

The Multiple Identities of W. B. Yeats' Poem *The Stolen Child*

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Abstract: Yeats' poem *The Stolen Child* is about the kidnap of a human boy from the human society to a fairyland conducted by a group of fairies. Being an Irish poem with notable Irish features, a children's poem with innocent content as well as a philosophical poem with profound meanings, *The Stolen Child* is the epitome of Yeats' talent as a leading figure of Irish poetry.

Keywords: *The Stolen Child*; Irish folk tales; children's poem; philosophical poem.

INTRODUCTION

The Stolen Child is one of the most notable poems written by William Butler Yeats and it is first published in *The Irish Monthly* in 1886. This poem is short, with 53 lines divided into 4 stanzas. It mainly tells a story about how the fairies that inhabit in the woods of a leafy island tempt one human child to go with them, leaving his human society behind. As the one composed in the early years of Yeats' career, this poem is regarded as the reflection of Yeats' influence of Late Romantic writing style and is distinct from his later Early Modern style as his height. The inferior importance of *The Stolen Child* among Yeats' works results in the insufficient analysis on it. Theses on this poem mainly focus on its symbolic meaning which is the major feature of Yeats' early poems. And with the rapid development of eco-criticism, some critics tend to analyze it from its profound ecological meaning.

They failed to examine the poem from an all-round way. The purpose of this thesis is to offer a comprehensive interpretation on the multiple identities of *The Stolen Child*. In fact, by setting the background from an Irish folk tale, depicting the scenery as a children's poem, and illustrating the profound meaning as a philosophical poem, *The Stolen Child* is the outcome of Yeats' aesthetic taste, great imagination and life wisdom.

An Irish Poem with Distinct Irish Features

As an Irish Poet, Yeats is greatly immersed in the glorious and long standing Irish fairy and folk tales. "His poetry, at least in the first three decades, proclaimed its profound connection with the country" [2]. The Irish supernatural stories are always the fundamental sources of his inspiration no less than the ancient Greek and Byzantine civilizations.

The Stolen Child is an exact illustration of Yeats' Irish background. The poem is based on a pattern of Irish folk tales about magical creatures who seduce or kidnap the humans to another world. The folk tales under this topic are various in Ireland as Yeats records in his *The Celtic Twilight* which is "W. B. Yeats's most creative attempt to render his folklore materials with precision." [1]. In this book, Yeats collects and rearranges the Irish folk tales he knows. Among his records, the one which fits the content of

The Stolen Child most is the first one in the chapter of "KIDNAPPERS". It tells that there is a door in a square of Sligo, a coastal seaport and the county town of Ireland, and the door swings open at night, and then an unearthly troop goes out, bending to and fro, making high-pitched voice. That is very dangerous for the newborn babies and new-wed brides nearby, because the troop is going to seduce them, and leads them to go into the door. The chance for the humans to go back to human society is slim. As Hirsch points out, "[i]ndeed, the concept of the fairy abduction is one of Yeats's most crucial borrowings from Irish folklore." [1]. Yeats brings this original Irish folk tale into his creation of *The Stolen Child*. In this poem, the stage is set on an isolated island, and the story also takes place at night. The fairies in the island dance in the moonlight and finally seduce the human boy to join them by giving up his earthly life. Although they are not totally similar in every detail, it is convincing that Yeats' *The Stolen Child* is originated from the ancient Irish folk tales that Yeats knows.

Specifically, the poem is set in "Sleuth Wood", which in fact is based on his childhood memory in Sligo. The birth place of Yeats is Sandymount, Dublin. Although his family then moved to London, they would "frequently trips back to Co. Sligo, where the family of Yeats' mother still lived" [2]. In Sligo, young Yeats learnt a lot of fairy tales told by local people which later

become his writing materials. In the note for this poem, Yeats writes “[t]he places mentioned are round about Sligo”[3]. And another particular place he mentions in the poem is Rosess in the second stanza, which is “a very noted fairy locality”, “There is here a little point of rocks where, if any one falls asleep, there is danger of their waking silly, the fairies having carried off their souls.” [3]. He is not only creating a fantastic fairyland, but deliberately telling an Irish story in an Irish place.

