



IUScholarWorks at Indiana University South Bend

Yeats's Dreaming Back, Purgatory, and Trauma

He, Chu

To cite this article: He, Chu. "Yeats's Dreaming Back, Purgatory, and Trauma." *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 11: 2021.

This document has been made available through IUScholarWorks repository, a service of the Indiana University Libraries. Copyrights on documents in IUScholarWorks are held by their respective rights holder(s). Contact iusw@indiana.edu for more information.



Yeats's Dreaming Back, *Purgatory*, and Trauma

Chu He

Indiana University South Bend (<chuhe@iusb.edu>)

Citation: C. He (2021) Yeats's Dreaming Back, *Purgatory*, and Trauma. *Sijis* 11: pp. 343-356. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-12891

Copyright: © 2021 C. He. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract:

As few plays can compare with Yeats's late play *Purgatory* with its probe into the tormented human psyche, this play can be viewed as a precursor to trauma plays we see later in modern Irish theatre. Yeats's *Purgatory* not only deals with a subject of generational trauma accompanied by grinding guilt, shame, anger, and despair but also establishes many of the defining features of later trauma plays through its hybrid form of realism, symbolism, Japanese Noh, minimalist setting, linear-cyclical structure, etc. Yeats's interest in spiritualism and occultism also allows him a few profound glimpses into psychological studies: Yeats's *A Vision*, though viewed by many as his philosophical writings on mystic spirituality, contains some pioneering insights into trauma. By placing *Purgatory* in dialogue with *A Vision*, I want to acknowledge *A Vision* as the theoretical framework for the play, which, however, does not reduce the play to a mere illustration of the theory Yeats outlines in his *A Vision*, but rather, enables us to understand the complicated process of working through trauma.

Keywords: *A Vision*, Dreaming Back, *Purgatory*, Trauma, Yeats

Yeats's late play *Purgatory* (1938) has always been a controversial play. When it was first produced at the Abbey Theatre on 10 August 1938, it "scored a major public success with audience and critics alike" (Miller 1977, 305). Despite its successful production, the play perplexes the audience and the critics in its ways to present the ghosts on stage. Schmitt summarizes the issue well: "Three interpretations of the figures of the dead present themselves: that the dead do, in fact, return; that they are images of the old man's misery; that they are manifestations of the remorse of the mother, dead and 'dreaming back' through her passion" (1973-1974, 318). The ambiguous nature of the ghosts enables critics to interpret the play in multiple ways. Many have noticed the influence of the Japanese Noh plays on Yeats: "in *Purgatory*, the Old Man, who would play the role of a priest if *Purgatory* were a Noh play, fails to appease the suffering of his mother's ghost, and prays for God in despair at the end of the play" (Sato 2011, 79). While the general consensus is that "the

dead are not released from their torment and are destined to relive the impassioned moment over and over" (Ohno 1991, 42) because "the living cannot expiate the sins of the dead, nor can they escape the results of those sins" (Leamon 1977, 179), other critics see the ghosts as a reflection of the Old Man himself though for different reasons. Pocock reads the play in the Irish bardic tradition:

The Old Man in *Purgatory* is a wandering repository of cultural memory [...] He is fundamentally confused about the important spiritual reality of the play – that it is not his mother's soul trapped in purgatory, but his own [...] because even his tenuous grasp of a spiritual realm sounds like insanity to an objective generation. (Pocock 2008, 109, 113)

In contrast, McCormack casts a more autobiographic light on the play and views it as Yeats's "late admission of [...] the problematic nature of Modernism" by abandoning "such assumptions of integrity and self-completeness" since "it is not the mother and grandmother who are in Purgatory so much as Man and Boy. The stratagem of bringing pollution to an end by killing the boy is pathetic self-deception [...] 'Purgatory', far from serving to make accessible some 'radical innocence', actually reveals ineradicable guilt" (McCormack 1979, 33, 39). Unlike other critics, Genet dives into the psychological realm and claims that:

If *Purgatory* is in the beyond, it is also in this world and in the soul of the old man who suffers for his past crimes [...] the old man is directed by a secret motive, an inner fatality: the fixation on the mother [...] Parricide and infanticide are two identical sacrifices on the altar of motherly love. (Genet 1991, 240, 242)

While her psychoanalytical exploration is valuable, Janet wrongly attributes all the old man's aberrant behaviors to the Oedipus complex. The fatal flaw of her reading lies in a simple fact – the old man never gets to know his mother: she dies in childbirth. It is thus preposterous to assume that the old man could be attached to a stranger mother who he never sees, hears, or knows to such an extent that he is willing to kill twice for her. In this article, I will continue the work Janet has started by pursuing further into the psychological depth of the old man but I'm taking a different route. As few plays can compare with Yeats's *Purgatory* with its probe into the dark, deep, tormented human psyche, I will argue that *Purgatory* is a precursor to trauma plays we see later in modern Irish theatre. By trauma plays, I mean plays that either directly depict a traumatic event as seen in Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985), Tom Murphy's *Famine* (1977), and etc., or addresses the shattering psychological impacts of certain events on people as seen in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), Jennifer Johnston's *Moonlight and Music* (2000), and so on. Yeats's *Purgatory* not only deals with a subject of generational trauma accompanied by grinding guilt, shame, anger, and despair but also establishes many of the defining features of later trauma plays through its hybrid form of realism, symbolism, Japanese Noh, minimalist setting, linear-cyclical structure, etc. What is more, Yeats's interest in spiritualism and occultism, which has long been an embarrassment to his critics, actually allows him a few profound glimpses into psychological studies. More specifically, I will argue that Yeats's *A Vision* (1925; 1937), though viewed by many as his philosophical writings on mystic spirituality, contains some pioneering insights into trauma since trauma was not officially acknowledged until 1980 when the American Psychiatric Association included Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a new category in its official manual of mental disorders. By placing *Purgatory* in dialogue with *A Vision*, I want to acknowledge *A Vision* as the theoretical framework for the play, which, however, does not reduce the play to a mere illustration of the theory Yeats outlines in his *A Vision*, but rather,

enables us to understand the complicated process of working through trauma that involves dire real-world consequences and hard-to-achieve recovery. It is thus fair to say that Yeats's *A Vision* and *Purgatory* have paved the way for Ireland's future trauma plays.

