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The Supernatural Elements in W. B. Yeats's *The Shadowy Waters*

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Abstract:

This research paper deals with the use of the supernatural elements in W. B. Yeats's *The Shadowy Waters*. It is an attempt to shed light on the significance and functions of these elements. Yeats has long been suffering from his unrequited love for the beautiful Maude Gonne with whom he cannot unite in marriage because she has refused his advances towards her. Nevertheless, he finds his refuge in a dreamy world where, by means of the supernatural agencies such as the magical harp and the human-headed birds of Irish mythology, he can accompany his beloved to the world of eternal love and beauty that is void of pains and sufferings. In this drama, Forgael and Dectora stand for Yeats and Gonne respectively. It appears that Yeats, in this play, has fulfilled though imaginatively both his personal desire, and his dramatic purposes in achieving a universal human experience throughout the use of the supernatural elements, magic and Irish mythology.

What prompts this study is the fact that the supernatural agencies play a great role in the works of W. B. Yeats who has employed them on a wide scale. It is generally accepted that his yarns have been interwoven with the supernatural. It has been assumed that any literary man usually attempts to describe a vision quiet understandable by readers, but a few poets like Shelley and Blake create the kind of visions which make readers never understand them easily, for they require an in-depth pondering and full understanding of the supernatural, mystical, mythological and biographical interpretations. Among those poets is Yeats who encourages

Figures of strange and compelling beauty—
angels, demons, fairy people, ancient Gaelic
kings and queens, heroes and heroines—and
over all and through all feeling the poet's
unquestioned faith in a soul-saving knowledge or
intuition, which only a few men have, a
knowledge from beyond their own minds, the
reader comes to breath in the great idealism that
is Yeats.¹

The Shadowy Waters is a one-act play telling of an ancient love story based on Irish mythology, in which the god of the sea, Forgael, makes a journey during which he affiliates with particular spirits that figure out in the shape of birds promising him love just in case he follows them. However, his helpers and supporters, the sailors whose main concern is to have spoils, have regarded him as being mad. They have arrested a ship upon which they discover a queen. In the end the crew depart leaving Forgael and the woman alone to run after the birds.

It has been suggested that the subject matter of this play has been inspired by the dramatist's early childhood. Yeats once declared that when he was a boy he thought that his grandfather was just like the those sailors whom he considered heroes with special powers, as it is pointed out by James W. Flannery who further unfolds the notion that *The Shadowy Waters* might have been inspired by Yeats's "favorite childhood romance" in which he imagines that he commands his friends as sailors for the sake of doing some athletic practices.² Another inspirational factor is that once Yeats recognized birds flying in the sky, and thus he grasped the idea of birds leading him to an eternal world where he could unite with his unrequited love—a mystical experience.

In this play the protagonist makes a sea journey to attain a world that is happier than his, accompanying his beloved named Dectora whom he meets on the seas. He decides to travel to the other world with her. It is indicated then that the sea is the setting of the play—the place where the action of the play is to happen—which stands as the main metaphor. According to Deborah Tannen, this metaphor implies that the otherworld to

which Forgael and Dectora aspire to live in is a metaphor for the perfect love, and this is the main reason why Forgael undertakes his trip to the otherworld—the world of love.³

The Shadowy Waters addresses the ancient Irish mythology and legends and presents the dream-like world of a romantic lover. By doing so, Yeats aims to symbolically express his love for Maud Gonne, creating a romantic world by means of a dream in hopes that his love for her is to be analogized with the mythical and legendary love between Forgael and Dectora who figure out in this play. From the autobiographical perspective, Yeats has been tortured and disappointed by his frustrated sexual desire for his beloved. Thus, the play reflects on his unrequited love, and therefore the play is expressive of the fact that he has suffered too much from the woman whom he loves so much and who has been unwilling to respond to his demand. However, the play is an attempt to develop the Irish drama, being one written in the form of poetry. It may be suggested that the play has not been written to the common man, being so esoteric, for it addresses mythology, philosophy, symbolism and the supernatural, though its plot is very simple telling of the supernatural experience of love and the struggle between Forgael and Dectora. Yeats himself comments on the plot of the play and how it has been inspired by the supernatural referred to in the Irish mythology and legends, and as follows:

Once upon a time, when herons built their nests in old men's beards, Forgael, a sea-King of ancient Ireland, was promised by certain human-headed birds love of a supernatural intensity and happiness. These birds were the souls of the dead, and he followed them overseas towards the sunset, where their final rest is. By means of a magic harp, he call them about him when he would and listen to their speech. His friend Aibric, and the sailors of his ship, thought him mad, or that this mysterious happiness could come after death only, and that he and they were lured to destruction. Presently they captured a ship, and found a beautiful woman upon it, and Forgael subdued her and his rebellious sailors by the sound of the harp. The sailors fled upon the other ship, and Forgael and the woman drifted on alone, following the birds, awaiting death and what comes after, or some mysterious transformation of the flesh, an embodiment of every lover's dream.⁴

