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Spiritual Triumph of the Self in W. B. Yeats' "A Dialogue of Self and Soul"

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Abstract

"A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is an autobiographical poem by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). It is written in the form of a conversation. The poem displays a conflict between the desire to live and yearning to get liberated from the cycle of birth and death. It first appeared in the collection *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* in 1933. In it, the Self represents human being whereas the Soul stands for divinity. Self represents the desire to live on in spite of difficulties. On the other hand, Soul represents the desire to be liberated from the cycle of birth and death. This conversation between two personality-traits of Yeats draws comparisons with the poem, "Strange Meeting" by Wilfred Owen. In this poem Owen describes a soldier's descent into Hell where he meets an enemy soldier. The dead soldier talks about the horrors of war and the ability to fathom that gruesome experience by only those who have been involved. However the dead soldier i.e. the man in Hell is the soldier's double or his 'other'. He is the reflection of the speaker himself. A man's encounter with his double is represented here as well by W. B. Yeats.

Keywords- Spiritual, Self, Soul, Sword, Symbolism, Modernism

The poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" consists of eight-line stanzas and it is divided into two parts. The first part is a conversation between the Soul and the Self in five stanzas. In second part, the Self emerges as the sole speaker in four stanzas. Most of the lines are in iambic pentameter with rhyme scheme of *abbacddc*. Within the poem, both the meter and rhyme have certain variants.

"What is material and what is not? When the world is the end and God is the means to attain that end, that is material. When God is the end and the world is only the means to attain that end, spirituality has begun" (Vivekananda, 66). In other words spirituality is in the very effort to attain the Infinite Reality through the life that we lead in this world. Only our

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rightful actions and by accepting every facet of life we come closer to the Almighty. Yeats' profound belief in spiritualism and mysticism find expression in the lines of the poem. His personal spiritual and philosophical system which he developed over the course of time, and explained in his book, *A Vision* (1925) are well delineated in the poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". He writes:

I summon to the winding ancient stair;
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
Upon the breathless starlit air,

(A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 1-4)

Initially the soul summons the self to the old and the ancient staircase of the castle Thoor Ballylee. Yeats purchased this castle in 1916. He and his family lived there and it became their summer home and country retreat. Being deeply attached with the castle, it inspired him immensely; and slowly assumed the significance of both a monument as well as a symbol for Yeats. The winding staircase of this castle is mentioned here.

A parallel can be drawn between "...winding ancient stair;" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 1) and the first line of "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats; "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" (The Second Coming, 1). Yeats uses the symbols of interlocking gyres which is similar to intersecting conical spirals to represent the development and reincarnation of the soul. The interlocked gyres bear a winding appearance similar to the winding staircase. Similarly here, the first line describes the spiritual ascent of the soul. The third line reminds us of "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats once again. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;" (The Second Coming, 3). So at a time when things are falling apart, the soul tells the self to concentrate upon the ultimate height where it has to reach. The acute climb to a place beyond physical can make the self bereft of breath. Still it should fix its mind on God – who is invisible but religion makes us feel His perpetual presence. "Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 5) refers to the Pole Star which stands fixed, never changing and guiding humans since time immemorial. Self is advised by the soul to set aside every fleeting thought and focus on that spiritual firmament where there is no distinction between darkness and light; where there no distinction between life and death.

In response to the summoning by the soul, the self sends out a message that man is capable of creating things that defy the passage of time. He writes in this regard:

The consecrated blade upon my knees
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass
Unspotted by the centuries;

(A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 9-12)

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Yeats' self speaks about the antique Japanese sword gifted to him by Junzo Sato in 1920. He had attended a lecture of Yeats at Portland, Oregon. Being immensely impressed Sato presented him with the 550 year old sword which had been a part of his family for five centuries. (Yeats' *The Letters*) The phrases: "consecrated blade" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 9) and "ancient blade" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 10) are examples of metonymy. "In metonymy (Greek for "a change of name") the literal term for one thing is applied to another with which it has become closely associated because of a recurrent relation in common experience." (Abrams, 109) Describing the sword, the poet says that despite being older than five hundred years it is still very sharp and has remained spotless. The silken embroidery, made from the best cloth which wraps up the scabbard still decorates and shields the sword from rust. The twelfth line conveys that the passage of time could not destroy the sword; only the embroidery of the sheath is a bit tattered. Even if the human body grows old and weak it can protect the urge to live on; just as the torn cloth still protects the sword. "Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn." (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 16) Through these lines Yeats tells us that as the sword has lived for such a long time; he too can lead a bright life. Hence he resists the demand of his soul.