Yeats wrote *A Vision* in 1925 but revised it in 1937, a year before he wrote the play *Purgatory* in 1938. So close to his death in 1939, Yeats had been in a bitter, dark state of mind, which may be partly due to his poor health: "By 1937 Yeats's health was failing. Suffering from kidney problem, angina and breathing difficulties" (Edwards 2016, 16) but more importantly, may result from his disillusion over the defeat of the aristocratic tradition as shown in his 1939 essay *On the Boiler*:

Our representative system has given Ireland to the incompetent [...] the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing theirs. Unless there is a change in the public mind every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly. (Yeats 1939, 11, 18)

His concerns about the degeneration of the bloodlines in aristocratic culture led him to write about hereditary sufferings in his play and inevitably, put too much of his own voice in it: not only is *Purgatory* based on Yeats's recollection of a ghost story in his childhood (McCormack 1979, 34-36) but many critics also fault the play for its autobiographical elements: Bloom's claim that "Yeats is not separate enough from the old man's rage to render the play's conclusion coherent" (qtd. in McCormack 1979, 37) is echoed by Vendler: "I find *Purgatory* thin and unsatisfying. I do not doubt that it is an exact representation of Yeats's state of mind in 1939; one has only to glance at *On the Boiler* (in which *Purgatory* was first printed) to understand how greatly Yeats's imagination was imbued with rage and hatred" (1969, 201). Even Holloway who attended the first performance of *Purgatory* in 1938 and saw Yeats was called to the stage for recognition concluded that "W.B. Yeats seemed to me a 'broken man.' His upright bearing gone – a wreck of his former self [...] It is a pity in his old age that sordidness of thought should have captured him [...] Now the old poet's thoughts are turned to woe and desolation and the ugliness of life" (qtd. Miller 1977, 305). Admittedly, nothing speaks louder of Yeats's state of mind in 1938 than his own poem "Man and the Echo":

All that I have said and done,
 Now that I am old and ill,
 Turns into a question till
 I lie awake night after night
 And never get the answers right.
 Did that play of mine send out
 Certain men the English shot?
 Did words of mine put too great strain
 On that woman's reeling brain?
 Could my spoken words have checked
 That whereby a house lay wrecked?
 And all seems evil until I
 Sleepless would lie down and die. (Yeats 1989, 345)

Yeats's own restless soul reliving the words and actions he said and did in the past seems to mirror both the "dreaming back" in *A Vision* and the haunting ghost of the old man's mother in *Purgatory*. It is clear that Yeats's own bitter disillusion, regret, and self-doubt in his last a few years lead him to focus on the darker side of human psyche in his works.

Although Yeats's *A Vision* is always considered as a philosophical writing, it is possible to

make a psychological reading of it. To start, his discussion of dreams strikes a familiar note of Freudianism regarding dreams as wish-fulfillment: “In dreams we finish what we began awake or what the waking suggests” (1937, 227) or regarding the distortion in dreams: “Much of a dream’s confusion comes from the fact that the image belongs to some unknown person, whereas emotion, names, language, belong to us alone” (234). While Yeats seems to talk about mystical, ethereal elements such as spirits and soul, he nevertheless ties them to human psyche from time to time: “All spirits inhabit our unconsciousness or, as Swedenborg said, are the *Dramatis Personae* of our dream” (232). Acknowledging the connection between our dreams and our unconsciousness, Yeats’s *A Vision* seems to contain some inchoate truth about human mind. For the sake of this article, I will focus on “Book III: The Soul in Judgement” in which Yeats describes the six states the soul travels from death to rebirth: the vision of the blood kindred, dreaming back/return, shifting, marriage/beatitude, purification, and foreknowledge. According to Yeats, if the first state still bounds the Spirit to Husk and Passionate Body at the moment of death, in the second state Passionate Body will disappear so the Spirit will find the Celestial Body. However, “If the Passionate Body does not disappear, the Spirit finds the Celestial Body, only after long and perhaps painful dreams of the past, and it is because of such dreams that the second state is sometimes called the Dreaming Back” (1937, 229). “Dreaming Back” happens only when the second state goes awry: the Spirit clings to Passionate Body and cannot let go. While Dreaming Back is a symptom of a problematic second state, it also functions as a solution: “The true name of the second state [...] is the Return and it has for its object that Spirit’s separation from the Passionate body, considered as nature, and from the Husk considered as pleasure and pain” (1937, 225-226, 230-231). To separate the Spirit from Passionate Body and Husk, Dreaming Back must happen to ensure a return to equilibrium.

