

Psychobiography and Irish Literature: A Re-Reading of the Select Works of William Butler Yeats and George William Russell

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Abstract

Irish Literature is the 3rd oldest literature of Europe and its origins can be traced to the 3rd and 4th century. Many Irish writers like Edmund Burke, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, George William Russell, to name a few, lived in exile in England and broadened the cannon of Irish Literature. Like many colonized countries, Ireland, too, fought a violent battle of independence in 1919. The year 1916 is known as the ‘Easter Rising’ and it was in this battle that Dublin was invaded which is synonymous to Ireland’s independence. This has been very realistically described by W. B. Yeats in his poem ‘Easter 1916’.

George William Russell, an Irish poet and artist, wrote under the pseudonym of AE. He was forced to leave his motherland and his writings show the pain of exile, loss and lamentation. Similarly, William Butler Yeats also went through both personal and professional losses which are reflected in his work.

My paper intends to understand this pain through the introduction of an interdisciplinary concept of Psychobiography, the unique combination of using psychoanalysis to understand the inner self of the writers.

However, this paper will also show the interdependence and relation among migration, mind and literature. The geographical movement of the writer from Ireland to England through a psychological perspective through the study of some of their chosen literary works.

Keywords: Irish Literary Movement and its effect on poets, Psychobiography and Dualism as a concept, Works of W. B. Yeats and George William Russell.

Introduction

The origins of Irish Literature or Celtic Literature as it is called, can be traced to the 4th and 5th century. It is considered to be the third oldest literature in Europe. It has a ‘Dual Tradition’. [1] Many Irish writers lived in exile in England and broadened the canon of Irish writing with their unique Irishness. Some of the well-known writers of this time were Edmund Burke, Jonathan Swift, Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, George Russell and Frank O’Connor to name a few. Their writings were intertwined with English society and it was difficult to separate the writer from the place.

Celtic Mythology:

It is the root of Irish literature, along with the sufferings and hardships of the Irish men and women. Writers like Maria Edgeworth, who portrayed the hardships of rural Irish life or Lady Sydney Morgan’s

‘Woman and her Master’ which shows the mistreatment of women in the hands of men throughout history. They wanted to spread awareness against the various ill practices of society.

Like many of the colonized countries, Ireland too fought a battle of independence in 1919, when England misused their power and the crown took over the entire country. The year 1916 is known as the ‘Easter Rising’, it was in this violent battle that Dublin was invaded which is synonymous to Ireland’s independence. This has been very realistically described by W. B. Yeats in his poem ‘Easter 1916’.

George Russell first met W. B. Yeats at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin and it is from there that their life – long friendship started. Both had similar likes and dislikes which united them forever. He was introduced to the Irish National Movement in 1880. [2]

W. B. Yeats and George Russell were united in their experience of pain and reflected it through different literary forms; poetry, novels and short stories. They wanted to spread awareness against the various ill practices of the Irish society. Yeats was forced to leave Ireland at an early age only to return after 14 years. Similarly, George Russell, too, spent a major part of his life away in England. Though away, they were closely bound to their roots.

George Russell during this period wrote:

‘[The] earth began more and more to bewitch me and to lure me to her heart with honied entreaty. I could not escape from it even in my busy office where I sat during week-days with little heaps of paper mounting up before me moment by frenzied moment. An interval of inactivity and I would be aware of that sweet eternal presence overshadowing me. I was an exile from living nature and yet she visited me. Her ambassadors were visions that made me part of themselves.’ [3]

The Irish Literary Revival:

It was also called the Irish Literary Renaissance or the Celtic Twilight, was an unfolding of Irish literary talent in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was closely allied with a strong political nationalism and a revival of interest in Ireland’s Gaelic literary heritage which was formed in 1893 to revive the Irish language and culture.

This revival was characterized by a flourishing of Irish literary talent and a renewed interest in Ireland's cultural heritage. It was closely linked to Irish nationalism and sought to create a distinct Irish identity free from British influence. Key figures included W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and John Millington Synge, who wrote about Irish mythology, legends, and folklore. This was a 20th century phenomenon. The Revival was fueled by a growing sense of Irish nationalism and a desire to reclaim Irish cultural heritage, which had been suppressed under British rule. This new wave in literature aimed not only to revive the ancient Irish legends and folklores but also redefining the past writings with the nationalistic struggle. Theatre, plays, poetry, etc. all flourished during this period. The Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland, was a creation of this period. William Butler Yeats and George William Russell were considered the pillars of this theatre.

It seems Irish writers exhibit more of self-reflexivity and self-referentiality in their works than many of their English counterparts. This may perhaps be because of their intense pre-occupation with the history, culture and the freedom movement of Ireland following the English occupation. This is because the Celts consider themselves to be geographically, racially and linguistically different from their colonizers. They feel that they have a distinct and comparable identity to other nations, cultures and people in the world.

This sense of strong Self-hood can be preserved, protected and propagated in different spheres of the national growth only in a free Ireland. Hence the Irish people have been struggling to obtain total freedom

from English rule over their land. For this they have adopted several intellectual, political and cultural measures. One of them is their scintillating nationalistic literature of the last two centuries. In the process of their passionate engagement with their freedom movement, they have identified themselves with their nation. For that reason, their poetry, fiction and drama are abound with frequent references to them – the writers.

W. B. Yeats and George William Russell:

They play a very important role in the literary scene of Ireland; each dependent emotionally and professionally on the other. Through their works, each one of them tried to spread the air of nationalism in every corner of the Irish locale. These writers have proven the age old proverb ‘the pen is mightier than the sword.’ Their notable works across genres like *Easter Rising 1916*, *Homeward*; *Songs by the way*, *Freedom* or *Candle of Vision* reflect their deep sense of nationalism and patriotism.

Since these writers were forced to spend many years in exile, away from their motherland, these writings also have an element of lamentation and loss. The subtle undertone is that of the immense suffering that they have faced in the hands of the ‘Others’. This pain can be understood through the introduction of an interdisciplinary concept of Psychobiography and Dualism, the unique combination of using psychoanalysis to understand the inner self of the writers. As psychologists have stated that mind and body are not two isolated entities. They are always together in developing one’s cognitive and behavioral self.

Psychoanalysis:

It is a theory of the mind, developed by Sigmund Freud who believed that the unconscious had an effect on the behavior of a person. The base of this theory is that our present is shaped by our past. Painful experiences give rise to feelings of anger, depression and remorse which stay hidden in the unconscious for years. These feelings lead to low self-esteem.

For instance, Yeats’ relation with Maud Gonne uplifted his spirits and helped him write beautiful poetry on nature. But with her marriage, a separation Yeats could not accept, the themes became realistic and bitter. Pain of leaving ones home against his/her wishes is an irreparable feeling. This feeling continued in the unconscious mind of George Russell only to find a voice in his poem ‘Freedom’. Dreams and Imaginary illusions are a part of this troubled mind.

Psychobiography:

It is a concept introduced by Sigmund Freud and is a part of psychoanalysis. According to William Todd Schultz ‘Psychobiography is the analysis of historically significant lives through the use of psychological theory and research.’ [4] The main aim of which is to bring to light the hidden motives behind various acts, whether in art, science or politics. Timothy O’Connor, in his book ‘Philosophy of Mind – Contemporary readings’, elucidates that the mind is a conscious subject. They feel pain which is not physical. ‘Dualism’ conceives mental processes as essentially ‘inner’, reflected outwardly in behaviour. The mind is a non-physical substance with a consciousness and self-awareness. For instance, the term ‘pain’ is intended to refer to a particular sort of phenomena typical of people who exhibit various kinds of ‘pain behaviour.’ For the dualist, its referent is ‘from the inside’, when we have a painful experience. They further separate it from the physical brain which is related to intelligence.

Psychobiography as a qualitative research method in psychology has witnessed prolific growth in the last

few decades. This growth has been accompanied by concerns regarding the veracity, rigor, quality, and trustworthiness of psycho biographical research. Current research has gone a long way toward addressing these concerns through the publication of excellent best practice guidelines as well as criteria for evaluating the quality of psycho biographical research. However, a gap remains regarding guidelines detailing the steps involved in conducting psycho biographical research.

This article addresses this gap by relying on existing psycho biographical guidelines and general qualitative research strategies to advance a step-wise approach to the conducting of a psychobiography. The aim is to provide simple and clear guidelines that can be followed when undertaking psycho biographical research. By doing so, this article contributes to the continuous growth and improvement of the field of psycho biographical research.

According to William Runyan, 'Psychobiography studies the personal lives of people not as a case study but as a story respecting historical, interpretive and narrative methods.' [5] He also mentions that personal life histories are essential to psychologically understand the cognitive and behavioral patterns among people.

According to psychologists, imagination and the world of illusions is a state created by the mind to cope with the harsh realities of the world. In the novel, 'The Candle of Vision' written by George Russell, a similar situation can be seen. Man's spirit is the burning light of the candle which gives him hope and shows him the path to come out of problems.

In Yeats', 'Second Coming', there is a character named 'Avatar', a beast with the head of a man. It is a destructive force which brings the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. In George Russell's poem 'Freedom', he bids a tearful and painful adieu to his motherland, hoping to come back to it some day when she is free from the shackles of the colonial rule. These examples illustrate the working of the psyche in a chaotic world and its effect on the literature of the times.

However, this shows the relation between mind and literature. It further portrays that the mind, literature and geographical locations play a vital role in shaping one's creative ideas. The geographical movement of the writers from Ireland to England through a psychological perspective through the study of some of their chosen literary works. Their engagement with emotive and psychological pain.

It is further believed that the mind is conscious and aware of the pain and other emotions it experiences. Psychoanalysts' believe that the unconscious reminds the conscious mind in various ways and at various intervals about the traumatic incidents or experiences of the past. This can be through day dreams, hallucinations, illusions, etc.

Irish Literature or the Irish Literary Revival is incomplete without its forerunner William Butler Yeats. A poet, dramatist, a mystic and so on. A man steeped in versatility with a plethora of works to his credit. His themes were greatly influenced by traditional Irish folklore and myth. According to Oliver St. John Gogarty, Yeats's patriotism was 'peer, selfless and ideal.' As a writer, Yeats owed everything to Ireland, and Ireland must be indebted to him for that. Though in exile, Yeats was an originator of an intellectual antimigration scheme, according to Micheal MacLlammair. His influence stopped Irish writing from being amateurish and provincial.

George Russell has rightly mentioned that all states combined with a population of hundred and ten million people could not come out with that level of pure literature as Ireland did in those thirty years with Yeats and other prolific writers by their side. The themes of Yeats's poetry and drama have always shown pain or suffering. Whether a romantic poem or a nationalistic one, his subtle theme is that of loss; loss of a loved one, a nation or an individual.

Yeats once said, 'I thought we might bring the halves together if we had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful memory, and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European pose.' [6] His views on nationalism and literature were published in critical journals from 1886 onwards. This style changed suddenly when Yeats suffered a shock due to Maud Gonne's marriage in 1903. His subject matter in poetry changed from beauty in nature to realistic and bitter feelings experienced in life. His prose work also suffered and became very direct and simple.

Yeats' poem 'The Second Coming', first published in 1920, have been quoted by politicians and writers alike as they face a world where "things fall apart" and "the center cannot hold" as "mere anarchy is loosed" and "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of intensity." In this poem, Yeats' peers into a darkened, collapsing world shorn of beauty, truth and order.

In the poem 'Easter 1916', with its refrain that in the wake of the Irish resurrection, all was "changed, changed utterly" as "a terrible beauty is born", succeeds in paralleling the drama of the national event while simultaneously identifying a moment of grand metaphysical transition at a European historical level. This theme is echoed in 'the Second Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan'.

As a versatile genius, Yeats' poem "Freedom" refers to his poem 'The Lake of Innisfree', which explores the themes of freedom, nature and a yearning for a simple life. The speaker expresses a desire to escape the constraints of modern life and find peace on a remote island, Innisfree. With the experience of personal losses, this simple yet elegant theme and style changed to realistic themes filled with pessimism and bitter feelings.

William Butler Yeats and George Russell are the two pillars of the Literary Revival. Both have contributed immensely to bring back Irish Literature to the global platform and give it a uniqueness of identity.

George William Russell, also known as the 'Myriad – minded' writer, according to Gabriel Rosenstock, an Irish poet and artist, and occasional critic and magazine editor, is the primary focus of my fifth chapter. As a writer of poetry he was usually known by the pseudonym *Æ*, often written as AE or A.E. He also belonged to an esoteric group of Dublin-based philosophers whose discipline was known as theosophy.

During the early years of the 20th Century, when Ireland was searching for its own, independent identity, away from Britain, George Russell played an immensely influential role. The family moved to Dublin eleven years later and here began his lifelong friendship with the famous Irish writer William Butler Yeats. His politics were strictly Irish Nationalist but, because of his role with the IAOS, he was not able to express his opinions too openly. He set out for America shortly afterwards and the publicity generated there meant that his books suddenly started selling well. He had started out as a writer in 1894 when, as part of the Irish Literary Revival, he appeared to have a big future.

His first volume of poems was called *Homeward: Songs by the Way* was published in 1894. These poems portray the pain and anguish of leaving home and its aftermath. They also firmly established him in the Irish Literary Revival.

George Russell in his book, 'The Candle of Vision' describes having visionary experiences from an early age. This can be attributed as an escape from the rough conditions Ireland faced in the hands of the British. He believed in the spiritual awakening of the people immediately after independence. It would help them calm their inner selves.

According to the theory of 'Dualism', where the mind and body are inseparable and effect each other. It is important to be in a state of tranquility and serenity to bring out one's best.

Russell was heavily involved in the whole Irish literary movement and was later credited with being "the man who was the father to three generations of Irish writers" [7]. Patrick Kavanagh called him "a great

and holy man”. He was a spiritual man who was always willing to offer kindness and encouragement to young writers making their way.

Therefore, it is visible through the works of these two writers that it is a psychological migration of the authors from simplicity and beauty to heartless reality and brutal fantasies.

A struggle which has led to people not only losing their lives but also their identity is a matter of great concern. Irish writers have fought for their country, people and literature, both from the foreground as well as in exile. Situations forced people to leave their homes as they were not allowed to express themselves for their nation. Writers like Yeats, Russell, James Joyce and others lived in exile and wrote about the ills of their society. The concept of ‘Dualism’ which states that the mind and body are one as a concept has a lot of significance when compared to the struggles that the Irish writers went through.

Overview and Conclusion:

Though Yeats and Russell are considered the founding stones of Irish Literary Movement. They cannot be compared to each other as each one’s contribution to writing is different and unique. They are united in their losses but their perception to loss is different. Even though Yeats was considered a mystic, he believed in gaining his identity by raising his voice against the wrong doers. George Russell, on the other hand, slipped into a world of imagination which helped him see hope in the real world.

Both W. B. Yeats and George Russell contributed immensely in protecting and preserving Ireland’s rich culture and Celtic traditions. With their powerful, yet subtle, style of writing, their poems, plays, editorials, etc. were able to influence people from all strata of society. It helped to unite people and finally, culminated in Ireland being declared as a ‘free state’.

In conclusion, it can be said that their writings still inspire future generation of writers, playwrights, critics and social activists all across the globe.

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