Myth as Structural Component: A Study of W. B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" from Mythical Structuralism

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Abstract

Structuralism commonly deals with signs and signification process to produce meaning of any text based on structures tied in signifier and signified. It is theoretical concept developed by Ferdinand de Saussure which, later on, became conversant in art and literature known as structuralism and is applied in literary texts. From the structural sense, myth is one of the prominent components to connect both visible and implicit signification attuned to a language.

Mythical structuralism tends to embody a system of communication where mythical references and allusions indicate message. That is, myth cannot be simply categorized as an object or image. Rather, it is a mode of signification s liked in the chain, both apparent and non apparent. Especifically, myth is structural sign of the past whose signification process can be traced into the language in use as in second order. Considering this, myth as structural analysis is applied to see undercurrent mythical allusions and references in W.B. Yeats' " Sailing to Byzantium". I focus on the ideas and theoretical concepts employed by Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva. These scholars try to see language as an embodiment of structure: both the visible and invisible within certain linguistic entity incorporated with signs, signifiers, signified and signification process. Myth as the signification process is discussed as latent and visible structures exposed in language.

Key words and terms: **mythical structuralism, phenotext, genotext, signification, semiological , collective unconsciousness, archetype, denotation, connotation**

Introduction

William Butler Yeats is often called a key figure of the modernism with distinct place in English literature and Irish Renaissance. He has been recognized as a great poet of the twentieth century. This recognition came as early as 1928, a decade before his death with the publication of, arguably, his finest volume that are considered as fabulous literary pieces of English literature.

"Sailing to Byzantium" is one of the powerful poems with evocative cultural wishes and mythical references, where this corporeal entity of human body and life seem to be on defunct, thereby making a quest for something beyond body and temporality. Though Byzantium is the place with historical and artistic potential, Yeats, however, tries to emulate this place beyond denotation, not as mere place, but a land of dream or utopia. He has described the Byzantium as the holy city, as if it were a place of soul in which a new dawn of civilization is

to emerge: where old connection is to come to defunct and new promises are to usher. The mythical chronology of the place, from the past to the present including and its historical and cultural legacies are traced into new structural chain: a place for utopian projection.

Yeats was attracted to the myth for different reasons. He was associated with many of the myths and mystical ideas in his creative process. His early poems have a lot to do with Irish mythology, depicting the rise and fall of civilization. He is also of the opinion that the nature of civilization changes after almost every two thousand years, giving some solace for ailing human beings, thereby giving landmark for rejuvenation. This motif is clearly manifested in his poem "Sailling to Byzantium." Ferdinand de Saussure, the proponent of structuralism states: "In fact, every means of expression used in society is based in principle, on collective behavior or what amounts to the same thing –on convention" (41). Myth is a form of structure which is a signifier tied in signification process.

Structure of language, according to Saussure, is based on convention and arbitrary roles. Myth, in this sense, is one of the prominent components of structural study which connects both visible and non visible signification. Julia Kristeva makes a beautiful distinction between genotext and phenotext to which she refers to the   communication process involved in language either in written or spoken form . She seems to be nothing that myths and oral traditions   are tied in signification from cultural and artistic artifice, no matter they can be verbal or nonverbal . She further espouses: "The signifying process therefore includes both the genotext and phenotext , indeed it could not do otherwise . For it is in language that all signifying operations are realized (even when linguistic material is not used , and it is on the basis of language that a theoretical approach may attempt to perceive the operation"(145).

Kristeva points out that language can take any form for its signification process because signifiers may be different in social, cultural, and conventional context. From this what we can easily allude that material language is not the pivotal for its operational realization. To be clear, the myth and cultural connotations, even not in realistic felt component of communication, can deal to infer meaning.

Mythical structures   play a significant roles in human life, especially social and cultural transformations because they are ingrained in human psyche. Moreover, some mythical allusions are involved in the chains of signifiers and signification process. That is to say, mythical references give us social and cultural order in connotative plane of language that get connected with signification process. In this sense,   the social, cultural and mythical order sometimes become explicit at the interplay of language. Sometimes, however,   they are so obscure to exert

them into linguistic expositions. We therefore need to explore semiotic link and signification process from the past to the present. Peter Widdowson also thinks of structuralism and as internal linguistic codes what may coincide with Kristeva and Barthe's conceptualization of myth. He states:

> Structuralism was also indebted in Sassure's concept of the signifier/ signified duality. But in contrast to the Bhaktin School's social orientation, it developed the theory that as a signifying system which is meaningful only in respect of the internal linguistic "codes" of which it is comprised, literature does not allude to any reality outside itself, and therefore cannot be truthful: it is neither "mimetic" nor "expressive". (84)

Widdowson hints that structures of language in some cases seem to be quite innate and are therefore not explicit. He indicates that internal linguistic codes, supposedly the myths and other sources of mythical references are not easily expressive. That is, they are to be codified and explained in the broader frame of signification process.

