

An Explication of William Butler Yeats's "The Stolen Child"

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William Butler Yeats, as a co-founder of the Irish Literary Revival and arguably Ireland's favorite poet, surrounded himself with Irish patriotism, folklore, and mysticism. As a child, his spiritual center was and would always be with the Irish countryside. As biographer B.L. Reid states, "The hills and lakes and fens about the busy West of Ireland seaside town, with Ben Bulbin to the north and Knocknarea, topped by Queen Maeve's cairn, to the south of a tidal river, became Yeats's spiritual home in childhood and remained so all his life" (Reid). When his father decided to follow an unsuccessful painting career and moved the family to London in 1868, Yeats suffered from harsh poverty and a heartbreaking separation from the Sligo countryside. In his autobiography, Reveries over Childhood and Youth, Yeats wrote: "Indeed I remember little of childhood but its pain" (Reid). Such pain is largely visible in many of his poems about children and childhood, especially "The Stolen Child" and "The Song of the Happy Shepherd." The young Yeats lived only for the occasional vacation to the Irish countryside, where he "rode about the Sligo countryside on a red pony, with a black dog ... alert to flora and fauna, and beginning to steep himself in the fairy lore of the local peasants" (Reid). As a child in school, Yeats was hard to teach and slow to learn. This may be because, as he stated years later, he found it difficult to attend to anything less exciting than his thoughts. He emulated solitary and heroic figures, those of Athanase, Hamlet, Manfred, Alastor, perfectly and miserably doomed (Reid). To him, these stories of magic and faery legend were inspiring not because they were a form of escapism or comforting fiction, but because he saw them as a supernatural reality. As Frank Kinahan mentions, "Many Irish writers saw the attractions of faery as dangerous because illusory. Yeats saw them as dangerous because real" (Yeats and the Fairy Tale). The ordinary world of man was simply insufficient; there had to be something more, some magic in the world. Yeats's fairylands and Irish folklore sustained a spirit in him all his life, from the

moment he became infatuated with the Sligo countryside, to his lonely years in London, and finally, in his extensive writing career.

The style and characteristics of Yeats's poetry may be classified as fairly classical in structure and language, yet highly exemplary of many Irish elements such as Celtic grace, peasant folklore, and imagination. His sentiments and subject matter often relate to or show a profound mood of sympathy to the world's fortunes, yet are neither vague nor vast (Johnson). His Celtic poetry, by far his largest category, is many times constructed around an ambiguous legendary figure or myth, yet becomes controlled and directed in Yeats's hands as he shapes it into pleasing art (Winters). While his verse is often beautiful, it is also sometimes haunting, which springs from Yeats's masterful use of musical devices such as refrains and song-like language. Views within most of his poems reflect the influence of Romantic literature with an incorporation of Pre-Raphaelite verse. Fittingly, Yeats also writes almost completely in traditional verse and classical stanza forms. He once said, "Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional.... Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage" (Yeats, *A General Introduction for My Work*).

"The Stolen Child" was written in 1886 and published in *Irish Monthly*, Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland, and Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry respectively. However, it is best known to reside in Yeats's collection The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems, published in 1889. On the surface, it is a story of faeries taking a human child away from a distressing world, presumably to shield him from the heartbreaking nature of reality. The faeries, throughout most of the poem, describe their home and entice the child into their fairy-tale world.

Yet in the last stanza, they show the reader a comforting view of agrarian life which, because of their actions, the child will never experience. Though the child will never feel sadness, he will never feel the happiness of home and country either. This poem, both in theme and other elements, is highly exemplary of most of Yeats's Celtic work. The concentration on Irish folklore and scenery comes across in many of his pieces, especially in the collection In the Seven Woods, which is concerned chiefly with the Irish Heroic Age. The poem "Baile and Aillinn" is included in this collection, which re-tells the Irish legend of two lovers that are deceived by the other's apparent death (Yeats, "Baile and Aillinn"). Likewise, similar to the look at Ireland's picturesque scope seen in "The Stolen Child," "The Song of Red Hanrahan" illuminates the dark imagery of Ireland's native and mysterious beauty, while simultaneously concentrating on an obscure peasant legend (Yeats, "The Song of Red Hanrahan").

