

# An Interpretation of Ecological Images in William Yeats' Poems from the Perspective of New Historicism

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## Abstract

There are many descriptions of the environment in William Yeats' poems. From the perspective of new historicism, this paper analyzes the ecological images of poetry from two aspects: the historicity of the text and the textuality of history. Ecological images are those depicting nature and cities. Among them, birds, roses, and Innisfree are the classic ones. Through these images, William Yeats concerns the relationship between the ecology and people. The historicity of the text presents the historical reality of Ireland and Irish life experience. Then, based on the function of literary texts which work as an ecological reality, the thesis explores the assimilation and arrogance of humans in constructing Irish life experience. The textuality of history focuses on fiction and historic reality. Through the images, Irish ecology enters the public. Moreover, William Yeats applies defamiliarization and intertextuality to contrasting the authoritative history and offering a fresh history.

**Keywords:** historicity of text; textuality of history; ecological images.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ecology dates back to the state of organisms in surroundings and also the features of creatures. People live on the earth and nature cannot be essential enough for a human. Then along with the industrial revolution, urban ecology appears. Urban ecology only includes urban humans but also organisms and abiotic environment. Therefore, this thesis concerns the ranges of images about city and nature in several poems including *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *The Stolen Child*, and *The Wild Swan at Coole*, *The Second Coming*, and *Sailing to Byzantium*. The swan and branches are the classic ones. Images could be divided into five types: place, plants, animals, scenery, and tools. The herons, rats, cattle, bees, crickets, trout and rats are the animals. The rush, branches, beans roses are plants. The hills and islands are places. The kettle and stove plate are tools. The road is infrastructure. The sky is scenery.

Ecological images have a literal meaning and connotative meaning. It is necessary to reinterpret the ecological connotation in poetry, re-examine the images in modernist poetry, analyze the social situation at that time, the limitations of the social situation on Yeats'

poetry creation, and how a writer interacts with society through poems, which is of great significance to the relationship between nature and human.

## 2. HISTORICITY IN WILLIAM YEATS' POETRY

### 2.1 Ecological Reality

Traditional images are romantic. Images burst into life. Ireland once is a beautiful place. Life there is simple and comfortable. Although William Yeats' poems are romantic in the early period, the connotative meaning of images is very different from the traditional ones. For instance, images depicting Irish life are small and without beauty. After the industrial revolution, ecological images are those inconspicuous things, such as trout, rats, hills, kettle, and stove plate in *The Stolen Child*. They only give people cold things, inconspicuous but real, and do not make people feel romantic and aesthetic.

As a form of text, this non-aesthetic poetry records historical facts and reflects the historicity of the text. In *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, images are Innisfree,

huts, branches, nine rows of beans, crickets, cardinals, gray sidewalks, and roads.

However, ecological images, such as wilderness, river, fern grass, wick grass, reed, and hillside, give people a sense of desolation. Innisfree is an ideal place William Yeats longs to go to because Innisfree is his home and he connects an ideal place with Irish ecological reality. A few things satisfy the basic demand of human. The image fern grass records the simple and happy life in Innisfree far away from the destructive force of the industrial revolution and criticizes the human-centered lifestyle.

The destructive force of the industrial revolution could be found in *The Stolen Child*. The images in *The Stolen Child* are all obscure and not beautiful things such as herons, rats, rushes, trout, hills, kettles, and stoves. The romantic style represented by the image rose disappears. However, facing the desolation of reality, people are puzzled over the future.

Ecological images in *The Wild Swan at Coole* are Coole, stones, swans, streams, and rushes. These words construct a beautiful but isolated Ireland. On the one hand, Irish scenery is unforgettable. On the one hand, William Yeats and the Irish are opposed to the human-centered lifestyle; on the other hand, they hope to live an eco-friendly life. Therefore, the art becomes an assistant for William Yeats to express his thoughts.