Although in *A Vision* Yeats is describing the Spirit’s journey after death, this journey uncannily parallels how our mind processes and stores the external events psychologically. If it is a natural death, the Spirit moves from the first state to the second state gradually by letting go Husk and Passionate Body, but “If death has been violent or tragic the Spirit may cling to the Passionate Body for generations” (1937, 224-225) which gives rise to Dreaming Back. Likewise, ordinary events are processed and stored routinely in our minds: when we are amid a happening event, it gives us strong stimulus of pleasure or pain, but such sensations and emotions (Husk and Passionate Body) will gradually disappear over time when our mind changes the event from a living experience to an impression and finally to a memory. However, liminal events that are too “violent or tragic” will not be absorbed or disposed readily by our minds but linger on for a long time and keep coming back. What traps the Spirit in Passionate Body in Yeats’s *A Vision* is not unlike our modern concept of trauma which traps its victims in nightmares and living hells: “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1993, 24). What Yeats calls “long and perhaps painful dreams of the past” can then be understood as “uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena” trauma victims are subject to because the traumatic event has overwhelmed their normal coping mechanism. Yeats emphasizes the compulsive repetition in his Dreaming Back: “In the Dreaming Back, the Spirit is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it; there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light which is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them” (1937, 226). Yeats’s early insight of the compelled repetition of the original events is confirmed by modern psychology and it speaks to the puzzling nature of trauma: “purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against

the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth 1993, 24). By identifying the cause (a violent or tragic death) and the symptom (dreams of the past/compelled repetition), Yeats's *Dreaming Back* conceptualizes what we now call trauma.

Such a conceptualization cannot be complete without a solution. It is thus no wonder that Yeats offers a possible closure:

In the Return, upon the other hand, the Spirit must live through past events in the order of their occurrence, because it is compelled by the Celestial Body to trace every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself. All that keeps the Spirit from its freedom may be compared to a knot that has to be untied or to an oscillation or a violence that must end in a return to equilibrium. (Yeats 1937, 226)

The idea of "a knot that has to be untied" so that "all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself" hits the nail on the head about how trauma should be treated for recovery. As Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart put it, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it" (Van der Kolk, Van der Hart 1995, 176). Yeats's *Dreaming Back*, in this sense, is not only a symptom but also a treatment of trauma: it allows the traumatized to return to their traumatic memories, to sort out their causes and effects, to understand the original events, to put them back in time or sequences, to transform them into meaningful narratives, and to incorporate them into their existing memories. All of these are the foundations of their recovery. Besides, Yeats also correctly points out that recovery means "a return to equilibrium" which is corroborated by Freud's concept of trauma as "a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli" (Freud 1961, 23): recovery is to restore what has been broken through and to reestablish balance and order in our mental apparatus. Interestingly enough, while Yeats emphasizes the importance of "Dreaming Back": "The more complete the Dreaming Back the more complete the return" (Yeats 1937, 228), he does not view it as an absolute closure: "But knowledge of the past is not sufficient. The second stage contains in addition to the Dreaming Back and the Return what is called the Phantasmagoria, which exists to exhaust, not nature, not pain and pleasure, but emotion" (231). Yeats insightfully sees that emotional sufferings will still linger on even after the original event is understood intellectually. Such a lack of closure exists in many trauma scholars' writings too, though for varied reasons. For Caruth, complete recovery is unlikely because traumatic event cannot be fully known in spite of victims' compulsive, repetitive attempts to understand it:

The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it [...] The history that a flashback tells [...] is, therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood. (Caruth 1995, 152-153)

For LaCapra, acting-out and working-through are interwoven in one's recovery, which makes it a slow, inconclusive process:

[...] with respect to traumatic losses, acting-out may well be a necessary condition of working-through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working-through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all. (LaCapra 1999, 716-717)

It is no small wonder to see Yeats's *Dreaming Back* resonates so much with modern trauma theories in terms of trauma's cause, symptom, and recovery. We may not know how much Yeats has been influenced by his contemporaries such as Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, but his formulation of *Dreaming Back* is surely a forerunner of the modern concept of trauma, and what is speculated in *A Vision* eventually fleshes out in his play *Purgatory*.

Regarding *Purgatory*, Yeats has admitted in his letter to Dorothy Wellesley that "I have put there my own conviction about this world and the next" (1955, 913), which causes his play to be viewed as a literary child born from his philosophical and mystical writing *A Vision*. While *Dreaming Back* constitutes an important part of the play with the repeated haunting of the remorseful soul of the old man's dead mother, I will read it as a definitive symptom of the old man's traumatization. It is the old man who is possessed by the past that keeps having flashbacks with "the power of a diseased imagination to make its own truth and the extremes to which such a mind will go to authenticate a private fantasy" (Cave 1982, 312). Cave makes it clear that the ghosts are nothing but products of the old man's psychologically stressed mind – "a projecting of his private guilts on to the older generation" (1982, 318) which Schmitt agrees: "the unspeaking ghosts [...] [are] manifestation of his severe conflicts" (Schmitt 1973, 320). The original and foremost trauma for the old man is the death of his mother when he is born. By stating "she died in giving birth to me" (Yeats 1938, 25), the old man is locked in a knot that death and life are so intertwined that not only he loses his mother from day one, but it is his life that costs his mother's life. His loss of mother can fuel a feeling of abandonment, as we see from the play: "And here's a bit of an egg-shell thrown out of a jackdaw's nest" (24). Like the broken eggshell dropped from its nest, the old man is "an old crow thrown out of a no longer existent nest" (Schmitt 1973, 316) who is orphaned and severed from his mother the moment he is born: he will never get to know his mother or be cared for, and the knowledge that he is the reason his mother dies only adds more guilt to his loss. Born into a guilt-ridden trauma, the old man has to witness how the trauma of his mother's death unfolds and begets more traumas.