On the allegorical level, Forgael stands for Yeats who yearns to fulfill his desire for an optimal union with his beloved which he can by no means

achieve, except by means of resorting to the world of dream, magic and the supernatural. For him, the dream may come true throughout his death and his attaining the hereafter. It can be suggested that the characters of the play are imaginary, being ones that only exist in myths and legends. The significance of the atmosphere of the play indicates that Yeats tries to mythologize his own desire for a permanent love and consummate love no living man can obtain. This also candidly expresses his act of psychological compensation for his weakness and timidity which prevent him from doing what the romantic hero in him desires.⁵

As a result, to Yeats, what he cannot realize in the actual world can be realized in the world of magic, mythology, and the supernatural. Therefore, his love for Gonne in *The Shadowy Waters* has been mythologized, and in this case it has been made perfect and eternal. Yeats's father has embedded in his mind the idea that the poet is a dreamer or a magician whose power is to overcome what is real and what cannot be attained.⁶ In Yeats's *Oisín*, it is Oisín who has been seduced by his beloved the fairy Niamh, whereas in *The Shadowy Waters* it is Forgael who accompanies his beloved Dectora to the immortal world of happiness and joy. Here, Forgael resorts to magic and the supernatural to achieve his desire concerning his unrealizable love, an act analogous to those lovers who resort to magicians, trying to realize what cannot naturally be realized. Thus, by resorting to imagination, Yeats tries to enjoy the kind of ecstasy associated with pure love which is void of any physical pleasures and pains. Yeats's revisions of *The Shadowy Waters* in 1906 imply that he aspires to unfold those ideas concerning love which have accompanied him till the end of his life. Flannery envisions that Yeats may regard women as being much more closely in touch with the world of experience than men, and this may be the main reason why many of his significant characters "are of self-determining women who assume a dominant role in the love relationship,"⁷ for a close look at the revisions of the play shows that it is Dectora, the protagonist of this drama, who assertively and operatively lets him know the real meaning of love.

The imaginary world in which Forgael lives indicates that Yeats, in reality, recognizes the fact that he has created a mere disguise and a mask that may hide his primeval demands. Yeats's hidden yearnings for his beloved find their shelter in *The Shadowy Waters* which may meet his desire for his unrequited love, and as it explicated by Flannery in the following excerpt:

The violent energies aroused in the combat of lovers and the act of sexual congress itself were evidence to Yeats of the supernatural powers latent in man's own nature but forever beyond

the reach of his conscious mind.⁸

It may be understood that there is a close yet significant connection between Yeats's personal life and his dramatic works, which is an important point necessary for the understanding of his dramas whose acuteness and earnestness revolve around the central tragic theme that comes as a result of his disillusionment concerning his lost love. His yearning for his past old love can be explained by means of Forgael's immortal longings in *The Shadowy Waters*, and as follows:

Yet never have two lovers kissed but they
Believed there was some other near at hand,
And almost wept because they could not find it.⁹

What makes Yeats's dramatic and poetic visions stand unique among literary media is his skill in mingling both mysticism and humanism which figure out in most of his works, especially his poetic drama: "from first to last, Yeats sang the perfectibility of man's coexistence with the eminent presence of the supernatural in all the actions and artifacts of the world."¹⁰ When examining carefully Yeats's biography, one can recognize, apart from his escapism, Yeats's careful examination of mysticism and of the supernatural and mysterious experiences which have optimized him as a great poet and dramatist, for he manages to substitute his early longings for "transcendental experience and magical powers into a faith that sought its proofs not beyond the world but within the heart of man."¹¹ Thus, Yeats has written *The Shadowy Waters*, seeking a mystical association with the woman he loves, a play which portrays lovers as symbols and not actual ones, yearning for the renouncement of love for the sake of living an inexhaustible world.

