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PURGATORY: YEATS'S MODERN TRAGEDY

By DAVID L. VANDERWERKEN

IN RECENT YEARS, critical studies of *Purgatory* have focused on the nature of the tragedy expressed in the play.¹ I wish to continue this trend and more specifically examine the modernity of the tragic context, the nature of the tragic hero, and the nature of the tragic act. And such a study may partially define some distinctive traits of tragedy in the Twentieth Century.

The Tragic Context: Objectivity and Desolate Reality

Man's aspiration to transcend the limits of natural reality and identify himself with supernatural reality provides the basic tension in Yeatsian tragedy. According to *A Vision*, a man's capability of transcendence depends upon his position on the Great Wheel and his place in history. Yeats categorizes the present age as the last days of an objective cycle of history in which transcendence is impossible. The modern age contrasts with subjective eras in which supernatural reality is accessible and can be validated. Thus, in those plays in which subjectivity is at the center of interest, the theme is the achievement of heroic transcendence which realizes tragic ecstasy. Correspondingly, in plays centered in an objective context, the theme be-

1. David R. Clark, *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Dublin, 1965), closely examines the "achieved language of passionate perception" characteristic of the Old Man's tragic awareness. Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (New York, 1963), discusses the Old Man's state of "half-knowledge" as integral to his tragedy. Helen Vendler, *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), and Leonard Nathan, *The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1965), study *Purgatory* within the context of *A Vision*.

Earlier studies which cannot be overlooked include John Heath-Stubbs, *The Darkling Plain* (London, 1950), and Donald R. Pearce, "Yeats's Last Plays: An Interpretation," *English Literary History*, XVIII (March 1951), 67-76, which are concerned with the historical and political allegory of the play. F. A. C. Wilson's important *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (London, 1958), illuminates the play's historical and theological sources and allusions.

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comes the failure of heroic transcendence. In *Purgatory*, Yeats's final objective play, intensity replaces ecstasy as the achieved condition.²

The nature of the spiritual world is important in establishing the tragic context of the play. In "The Soul in Judgment" section of *A Vision*, Yeats outlines four principal movements of the soul. In the category of the "Return," the milieu of *Purgatory*, the individual soul periodically recapitulates a crucial event of its life. The significant event is determined by the extent and importance of the consequences caused by the event. The soul does not know the significance of this past event until death. Never before in his dramatic work has Yeats provided a direct statement of this belief until the Old Man's speech in *Purgatory*:

[they] Relive
Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times; they know at last
The consequences of those transgressions
Whether upon others or upon themselves;
Upon others, others may bring help,
For when the consequence is at an end
The Dream must end; if upon themselves
There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God.³

The consequences of the mother's willful and heedless act of violating her aristocratic blood are increasing violence and degradation. Since *Purgatory* documents the end of a cycle, it is full of references to the total breakdown of civilization. In *A Vision* Yeats says: "A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some great tragic person, some Niobe who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes toward the end; first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation — the stream of Juno's peacock."⁴ Yeats's most severe indictment of modern culture is the volume of essays, *On the Boiler*, to which *Purgatory* is appended. The mother's lust represents a moral

2. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), 907, 913. These two letters, to Edith Shackleton Heald and to Dorothy Wellesley, outline Yeats's general intentions for *Purgatory*.

3. W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1952), 431. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

4. W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York, 1966), 268.

failure symptomatic of the end of an age. The Old Man uses her failure as a reference point since he cannot see the act as a concomitant of the final historical phase.

The tendency toward disintegration at the end of an historical cycle manifests itself most strongly in *Purgatory* in terms of the morality of human relationships. The relationship between the Old Man's parents is one of lust alone and is not dignified in the Old Man's eyes upon any other level. Debasement through lust is reinforced when we learn that the Boy is the bastard of a tinker's daughter begotten in a ditch. One of the Old Man's rationalizations for killing the Boy is:

He would have struck a woman's fancy,
Begot, and passed pollution on (p. 435).

Moreover, filial love seems denied in *Purgatory*. The Old Man hates his son every bit as much as he hated his father. Even his attitude toward his mother is ambiguous. Filial devotion is at odds with his hatred of his mother's sexuality. The relationship between the Old Man and the Boy is seen by the Boy only in terms of commerce. He is out to steal the money bag throughout the play. The Boy has no moral sense at all and cannot comprehend the significance of his father's rage.

What's right and wrong?
My grand-dad got the girl and the money (p. 431).

or,

My God, but you had luck! Grand clothes,
And maybe a grand horse to ride (p. 432).

The Boy becomes the complete representative of objective man at the end of an objective age. He is corrupted by money, ruled by common sense values, lacking in moral and spiritual dimensions. In a world full of such men it is impossible to develop viable human relationships.