His concentration on children, as well, is shown in many of his works. As in "The Stolen Child," Yeats grasps the Romantic attitude toward children as vulnerable and fragile, something that society may unhappily warp and wither (Pacey). For example, in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," published in Collected Poems, there is a reference to a "stammering schoolboy" who is awkward and unsure in his reading aloud of a story about adventure and dead kings of old. As critic Desmond Pacey writes, such a stammer represents the boy's "sense of being entangled in some world he never made" (Pacey). Furthermore, the lament of "O, sick children of the world,/ Of all the many changing things" (Yeats 6-7) mirrors the "Come away, O human child!" (9, 24, 35) seen in "The Stolen Child." Finally, this view again presents itself in poems such as "The Coming of Wisdom with Time," where childhood's happiness is said to be illusory and treacherous, or in the pair of poems "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" and "Two Years Later,"

where a vulnerable child does not recognize the destructive forces which reside in the world around her (Pacey).

“The Stolen Child” begins its adventure by presenting the reader with a slew of visual imagery of the Irish countryside. The first five lines read,

Where dips the rocky highland/  
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,  
There lies a leafy Island/  
Where flapping herons wake/  
The drowsy water rats; (1-5).

This visual imagery is established by several soothing and picturesque words and phrases, including “dips the rocky highland” (1) and “leafy island” (3). The image of majestic birds flapping around a lake of dozing water rats implies that there is not a care in the world on this special island. The tone, too, holds something of a lullaby as to lure the child into a land of beauty, all summed up by the single word “drowsy” (5) which speaks of an acute dreamland between sleeping and completely waking. This calming picture is amplified by the subtle alliteration of “lake,” (2) “lies,” (3) and “leafy” (3). Furthermore, there is an allusion in “Sleuth Wood” (2) to the Irish countryside of Slingo, where Yeats spent most of his childhood. By including this allusion placed in between enticing descriptions of an island that would otherwise have no place in reality, Yeats makes his faeries’ home seem to have some substantial location, almost as if because Sleuth Woods may be found on a map of Ireland, so too may the faeries’ abode.

The next three lines leave some hesitancy. They read, “There we’ve hid our faery vats,  
Full of berrys/  
And of reddest stolen cherries.” (6-8). Again, the visual imagery comes through

greatly in “reddest...cherries,” (8) suggesting the most perfect and delicious cuisine of the island will lead the young child to happiness. Furthermore, the speaker is made known in these lines when the faeries state, “There **we’ve** hid our faery vats” (6). Yet the cherries are “stolen” (8), much like the child in the title. This is the first sign that the faeries may not be as innocent and trustworthy as their name and island may suggest. In fact, Yeats was vastly aware and wrote many stories in Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry about faery lore involving changelings, the tricky faery breed that steals human children from their homes and leaves an immoral faery child in their place (Yeats, Fairy Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry).

With the end of the first stanza comes the reader’s first glimpse at the refrain that repeats throughout the rest of the poem. It reads,

Come away, O human child!/  
 To the waters and the wild/  
 With a faery, hand in hand,  
 For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand (9-  
 12).

This refrain speaks directly to the child. Its tone is of some delicate melancholy, as the faeries give a wailing cry to a “human child” (9). The faeries tell him that his world is more heartbreaking than he, at this age, has the capacity to comprehend. From this, it seems that the faeries are trying to save the boy from experiencing sadness by drawing him into a magical world in which pain is conspicuously absent. The sing-song language of this refrain may be further looked at in terms of rhythm, rhyme, and other devices. While there is no constant metrical pattern in the poem, the more dominant foot in the lines that are not part of the refrain is the iamb. Yet the refrain diverges from this pattern. For example, lines 1-11 have the same meter:

two trochaic feet followed by one amphimacer, which creates a daze-like lullaby in its repetition of three lines. The fourth line breaks from this second pattern both in meter and number of feet. It is far longer and follows the flow of soft, natural speech with no consistent metrical structure or dominant foot. This break emphasizes the last line's significance in the context of the poem, the refrain, and from a biographical view. The faeries make it quite clear that reality is full of sorrows and therefore, the only escape the child may hope for is being stolen. Yet, given Yeats' childhood and blissful years in Slingo, this refrain echoes what he could be telling his childhood self; his years of poverty and misery in London may have caused him to consistently retreat into these "faery worlds."

