

# MORBIDITY IN THE POETRY OF W.B.YEATS AND T.S.ELIOT

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Morbidity has been a recurring theme in modern poetry from W.B. Yeats down to Ezra Pound. Yeats has written his autobiography 'The trembling of the veil', 1955 in which he has thrown sufficient light on his personal life, this is to say, what circumstances made him lonely, alienated and cut off from the society. Yeats was born in 1860. He came to love Maud Gonne when he was hardly 22 years old. Maud Gonne was born in 1866. Thus he was one year older than Maud. His love for Maud was one-sided. He offered his proposal for marriage before her half a dozen times in 1891, 1898, 1901, 1916, and every time his proposal was turned down by Maud. She was married to a military officer named McBride. In 1884 she gave birth to a female child named Isoult Gonne. Funnily enough Yeats offered his proposal of marriage before her which was rightly thwarted. Apart from those love affairs Yeats loved several girls and every time he was disappointed. All these events and many others added to his aloofness and alienation and he often felt like committing suicide. In December 1912, Yeats wrote a poem 'To A Child Dancing in the Wind'. Obviously this poem was directed towards Isoult. A few lines from this poem are as follows,

“ Being young you have not known  
The fools triumph, nor yet  
Love lost as soon as won.”<sup>1</sup>

In his poem written in March 1914 entitled 'Two Years Later' Yeats wrote,

“ But I am old and you are young  
And I speak a barbarous tongue.”<sup>2</sup>

From the above account it is manifest that Yeats was all through wrestling with himself. He was mentally and physically broken. He felt that the entire world had disowned him. He felt completely lonely in crowd. His sense of utter loneliness, alienation and isolation prevailed in his mind resulting in his poem dealing with self-remorse, conflict and mental penetration.

Yeats' poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' was published in 1927 which was followed by his poem 'The Tower' which was published in 1928. By this time Yeats had become very old. In his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' he compares an aged man with a tattered coat upon a stick. The imagery is highly suggestive. And

old man is left a skeleton. His body becomes completely lean and thin. So the poet has rightly compared the body of an old man with a stick. In the poem, 'The Tower', the poet's attitude to the decrepit age becomes all the more serious. He realizes the worthlessness of life when he has become very old, unable to think anything to any effect,

“What shall I do with this absurdity-

O heart, o troubled heart-this caricature

Decrepit age that has been tied to me

As to a dog's tail.”<sup>3</sup>

When anything is tied to a dog's tail and the dog runs, the thing or object produces a rattling sound which carries no sense. It is not musical either. So is the condition of the poet's body. He has become caricature. He can be only be laughed at because his body gives an odd look. The two poems quoted above give the idea of the poet's mental condition in his old age. The poet is now ambitionless and has forfeited his will to leave. He can not regain his youth again. This idea pains him does not let him live in rest.

In his poem, 'Among School Children' published in 1926, the poet looks at the young school children moving, playing and dancing happily. He is reminded of his own beloved Maud Gonne lonelier that that his beloved would have also played and danced, when she was a school child, in the manner the school children were dancing. But the poet repents that his beloved has now become a grown up lady and her attitude towards him has changed. She no more loves him. She has turned his back towards him. In spite of seeming indifference he will not be able to forget her. Her present image floats into his mind,

“ Her present image floats into the mind-

Did Quattrocento finger fashion it

Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind.”<sup>4</sup>

In the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' the poet longs to transform himself to the land of Byzantium where he will find perpetual peace and solace and will not be afraid of the threat of decay and death. In that land of Byzantium there would be a golden bird whose body would be made by the Grecian goldsmith and buy gold enamelling that golden bird would set upon golden bough and would incessantly sing to keep the Emperor away,

“Once out of Nature I shall never take

My bodily from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake.”<sup>5</sup>

T.S. Eliot, particularly In his poems like ‘The love song of J. Alfred prufrock’, ‘Gerontion’ and ‘Portrait of a lady’ projects the scene of gloom ,alienation and disarray. ‘The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ is not a love poem in the traditional sense. It is the outpouring of an adolescent lover who is broken from within and without. The very opening line of the poem describes the frustration and ennui of Prufrock who offers a peculiar proposal before his lady love,

“Let us go then, you and I,  
 When the evening is spread out against the sky,  
 Like a patient etherized upon a table.”<sup>6</sup>

The image of evening which is compared here with a patient etherised upon a table brings before us a sombre picture of gloom and alienation. Prufrock exists no doubt, but mentally he is non- existent. He is simply a shambling figure moving on the earth. This is clear from his self -assertion

“Morning ,evening and noon  
 I have measured out my life with a coffee spoon.”<sup>7</sup>

And further Prufrock compares himself with Lazarus who was raised from the grave by Jesus Christ:

“I am Lazarus, come from the dead.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, while comparing himself with Lazarus, Prufrock intends to say that he is a living corpse. He is a symbol of the predicament of a modern man who lives physically but is mentally defunct. It amounts to death and life. Eliot’s Gerontion is a tragic tale of an old man languishing for complete annihilation. The admission of the old man is:

“An old man is a draught house  
 Under a winding knot.”<sup>9</sup>

The Image of draught is very significant here. Draught signifies want of rain. Gerontion craves for rain which is denied to him. As captain Boycott was excommunicated from the society for his fault so Gerontion

also feels excommunicated from everything around him. His anguish is described by the poet with the help of striking symbols and images. The poem ends with a remark,

“Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season”.<sup>10</sup>

How Gerontion feels alienated and how he hankers after death and how he realises the futility of life is the theme around which the whole web of the poem has been spun out.