The context of nature in the play is a wasteland, looking backward to Eliot and forward to Beckett. What is missing in *Purgatory* is any inkling of a possible regeneration of the dead land or the morally dead society. The Old Man looks back to the former fecundity and to the thriving and vital society symbolized by the ruined house. The Old Man and the Boy are

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isolated from the house which can be only dimly perceived in the background. The stark tree and the Old Man are identified because they have both seen more fruitful times. The Old Man is still capable of responding to the spiritual element within himself, although he is isolated from it and can only experience it through the window. The house, the tree, and the Old Man retain a kind of vestigial consciousness of something which transcends natural reality. But the natural imagery of the play tends to deny that the supernatural element can in any manner rejuvenate this wasteland. The truth of reality lies in desolation, not in the fecundity of a past age. As Yeats says in "Meru":

Civilization is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:⁵

Here Yeats is drawing a distinction between civilization and subjective thought. Civilization, unity of culture, the Eighteenth Century house, are elaborate constructions which mask reality. Man's subjective thought destroys this established order in searching for truth. The Old Man's vision, therefore, is ultimately destructive in nature. But that is the price one pays to witness the desolation of reality.

Nature of the Tragic Hero: Impotent Rage

A revised conception of the tragic hero is necessary in dealing with the Old Man. Northrop Frye's work is useful in this revision. The Old Man is a low mimetic hero with overtones of the ironic. In the "Theory of Modes" Frye says that "In low mimetic tragedy, pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally, as sensations."⁶ This is certainly true of *Purgatory* and corroborates Yeats's avowed intention to achieve a state of tragic intensity in the play. The cultivation of intense and static emotional conditions is a concern of Yeats's tragic theory throughout his career. In

⁵ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1956), 287. Future references will be cited parenthetically.

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York, 1969), 38.

an early essay on Synge's *Deirdre*, "The Tragic Theatre," Yeats articulates this dictum: "Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons on the stage, let us say, greatness till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea. That which is before our eyes perpetually vanishes and returns again in the midst of the excitement it creates, and the more enthralling it is, the more do we forget it."⁷ As a low mimetic hero, the Old Man is one of us, but in a sense we are looking down at him, which takes us into the realm of the ironic. Both the Old Man's conception of the afterlife and his obsession to effectively liberate his mother from her dream make him less free than we are. All his actions are shaped by his *a priori* conception of the state of Purgatory and his willingness to commit an action that may affect that state.

Since tragedy deals with exclusion, the causes of the Old Man's isolation must be examined. The overriding agent of his isolation is the conflict between his subjective imaginative reality and the social consensus of the opposing objective age. Out of this primary conflict comes a series of isolating forces. First and foremost, the Old Man is unable to participate in that supernatural reality which his imagination has conceived. He may only observe it at a distance. He is isolated from the characters in the window in the same way that the audience is isolated from the stage. Secondly, the Old Man is isolated from his age as seen through his contempt for modern man as represented by his son. Finally, in Yeatsian terms, he is isolated from himself in that he cannot reconcile his daemon, his subjective nature, with his mask, his objective nature. The Old Man becomes a figure of quintessential isolation.

The Old Man's sense of his own divided nature and his inability to reconcile his mask and daemon may explain the preponderant mood of rage and frenzy in his rhetoric. One cause of his rage is his sense of the glory of past values represented in the Eighteenth Century house. It symbolizes a lost paradise for him. Although he realizes that past greatness cannot be re-

7 W. B. Yeats, *Essays* (New York, 1924), 302-303.

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stored, he is determined to at least end the chain of consequences which has debased it. His motivation to relieve his mother's soul, that last link with greatness, arises as much from disgust as from love. But his ability to experience intense passion proves that he is not emotionally or morally vacuous. The Boy has no conception of greatness, especially in terms of passionate experience. Greed is as close as he may come to experiencing a passion. When the Boy sees a figure in the lighted window, he is shocked, but only at a vision which his orientation to experience has not prepared him to admit. He is a product of degradation and cannot participate in this experience on the same level as the Old Man who has seen greatness. However, it is important to note that the Boy participates in the supernatural experience after he has attempted the robbery and has entertained the idea of killing his father and thereby recapitulating the past event. It seems to me that this incident shows that the Boy has been incorporated into the subjective imaginative reality of his father. It illustrates the power of the Old Man's imagination and enhances his heroic image. The strength and vitality of the personal vision is still operative in adding a spiritual dimension to man which only shocks and disgusts the man of common sense.

