face seems the nobler for lacking curiosity, alert attention, all that we sum up under the famous word of the realists, 'vitality.' (32)

So Yeats made use of the major devices of religious ceremonies in primitive societies, the mask and the dance. In the primitive ritual, the mask objectified the religious mystery. It was a symbol of the relationship of man to spirits and of man to God, as well as the heritage of generations. The dance was closely related to its more primitive function as an expression of religious ecstasy. We can safely say that Yeats's final achievement is a theatre for those who sought religion in art. It was the final objective for his contemporary artists who belonged to the Movement of 'Art-for-Art's Sake'. This is very well illustrated in **At the Hawk's Well** where we find the stylized dance and the elements of formalization in the verse and the songs. Yeats also made use of devices which intensified the emotional impact of the play: the music, the patterned screen, the stylized movement of the figures, the mask and the ceremony of the cloth. The mask symbolized a deep emotion. It also helped to simplify the actor's personality and the figure from Irish mythology. The character becomes mere emotion. And so the mask of the Old Man in **At the Hawk's Well** is just an objectification of emptiness and frustration. Even in this play the mask is essential in achieving symbolism through action.

Masks have another function. They not only help characters to keep at the aesthetic distance Yeats has been aiming at; but they also help towards the creation of archetypes. This double purpose justifies Yeats's statement in the preface to **Four Plays for Dancers** that the face of the speaker should be as much a work of art as the lines that he speaks or the costume that he wears, that all may be as artificial as

possible. Aiding masks in the creation of archetype, are the use of symbol, myth and the supernatural. Thus Yeats concentrates in his plays on the legendary characters using masks which enhance their archetypal roles.

The dance is the culmination of the dignity, symbolism and remoteness already effected by the ceremonial movements, the songs, and the symbolic actions which precede it.

As Yeats's own theory of drama stems from the Romantic Image, his dance plays were so antagonistic to the realism that he considered draining the vigour of the theatre. His theatre was so free from the whole mimetic practice of the West, which explains why the players in his plays went masked.

Another point of difference from conventional drama is in the nature of dramatic character. Yeats's characters are not distinct separate individuals with unique personality traits. Man as a distinct independent individual did not attract him because characterization would be an obstacle, as the purpose of his drama was to intensify passion, — something commonly shared by everyone. Yeats's poetic passion is impersonal. It is distinct from transitive emotions which spring from human instincts and are bound up with common life. So by using masks, Yeats tried to avoid the human features of a natural face and to produce that icy quality of "passion" which Yeats believes can be felt in the lifeless mask of the Sphinx.

In "The Tragic Theatre" Yeats says:

"One dogma of the printed criticism is that if a play does not contain definite character, its constitution is not strong enough for the stage, and that the dramatic moment is always the contest of character with character.

In poetical drama there is, it is held, and antithesis between character and lyric poetry, for lyric poetry — however much it moves you when read out of a book — can, as these critics think, but encumber the action. Yet when we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears, and there is much lyric feeling, and at times a lyric measure will be wrought into the dialogue, a flowing measure that had well-befitted music, or that more lumbering one of the sonnet. Suddenly it strikes us that character is continuously pre-

sent in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy, that of Corneille, that of Racine, that of Greece and Rome, where its place is taken by passions and motives, one person being jealous, another full of love or remorse or pride or anger. In writers of tragi-comedy (and Shakespeare is always a writer of tragi-comedy) there is indeed character, but we notice that it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet's gaiety, let's say; while amid the great moments when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio "absent thee from felicity a while," when Antony names "Of many thousand kisses the poor last," all is lyricism, unmixed passion, "the integrity of fire."...(33)

Some critics may protest that plays are not lyric poems, and that in a play the audience should hear people speak different and well-defined characters who arouse our excitement by reaching in different ways the situation the playwright is interested in exposing. They may add that real human beings do not act in such isolated situations or with such isolated motivations.

Yeats answers these superficial accusations and defends his 'unpopular' drama as well as his 'pure' technique. In "The Tragic Theatre" he writes:

We may not find either mood in its purity, but in mainly tragic art one distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character, to diminish the power of that daily mood, to cheat or blind its too clear perception. If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance; and if we are painters, we shall express personal emotion through ideal form, a symbolism handled by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks, a style that remembers many masters, that it may escape contemporary suggestion. (34).

## FOOTNOTES

1. **Essays and Introductions**, Macmillan, (London, 1971), p. 232.
2. **The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats**, edit. Russell K. Alspach, Macmillan, (London 1966), p. 415.

3. **Essays and Introductions**, Macmillan, (London 1971), p. 243.
4. **Four Plays for Dancers**, (New York 1921), p. 106.
5. **Essays and Introductions**, p.166.
6. *Ibid.*, p.170
7. *Ibid.*, 174.
8. **Plays and Controversies**, pp. 212-215.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 215.
10. **Essays and Introductions**, pp. 224-225.
11. "Ideas of Good and Evil" in **Essays and Introductions**, (London 1971), p.. 166.
12. **Essays and Introductions**, p. 170.
13. P. Thouless, **Modern Poetic Drama**, (Oxford, 1949), p.150.
14. **Essays and Introductions**, p. 148.
15. As cited in Richard Ellman, **Yeats: The Man and the Masks**, (New York, 1958), pp. 129-130.
16. "introduction by W.B. Yeats to **Certain Noble Plays of Japan**" by Pound and Fenollosa, (New York, 1959) p. 151.
17. As cited by Gerald Moore in "The No and the Dance Plays of W.B. Yeats" in **Japan Quarterly**, March 1966, p. 184.
18. As quoted by John R. Moore, **The Tulane Drama Review**, September, 1968, p. 158.
19. **Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats**, Macmillan, (London 1972), p. 681.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 681.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 683.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 681-682.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 688.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
31. "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", **Essays and Introductions**, Macmillan, (London 1971), pp. 224-225.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

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2. ——— **Essays and Introductions**. Macmillan, London, 1971.
3. ——— **Collected Plays**. Macmillan, London, 1972.
4. ——— **Autobiographies**. Macmillan, London, 1973.
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6. Alspach, R.K. (edit.) **The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats**. Macmillan, London, 1966.
7. Pound, E. and Fenollosa. **Certain Noble Plays of Japan**. New York, 1959.
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1. **Japanese Quarterly**, March, 1966.
2. **Tulane Drama Review**, September, 1968.