

ENGLISH ADVANCED MODULE B

‘What will continue to make Yeats’ poetry worthy of critical study?’ Analyze construction, content and language of these texts.

A poem being worthy of critical study relies on the text’s integrity or ‘artistry of the text’ and its ability to be accepted in various contexts. In ‘The Second Coming’, ‘Among School Children’ and ‘An Irish airman foresees his death’ it can be observed that the poems strengths lie in their construction, content and language combining to empower the meaning. The Historical and personal context plays a role in the empowerment of the texts as shown through Yeats’ belief in the 2000 year cycle and his personal philosophy of the gyre. The language of the texts acts as the medium used by the Yeats’ to convey his ideas on the issues of time and death and when supported by the structure and context a unity of elements combines to give his works textual integrity allowing them to transcend time and cultures and captivate the minds of contemporary responders.

The structure of Yeats poems reflects the meaning presented through the language to add emphasis to the ideas of the composer in a poetic representation. ‘Among School Children’ is made up of 8 stanzas of 8 lines, a sestet followed by a rhyming couplet. Each stanza is defined by a Roman numeral which sets it apart as a stage of thought. Each stanza begins anew and hinders the poem from being read seamlessly, giving responders a chance to understand each stage of Yeats’ thought process as he reflects on the frailty of life and inevitability of aging. The structure collapses into the last stanza with a sense of clarity reflecting a catharsis as Yeats’ envisions a perfect world, leading him to an understanding of his own. Similarly a change in structure reflects the meaning in ‘The Second Coming’. Constructed of two stanzas, representing the present in stanza one and what Yeats’ theorized future holds in stanza two. This mirrors the inevitable changing of the gyre from one age to another in the 2000 year cycle. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre”. Yeats’ believes this to be “The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the characters of the next” as he states in his personal writings. The poem begins in disjointed and off balance rhythm and gathers momentum an eventually loses all order, descending into free verse, matching the unraveling of the gyre and the end to order that accompanies it. That the structure reflects Yeats’ 2000 year cycle theory and the concept of the gyre serves to empower the language in the poem is conveying Yeats’ ideas.

The historical context and the content of ‘The Second Coming’ reveals Yeats’ motivation for writing the poem and why he believes that the cycle for the last 2000 years is coming to an end. It is post World War 1, thousands have died in an event when “Nations rise against Nation” as foretold in the biblical revelations. Many have died and it does not look like an end is near with the Russian revolution, the spread of communism and the world spiraling towards more violence. This is reflected through the poem by the coming of the ‘beast’ bringing “Mere anarchy” on the world. Yeats’ is very concerned with what humanity is becoming, the violence and the wars and no one willing to stop it “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity” His concern can be seen by combining the historical context with the ideas presented by Yeats’ through the language of the poem. This acts to empower the Yeats’ texts giving them integrity worthy of critical study.

The language of a text is what ultimately conveys Yeats’ presentation of the issues of time and death and is fundamental to the strength of a text and its ability to remain ever worthy of critical study. ‘The Second Coming’ reflects Yeats’ thoughts of the inevitable change approaching as a result of a time abundant with violence and death. Immediately introduced by his concept of the gyre and supported by the repetition of the words “turning” and “widening” throughout the rhyming scheme present a feeling of circular movement. The metaphor for the unwinding of the gyre “The falcon cannot hear the falconer” is very significant due to the fact that the falcon is a symbol of order and harmony. If a falcon breaks free it can fall into an uncontrollable centrifugal movement resulting in loss of contact with its master. This not only represents the interplay of nature and mankind but

the loss of authority and control of power. From this loss of control “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”. As an old age end “Mere anarchy is loosened on the world” This sums up the insecurity caused by the slackening of the gyre and the freeing of the Christ antithesis, ‘the beast’. “The ceremony of innocence is drowned” is the third stage of the loss of control on the world, Yeats’ believes there to exist three steps in the disintegration of a civilization – The falcon not in contact with its master, the centre of the gyre coming apart and the loss of the world’s innocence. All elements are emphasized stylistically by the use of a semi colon marking the completion of a step towards anarchy. The metaphor of “The blood dimmed tide (drowning) the ceremony of innocence” is a powerful image depicting the loss of order as the current tide of violence destroys all that is innocent in the world. “Surely some revolution is at hand” is Yeats’ personal assertion that these are signs of an imminent revolution with no time to stop it.

Similarly, In ‘An Irish Airman Foresees His Death’ the language also conveys Yeats’ preoccupation with time and the nature of life and death, specifically his cyclic views of life and history represented by the gyre. A post-colonist viewpoint may consider the poem as ‘Anti-British’ yet to do so is to ignore the universality of the issues of life and death represented by the airman and further to ignore Yeats’ preoccupation with the balance of binary oppositions presented in his personal philosophy of the gyre. The poem defines the cyclical nature of life and death as it reflects on the internal conflicts of an airman flying to a certain death. Yeats’ again alludes to his theory of the cycle of time through the gyres to express his concerns with the binary opposition of life and death “I balance all” as the past and future are no longer significant, because at the moment of death it is only the present that matters. “In balance with this life, this death” The irrelevance of time is indicated as the airman contemplates the future and the past as “A waste of breathe”. In the present exists a man who wants to embrace the time regardless of its consequences. For the airman his final flight is “A lonely impulse of delight”, a single thrill in an otherwise banal existence.

Yeats’ poetry is worthy of critical study because it maintains its strength through varying contexts and interpretations as reflected by the post colonist response to his poem. The universality of the issues his presents are represented by such as the final thoughts of the airman, the coming of a new age and his own degradation as his ages. By balancing structure, context and language to form a unity of text Yeats’ work effectively presents his personal philosophy on the concept of the gyre and an effective presentation of the issues of time and death.