Usually, certain choices confront tragic heroes. What is ultimately discerned, in the case of the Old Man, is that his passionate obsession allows of no choice. His will is bound by the past in his awareness of lost values which he can neither appropriate nor reject. The most dramatic illustrations of his powerlessness is in his sudden killing of the Boy. The deed comes as a shock, but it is plausible if we cast it in terms of what I shall call negative causality. I mean that the Old Man did not actively will to kill the Boy, but the act was not willed against either. However, he gives a carefully reasoned statement justifying it after the fact. Remembering how Macbeth or Hamlet reason out their acts beforehand will show how very different this indeed is. Possibly this method illustrates how the Old Man is in the most tragic state imaginable: he is fully conscious of his destiny as agent ("Because of what I did or may do"), and at the same time fully aware that his agency is totally ineffectual ("Mankind can do no more"). What seems to motivate him is frustration, impotent rage, which finally must relieve itself

violently.

A fuller clarification of the absolutes at work in the play is needed to determine whether the Old Man is bound only by his personal reality or by something more universal. The first problem in this connection is that of the role of God.⁸ It seems to me that the prayers to God serve to reinforce and deepen the Old Man's awareness of his isolation. Calling upon God, who is dead, at the end of the Christian era becomes in a sense rubbing salt in one's wounds. Although man has a spiritual element as part of his being, man creates his own spiritual destiny. Thus, no agency, neither God's nor other men's, may influence, assuage or determine that destiny.

Although the absolutes at work in the play are personal and subjective instead of universal and transcendent, their effects are no less tyrannous. The Old Man's inability to maintain the tremendous tension between his subjective vision and natural reality results in madness. His confusing of the two worlds is shown most dramatically when he speaks to the ghosts. This is a most pathetic touch as he attempts to somehow prevent a past action:

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.
Deaf! Both deaf! If I should throw
A stick or stone they would not hear;
And that's a proof my wits are out (pp. 433-434).

Notice that he himself realizes his madness. He is caught between the two worlds and partakes of both. But because of this condition, he has no efficacy in either. His attempt to bridge the gap by a sudden frenzied act is in effect the final attempt of his spiritual nature to transcend the natural world. Of course it fails, the chain of consequence continues, but it is no less admirable because of that.

The palpable suffering of the Old Man needs further examination. The killing of the Boy means that the Old Man has damned himself. If Yeats had been content to stop at that point

⁸ See John Rees Moore, "An Old Man's Tragedy—Yeats's *Purgatory*," *Modern Drama*, V (February 1963), 443, for a comment on God's "anomalous" position in *Purgatory*.

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a state of awe would have resulted. But the hoofbeats return and create an emotion of startled horror similar to that in *King Lear* when we are numbed by Cordelia's superfluous death. Yeats knows that gratuitous suffering is part and parcel of the human condition. The effect of Yeats's truthfulness is something difficult to frame, but it partakes of grandeur and magnificence.

Another element operative in deepening the tone of *Purgatory* is the plight of the Boy. Although he lacks a moral sense and a spiritual dimension, what happens to him seems grossly unfair since his condition as objective man is predetermined. The Boy is both a member of a guilty society, the meretricious objective age, and part of a world where gratuitous violence and suffering are indeed facts of life. Moreover, he is an innocent in his limited orientation to experience in which common sense and money are his only values.

Nature of the Tragic Act: Displaced and Impure Ritual

The Old Man's sudden and convulsive stabbing of his son should be seen in terms of the disparity between the honorable intention and the ironic result. Ostensibly, it is done to end the consequences of his mother's deed in the natural world and release her from the cycle of Return:

Upon others, others may bring help,
For when the consequence is at an end
The dream must end (p. 431);

Thus, the killing is intended as a sacrifice, a ritual act, to appease and propitiate the powers of the supernatural. In myth, the sacrifice is successful in appeasing the gods and brings tangible benefits such as good weather, regeneration, or the end of plague. For the Christian, the sacrifice of Christ brings the possibility of eternal life. From Frye we learn that realistic literature displaces myth to serve the end of plausibility. Moreover, myth loses its efficacy when literature turns ironic. It seems to me that ironic displacement of the myth of ritual sacrifice is at the heart of the tragic act in *Purgatory*.

One element of the ironic lies in the Old Man's hatred of his son. Traditionally, the father loves the son who is to be the sacrificial object. The most characteristic instance is the

Abraham-Isaac story. But our Old Man totally loathes his son. This lack of affection creates no inner conflict and consequently the killing strikes us as murder, and not as sacrifice. The weapon itself adds an element almost of parody. It is not a consecrated sword but a jackknife, the same one with which he opens cans and eats his meals.