To a considerable extent, the death of his mother has shaped the old man's life. As a fundamental source of his identity and personal history, his mother, however, can never be approached by him. Her inaccessibility dooms the old man to defining his own existence around a permanent void, an emptiness, which can only be filled through association – his mother's house: "Study that house. I think about its jokes and stories; I try to remember what the butler said to a drunken gamekeeper in mid-October, but I cannot. If I cannot, none living can" (Yeats 1938, 23). The old man is keenly aware that the history of the house is the history of his mother and thus the history of his own. As the only heir to such a history, he alone attempts to preserve his mother's memories represented by the house. His love for the house is an extension of his love for his mother: "Had loved the house, had loved all the intricate passages of the house, but he killed the house; to kill a house, where great men grew up, married, died, I here declare a capital offence" (1938, 25-26). The "intricate passages of the house" connect him to his deceased mother like the umbilical cord. The "capital offence" his father commits is not against the house but against people who "grew up, married, died" in the house, or more specifically, his mother. The house has become the embodiment of his dead mother, and in the light of Freudian symbols, the missing womb itself. Therefore, to the old man, his drunken father's burning down the house comes as a second, repeated trauma: it feels like he loses his mother over and again. Many critics have noticed the equivalence between the house and the mother: "To kill the house becomes the equivalent of killing a family, a nation, or even a person – a woman such as the old man's mother who died bearing him to the groom. It is like killing her and the future generations with her" (Clark 1965, 90). By accusing his father of "[killing]

the house” as if the house were a living human being, the old man acutely expresses his agony and rage of being robbed of his mother again.

The second trauma has profound impacts on the old man. If it were not for the complete destruction of his mother's house: “everything was burnt; Books, library, all were burnt” (Yeats 1938, 26), the old man might have a half chance of growing up as his mother's son: “A game-keeper's wife taught me to read, a Catholic curate taught me Latin” (*ibidem*). However, with everything turning into ashes, the old man is stripped of all the family heritages, histories, and memories his mother could have passed on to him, which leaves him no other ways to hold onto his mother but to turn his whole life into a remembrance. By identifying with his mother, the old man continues her ghostly existence at the cost of his own life: he lives not at the present but in the repeated past. In Cave's words, the old man “is so obsessed by the past that it is no longer simply a matter for imaginative recall, rather he inhabits it as a living reality” (Cave 1982, 317-318). By killing his father, the old man expresses his internal rage and guilt in an external revenge against his mother. It is important for his fratricide to take place in the burning house where his father, the old man believes, has killed his mother the second time. Revenge – against his mother and against himself for his ruined heritage – is clearly the direct cause of his murder of his father, but the way he describes his murder is quite puzzling: “I stuck him with a knife, that knife that cuts my dinner now, and after that I left him in the fire” (Yeats 1938, 27). To leave his dying father in the fire is not only to cover his murder but also to indicate the root cause for his death – the fire: what “killed the house” will also burn him “black and charred” (*ibidem*). While fire may conceal his murder and the true cause behind it, the knife reveals it all. It is curious how life and death are intertwined here again: the knife he kills his father with is used to cut his dinner, which uncannily echoes the first trauma he suffers when he is born – his life and his mother's death are one and the same, although here it is his life and his father's death that become one and the same. The knife that kills and feeds at the same time seems a haunting knot that the old man is doomed to grapple with for the rest of his life. What is more, the eerie correlation between his mother's death and his father's murder suggests a deeper psychological need for his killing: he needs to use his father's death to replace his mother's death so that he can transform his crippling guilt to a justifiable outrage. By scapegoating his father, the old man relieves the double guilts of killing both his mother and father on the ground that his father deserves his own death because he destroys his mother and her legacy through marriage and fire. If the knife feeds the old man with the wishful food to clear his conscience and to fortify himself psychologically, the un-erasable blood stain on his dinner knife also indicates a lurking guilt that cannot be easily repressed.

Throughout the play, we see what Yeats terms as “The souls in Purgatory that come back to habitations and familiar spots” (Yeats 1938, 24) are indeed the mental figurations of the old man haunted by the past. It is in his own mind that he hears “the hoof beats” and sees the ghosts “re-live their transgressions, and that not once but many times” (27, 24). Given the fact that “the recurring event in the play is the mother's coupling with the groom to engender her son, now the old man” (Vlasopolos 1981, 70), it is clear that what cannot rest in peace are not his parents' souls but his own soul which is troubled ceaselessly by the impossibility of his own life: “this night is the anniversary of my mother's wedding night, or of the night wherein I was begotten” (Yeats 1938, 27). The old man is compulsively reliving his parents' wedding night because they are begetting a life that ends all lives: “Do not let him touch you! It is not true that drunken men cannot beget, and if he touch he must beget and you must bear his murderer” (28). Such a dread towards the begetting moment seems to indicate his soul's predicament rather than his mother's, as if he wishes to “recreate the soul differently, control

the nature of one's conception, and mold destiny anew" (Cave 1982, 317). While the hidden guilt of killing his father resurfaces here through his owning up the murder and through "the hoof beats" he suddenly hears moments ago as if he is chased by his father's horse-riding ghost, a much deeper guilt towards his mother's death displays itself inexplicitly as a death drive – a longing to deny his own life, or in this case, his own birth. Trying to awaken his "deaf" parents retrospectively (Yeats 1938, 28), the old man traces the origin of his trauma down to his own birth: only through a complete self-annihilation can the trauma be averted. Such an impossibility of life gives rise to his deep-rooted guilt, self-hatred, and self-denial which then lead to a life of self-punishment: "I ran away, worked here and there, till I became a pedlar on the roads, no good trade, but good enough because I am my father's son, because of what I did or may do" (27). There must be some masochistic pleasure he obtains by degrading himself to be "my father's son" and by paying the price for "what I did or may do," the same gratifying abuse he subjects himself and his son to by begetting "a bastard that a pedlar got upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch" (26). His self-condemnation does not stop at himself but passes down to his son, the bastard. Unwittingly or not, the old man passes the traumas he inherits since his birth down to his son, who also loses his mother and lives with a hateful father who gives no education or shared rights to him (26, 29).