Theoretical Framework

It would be relevant to discuss as to how myth, mythical allusions, traditional references of art, cultures, and archetypes can be analyzed into structural proposition to what Yeats' poems are profusely characterized. As is discussed, myths, legends and folk literatures have structural proposition. Semiotic chain converged in structural premise is connected through signification process where sign, signifiers, and signified are linked. This link can be both implicit and explicit. To some extent, mythical structural net work is resurgence or revisiting of some repertoires of myth and cultural contexts. The theory of sign expects us to understand that the semiotic chain begins from the immemorial past to the present. What we know about Plato, Aristotle, Greek traditions or Anglo Saxon times can be seen in some forms or signification process in the present. That is sign is the pivotal thing that governs the signification process.

Justification

Myth is unexplored structure of language which is composite of several aspects of the meanings in any language. Myth can be improvised to construe certain linguistic references and context. Habib in this regard states , " What myth does , then, is to free certain concepts or meanings from their original history and context , and to implant a "whole history". Hence, the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated" (640). Myth is a form of structure based on implicit signs of language. As language is product of deep structure that is in core in the internal linguistic codes. Lois Tyson aptly states:

> Our understanding of the world does not result from our perception of

structures that exist in the world. The structures we think we perceive in the world are actually innate (inborn) structures of human consciousness, which we project on to the world in order to be able to deal with the world. It is not that there is no factual reality; it is that there are too many facts to be perceived without conceptual systems to limit and organize them. (211)

Tyson explicitly notes that the structures of any language is not merely manifested entity. Rather, it has an innate form which is conflated with human conscious and unconscious minds over a course of the time.

Roland Barthes, a prominent structural critic, is of the opinion that myth is a type of speech and structure which takes active role in the mode of signification. As everything is not expressed in the same time, there are, though, some traces to be interpreted in semiotic structure. In this sense, mythical link, especially some objects or artifice become the prey of the mythical speech for a while and disappear in course of time and other take place of their place and become the part of signifying process. As he specifically asserts, " But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from semiological chain which existed before it: is second order of semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associate total of a concept and image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (57).

The modern application of structuralism is becoming an innovative literary interpretation based on the root of justification of structures that go beyond physical realm and codifications attuned to languages and norms. This gets posited in collective unconsciousness which is experienced through race, culture, and myth and certain archetypes . Carl Jung, the proponent of unconscious and psychic model of study is phenomenal in this field whose ideas can be influential in the stud of mythical structure. Richard M Gary quotes Jung:

These experiences exist in the subconscious of every individual. and are recreated in literary works or in the forms of art. On the other hand, Joseph Campbell says that no matter or culture or religion one looks at, one will find the same story being told. In a sense, everything else is presentation of archetypes that reside in our unconscious. . . .The cultural contexts of Marlon James' John Crow's Devil provides an ideal opportunity to analyze the signatures , avatars , and archetype of each of its four main characters . (56)

On this backdrop, is can be said that myth is another form of that either comes as the word, an object or things to infer meanings linked in the socially accepted linguistic mediums. However, these signs may not be so palpable and vital in other

contexts. Baudrillard points this phenomenon in his words, "There is a plethora of myths of origin and signs of reality –plethora of truth of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared" (219).

Myths are rampant in any society, but some of them don't take active roles in the sign system and are therefore submerged. As linguistic structures are composite of several rhetorical interconnections, some of the signifiers and signified are not prominently exposit in objective parlance of language. This situation does not indicate that they are dead, but they can be dormant with potentiality of resurrections. Similarly, Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who explains, "Myth and dreams were expressions of the collective unconscious, in that they express core ideas that are part of the human species as a whole. The comparison of myths from different cultures reveals universal archetypes: images, symbols, and structures that recur throughout time and culture" (qtd. in Segal 102).

This way, it is important to note that myths can be objectified in certain manifested levels that can be explicit in some cases. In this,   they take forms of linguistic medium and people can easily associated with. In course of time, it takes a form of socially accepted code and conduct applicable.   However, in some cases latent and needs other connotative mediums through art, literature, and paintings that people explore meanings that are not direct ones.

Analysis of the Poem

Yeast's poetry can be interpreted from different aspects; there is a blend of inter-textual and allusive references rife with mythical fabric. Greek mythology, war, Gallic traditions, and Irish cultural influence are some of the dominant elements in his poems. Furthermore, his artistry is conflated with   myth, mythical allusions and Christian and Biblical references.