Responding to the Self, Yeats' Soul wonders that why should man think of love, war, joy and pleasures of life when his real creative age is past. "Why should the imagination of a man / Long past his prime remember things that are / Emblematical of love and war?" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 17-19). In these lines we find reverberations of "Sailing to Byzantium" by W.B. Yeats. "That is no country for old men. The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees, / - Those dying generations – at their song," (Sailing to Byzantium, 1-3) This is Yeats' firm statement about the agony of old age and the spiritual task required to remain a vital being even when the heart is fastened to an ageing body. His solution is to leave the country and travel to Byzantium. Therein he wishes to take the form of a golden bird which is eternal while the poet's own body is prone to decay. Yeats conveys deep spiritual truth through this golden bird; i.e. the renunciation of the mortal world for something spiritually higher.

In the words "Emblematical of love and war?" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 19) the sword is the emblem of war and the lady's cloth guarding the blade despite being torn, is the symbol of love. The Soul asserts that if the imagination makes fun of what we visualise on this earth, only then we can think of the eternal darkness. In the twentieth line, "ancestral night" stands for the spiritual desire for absorption into darkness. It is the perpetual darkness into which one's soul gets absorbed before being liberated. The Soul reminds us that wandering intellect leads us nowhere. Rather concentrating on the ancient spiritual darkness can help us in getting liberated from the cycle of birth and death. "Deliver from the crime of death and birth." (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 24). Allusion is perhaps being drawn to the

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concept of Moksha in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. It not only states freedom from the cyclic path of birth and death but also oneness with the Divine Reality (Moksha).

“Montashigi, third of his family, fashioned it / Five hundred years ago,” (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 25-26) Yeats once again goes back to Sato’s sword while resisting the Soul’s call for spiritual renunciation. ‘Montashigi’ here is Bishu Motoshige – the maker of the sword, whose name Yeats saw on its hilt. The poet states that the deep bluish-red colour of the embroidered cloth which wraps the sword implies blood. It also stands for the light of the day. The tower symbolises the spiritual darkness or eternity. In this regard following lines can be cited:

Flowers from I know not what embroidery -
Heart’s purple - and all these I set
For emblems of the day against the tower
Emblematical of the night,
And claim as by a soldier’s right
A charter to commit the crime once more.

(A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 27-32)

Here, ‘crime’ refers to Adam’s disobedience. “OF Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit / Of that Forbidden tree, whose mortal tast / Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,” (*Paradise Lost*, 1-3) In these first three lines of his epic, John Milton talks about the consequences that Adam and Eve have to suffer after having eaten the fruit from the Forbidden Tree of Knowledge against the commandment of God. This action of theirs brought death and suffering into this world. Yeats feels that the Self has been a fighter just like a soldier. Hence, he should have the authority to live his life with all its lightness and darkness once again.

Stating forth its last argument the Soul spurs on the Self to focus on attaining heaven. Describing the paradise, the Soul says that there is overflow of happiness. Once man realises the true virtues then there exists no anxiety. “That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,” (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 35) When human mind realises this absolute completeness then all the senses are overwhelmed. Exuberance is so much more. “For intellect no longer knows / Is from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known* - ” (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 36-37) The Soul affirms that when a man ascends to heaven, general wisdom can no longer distinguish between good and bad or between God and human. There both get identified with one another. “Only the dead can be forgiven;” (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 39) once again draws allusion to the Sin of Disobedience of having eaten the Forbidden Fruit. (*Paradise Lost*, 1-2) Only dead people can be forgiven of their sins. When God reveals Himself in fullness, man is left speechless. The Soul categorically says that those people whose physical desires are dead, only they can reach that blessed place. Physical death and spiritual

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resurgence has to be attained. In Part-I, the Soul is instigating the poet for asceticism. On the other hand, the Self i.e. Yeats himself asserts that human life is joyous. Even if life is miserable we must fight, endure and live on.

From now onwards in Part-II, the Self i.e. Yeats, is the sole speaker. This poem is now a kind of 'dramatic monologue'. "Dramatic monologue means self-conversation, speech or talks which includes interlocutor presented dramatically. It means a person, who is speaking to himself or someone else speaks to reveal specific intentions of his actions. However, in literature, it is a poetic form or a poem that presents the speech or conversation of a person in a dramatic manner." (LiteraryDevices.net)

"A living man is blind and drinks his drop" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 41). In response to the Soul's summoning, Yeats says with authority that in general man is ignorant and accepts everything that comes his way in his lifetime. He accepts life as it is. The poet wants to tolerate the sufferings of growing up both mentally and physically. "Endure the toil of growing up" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 44). He gladly wishes to endure the pain, shame and awkwardness accompanied with adolescence. The Self is willing to face these fears and brave them once again. Thus, emphatically sending out a message that even if life is full of hardships, impurity and indignities; we must be ever ready to live on while enduring this pain.