Such a transgenerational trauma is more clearly seen when the boy becomes an uncanny mirror image of the old man at some point: he is not only sixteen years old, the same age as the old man was when he killed his father (26), but considers killing his father as well: "What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad because you were young and he was old. Now I am young and you are old" (29). The boy's threat to kill his father, however, prompts the old man to point to the suddenly lit-up window to show the boy his granddad's reappearing ghost. For the first time in the play, the boy sees the ghost that used to be visible only to his father in the past, which, to many critics, signals the initiation of the boy from his objective world into his father's subjective world "to achieve a perverse sort of clarity" (Pocock 2008, 115). To me, however, it is a pivotal moment that seals the identification between the boy and the old man, because it gives away the possible guilt of patricide the boy shares with his father. In this sense, the horrible apparition of the murdered man the boy sees in his mind is more likely his father's dead body than his grandfather's if not an overlapped image of the murdered fathers. Therefore, what the boy actually sees is the guilt-ridden horror of patricide: "A dead, living, murdered man! [...] A body that was a bundle of old bones before I was born. Horrible! Horrible! (*He covers his eyes*)" (Yeats 1938, 30). The real horror the boy cannot face is the guilt of killing one's father: "A dead, living, murdered man" – seeing both the past and the future in the present, the boy sees his father as both living and dead, old bones and murdered man. He has witnessed with his own eyes how such a guilt has possessed and wrecked his father for years and now it is ready to consume him if he carries out the same patricide. While the boy covers his eyes to avoid looking into the dire consequences of killing one's father, he also inadvertently turns blind to his own imminent death. Like his granddad, he fails to see the death coming and dies as an ignorant beast who "would know nothing, being nothing" (*ibidem*). The lack of knowledge of death threat costs their lives but also bonds them together: the old man's murder of his son is a clear reenactment of his murder of his father. "My father and my son on the same jack-knife! That finishes—there—there—there— (*He stabs again and again. The window grows dark*)" (*ibidem*). The old man kills his son with the same knife at the same spot of his mother's burnt-down house: he is literally repeating what he did sixteen years ago, which brings the present to the past and turns now into then. Such a compulsive repetition of the traumatic event at another time or place is common to many traumatized people as it is their attempt to retrospectively know

or understand the disturbing event, but in the old man's case, there is a noticeable difference. Although he repeats the same act of killing, he reverses the relationship between the murderer and the murdered: instead of the father being killed by the son, now it is the son being killed by the father. It becomes more interesting when we see the son as the mirror image of the old man's younger self, who is of the same age, expressing the same desire to kill his father, and susceptible to ensuing guilt. It is arguable that the old man's killing of his son is indeed a substitute killing of himself or at least killing of his young, bloody-handed, guilty self. Although Genet may see different reason behind the old man's murder of his son (Oedipus Complex), she nevertheless recognizes this murder as another form of his suicide:

This suicide through an interposed person takes up, in another mode, his first attempt at suicide when, in a paroxysm of despair, he cries to his parents not to conceive him, in a fantastic attempt to blot out the past and blot out himself. That time, he besought others to make him disappear. This time, he acts and chooses to eliminate a part of himself, destroying in himself the man guilty of murder and the man guilty of a vile sexuality. (Genet 1991, 242)

While Genet sees "Patricide and infanticide are two identical sacrifices on the altar of motherly love" (*ibidem*), I view them as the casualties of his trauma of losing his mother. In this sense, the old man's murder of his son assumes double meanings: on the one hand, he reenacts his killing acts sixteen years ago out of compulsive repetition, but on the other hand, he also tries to redeem himself by revenging his father against a murderous son by killing his young, criminal self through his son. His repeated murder is thus both a symptom of and an attempted closure to his trauma, which accounts for the temporary disappearance of the haunting ghost as "The window grows dark": his psychological peace returns when the life light goes out in his son. Although many critics have commented on the cleansing nature of the old man's murder of his son: "the whole movement of the play has been a carefully prepared act, a ritual of expiation to purge...the burden of guilt that harrows his mother's soul" (Cave 1982, 316), not many realize that this ritual of purgation is performed not for his mother but for himself, because "it is not his mother's soul trapped in Purgatory, but his own" (Pocock 2008, 113). That, to some extent, explains the puzzling, disproportionate emotions the old man shows towards his mother and his son: "That he should sacrifice a son for the happiness of a mother he never knew" (Leamon 1977, 179). Leamon fails to see that just because "he never knew her, he loves the promise she held out to him of love, culture, wealth, and a heritage" while the son is only "an expression of his own self-hate" (Schmitt 1973-74, 319-320). By identifying with his mother as his unfulfilled potential and projecting his dark, base self to his son, the old man turns his son into "a scapegoat" (1973-74, 317) and attempts to remake himself through murder. However, such a self-remaking is not only ironic: "In trying to regain the purity of his mother's line [...] he resorts to an act which could only have come from his corrupted half – his father's line" (Pocock 2008, 116) but also self-sabotaging: it will only plunge the old man deeper into trauma.

The lullaby the old man sings after his second murder seems to suggest a restored equilibrium in his mind, if only temporarily: "Hush-a-by baby, thy father's a knight, / Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright" (Yeats 1938, 30). With the gnawing guilt towards his dead parents hushed, the old man now could honor them properly as "knight" and "lady" and could express "the fervent hope that he himself has been reborn pure" (Schmitt 1973-74, 317). He is quite articulate about how he appeases his mother's ghost: "Dear mother, the window is dark again, But you are in the light because I finished all that consequence. I killed that lad because had he grown up He would have struck a woman's fancy, Begot, and passed pollution on" (Yeats