The rhyme scheme in this refrain of "AABB" and the smooth alliterations of "waters," (10) "wild," (10) "world's" (12) and "weeping" (12) adds to the lullaby quality. While the rhyme scheme differs from stanza to stanza throughout the entire poem, the refrain's rhyme scheme remains unchanged. These alliterations, moreover, emphasize some of the most important words in the stanza. The faeries are presenting the child with an alternative: "waters" (10) and "wild" (10) in exchange for forsaking the "world's...weeping" (12). It would seem as though this exchange could bring bliss for anyone, especially a young Yeats's who shrouded himself in mystical lore and can "remember little of childhood but its pain" (Reid).

The second stanza enters the poem just as the first one did: with the word "Where" (13) and a description of the faeries' island. The first three lines read, "Where the wave of moonlight glosses/ The dim gray sands with light,/ Far off by furthest Rosses" (13-15). Again, visual imagery dominates in presenting the reader with a comfortable night lacking any uneasiness children sometimes feel in the dark. It is as if the moon has come out specifically for the child, to calm and reassure him of a life without troubles. Here again is an allusion to a place around

Slingo in “Rosses” (15) which reinforces Yeats’s psychological connectedness to what is happening in the poem.

In lines 16-23 of the second stanza, there is no mark of hesitancy that the reader feels as there is in the first stanza. The lines read,

We foot it all by night/  
 Weaving olden dances/  
 Mingling hands and mingling glances/  
 Till the moon has taken flight;/  
 To and fro we leap/  
 And chase the frothy bubbles/  
 While the world is full of troubles/  
 And anxious in its sleep (13-23).

The faeries are apparently nocturnal, as they “foot it all by night” (16) and dance through most of the darkness until the morning. There is an allusion in “olden dances” (17) to fairy rings, which were quite prominent in Irish folklore. The faeries were thought to have danced around in a circle while holding hands and pressed down the grass beneath their feet to form a ring or circle on the ground. Finally, Lines 20-23 present a joyful picture of childhood that the faeries will give the child. He has already heard that the “world is more full of weeping than you can understand” (12, 27, 42). All the better, then, to be dancing joyfully on a far away island with magic creatures than to live through all the troubles of the world.

Several devices lead into the charm of lines 13-23. The use of assonance in “wave” (13) and “gray,” (14) “hands” (18) and “glances,” (18) and the repeated “f” sound in “Far,” (15) “furthest,” (15) “foot,” (16) “flight,” (19) “fro,” (20) “frothy,” (21) and “full” (22) leave this

section with a connectedness and trance-like feeling. Furthermore, as in the first stanza, visual imagery dominates. The descriptions of the moonlight, “dim gray sands,” (14) and “frothy bubbles” (21) is further amplified by the personification of the moon and the world. The moon is said to take “flight” (19) at dawn, whereas the world is said to be asleep and “anxious,” (23) which moreover shows organic imagery. All of these devices combine to create a magical image of childhood bliss.

At the end of the second stanza, the refrain is heard for a second time and presented exactly as it is in the first stanza. The only difference is its context and implications of that context. The line “With a faery, hand in hand” (26) takes on a new meaning with the allusion to “olden dances” (17), showing that the child may be entering into the faery dance which is therefore symbolic of entering into the faeries’ world and way of life.

The third stanza is pivotal in discerning the true nature of the faeries and their role in the child’s life. Lines 28-31 read,

Where the wandering water gushes/  
 From the hills above Glen-Car,/  
 In pools among the rushes/  
 That scare could bathe a star, (28-31).

This time, however, the description of the landscape contains both visual and auditory imagery in “gushes” (28) and “pools among the rushes” (30). The alliteration and assonance seen in “Where...wandering water” (28) and “scare...bathe” (31) again take the reader into the dreamy and comforting state that has been induced in the last two stanzas. Furthermore, the same pattern of mentioning an authentic place is fulfilled. There is an allusion to a “Glen-Car,” (29) which,

when seen on a map of Slingo would read “Glen-Car Falls.” Indeed, all seems as it should in this faery world.