Images record the impact of the industrial revolution. People are fearful of the strength of technology. However, although they are opposed to the industrial revolution, they must accept it. Moreover, it records the human alienation because of the industrial revolution. These could be found through the ecological images.

Besides, people should think about the relationship between the metropolis and the countryside. *Byzantium in Sailing to Byzantium* becomes the ideal urban area.

William Yeats constructs this place as an important place in the history theory. *Byzantium* becomes an ideal image for eternal arts. William Yeats asks eternal arts to reconciling the conflicts between the two. The rural places are calm and isolated while the urban places are developed. However, there is an image called cone. It is used to refer a circle and it last for two thousand years. After the circle period finished, the countryside will develop through the development of art.

## 2.2 Irish National Movement

Ireland is full of violence, oppression, and turbulence in reality (LI Yingxue, 2020:117-126). Innisfree is an ideal Irish place. As an ideal place,

Innisfree refers to William Yeats' homeland Lough Gill, Sligo. The place connects the Irish national movement with the "homeland consciousness" (LI Yingxue, 2020:117-126). Innisfree guides people to yearn for their homeland. There Innisfree refers to homeland awareness.

Therefore, in *The Wild Swan at Coole* the ecological image Coole implies a lot of meanings for the Irish. First, it records the failure of the Irish national movement. National Movement fails and it is the historicity of the text. Moreover, it is the homeland of the Irish although it is isolated. The wild could also exit in *The Wild Swan at Coole*.

Readers could also connect the nation movement with *Byzantium*. Facing the failure of Irish nation movement, William Yeats believes that the movement will come true someday because of the period of history. Someday, a chaotic and bloody era ends and a new era of Ireland comes.

## 2.3 William Yeats' Life Experience

Ecological images in *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* and *The Stolen Child* record the response of the social environment at that time, and the desolation of the industrial society is reflected incisively and vividly. Everything built is based on human-centered theory without concerning nature. Through outlining the rural life, William Yeats' lifestyle appears. He is simple and happy and gets along with nature instead of destroying it.

Ecological images in *The Wild Swan at Coole* record life in Coole. First, William Yeats loves Maud Gonne and desires to marry her. However, he is refused by her. Both Maud Gonne and William Yeats are devoted to the Irish national movement. After Maud Gonne's rejection, William Yeats makes friends with Lady Gregory. She invites William Yeats in Coole to create poems for Irish Literary Revival. Coole is very isolated. William Yeats' life was in trouble in 1890. After Maud Gonne's rejections, he is sad and lonely. Psychologically, he is eager to stay away from the world (Zheng Qing, 2016) and find a place of inner peace. The place for inner peace is the lake Coole in William Yeats' mind.

The image *Byzantium in Sailing to Byzantium* expresses the love for the art. He deems art as a way to eternal life. Through images, William Yeats' life is outlined. His life is unhappy and regards arts as his way to the eternal world.

## 3. TEXTUALITY IN WILLIAM YEATS' POETRY

### 3.1 Fiction and Historical Reality

Literature is not a passive response to historical reality but affects the reconstruction of facts

through the creation of texts. The images in *The Stolen Child* are all modest and not beautiful things such as herons, rats, rushes, trout, hills, kettles, and stoves. When choosing these images, the poet is influenced by the social environment at that time. Through images, modern industrial civilization betrays nature. Industrial civilization reveals oppression from England. England develops fast after the industrial revolution. The city expands while nature narrows. The historical reality appears in the relationship of human and nature. People just do things according to their own desires without concerning the ecology. William Yeats is apt to like nature and wants to live a simple life without the industrial revolution. William Yeats expresses his life experience in a poem and the textuality of human-center lifestyle is recorded.

Moreover, the island Innisfree is like William Yeats' homeland. Although Innisfree is the ideal place people long for, in reality, it refers to the homeland awareness in historical reality. Besides, Coole is isolated. Through the description, the calm but isolated features are defined in Irish literature revival. Then, the way of transference of countryside to the cities is through the construction of art (LI Yingxue, 2020:117-126). William Yeats thinks a history cycle is two thousand years. When a cycle is completed, it enters the next cycle, so it continues to cycle. Through fiction, historical reality changes, and textuality appears.