Because of the ironic treatment of these materials, I think that the killing is a secularized version of the Abraham-Isaac myth. Abraham is willing to violate moral law in order to follow the will of God. Abraham's torment, the source of his *angst*, is the question of whether he has interpreted the will of God correctly. The Old Man's situation is the obverse. The Old Man is willing to kill according to the dictates of his subjective vision. The question then lies in his correctly understanding the rightness or wrongness of his vision. But his lack of love for his son tends to decrease his torment, making his problem less morally compelling than Abraham's.

The major element of displacement, of course, is the final result of the killing. The ritual does not end the gyre of consequence nor does it release the mother from her dream. Both the pilgrimage and the central religious act are failures. Possibly they fail because of the nature of the Old Man's motives. He wants to relieve his mother's suffering, but he also wants to relieve his own suffering and assuage his own sense of guilt, both from his earlier murder of his father and from his life of degradation. His motives are partly impure and selfish and tend to negate the meaning of ritual. An exaggerated analogy may clarify my meaning — Hitler celebrating mass. The Old Man is an unholy priest in that his past crimes mock the ritual. A further significance is that the Old Man acts in light of a subjective vision and not in light of a universal and transcendent reality.

In what sense can this failed ritual be considered heroic? I think the answer is simply the attempt itself. An heroic act in an objective age in which it will necessarily fail seems more deeply tragic than one in a subjective age when success is possible. If a viewer sees the Old Man as merely brutal and stupid, then more insight into the nature of the viewer is given than about the Old Man. Given his personal bias, his self-damnation from past crimes, and his laudable willingness to damn himself

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even more to relieve his mother, he still tries, however, to do something about it. Despite such insurmountable obstacles, he exercises that dimension of himself which raises man to magnificence. He is no Cuchulain, but neither is he a man rendered totally apathetic out of a belief that all action is absurd like Camus' stranger. The Old Man is a representation of all men's futility, but yet he is an individual instance of man's glory.

Afterword: Two Comments on Tragedy in the Modern World

I have two general observations on the nature of modern tragedy, using *Purgatory* as a model. The first concerns the idea of absolutes. All those who have written on tragic theory from Aristotle and his Italian and French interpreters to Nietzsche, Yeats, and Frye have accepted the idea that there are stable and unyielding forces at work which frustrate the tragic hero's will. Classic absolutes such as God, or moral law, or nature have universal validity. In times such as ours when these absolutes have lost their cogency, what conception of absolutes has evolved? It would seem that in this period of fragmentation the individual vision replaces the general vision. Yeats's absolutes of moon and history are personal, but yet subsume all men and all times under them. The Old Man has a personal vision which gives order to his ideas of experience. But his sense of social responsibility gives his faith in his subjective vision community with the rest of mankind. The personal set of absolutes which incorporates all men has replaced transcendent absolutes. The tragic artist has a truly difficult task. Instead of working from within a framework of transcendent absolutes, he must work outward from the individual to incorporate the universe.

The second observation deals with an element common to all tragedy: self-discovery. When absolutes are transcendent, the tragic hero comes to a point of awareness that he has violated them, and then those absolutes exact their retribution. When the absolutes are personal, however, self-awareness comes from the tragic hero's recognition that his vision is somehow imperfect and faulty. Yeats says in "The Man and the Echo":

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till

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I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right (p. 337).

The hoofbeats return and the Old Man realizes that he never got the answers right.



THE BIRD GIRLS OF IRELAND

By ALBERT J. SOLOMON

THE INISHMAAN GIRLS in J. M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) are frequently suggested as the direct literary prototype for James Joyce's wading-girl in *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916).¹ George Moore's use of a similar situation in *Hail and Farewell: Salve* (1912) suggests that he too should be considered in the progression of the image.

Synge was the first to commit his experiences to print. The girl-watching episode occurs, almost as an aside, in the midst of a discussion about the scarcity of water on the island.

The water for washing is also coming short, and as I walk round the edges of the sea, I often come on a girl with her petticoats tucked up round her, standing in a pool left by the tide and washing her flannels among the sea-anemones and crabs. Their red bodices and white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical sea-birds, as they stand in a frame of seaweeds against the brink of the Atlantic. Michael, however, is a little uneasy when they are in sight, and I cannot pause to watch them.²

There is a distant, yet clear, note of regret in that final statement.

It is not presumptuous to assume that Moore read *The Aran Islands*. The book was published in April 1907, in the still-broiling wake of the *Playboy* riots; Lady Gregory and Yeats,

1 Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers: Literature and Nationalism, 1880-1940* (New York, 1959), 243; Caroline G. Mercer, "Stephen Dedalus's Vision and Synge's Peasant Girls," *Notes & Queries*, VII (December 1960), 473-474; Donna Gerstenberger, *John Millington Synge* (New York, 1964), 25.

2 *The Works of John M. Synge* (Boston, 1912), III, 67.