Yet lines 32-38 of the third stanza, show the faeries in a different light of mischievousness and misbehavior. The faeries state,

We seek for slumbering trout/  
 And whispering in their ears/  
 Give them unquiet dreams;/  
 Leaning softly out/  
 From ferns that drop their tears/  
 Over the young streams (32-37).

Judging by this assertion, faery-land no longer seems to be the paradise it is built up to be in the previous stanzas. The faeries are disturbing sleeping trout by troubling them in their dreams. This picture contrasts lines 4-5 in the first stanza. Whereas the visual imagery shows herons harmlessly and even charmingly disturbing the sleep of “drowsy water rats,” (4) the faeries are ill-behaved in their purposeful bothering of other creatures on the island. Furthermore, the faeries lean over ferns that “drop their tears/ Over young streams” (36-37). This further unsettles the utopian atmosphere, as it is evident that the plants already recognize something rather melancholy and arcane about the island. Critic Desmond Pacey corroborates this point in stating, “Yeats makes the faeries faintly ridiculous by having them whisper in the ears of “slumbering trout” to “Give them unquiet dreams”, by having them lean from ferns “that drop their tears / over the young streams” (Pacey). The “young streams” (37) like the child, are unknowingly stuck in a world of raining grief. The streams absorb the dropping water relatively unharmed, yet

still aware of its presence. This is similar to the child living through pain which he does not truly understand yet is not exempt from feeling.

Though the musical and charming flow of the lines is still there, certain devices are used to amplify an altered feeling that nonetheless flows like the previous parts of the poem. For example, there is much more prominent auditory imagery in lines 32-33. The faeries “whisper” (33) in the ears of the sleeping trout, while the dreams that the faeries give the trout are described as “unquiet” (34). Furthermore, there is organic imagery in the “unquiet,” or disturbed sleep of the trout and the implied sadness of the personified plants on the island. This imagery adds to the overall tone of the stanza. Whereas the previous two stanzas contained hints of the faeries’ playful and mischievous nature, such as in “stolen cherries,” (8) they are chiefly concerned with creating a paradisiacal image of a young child’s utopia. Yet in this stanza, such an image becomes questionable as the reader hears and feels the mystical woe associated with some hidden sadness of the island. Even so, this extended use of different types of imagery does not compromise the pattern of providing a relatively mystical visual image into which the previous stanzas flow. The picture of a “young,” (37) or youthfully careless stream and the flower and fauna that surround it emphasizes the fundamental beauty and appeal of the island.

The refrain is again seen at the end of the third stanza exactly as it is presented in stanzas one and two. Given its context, however, the words take on a new meaning. Whereas the faeries have been shown to be mischievous, the tone of this refrain becomes ominous. What once appeared to be a soothing lullaby in meter and rhythm is now comparable to the song of the sirens in Greek Mythology, who would ensnare unwary sea-goers and lead them to their demise. Like this song, the faeries’ refrain is hard to resist; yet in both instances there is an implied possibility of misfortune if heeded. The faeries tell the child to “Come away.../With a faery hand

in hand,” (38, 40) which this time presents an image of the child being dragged away by the mystical creatures. The faeries’ previously established role of rescuing the child from a heartrending world is called into question with this divergence.

In the last stanza, this hesitation is vindicated. Lines 42-49 read,

Away with us he’s going,  
 The solemn-eyed:  
 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,  
 Or see the brown mice bob  
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest (42-49).

The child has become spellbound by the faeries’ striking story of their island and its unboundedness. Uncomfortably, the faeries then paint a picture of quaint agrarian life that the child is sacrificing. They ridiculously congratulate themselves on allowing the child to never again hear the sounds of cattle on the “warm hillside,” (24) feel the affects of a whistling kettle that “Sing[s] peace into his breast,” (47) or watch mice scurry around “the oatmeal-chest” (49). Through this picture, the child is giving up both the world’s melancholies as well as its homely pleasures. Though the child is not fully aware of the implications of leaving his human life, the faeries are. They plainly admit in this stanza that there is some beauty to reality.

Yeats uses several devices to achieve this end. For instance, the synecdoche of “solemn-eyed” (43) is used in place of any pronoun or “the human child,” as he is usually referred to in the refrain. This emphasizes the child’s state of mind as his entrancement is finalized and the

faeries stop their enticing verse. The “solemn-eyed” condition that the boy feels also underlines the utter temptation of a world without cares or human sadness. Similar to the repetition of the pacifying rhythm in the refrain, the phrase “Round and round” in line 49 adds an enticement to the human world. Like the faeries’s song, the vision of the mice’s persistent and captivating movements shows that there is some beauty in being human.