A Children’s Poem with Innocent Content

Unlike the original brief and rough Irish folk tale which inspires Yeats, the story tells by him in *The Stolen Child* is full of splendid imagination and purified beauty. In order to capture the interest of both the human child in the poem but also the children readers, Yeats also vividly depicts the different children’s games and behaviour in the monologues of fairies. In addition, unlike the traditional romantic poems, the scenery pictured in *The Stolen Child* contains little complex emotions of adults which make it more close to the innocent inner world of children.

The images used in *The Stolen Child* are typical plants and animals in nature which is a strong feature of children’s poems. And the poet also adds his great imagination in depicting the scenery. Thus he creates a wonderful and beautiful setting which is appealing to children readers for this ancient folk tale. In *The Celtic Twilight*, the original story about the kidnapping of human babies recorded by Yeats contains only several sentences. And it is rather horrible and frightening to children. As he writes in *The Celtic Twilight*, the place where new-born baby or new-wed bride gets lost is a square that “[n]o mortal has ever touched it with his hand; no sheep or goat has ever browsed grass beside it.”[4] and “the fields are covered by red-hatted riders. And the air is full of shrill voices.” [4]. What is more, in his record, the creatures are more like devils rather than fairies because their sound is “wholly different from the talk of the angels.” [4] The kidnapping they conduct is anything but beauty and fantasy. While, in *The Stolen Child*, the setting is completely changed into a much more attractive and poetic one. He practices his imagination to reset the story at a lovely night, on a thriving island with energetic animals living in it. The images he chooses are “leafy island”, “reddest stolen cherries”, “wave of moonlight”, “frothy bubbles”, “wandering water”, “young stream”, etc. And he develops the characteristics of fairies. They are no longer mysterious and cruel creatures making horrible voices. Instead of that, they are clearly classified as fairies that dance in the moonlight, eat cherries, play tricks on fish, and are willing to play with human children. Justine Quinn believes Yeats’ modulation on supernatural stories further paved the way for children’s literature. For example, Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* [2]. To sum up, by making these changes, Yeats turns the terrifying folk tale into a

dreamy fairy tale. His reformation on the original story reveals that he is intended to remove the dark and frightening part of it, and beautify and purify it in order to make it more suitable to children.

In addition, *The Stolen Child* is a children’s poem because it pictures the world of child. That is to say, it is written based on the understanding of children to the world. In the first stanza, the fairies say they have a secret vat with reddest cherries in it. The human children can be easily lured by tasty fruits, and that is why fairies tell the human boy about the cherries in the beginning. Then, in the second stanza, the dance is described to the child. The fairies say they can dance under the soft moonlight, dance hand in hand with friends, and chase after the bubbles. The dance here is like a game made by a group of children. Playing happily with friends and not worrying the control of parents is what children like. And in the third stanza, the fairies suggest a game that is unique in human world. They say they can whisper to the ears of trout, a kind of fish, in order to disturb their dreams. Whispering to a fish and assuming a fish can have dreams like humans is ridiculous in the world of adults. But possible and exciting in the children’s eyes. And among the four stanzas, the fairies keep saying that human world is full of weeping. Weeping is the symbol of sadness to children and is the only and direct way for them to express their sadness. The pure beauty in the nature is not the major thing that can tempt a human child. Only by viewing the things in the same way like a child can the fairies succeed. Yeats studies the mindset of children carefully and makes his poem closely related to children’s world. He focuses on catching the attention of human children rather than adults, making *The Stolen Child* a vivid reflection of children’s inner world.

What’s more, the scenes in *The Stolen Child* are in accordance with children’s emotion. Although the depiction of natural beauty is vivid, it only contains simple, pure and innocent feelings. Before Yeats, the romantic poets own their fame by including their strong personal emotions into their lines. The things they mention in the poems are usually endowed with human feelings. Or sometimes images are just the metaphors of certain lovers or heroes. However, in Yeats’ *The Stolen Child*, the images lack human feelings and human characteristics. These plants, water, and animals keep their original appearance without being interpreted by human feelings. Except the magical fairies, other things are normal and they do not play any whimsical tricks. They just keep their natural features. For example, the herons stir the rats, indicating the food chain is still working in the fairyland. The moon still goes up and down, and the bubbles are “frothy” suggesting they are not eternal but light and delicate as usual. In this isolated island, human feelings leave the stage for nature. The nature keeps itself but replays its beauty in an innovative and poetic way. Being isolated in the

fairyland, the plants grow freely, the animals live vigorously and water runs peacefully without human interference. When human feelings and interferences are gone, the fairyland becomes the pure and innocent world which is similar to the children's world. In a lover's eyes, the moon may be his lover, elegant and lovely. In a hero's eyes, the heron may be the embodiment of a brave warrior. In a stranger's eyes, the river may symbolize the years he spent in the foreign land. However, these human emotions disappear in the fairyland since a child will never interpret the nature in this way. In *The Stolen Child*, the scenery is pure, simple, in line with the innocent emotion of children.