1938, 31). By murdering his son, the old man strives to stop the cycle of traumatic repetition and put an end to this generational trauma. For a trauma that originates in birth, death seems to be the only natural end. By killing his son, the old man appeases both his father's ghost through a filicide that symbolically vindicates the murdered father and his mother's ghost by completing a psychologically driven self-elimination that his earlier attempt to be unborn fails to achieve. All the drastic actions he takes to deflect the pains of his trauma, however, only inflict more wounds on his psyche and perpetuate the trauma he tries to close. As the old man cleans his knife as if to clean his conscience to part with his past and get ready for a new future: "When I have stuck This old jack-knife into a sod And pulled it out all bright again [...] I'll to a distant place, and there Tell my old jokes among new men," the haunting ghosts from the past surely return, for his second murder cannot cancel out his first murder but drags him further down to a bottomless hole of guilt and anguish: "Hoof beats! Dear God, How quickly it returns—beat—beat—!" (*ibidem*). Exasperated by the futility to stop the recurring nightmare, the old man finally realizes that his double murders only double his entrapment in trauma: "Twice a murderer and all for nothing, And she must animate that dead night Not once but many times!" (*ibidem*). What the old man does not realize is that as long as he evades his psychological core issues, no hope of recovery will be in sight. By displacing what has been haunting him all the time — deep-seated guilt, shame, self-hatred, regret, and sorrow — onto his dead mother, the old man fails repeatedly to confront his own trauma and acknowledge that he, himself, is the one compelled to repeat the nightmare. After two murders, the old man is still incapable of reaching a true understanding of himself. His lack of self-knowledge makes him unable to come to terms with himself. Therefore, the old man's Dreaming Back, unlike what Yeats lays out in *A Vision*, does not lead him to any understanding or knowledge of his life tragedy. As a result, his psychological knot cannot be untied nor can his disturbed psyche return to equilibrium.

The old man's doomed fate is presented visibly through a silent prop. The tree has been "a bare tree" from the very beginning of the play, but it has "Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter, Fat, greasy life" "fifty years ago Before the thunderbolt had riven it" (Yeats 1938, 23). Like the tree promised of a full, rich life yet ruined by the thunderbolt, the old man experiences a similar disaster — the fire his drunken father sets to the house cuts short his potential future: "I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now, So I chose a better trade" (*ibidem*). What he sees in the bare tree is a mirror reflection of his own life which has since deteriorated towards annihilation, which compels him to choose "a better trade" as if to grasp a last chance to save himself from a literal or metaphorical death. Although scholars interpret the tree differently, they do recognize that the wretched state of the tree motivates the old man into action: "It is the sight of this stripped tree which makes the old man turn from peddling wares in the here and now to attending to the suffering of his mother's soul in the hereafter" (Clark 1965, 91). However, it is not his mother's soul but his own that he is trying to save, for by the end of the day, "it is his own peace of mind the old man extols in his moment of jubilation: 'I'll to a distant place, and there/Tell my old jokes among new men'" (Cave 1982, 316). After the old man murders his son, the tree is suddenly in a different light: "*The stage has grown dark except where the tree stands in white light. Study that tree. It stands there like a purified soul, All cold, sweet, glistening light*" (Yeats 1938, 31). Clearly, the "better trade" the old man picks up is to kill his son to purify his own soul. By reversing the first murder, slaying his guilty self, and wiping off all the lingering consequences of his original trauma, the old man sheds a wishful white light on the tree. Such a self-salvation is illusionary as the tree remains stripped bare in the end just as in the beginning: it is an eternal, unredeemable, nightmarish life that is waiting for him. The peaceful mind he longs to have is equally shattered by the returning hoofs from

the past: there is no distant, new place to go – he is as immobile as the bare tree, forever trapped in there and then.

Yeats's *Purgatory* is a precursor to modern trauma plays in Ireland not only because it deals with trauma and its psychological impacts on people but also because it sets a precedence for future trauma plays by using a hybrid form and establishing some of their defining features. As a poet-playwright, Yeats is never content with the existing conventions of mimicking realism but constantly seeking new dramatic forms of representation which not only “get[s] rid of irrelevant movement” to focus on “vivid words” but “permits an actor [...] to throw up an arm calling down the thunderbolts of Heaven, instead of seeming to pick up pins from the floor” (Yeats 1961, 527, 529). Yeats's interest in words, images, emotions, and imaginations rather than plots and actions characterizes all his plays. This distinctive feature is seen in *Purgatory* through a hybrid form of realism and symbolism: “The realism of *Purgatory* is simplified, stylized, reduced to barest essentials, so that the play becomes symbolical, yet is not [...] cut off from the recognizable world” (Clark 1965, 85). Take the old man's killing his son for example, we witness an act of murder on stage, which is far more powerful as it is produced in crude realism without any trappings of myth or folklore, but at the same time, we also sense its symbolic, ritualistic gesture towards a rebirth sacrifice through the character's words, the images, the stage lighting, etc. Such a balance between realism and symbolism, though a signature of Yeats's plays, is often used in later trauma plays too such as Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) and McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985) in which many objects (the caravan, the swan, the drum, etc.) assume a symbolic significance while rooted in a realistic situation (mid-land bog, WWI, etc.). Realism matters to trauma plays because invested in truth claims, these plays aim to restore the reality of the traumatic events and validate victims' experiences. The reenactment of trauma on the stage is to literally show what has truly happened. However, whatever realistic effect such a reproduction may render to the audience, it cannot compare with the psychological havoc and shattering experience trauma gives to people in real life. Therefore, the depth of the traumatic impacts on human psyche cannot be simulated through realistic reproduction of the event but rather, be suggested, implied, and gestured towards infinitely through stylized, symbolic representations. By embedding symbolism in reality, trauma plays can transcend the limitations of factual representations of extreme events to tap into the audience's powerful imagination and to probe the unthinkable without losing grasp on its actuality. Given the potential of Yeats's hybrid form of realism and symbolism to represent trauma, there is little wonder that it has since become a defining feature of trauma plays, adopted by many future Irish playwrights.