Offering a troubled justification of life, Yeats states that the matured, grown up man perceives hostility around him. "The finished man among his enemies? -" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 49). Man is into the process of corruption. He finds himself surrounded by enemies who create obstacles in his path. All around him are present defiling and disfigured elements from which he can never escape. He finds his own reflection in the eyes of the begrudged people. Presence of ill-will in the society is something which man has to accept and move along. "And what's the good of an escape / If honour find him in the wintry blast?" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 55-56). In these lines, 'wintry blast' is the cold and inescapable touch of age. It is the ultimate catastrophe. A man born on this earth has to face this situation. There is no point in trying to find an escape route. Hence facing the torments and trials of life with head held high is the most favourable option.

I am content to live it all again
 And yet again, if it be life to pitch
 Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
 A blind man battering blind men;
 Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
 The folly that man does
 Or must suffer, if he woos
 A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

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(A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 57-64)

This stanza reflects the personal life of W.B. Yeats. It is suffused with images and painful memories from his life. Maud Gonne is the 'proud woman' here in 64th line. A reference is drawn to the long and unrequited love of Yeats for this Irish actress and nationalist. For several years Yeats waited for her. But his proposal was rejected every single time. Gonne went on to marry Maj. John Macbride. With the words "a blind man's ditch," (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 59) the poet tells us that falling in love with Maud Gonne proved to be a ditch for him. Yeats later admitted, "the troubling of my life began" (Cahill) from the moment he was rejected by Maud Gonne. Yeats confesses that it has been foolish of him to fall in love with Gonne. In spite of this he is not repenting. He is content to live his troublesome life all over again. Here the poet lays out the concept of rebirth, which is also known as reincarnation in the religions of the East, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Only the material body dies while the soul is born again and again. It is into a cycle of birth and death. (Reincarnation)

This dramatic monologue by the Self ends on a positive note. It is a celebration of life itself. "I am content to follow to its source," (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 65). Yeats tells us about the acceptance of life without any reservation. He wishes to live life with fullness and intensity; and with all its drawbacks and pitfalls. Lord Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" echoes through the affirmation of the Yeats' Self to live life all over again. In "Ulysses", Tennyson tells us that knowledge is infinite. In its pursuit one short span of human life is not enough. Old age must not symbolize retirement rather every moment should be utilised, till death brings about eternal silence. One should earnestly pursue his mission even in his next life. In order to gain perfection a series of lives is required. (Tennyson)

"Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!/ When such as I cast out remorse" (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 67-68). The poet forgives all those who have given him such a malicious life. He wants to set his soul free of all sense of sin and guilt. "We must laugh and we must sing,/ We are blest by everything,/ Everything we look upon is blest." (A Dialogue of Self and Soul, 70-72). These three lines remind us of "Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is a song that praises the glory of the God. Hopkins praises the Creator for this variegated beauty of the creation. This world is transient but God's beauty is beyond change. The joys and sorrows of life make it composite. If we understand this then sweetness will fill our hearts. Singing, laughing and enjoying ourselves; goes a long way into making life joyful. This spiritual ecstasy is rare.

Conclusion

Parallels can be drawn between W.B. Yeats, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body". Marvell's metaphysical poem presents a conflict between the human body and soul. The soul feels like a prisoner

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within the body. It wishes for the physical body's death, so that it can return to heaven. On the other hand, the Body considers the Soul a tyrant for putting restrictions on itself. It holds the Soul responsible for all its sins. In the end, Marvell does not project any clear winner. But with an extra four lines in the last stanza, the Body appears to have the final word. (Marvell)

Yeats opines that human life is a spiritual experience where joy and happiness is everywhere. If one has lived life fully then one does not lament what death takes away. Even that will not be tormenting. When we accept life as it is and forgive ourselves for our mistakes, we transcend them and become blest; reaching one step closer to the Spiritual Being. Because God sends His blessings through everything we come into contact with. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" ends with a radiant belief in life and with a sense of optimism. Yeats' poem chooses the Body over the Soul. It opts for the spirituality of human life with all its sins and failures over the morality of the soul.

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