A Philosophical Poem with Profound Meanings

Apart from being a simple children's poem, *The Stolen Child* can also be interpreted from its philosophical content. To be more specific, the change from the second person narration to the third person narration in the last stanza of *The Stolen Child* indicates the hidden philosophical meanings in it. The change provides its readers with an overview of the human life dilemma.

In the former three stanzas, the fairies repeat the whisper-like sentences to the human child:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a fairy, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand. [5]

The adoption of "you" leaves readers an impression that the fairies in the woods are talking directly to the human child. They are persuading the human boy to come with them into the carefree and happy fairyland. And this kind of persuasion repeats three times at the end of three stanzas. It seems like a kind of sleep-talking which can puzzle human's rational thoughts. While in the last stanza, the person is changed into "he":

For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a fairy, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than he can
understand. [5]

Although only two "you" are changed to "he", the person is completely changed from the second person narration to the third person. This change is so explicit and meaningful in the poem that can not be ignored.

The change of person is closely related to the content of each stanza. The three stanzas with second person narration are about how the fairies tempt the child. They emphasize that the life in the island is wonderful and interesting while the human society is full of troubles and unpredictable sorrows. Then, the cunning fairies conclude by repeating their direct

persuasion to the child as quoted above. However, in the last stanza, Yeats shifts the point of his description from fairyland to human life. Surprisingly, instead of continuously showing the troublesome and sorrow life, he refers to the peace of ordinary country life. "He'll hear no more the lowing/Of the calves on the warm hillside/Or the kettle on the hob/Sing peace into his breast," [8]. The image of calves indicates the harmonious farmer's life in the country and the kettle indicates the peaceful family life at home. "Or see the brown mice bob/ Round and round the oatmeal chest." [5]. These two lines describe children's self-indulgent observation over the little creatures in their houses.

With no exaggeration, and no belittlement, Yeats shows the ordinary human life in a calm and peaceful tone. The final words may be uttered by the fairies or by the poet himself, but one thing for sure is that by using "he" instead of "you", the object of talking is naturally shift to the audience. In other words, the last sentences are said to the audience to make them informed. No longer speaking directly into the boy, the fairies or the poet are now discussing the situation of the human boy at a distance. Once the distance is created, then the depiction of the human life is reliable and trustworthy. The readers then are able to analyze the situation of the boy in a clear way: the seduced human boy is going to live in the isolated happy island with the fairies and he is unable to go back to the peaceful human life. The feeling of regret is lingering in the last stanza, telling readers that once a person chooses a kind of new life, then there is no way for he or she to continue the old one. Life is a journey, full of junctions and choices. And the situation of the little human boy is frequently encountered in many people's real life. In order to get one thing, the abandonment of another thing is sometimes unavoidable. Besides, the wonder of life is that people never know whether their choice is right for they cannot go back to the past again. The boy leaves the happy human life in order to get the carefree life with fairies. But no one can be sure that the experience waiting for him is really true to the fairies' words or to say that the human life he abandons is totally boring. To sum up, the step back created by shifting person narration is Yeats' method to inspire readers' thinking on their own life choices.

CONCLUSION

The Stolen Child written by W. B. Yeats is a poem that contains multiple identities. Based on the Irish folk tales and Irish location, *The Stolen Child* is an Irish poem reflecting Yeats' absorption of Irish culture. It can also be regarded as a children's poem for it has been recreated to suit children's appetite. The purified and innocent images in the poem echo children's innocent inner world. And with the third person analysis in the last stanza, Yeats secretly reveals the profound meanings to its readers, and endows the poem the charm of a philosophical poem. The multiple identities, although they are in different categories, work as an

organic unity in *The Stolen Child*, giving readers different options to interpret the poem in more than one way. The analysis on the different identities of *The Stolen Child* may motivate the critics to pay more attention to the early works of Yeats, which also show his greatness as a leading figure in literature from 19th to 20th century.

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