Eliot's poem ‘The portrait of a lady’ reiterates the same theme of alienation. The lady described in the poem reminds us of the lady described by Henry James in his novel of the same title. But it gives the lady an entirely different tint and colour. The lady whose portrait has been drawn in the poem is a lady counterpart of the male lover Prufrock. Here Eliot draws a picture of a lady who is emotionless, sexually frigid and a good-for-nothing creature.

The lady portrayed in the poem is the symbol of meaninglessness and vacuity. She has completely withdrawn herself from the outside world. She is a stranger for others, she says,

“ You do not know how much they mean to me, my friends,  
And how rare and strange it is to find  
In a life composed so much, so much of odds and ends.”<sup>11</sup>

The lady struggles against the odds and ends of life and ultimately finds that she is nowhere. A sense of gloom looms large on her personality and she feels alienated from the world she lives in. Even in respect of love she cannot reciprocate the love of a lover whom she finds invulnerable. Not to say of herself, she also finds a love without any stamina, without any fervours.

“you have no Achilles' heel.”<sup>12</sup>

The phrase ‘Achilles heel’ suggests that like her her lover is also devoid of the warmth of life. Eliot’s poem ‘The Waste Land’ is a good example of the poet’s attitude to the world and to his own self also. While on the one hand the poem describes the religious and moral and spiritual sterility of the world, on the other hand it also describes the dryness of the poet’s heart. The poem depicts the emotional breakdown of the poet and this melody of the poet can be traced in his personal life. Though as a poet and as a critic Eliot gained immense success and popularity, his personal life was full of failures and frustration. He could not live a normal conjugal life because of the protracted illness of his wife. After the death of his wife he married his stenographer and confidential clerk and got momentary happiness. He himself said that he got happiness only twice in life once when he was born and another when he was remarried.

The word ‘rock’ occurring in the section ‘What the thunder said’ symbolises complete dryness. The word ‘water’ occurring in the same section symbolises faith. In modern time man has become so self-centred that

he has neither time nor propensity to look outside. He has lost faith in everything including in himself. There is complete breakdown of human relationship .Man is unhappy and miserable because he is dry from within and without.

“Here is no water but only rock  
Road and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water.”<sup>13</sup>

The poem ‘Sweeney among the Nightingale, 1918 is a prophetic poem. Sweeney is threatened by death. He reminds us of the Agamemnon story narrated in the Greek legend. Like many other poems of Eliot, this poem also deals with the horrors of death. The poet finds no way out of this horror. The poet wants to escape from this horror and terror but he is unable to do so.

Sweeney is our modern hero putting the whole structure of values over his head and only to be converted into a human swine wallowing in the mud of lust and gross materialism. He and all his companions are equally represented as animals ,fierce as well as mean. The epigraph is quoted by Eliot in original Greek meaning ,

“ I am smitten with moral blow”.<sup>17</sup>

This also means that he has been killed altogether by Sweeney and his modern accomplices. Actually Sweeney is introduced here as human beast. This human beast is under the threat of murder. The word ‘raven’ is intended to remind us of the word raven used by Shakespeare in his drama Macbeth.

Another modern poet in which we find the theme of morbidity is Ezra Pound. Even his outward countenance showed how much he had withdrawn himself from the world. It is to be noted that he breathed his last in a lunatic asylum after having been openly declared insane. His marital relation was a complete failure. Like a butterfly he moved from one flower to another and he did not find a permanent abode to dwell in. He had no steady track of mind though he was a guide and philosopher of Eliot from whom Eliot learnt a lot and he corrected and improved upon Eliot's ‘The Waste Land’. He himself was a man without sound philosophy. Ezra Pound’s philosophy is the philosophy of negation, a philosophy of pessimism, to some extent a nihilistic philosophy. In a poem entitled ‘New’ he says,

“ And when I woke  
The morrow  
Out of my bones ran out.”<sup>13</sup>



There is a tone of frustration and despondency. Pound was no doubt very unfortunate right from his very childhood. In him we find a clear amalgam of creative and critical faculty. He exercised deep and potent influence on Wyndham Lewis and R.N. Tagore including T.S. Eliot. Later his poetry was considered the echo of modern sensibility.

The theme of morbidity is also found in some other English poets particularly in W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas. In fact, the theme of morbidity is so conspicuous in modern poetry that it is hardly possible to conceive modern poetry without it.

#### Reference---

1. Yeats, W.B., 'To a child Dancing in the Wind', lines, 6-8
2. Yeats, W.B., Two Years Later, lines, 11-12
3. Yeats, W.B., The Tower
4. Yeats, W.B., Among School Children
5. Yeats, W.B., Sailing to Byzantium
6. Eliot, T.S., The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, lines, 1-3
7. Ibid., 96-97.
8. Ibid., lines 32,
9. Eliot, T.S., Gerontion, lines, 32-33
10. Ibid, lines, 84
11. Eliot, T.S., The Portrait of a Lady, lines, 22-24
12. Ibid., line, 61