It has been said that the idea of composing this play was born in the dramatist's imaginative mind as early as 1883 until it was published in the May-1900 edition of the *North American Review* which had gone through two more revisions in 1905 and 1906 and which was produced many times in the Abbey Theatre. These revisions of the play are of certain importance. Flannery declares that

Perhaps the chief significance of the many revisions of *The Shadowy Waters* is that they demonstrate the unceasing determination of Yeats to unify and express his vision of a transcendental reality beyond the material world as he experienced this in nature worship, peasant art and supernatural lore, mythology and arcane knowledge. The various revisions also reflect Yeats's struggle to find an appropriate balance between personal poetic expression and effective dramatic action.¹²

The first and foremost factor to be found in all the versions of *The Shadowy Waters* is its hero as voyager namely Forgael who seeks the strength of body, magic and the kind of love associated with wisdom. Besides, the kind of language—poetic as it is—used by Forgael and Dectora seems to be one spoken in a world much more different than the world of the sailors who use prose as their daily speech. Moreover, Flannery points out that "in his effort to clarify the meaning of the human-headed birds who lead Forgael on to his pursuit of the ideal, Yeats became too explicit, thus reducing their spiritual

From the structural point of view, the use of the supernatural agencies in the play directs its action. The course of the development of the action of the play is determined by the effects and determining factors of the supernatural represented by the men-headed birds created by the imaginative mind of the dramatist himself to achieve both his dramatic action in that the play appears to be dramatic and suspense on the part of the spectators being taken, metaphorically speaking, on the wings of imagination to the ideal and perfect world of love Forgael wants to live in. Dectora has already been taken on the ship where Forgael expresses his quest for immortality. Meanwhile the spectators are to expect the appearance of Dectora on the stage in response to Forgael's demand. There arises a particular conflict between Dectora and Forgael which is symbolic of the gap between Yeats and Gonne. The vicissitude that occurs in the play is the act of killing Dectora's husband who has been killed by Forgael who takes his wife Dectora as a prisoner. Here comes the role of the supernatural agency whereby Forgael tries to win the love of his captive by the magical harp which may enchant her. As if he were dreaming, Yeats manages to unify with his beloved by means of his imaginative mind resorting to the supernatural harp to allure Dectora to be willing to love him. Dectora in the earlier versions of the play, immediately sleeps upon hearing the sweet yet magical sounds of Forgael's harp, and then she wakes up to find herself to be converted into Forgael's beloved. However, in the 1906 version, Dectora has gone through certain experiences under the influence of the harp; she first mourns the death of her husband which is compared to the sadness of all lovers of the past; she eventually realizes that she is in love with Forgael; she feels the kind of love that is eternal. The theme of love is thus made conspicuous, which is regarded as being most significant. According to Flannery, the scene can sum up all the other themes of the play which shows

the unifying essence of perfect love, the transmigration of the souls, and the identity of Forgael's music (or poetry) with mystical conversion as embodied in the cries of the birds that call him to immortality. In the final image of the play, Forgael, wrapped in the net of

Dectora's golden hair, finds immortality not
beyond the world, where he has been seeking it,
but within the arms of his beloved.¹⁴

It seems that Yeats has succeeded to find a way of expression illustrative of his yearning and longing desire for his unrequited love for Gonne by resorting to philosophical, mythological, magical and supernatural allusions—elements which allow him to express his themes much more effectively and much more sagaciously. For in *The Shadowy Waters* Yeats expresses his extreme sufferings and his great joy of love between a couple of lovers with infinite affection and emotions, for Yeats presents here the image of "of something in the depths of the mind [made] visible and powerful"¹⁵ by means of mingling colour and sound with his dramatic experience.

The harp in the hands of Forgael is similar to the rod in the hands of William Shakespeare's Prospero of *The Tempest* whose magical sweet sounds produced by Prospero's supernatural servant, Ariel, is like the magical music produced by Forgael's harp. Interestingly enough, both Forgael and Prospero have encountered the sea and adventurous experiences, and both of them are made prone to a conspiracy to be made by others—Forgael by his sailors; Prospero, by his captives. Both kinds of music are magical; they are the harp's music and Ariel's music, which have the ability to have power over others and bring together ideal lovers—Ferdinand is brought to Miranda; Forgael, to Dectora. As a result, the Shakespearean treatment of magic and the supernatural has become in the hands of Yeats who has employed them for the sake of both a personal experience and a universal one. Yeats's motif can be regarded as being universal in that he has distanced his own personality from the play by resorting to the Iris mythology and picking up the story of Forgael which is presented by him within the frame of reverie and a dream lest he should be accused of killing Dectora's husband who stands in reality for Gonne's husband, John MacBride.

The harp can be considered a symbol of imagination which is quite dramatically convincing, for it excites the imagination of the audience, whose influence on character and action has already been established, and whose power becomes greater as the action of the play moves towards its climax. Both kinds of the supernatural agencies, Shakespeare's and Yeats's, have caused reconciliation at the end of both of the dramas of both dramatists.