In a trend of thought, images also present the changes from romanticism to realism and to symbolism. And through the tension between reality and ideal, poetry is more dynamic. In *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, gray sidewalks and roads show the historical environment of poetry creation. Poetry originates from the imitation of life. The description of ecology, such as the outline of beans, Innisfree, branches, and huts, is not a deep description of reality, but a rough description. Romanticism changes into modernism and the classical one is symbolism. Society has been impacted and oppressed by capitalism and is full of integration thoughts of romanticism and modernity.

In *The Stolen Child*, a series of specific images derive from basic images (Guan Fenge, Zhao Haiping, 2020: 23-24). The images hillside and highland derive from mountain images (Guan Fenge, Zhao Haiping, 2020: 23-24). Compared to the category, the images hillside and the highland are the specific images. Moreover, the hillside and highland separately symbolize London and Sleuth in Ireland (Guan Fenge, Zhao Haiping, 2020: 23-24). The symbolism creates poems with fewer words and more meaning. Besides, trout and water-rats rely on water. Through animals' behavior, the vivid images appear. The trout lays eggs risking their life and symbolizes parents. And the trout are slumbering because it forgets the danger in water and it symbolizes parents are unaware of danger so as

to make their children live a happy life. The stolen child in Austria is caused by English Colonists. The child has to leave the homeland Ireland to London. The state of children proves that in the hillside they are happy and naive while in the highland their state is unknown and uncertain. The miserable situation of the society in which William Yeats lives makes it difficult for him to be as elegant as the romantic poets of his predecessors, but his poems are worthy of reading thousands of times.

Through fiction and historical reality, William Yeats constructs the new meaning of ecological images, so containment appears. New ecological meaning and new literature homeland awareness are constructed. Along with the new trend of thought, William Yeats' poems have their own features. The ecological images are more concrete and more related to the basic and abstract.

Through the new images of connotative meaning and a new trend of thought, Irish literature revival appears because William Yeats integrates personal history into the nation's history (Hou Weirui, 1999: 762).

### 3.2 Defamiliarization and Intertextuality of Textuality

Defamiliarization is a tool for poets to increase the connotative meanings of sentences. The numbers of ecological images themselves label the ecological reality. They slow down the space of reading and unconsciously force people to think about the meaning and give people a sense of unfamiliarity. In *The Stolen Child*, herons, water rats derive from rats as if they run in readers' sight. The unfamiliarity connects the behaviors and scenery with the images. Probably readers see them yesterday around the river. The ecological images enter the memory of readers and the textuality of history of the close relationship between nature and humans. Moreover, the features of ecological images are cruel, indifferent, and ethereal. Defamiliarization as a means of symbolism also arises in text.

Moreover, intertextuality is important in poems. The image Byzantium in *Sailing to Byzantium* expresses the love for the art. Byzantium once was the capital of the ancient Eastern Roman Empire. The capital was renamed Constantinople by the Roman Emperor Constantine I. In 1930, it was renamed Istanbul. (Liu Luechang, 011:631-635) William Yeats connects the poem and social reality. Through the image, he expresses the future of Ireland. Byzantium expresses the connection with his image gyres. They all want to introduce the understanding of history. William Yeats thinks history is a circle. Through intertextuality, his life experience and textuality are connected.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Through the interpretation of ecological images in William Yeats' Poems, from the perspective of new historicism, readers would know about the relationship between nature and humans. People should not be human-centered. Today, along with the issues the industrial revolution brings out, the ecological images deserve more attention. Moreover, traditional culture and contemporary culture blend with each other, and readers will extract the essence and remove the dross. Therefore, culture can be enriched to affect the creation of the text, and then be shaped into history. Then, poems reveal the personal experience and historical reality, and also the poems themselves become a treasure and have the textuality.

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