The visual and strongly represented auditory imagery in lines 42-49 further serve to stress the beauty that the faeries are taking the child away from. Whereas the first and second stanzas are laden with visual imagery, the third and fourth stanzas show an incorporation of different kinds of images. One may plainly see the beauty and enticing elements of the island in stanzas one and two, yet one may not so easily find visual clues to the faeries’s mischievous behavior in the second half of the poem. Rather, the shortcomings of the island are highlighted in auditory images such as “whispering in their ears,” (33) “unquiet,” (34) “hear no more the lowing,” (44) “Sing peace” (47) and the implied organic imagery of weeping ferns (36) and the entranced child (43). Through this, Yeats is relating that not all drawbacks of confining oneself to a blissful yet isolated world without human sadness may be seen initially. From a biographical standpoint, Yeats’s childhood escape from the distraught reality of poverty and solitude may have held enlightenment in his older self. The journey from the seemingly beautiful world of the faeries’ reclusive island to the true beauty of reality mirrors Yeats’s life journey from seclusion to comfort in the real world. As he mentions in his autobiography about the years after his lonely childhood, “I have grown happier with every year of life as though gradually conquering something in myself...” (Reid).

Furthermore, Yeats was nearly blind. As biographer B. L. Reid recounts, “The gauzy, veiled effects of visual observation ... to a degree all his life, doubtless owed something to poor

eyesight: both eyes were weak, the left almost useless” (Reid). Given this, the visual imagery Yeats incorporates into stanzas one and two are likely to be, to a point, imaginary. Yet the strong non-visual imagery in the last two stanzas appears real and potent, which makes sense given that Yeats non-visual senses would naturally be stronger and more fluently described than his visual sense. Relating this to the theme of the poem, the real world takes on a more secure impression whereas the faery world lies on a rickety pretence. This further adds to the dwindling appeal of the once magical island. In any case, Yeats’s practical blindness only adds to the theme he constructs. In truth, his vision was far more visionary than visual (Reid).

In the final presentation of the refrain at the end of the fourth stanza, several elements are changed. The altered form reads,

For he comes, the human child,

To the waters and the wild

With a faery, hand in hand,

For the world’s more full of weeping than he can understand (50-53).

Yeats replaces the previous first line of, “Come away! O human child,” (9, 24, 38) with the altered “For he comes, the human child” (50). In doing this, the faeries make it clear that they have succeeded in stealing the boy from his place in the human world. Furthermore, the pronoun “he” (50) replaces the pronoun “you” (12, 27, 41). Whereas in stanzas one, two and three, the faeries are directly addressing the child, this altered form addresses the reader of the poem. In this, the faeries convey information to the listener both intentionally and unintentionally. They deliberately try to justify themselves in using this pronoun, not because they think their actions are questionable but because the reader has become unsettled by their mischief and the warm human world that is abandoned. The faeries also unintentionally relate that they have become a

cause of the world's weeping. The human world that the "Stolen Child" was once a part of will mourn his disappearance (Yeats and the Fairy Tale). In the end, the human world full of sadness and happiness, tears and joys, is highlighted over precarious imagination and isolation from reality.

"The Stolen Child" is a masterfully constructed piece that epitomizes the combination of distressing and joyful elements that make up the human world. The tale that Yeats relates in this poem is clear: the child has relinquished life's agonies as well as its joys. Yet the reader may see the deeper, more metaphorical meaning of the idea that there are drawbacks of confining oneself to a life of escapism and imaginary worlds. Yeats vividly reveals that although life contains sorrow, the beauties of reality are still always present. If not for the insightful theme alone, this poem is timeless for its haunting lyrics and beautifully constructed stanzas. In fact, "The Stolen Child" is Ireland's tenth most beloved poem according to a survey taken by the *Irish Times* in 2000 (Bargar). Thus, for its commanding use of Irish legend and eloquent language that is exemplary of Yeats's best works, "The Stolen Child" remains one of Yeats's most moving and delightful poems.

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