Yeats's *Purgatory* not only mingles realism and symbolism but also draws on the Japanese Noh plays, especially “the visionary scene of the ghost lovers in *Nishikigi* and the theme of purgatorial suffering of lovers in *Motomezuka*” (Sato 2011, 80). Thematically, Yeats's *Purgatory* is more akin to *Motomezuka* as it also dwells on trauma – not only Unai's drowning traumatizes her two rival lovers and leads to their suicides but Unai is destined to suffer eternally beyond redemption – which strikingly parallels the old man's condemnation after trauma begets more traumas in his life. Leamon, on the other hand, notes how Yeats's adoption of the Noh form in his drama reflects his concerns with the balance between symbolism and realism:

though he created what he himself called drawing-room drama, we should not imagine that he abandoned his efforts to make his ideas intelligible to his audience, that he simply wrote for those who know and ceased to worry about any realistic embodiment of his symbols. Though he chose to make symbolism the center of the plays, he still aimed at a dramatic rather than a purely lyric representation. He placed more faith in the imagination of his audience, it is true, but he was still left with the problem

of how to move his audience emotionally. For though he had an audience which he believed was imaginative or knowledgeable enough to comprehend his symbolism, he obviously intended the final effect to be other than intellectual. In order to achieve this effect he had to connect this symbolism in some way, however vague, with the world of his audience. (Leamon 1977, 170)

Purgatory is a case in point where Yeats modifies the Noh form to craft a space between drama and poetry, symbolism and realism, intellectual understanding and emotional touch. Unlike typical Noh plays, Yeats uses no masks, music, or dance to further ritualize his play and distance it from the everyday reality, but “the play’s setting, the ghost element, and the reduction of action to a single event derive from his experiments with the Noh form” (Leamon 1977, 178). The minimalistic setting of the play is “[in] the manner of the Noh drama, scenery and scenic devices are extremely reduced, and remain simple and symbolical. There is nothing but the house in ruins and the bare tree, the equivalent of the Japanese pine” (Genet 1991, 230). According to Yeats’s daughter Anne, who designed the setting for the play’s first production, there was not even a house:

It really could not have been simpler. It was just a bare whitish tree in the middle of the stage and a backcloth with a window cut out of it [...] the backcloth, I remember, was black and the window was dark blue – exceptionally dark. The tree was sort of ‘whitey,’ it was very simple. As for the figures at the window, there was probably gauze in the window and they were probably very vague behind. (qtd. in Sato 2011, 76-77)

Stripped of any elaborate set and enhanced by the sharp contrast between black and white, the stage becomes tense, stark, and abstract: it minimalizes visual distraction and heightens the tragic atmosphere. Although everything on the stage can be taken as symbolic (the bare tree, the burnt house, the knife, the old man, the boy, etc.), the play is still immersed in real life situation and daily speech, dramatizes a family’s tragic history, and sensationalizes events such as murder to evoke strong emotions from the audience. If, like Leamon puts it, the audience is disturbed by the “pain and death” in melodrama and by the unrestored order and the “irreconcilable clash” in realism (Leamon 1977, 171), Yeats’s audience is disturbed by both in *Purgatory*. To elicit empathy for an old man inexorably haunted by his parents’ ghosts, Yeats needs to create lifelike, realistic characters and deploy the audience’s imagination so that they not only relate to the characters but also feel for their sufferings.

Admittedly, *Purgatory* benefits from a cross-fertilization of realism, symbolism, melodrama, the Noh plays, and the verse drama. As Clark noticed, Yeats’s language in this play has its special feature: “Although the style does not abound in figurative language, it is rich in images” (Clark 1965, 89). The prosaic rather than poetic language in this verse play stands out clearly, but the plain, bare-bone language is by no means bland; instead, it instills a stark, crude or even harsh flavor into the play which matches its brutal subject. Likewise, the minimalized setting is not dull but quite suggestive: the “ruined house” and the “bare tree” are the predominant images in the play (Yeats 1938, 23). While critics may debate what they stand for specifically, there is no denial of their rich, symbolic connotations. The elimination of all the other props makes the decayed house and the bare tree the focal point of the play, which intensifies the trauma: “The play, like house or tree, is stripped bare of any irrelevant furniture or *foliage*, and nothing is left but the tragedy of vision” (Clark 1965, 92). Such a riddance of extra details also depersonalizes the characters who are only known as the old man, the boy, the mother, and the father. Suess argues that:

the lack of character names provides another instance of the use of archetypes [...] Rather than furnish them with specific historical identities, Yeats presents them *as* their relationships, as the funda-

mental father and son, mother and son. This type of characterization discourages the audience/reader from sympathizing with any individual character as an historical being [...] Rather, it obliges one to reflect on the significance of the relationships as archetypal. (Suess 1998, 64)

While the play may evoke archetypal relationship, use of archetypes does not necessarily alienate the audience; it may deepen rather than diminish the sympathy from the audience towards the human tribulations: the audience can look beyond the flawed individuals such as the ignoble old man to sympathize with his sufferings as universal human experiences.