"Sailing to Byzantium" is expressed in semiotic form formulated through signification at the interplay sign, signifier, and signified. The term "Byzantium" itself is rich mythical entity   convulsive in several layers of the mythical reference since the time   when it was artistically thriving place in the past. That is, the place signifier is handled in the signification process: indicating as a utopian land where human beings are deprived from corporeal entity but the entity of transcendental soul. From the stand point of semiotic perspective,   any language needs to be explored through cultural, social, and ideological contexts in the chain of signification process which are connected.   Julia Kristeva, the prominent critic and scholar, seems to be quite contextual in this and states,   "semiology concerns itself with a social domain and its formalization (permitted by the establishment of the concept of the sign) must be justified psychological or sociological theory" (65).

"Sailing to Byzantium" a form of evocation and wish fulfillment, extolling human prophetic quest of life conversant with myths and cultural context. Rife in visionary imageries, allusions and Christian beliefs, the poet dreams of taking us to wonderland. He does not seem to apportion this place only for young and resilient, and the old and dying, contrarily, are not welcome. Here, the young, to the poet, is not merely an indication of time, but a stage of fruition. According to the mythical references, the meaning of "youth" transcends its meaning and gets linked with vigor, enthusiasm, and fruition.   The stark first line begins: "There is no country for old men". The old men, according to the poet, are somewhat compared with rotten fruits which can rot other fresh fruits in course of time. This idea is consistently reinforced when the poet comes with another harsh and terse poetic like in the beginning of second stanza: "An aged man is but paltry thing".   Said that the category between "old" and "young" is not just based on temporal dimension, but invested with virulence and energy of human beings that create unfounded human civilization with vigilance and ardency. According to Yeats, this is, though a world captivated in human mind, is somewhat to be put in mythical structural premise. In that visionary substantiation comes the point of youth which is something to do with incarnation of new order, despising and shunning the traditional and conventional morality of human circumstances. In this sense comes here mythical semiotic structure where youth and old are basic entities of corporeal faculties of human mind but transcended to an extended implicit semiotic context: conflating past with present, history with dynamics, and physicality with ethereal existence. That is to say, the denotative meanings of young and old are purged on   the layers of connotative meanings with energy and virulence, as if basic prerequisites   for a person to live there: in Yeats dream land.

Moreover, Byzantium is not a place which can be extended metaphor linked with sign and signification   where human aspirations are considered to get fulfilled if one is suitable for this: he is to lose his corporeal body and has to attain soul hood. This can be implicitly drawn   to context as W. B Yeats, specifically, holds this visionary idea to take place through complete enlightenment as he indicates " Monuments of unaging intellect". Byzantium, the dream land for the souls, is also mystically converged with other semiotic links and chains like " God's holy fire" "gyre" " artifice of eternity" and "Grecian goldsmiths". These mythical references are linked with greater signification process, broadening the realm of " Byzantium". The denotative place identifier gets conjugated with labyrinthine mythical semiotic chain :   suffused by small and rather fragmentary details that ooze into the exposition of the bigger chain. And here, we are brought to the perceptions that "Byzantium" is transcendental and visionary conception, not necessarily a place but a state of mind.

Furthermore, there are many other words and images employed in the poem construed in mythical references, making broader mythical structural premise. The "holy city""sailed the seas""holy fire""drowsy emperor awake""golden bough" are assorted with the state of Byzantium as rejuvenation. At the same time, these imageries give us a sense of transcendental mythological evocation. The concept of holy city is taken as the place of sublimity unlike any land of the earth that may corrupt sooner or later, which , in this realm, is Byzantium. Similarly, the holy fire can be interpreted as the fire that cleanses human sins and corporeal evils. The drowsy emperors awake does not necessarily indicate about a personal identity as a king or emperor, but an awakening state of human being from the slumber of death and transitory. Likewise, the golden bough is the branch of tree where the fruits of divinity are expected to ripe. These words and imageries are condensed forms of mythical chains which may be interpreted in several facets structuralism.

Conclusion

In the recent years, scholars are seen interested to study social, cultural and mythical behaviors in literature. Several theories have been developed for this. One of the important aspect of studying myth is semiotic studies that links the manifested language with innate social, cultural, and mythical behaviors. The mythical semiotic structure employed in this poem helps readers see some undercurrent structures, thereby exploring theoretical propositions that go beyond mythical realm. The study of "Sailing to Byzantium" is therefore a step to see myth as structure of language that can impact art, literature, and painting. I think the collective unconscious , an underlying mythical allusions and archetypes which is still unexplored, may be an innovative study for the further perusal.

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