Yeats comments that the story contained in *The Shadowy Waters* envisions the wish for a perfect and immortal relationships among lovers. In other words, it is "the desire of Love to 'drown in its own shadow,'" ¹⁶ and that while Forgael seeks death Dectora always seeks life, and as Yeats puts it in the following excerpt:

these two [lovers] are simply man and woman,

the reason and the will, as Swedenborg puts it...The second flaming up of the harp may mean the coming of a more supernatural passion, when Dectora accepts the death-desiring destiny. yet in one sense, and precisely because she accepts it, this destiny is not death; for she, the living will, accompanies Forgael, the mind, through the gates of the unknown world. Perhaps it is a mystical interpretation of the body.¹⁷

Forgael's quest for the eternal world and his rejection of the actual one indicate that he yearns for an association with a world that is without the shadow of a woman that does not belong to the actual world. In contrast, Forgael's men seeks the materialistic world where they can get spoils as much as possible:

First Sailor. ...That was the bargain. What is the use of knocking about and fighting as we do unless we get the chance to drink more wine and kiss more women than lasting peaceable men through their long life time?¹⁸

Unlike his sailors, Forgael yearns for the exotic and the unattainable, or things that cannot be interpreted by his sailors. He is unable to cope with the materialistic world which is one of imperfection and of death. Katharine Worth believes that the play gives a sense of dream in which Forgael is made to attain a position above the real world, a position where he can thrust himself into dreams and imagination—a world where he can look for "symbols, imagery, he even composes there; and sometimes it seems that that world is to him more real, more substantially satisfying than the ordinary world of the waking senses and mind."¹⁹ This is the main reason why Forgael desires to leave the actual world, creating a vision portrayed by means of the supernatural to carry him to the ideal permanent world where there is "a country at the end of the world/where no child's born but to outlive the moon."²⁰ This is contrary to what some critics consider to be as being escapism on the part of Forgael who stands for the personality of Yeats seeking accompaniment with his old love. For Forgael possesses the kind of power that has the capacity to transcend him into the ideal world of love. Forgael is quite aware of the principle of life and the principle of death—two principles set by Sigmund Freud—and Forgael, as Parkin Andrew points out, is motivated to show his faith in the force of the imaginative power which is so significant to him that in case he loses it he will encounter a state of melancholy and despair.²¹ It may be suggested that Forgael's imaginative power and artistic capacity to produce magical music can be regarded as an element of the supernatural. He describes his state of life, saying:

I can see nothing plain; all's mystery.
 Yet sometimes there's a touch inside my head
 That makes all clear, but when the light is gone,
 I have but images, analogies,
 That mystic bread, the sacramental wine,
 The red rose where the two shafts of the cross,
 Body and soul, waking and sleep, death, life,
 Whatever meaning ancient allegorists
 Have settled on, are mixed into one joy.
 For what's the rose but that? Miraculous cries,
 Old stories about mystic marriages,
 Impossible truth? But when the touch is lit
 All that is impossible is certain.²²

At the end of *The Shadowy Waters*, Forgael and Dectora have left the sailors, launching for the end of the world where they decide to wait for their death. Accordingly, those two lovers are mainly concerned with the kind of romantic love that is fatalistic, who try to attain an ultimate union after they die together, which is called by Lee as the pattern of the "final union only after death."²³ the dreamy atmosphere as indicated in the setting of the play is created by means of words such as "shady, dim, shadows, blind,, dreamed, night, dawn, pale light, and star-glimmering" which are scattered here and there in the narrative and which contribute with the aid of the title of the play *unrealistic reality*, as it were, on the stage. The dejected Forgael seems to travel from the actual world to the world of love and beauty by means of imagination represented by the birds as indicators of the later world, whose wings are always taken to be the wings of imagination by the romantics, metaphorically speaking. Before Yeats, John Keats tries to free himself from the pains and shackles of reality by means of imagination, a fact which is well expressed in his poems "Ode to a Nightingale," and "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Both poems show a setting telling of the ideal world which Keats wants to attain—the world of beauty, magic, and spirituality. This kind of interpretation explains the fact that the play cannot be understood according to realistic standards. Rather, the play addresses imagination, magic, the supernatural, mythology and symbols, so that the main motif and theme of the play are to be crystallized.

The supernatural agencies and the symbols used in *The Shadowy Waters* are all based on the ancient myths and legends of Ireland, which make the play much more intelligible. Nevertheless, Yeats's aim is to colour the play with a sense of universality and objectivity as well, when resorting to familiar mythical ingredients which enrich the play with abundant meanings and connotations. Yeats himself comments that the use of symbols is so significant that it unfolds a great deal of meanings, and as follows:

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lay an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature.²⁴

Due to the influence of the new age of science and technology, mythical, legendary and supernatural agencies of the Irish folklore seem to be alien and forgotten, whose prominent meanings, symbols and connotations which were familiar in the past become unfamiliar in the modern age, and due to Yeats's sense of moral responsibility towards his nation, folklore and literature, he regards it as being necessary to renovate and revive the literary heritage of his own country throughout writing poems and dramas in this particular aspect. Hence, Yeats resorts to Irish folklore and mythology to create not only his own peculiar myths but also to bring to life the Irish mythology that is reflected in his poetry for the sake of shedding light on his Irish national myths and legends. Jeffares comments on Yeats's poetry, saying

What did capture his imagination was the possibility of creating a national mythology out of Gaelic legends....to echo some of the belief in the supernatural and the oral traditions he had found as a boy in Sligo among the peasantry and the servants in his relatives houses....his love for natural beauty was deeply felt; it blended with a desire for quietude, and also interacted with his growing interest in the supernatural.²⁵

It is indicated that Dectora stands for Gonne who stands a goddess-like representation, a symbol of beauty, love and the ideal world which Yeats dreams to attain. By means of his magical harp, a supernatural agency, Forgael manages to attain the unattainable, cure the incurable and achieve the impossible. The supernatural elements in the play are therefore to function as being structural in that they affect the course of the development of the action, serve the dramatist to achieve his aim in presenting a universal work of art—being closely related to man's life and experience—and give him an opportunity to spiritually unite with his unreachable beloved.

المُلخَص

العناصر الخارقة للطبيعة في W. B. Yeats و Shadowy المياه

أسماء مكرم

يتناول البحث استخدام العناصر الخارقة في مسرحية (مياه ذات أطياف) للكاتب المسرحي ديليو بي بيتس. إن البحث عبارة عن محاولة لتسليط الضوء على أهمية ووظائف هذه العناصر الخارقة. لقد عانى بيتس لفترة طويلة من الزمن من حبه غير المتبادل لمود كون الجميلة التي لم يتمكن من الزواج منها لأنها رفضت جميع محاولاته في هذا الأمر. وعلى الرغم من ذلك وجد بيتس ضالته في عالم الأحلام الذي تمكن فيه من مصاحبة حبيبته إلى عالم الحب والجمال الأبدي بمساعدة العوامل الخارقة مثل القيثارة السحرية والطيور ذات الرؤوس البشرية و المثولوجيا الأيرلندية. تظهر في هذه المسرحية شخصيتان رئيسيتان هما فورجيل و ديكتورا اللذان يمثلان بيتس ومود كون على التوالي. يحقق بيتس في هذه المسرحية رغبته الشخصية باستخدام عنصر الخيال واغراضه المسرحية في انجاز تجربة انسانية عامة وشاملة من خلال استخدام العناصر الخارقة والسحر و المثولوجيا الأيرلندية.

Notes

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2. James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of the Theatre: The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 7.
3. Deborah Tenne, "Celtic Elements in Three works by William Butler Yeats," *Folklore and Mythology Studies* 2 (Spring 1978)...<https://Deborah-tannen-npmr.squarespace.com>. p. 31.
4. W. B. Yeats, *The Arrow*, November, 1906, quoted in A. N. Jeferes and A. S. Knowland, eds., *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 60.
5. Se-Soon Lee, *The Shadowy Waters as Yeats's Private Methos*... < yeatsjournal.or.kr. Retrieved on December 6th, 2016. p. 3.
6. Ibid.
7. James W. Flannery, p. 45.
8. Ibid., p. 50.
9. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1952), p. 151.
10. James W. Flannery, p. 51.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 296.
13. Ibid., pp. 298-99.
14. Ibid., p. 300.
15. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1961), p. 276.
16. A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), p. 59.
17. W. B. Yeats, in A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, p. 59.
18. W. B. Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters in The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1982), p. 149.
19. Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: The

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20. W. B. Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters* in *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, p. 150.
21. Parkin Andrew, *The Dramatic Imagination of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Barnes & noble Books, 1978), p. 80.
22. W. B. Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters* in *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, p. 152.
23. Se-Soon Lee, "A Study on W. B. Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín*," in *A Collection of humanities Theses*, Chung-Ang University, no. 33 (Seoul: Chun-Ang Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 245-89. P. 21.
24. W. B. Yeats, as quoted in Se-Soon Lee, *The Shadowy Waters* as Yeats's Private Methos... < yeatsjournal.or.kr. Retrieved on December 6th, 2016.
25. A. Norman Jeffares, *Profiles in Literature: W. B. Yeats* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 2.

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