For a play that straddles between different styles and genres, its structure is bound to be ambivalent: linear narrative is laced with cyclical repetitions. Although *Purgatory* is constructed in a linear order in which the old man narrates his life story to his son, the recurring flashbacks and the repetitive nature of the events throw the linear order into disarray. To Suess, “De-accentuating the linear-narrative structure of the dramas re-directs the readers’ and spectators’ plot-driven response to the plays toward a focus on how and why events occur” (1998, 63), which is especially true in *Purgatory* as the linear order of the events is almost completely buried in the seemingly static, ongoing conversations between the old man and the boy, and furthermore, constantly disrupted by the reappearance of the ghosts from the past. As Schmitt puts it, “The return of the dead to their families signifies the hope that going back in time is possible; it implies that one is no longer living in chronological time but in the primordial time” (Schmitt 1973, 317). What the audience experiences in the play is indeed psychological time rather than chronological time. By reducing the characters’ actions to the minimum (i.e. they struggle for the bag, the old man stabs the boy, etc.), Yeats not only foregrounds their speeches but also further reduces the sense of time elapse, creating a semi-eternal stillness which suspends the physical, linear time and evokes what Suess calls “mythic time”: “The old man’s obsessive and continual recollection of his past, and our knowledge at the end of the play that the cycle is about to begin again distance us from recognizing the characters as individuals and instead relocate the narrative into a mythologized metanarrative” (Suess 1998, 64). Suess’s “mythic time” actually reflects the time experienced by the traumatized who live in a cyclical rather than a linear time frame due to their compulsive repetitions of the past. As the old man’s narrative integrates the past, the present, and the future all together in a repetitive cycle, it transforms fleeting linear time into enduring traumatic time. In this sense, the play is both linear and cyclical, timed and timeless. While these cyclical repetitions may speak to the ritualistic feature of the play as Cave claims “performance was to be akin to ceremony” (Cave 1982, 301) or as Schmitt argues “*Purgatory* is a religious drama, a ritual of rebirth – which fails” (Yeats 1973, 311), they are also primary, defining features of trauma, which characterize many trauma plays to come.

When Yeats wrote to Edith Shackleton Heald, he laid out clearly what *Purgatory* would be about: “I have a one-act play in my head, a scene of tragic intensity [...] My recent work has greater strangeness and I think greater intensity than anything I have done” (1954, 907). The tragic intensity and the greater strangeness in *Purgatory* mark its kinship to later trauma plays: it addresses not only the tragedy of traumatic events but also the intensified human psychological and emotional reactions; his effective use of a hybrid form of realism, symbolism, Japanese Noh, minimalist setting, linear-cyclical structure, etc. inspires future playwrights to break traditional boundaries to create a hybrid platform to represent trauma. Yeats’s germinal contribution to the development of Irish trauma plays is unquestionable as he has theorized trauma in *A Vision*, explored such a theory in *Purgatory*, and established some of the conventions in later trauma plays. With this article as a stepping stone, I hope more people will start to pay attention to and acknowledge Yeats’s admirable work in this field.

Works Cited

- Caruth Cathy (1993), "Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals", *Assemblage* 20, 24-25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181682?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad35973f5fd602e15f87d7a312ab43a05&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- (1995), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore-London, The John Hopkins UP.
- Cave R.A. (1983 [1982]), "Yeats's Late Plays: 'A High Grave Dignity and Strangeness'", in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. LXVIII, London, Oxford UP, 299-327.
- Clark D.R. (1965), *W.B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality*, Dublin, The Dolmen Press.
- Edwards Emma (2016), "Yeats: Public Man, Private Death", *Books Ireland* 367, 16-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/booksireland.367.16?refreqid=excelsior%3A1a8a4313995fcdcf07af1ae0732a4dae&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Freud Sigmund (1961), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Genet Jacqueline (1991), "Yeats's *Purgatory*: A Re-Assessment", *Irish University Review* 21, 2, Edinburgh UP, 229-244, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25484430?refreqid=excelsior%3A36280aa08c38ff3bb60fdf5511711b0e&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- LaCapra Dominick (1999), "Trauma, Absence, Loss", *Critical Inquiry* 25, 4, 696-727, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344100?refreqid=excelsior%3A2549304a308a1039a272c2e951b81883&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Leamon Warren (1977), "The Tragedy of Dogmatism: Yeats's Later Plays", *Southwest Review* 62, 2, 169-181, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43468949?refreqid=excelsior%3Acf1b9e2fa032848f765cf283c430701b&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- McCormack W. J. (1979), "Yeats' *Purgatory*: A Play and a Tradition", *The Crane Bag* 3, 2, 33-44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30059623?refreqid=excelsior%3Aeacf5e719f5602ddcf0b306e7385137&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Miller Liam (1977), *The Noble Drama of W. B. Yeats*, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press Inc.
- Ohno Mitsuko (1991), "When Ghosts Appear on the Stage – Yeats and the 'Three Swedes'", *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 16, 1, 31-45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43023556?refreqid=excelsior%3A96849118126d669adec6373aa805e54&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Pocock S.J. (2008), "Artistic Liminality: Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan and *Purgatory*", *New Hibernia Review* 12, 3, 99-117, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/251174>> (03/2021).
- Sato Yoko (2011), "The Symbolic Structure of Yeats's *Purgatory*", *Journal of Irish Studies* 26, 76-87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23033178?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae2763c3f7c424a5b4a01200bdc58165&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Schmitt Natalie Crohn (1973-1974), "Curing Oneself of the Work of Time: W. B. Yeats's *Purgatory*", *Comparative Drama* 7, 4, 310-333, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41152625?refreqid=excelsior%3A65bb74544da3c28790273c18b81d7a14&seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Suess Barbara (1998), "Suffering Mothers: The Birth of a New World in Yeats's *Purgatory* and H.D.'s *Euripides' Ion*", *Journal of Ritual Studies* 12, 2, 61-72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44369009?seq=1#metadata-info_tab_contents> (03/2021).
- Van Der Kolk Bessel, Van Der Hart Onno (1995), "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma", in Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore-London, The John Hopkins UP, 158-182.
- Vendler H.H. (1963), *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays*, Massachusetts, Harvard UP.
- Vlasopolos Anca (1981), "Thematic Contexts in Four of Yeats's Plays", *Modern Drama*, 24, 1, 67-72, <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/497732/pdf>> (03/2021).
- Yeats W.B. (1925; 1937), *A Vision*, London, MacMillan and Co. LTD.
- (1939), *On The Boiler*, Dublin, Cuala Press.
- (1954), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Allan Wade, New York, the MacMillan Company.
- (1961), "An Introduction for My Plays", in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, New York, Macmillan, 527-530.
- (1989), "The Man and the Echo", in R.J. Finneran (ed.), *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan.