Yeats's Archetypal Eternity in *The Wild Swans At Coole*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address those archetypal images embedded in Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" (October 1916),which are summoned up to provide a context through which Yeats blatantly illuminates the central motif of the poem, that is, the soul's eternity. By applying Philip Wheelwright's archetypal criticism into the poem, this paper tires to demonstrate that there is a direct correspondence between the poet's quest for his whole vision of personality and his creative flourish in art. The current study, hence, is undertaken to suggest that through swans as a major image that rules the mood of the whole poem, the poet discovers his ideal self in nature and restores the unity of his whole being. This task will be accomplished by bringing to light specific affinities between the theme of the timeless ideals of art and the immortal beauty and love of the imperishable swans.

Key Words: *The Wild Swans at Coole; archetypal images, eternity, Philip Wheelwright's archetypal criticism, ideal self, nature, immortality*

Partly conscious and relatively subconscious, it seems that a mythopoeic writer like William Butler Yeats has sensitively and intelligently constructed so many of his works on myth (Guerin et al. 199). Myth displays recurrent motifs or themes that both limit and inspire human behavior. Adopting Philip Wheelwright's view as expounded in "Poetry, Myth, and Reality," myth is to be defined as "the expression of a profound sense of togetherness" (11). This togetherness is not merely postulated upon "the plane of intellect, as is primarily the case among fellow-scientists, but a togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living" (ibid.). And so while a nation's distinctive myths may be mirrored in legends, folklore, sagas, rituals and the ideology of a nation, myth still has a communal, collective spirit. As this character of myth matches the cultural and political circumstances of each period, it provides as much impetus for those writers and poets who are willing to soak their imagination in dreams and myths of their nations.

However, "[i]n an age of mythopoeic and archetypal criticism, one of the most myth-conscious and archetype-oriented poets of the day" has been so thoroughly misunderstood and misinterpreted because, as Allen suggests, "analytical structures thoroughly foreign to the shape of his imaginative thought" have been imposed on his work ("The Road," 62). He considers, on the one hand, mythopoeic analysis and archetypal criticism as the most reliable approach to "Yeats's philosophical convictions, symbolic methods, and expansive imaginative vision" (ibid.). However, on the other hand, his view affirms that Jung's and Frye's notion of the archetype is not enough to provide a satisfactory framework in criticism of Yeats's thought. With reference to four aspects of Wheelwright's views on archetypes, Allen claims it is only a contribution like those of Wheelwright's system of thought which can lead directly to the meaningful and productive archetypal criticism of Yeats.

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First, Wheelwright's views on archetype is unlike Jung's clinical and psychological perceptions into the study of archetypes and unlike Northrop Frye's theory of literary archetypes (ibid., 55, 60). The word archetype has its root in ancient Greece. It is derived from "arkhe-, arkhi-, archi-," which means original and "tupos," which means "model, stamp," according to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition (448). Together, the word archetype refers to an "original model or type" from which all entities of the same kind branch off (ibid.). Meanwhile, Wheelwright, as a notable practitioner of one mode of archetypal analysis, calls archetypes "such Symbols as are found to be universal or nearly so, in their broadly human manifestations" ("The Archetypal," 222). He argues elsewhere, archetypal symbols, or archetypes are those "symbols that have an identical or similar meaning for mankind generally or at least for a large part of it" (*Metaphor* 110). The definition still express one of the distinctive features of an archetypal symbol or image, namely its collective and communal nature.

Second, Wheelwright goes into the related images and patterns more in terms of a dualistic cosmological structure that distinguishes between the earthly world and the supernatural world than a threefold or fourfold categorization of archetypal images like Frye's (Allen, "The Road," 60). Third, he acknowledges the presence of a level of reality beyond the main concerns of twentieth-century "technosophy," a movement designated to indicate that every phenomenon of nature is technologically grounded (ibid.). Finally, Wheelwright ascribes the same weight to the pilgrim image or quest motif as manifested in Yeats's own thought (ibid. 61).

Therefore, in the present study the emphasis is mostly placed upon Wheelwright's views on archetypes to provide useful ways of looking at the polarities of life/death, mortality/immortality and the silence of nature/the tumult of modern life portrayed in Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole" (October 1916). The paper attempts to reveal through the swan symbol, how the poet provokes unresolved conflicts concerning his story of unconsummated love but is still able to maintain a sense of equilibrium as a result of emotional interaction with the world of nature. This paper shows how Yeats's swan and nature iconography transcend time because they are transmuted into archetypal images that are the symbolic projections of humankind's desire to eternalize the experience of beauty.

Asserting Eternity through Archetypal Structure of Art

While being primarily a mythopoeic poet, Yeats ardently aspired to transform his intellectual and archetypal symbols into outward, visible signs and representations. Since the publication of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, first in 1917 by Cuala Press edition and the second revised one in 1919 by Macmillan edition, Yeats moved into reformulation of his poetic theory and technique. In this phase, the poet was much influenced by Jules Laforgue's and Charles Baudelaire's French Symbolist poetry and by the Austro-German expressionist, and French impressionist movement during the early part of the 20th century (Sarker 82). This volume of poetry concerns the poet's pastoral retreat to the estate of Lady Augusta Gregory, an Irish dramatist, folklorist and founder of the Abbey Theatre and Yeats's friend and patron, at Coole Park, near County Galway, in the west of Ireland. The poems in the collection portrays both the poet's healing of his Romantic crisis and a new entry into his impressive literary works. Yeats went through an emotional crisis, which severely disturbed him, when the political activist, actress his life-long love Maud Gonne and the extreme Irish nationalist Major John MacBride, got married in 1903. This was the milestone for his Romanticism (Miyake 49).

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As Yeats initiated to embrace the very cult of literary modernism in this collection of poetry, he grew increasingly concerned with what he perceived as "the calamitous nature of contemporary history and the likely destruction of culture and civilization" (Bradley 65). For Yeats, this transition from romanticism to modernism can be understood in part as resulting from his experience of Ireland's postcolonial history, the 1916 Easter Rising, the 1919-21 guerrilla war against England, and the Irish Civil War of 1922-3. The 1917 Russian Revolution and the decline of the Anglo- Irish Ascendancy were almost as the background to these events, as both hastened by the First World War. The catastrophes marked the termination of a declining aristocratic system, and especially of the large inherited properties (ibid. 65-6). Yeats as an artist, who stood at the centre of Irish culture, aspired to bring salvation and reestablish social and political order in his nation. Having witnessed and experienced the lack of economic growth, social harmony, political stability, and cultural integrity in modern culture, Yeats passionately endevoured to recreate the ancient Irish myths to bring a spirit of integration in modern civilization torn by dissonance and multiplicity.

Interestingly, Yeats's poetry collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* includes a group of poems about the value of art. Through this volume, Yeats "develops a positive attitude to time, age and death, an attitude based on the primacy of the heart and the concept of intensity in art and life" (Cowell 59). Yeats believes that "through art and literature man can make himself more than the trembling victim of incomprehensible forces such as age and death" (ibid. 61). Sifting through the theme of the whole volume, in fact, in the labyrinth of Yeats's entwined symbolism, one might sense that "the restoration of wholeness in the book is, in other words, the poet's reaffirmation of his will to art" (Miyake 49). Thus, in this phase the poet constructs his own mythology around Lady Gregory's estate as a form of asserting eternity and timelessness through art.

The poet fuses "magical symbolism with ironic realism" in the form of poetry in this collection (Daiches 1121). He finds their realizations by combining occultism, magic, mysticism, Irish mythology and folklore, use of symbols, Theosophy, Kabbalism, astrology and his early wide reading materials of Blake, Swedenborg, and Boehme (Jeffares, *A Commentary* 153). The symbolic title poem in the volume, as well as the first poem in the collection has a significance of its own and can be read as a representation of the whole volume to clarify the development of the poet's scheme. "The Wild Swans at Coole" follows the theme of longevity or immortality and the idea of spirituality against a background imbued with temporality and sensuality. Yeats, then, calls for images of eternity in this poem to restore the balance of time that is lost in the collapsing community of non-religious and even anti-religious modernism. Therefore, the poem's transitional situation is underlined and contrasted by the recurrent theme or motif of eternal art in the context of Yeats's own poetic creation.

Yeats's Spiritual Affinity with Nature

Standing upon the threshold of decline, brooding on awesome temporality yet in ardent quest for perpetuity, Yeats is still unmarried at the age of fifty-one. He resorts to nature "as composing the cool, formal—and silent—pattern of a work of art," (Posner 331) and to its healing power, in an attempt to avoid his own mortality. Because he finds that in nature the particular human concerns and anxieties are noticeably lacking from much of the human life. Being in the autumn of his life, he gives integrity as a poet to his images by showing his semblance to the nature, more intensely shown in autumn: "The trees are in their autumn beauty" (l. 1). In the first line of the opening stanza, the poet draws upon the creative cycle of evolution, the eternal chain

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of events, which is birth, life, death, and rebirth. Here the poet achieves, indeed, this impression through the image of the tree. Therefore, the archetype of the tree presents a contradictory tableau of both temporality and permanence.

The telling imagery of the poem is itself drawn from Celtic mythology and folklore, cabalistic and Eastern sources, and from the large body of related material collated by James Frazer's 12-volume treatise *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) (Allen, "Unity," 93). With its roots in the earthly world and its branches in the sky, the tree becomes a natural reflection of both the terrestrial imperfection and the super-terrestrial perfection (ibid.). While trees reflect seasonal changes of growth through the colour of leaves, the trees in "their autumn beauty" not only do picture the archetypal stages of man's life from birth, to life, and to death, but also imply the possibility of a continuation of life after death, or perhaps into a divine realm (ibid.). By virtue of the mythic symbol of the tree, the poet, then, seems to hint at the possibility that human immortality can be achieved through union of divinity and humanity. The majestic beauty of autumnal leaves which are gold may also indicate this union with divinity, as they are absorbing their color from the sun; and as they are granted with "universal generative power" (Wheelwright, *Metaphor* 139). Thus, Yeats's desire in reaching wholeness is manifested in all minute parts of the poem.

The beauty of that scenery is intensified by the lines, "Under the October twilight the water / Mirrors a still sky;" (l. 3-4). Yeats works upon the images that let time flow into eternity, intensified with the primordial image of water representing "both purity and new life," as Wheelwright puts it (*Metaphor* 125). This ideal archetypal image in Yeats's poems "symbolizes the human soul for its reflectiveness and depth. When it comes to water element, the poet's mind grows still, receptive and keen. His whole being waits for the illumination of truth to come" (Miyake 51). Perhaps more important is that Yeats presents the image of water to build upon the central symbol of the poem – the swans: "Upon the brimming water among the stones / Are nine-and-fifty swans" (l. 5-6).

Viewed from a lost play of Aeschylus, *The Daughters of Danae*, cited in Wheelwright's *Metaphor and Reality*, these symbolic implications are suggesting the primal father–mother principle of being. The sky father impregnates the earth mother in the form of life-giving rain (149). This image per se along with the image of the swans flying away in the last line of the final stanza show that Yeats's love for Maud Gonne is symbolically represented in natural scenery. As the sky stands above the female entity (i.e. earth), probably Yeats has managed to stand above the love of his ex-beloved Maud Gonne. Thus, it seems that his long obsessive wooing of Maud Gonne has lost its gloss and has been brought under control. Between 1915 and 1919, as David Young argues, Yeats is "more often present as a master of his art and life" (qtd. in Levine 411).

He grows older as his poetry grows younger (MacNeice 122) in his path to welcome the new birth, as well as change and mutability. That is why from the very beginning of this poem, beauty and permanency form an inseparable part of art, while "there is a hint of change, a creation of instantaneous nostalgia, in a beauty which is part of autumn and perceived in 'October twilight'" (Hahn 419). Also in the fifth line of the opening stanza, the idea of change and mutability shrewdly pushes itself into the realm of nature. Nature is prone to change; because of its temporal, fluctuating quality, nature cannot thoroughly reflect the boundless ethereal beauty that the poet now aspires to emulate. Thus, Yeats shows overflowing of water in "brimming" (l. 5). Later, he continues, "The woodland paths are dry" (1. 2). That is another natural clue, one of the representative symbols used by Yeats indicating transitional phases of the life cycle. The symbol can also imply the idea of unproductivity and barrenness of the poet's dreams.

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Certain biographical inferences are to be drawn from Yeats's extant works to interpret these lines. From the summer of 1916 through the summer of 1917 Yeats unsuccessfully proposed marriage to Maud Gonne whose husband, was executed by the British forces for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising and then to her daughter Iseult, Maud's second child with her French lover, the politician and journalist Lucien Millevoye. At last, after "a long barren passion for a marriage" (Jeffares, *The Poetry* 33) which was disappointing to the continuation of Yeats's lineage, in October 1917, he married Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he knew through her step-aunt Olivia Shakespear and occult circles of the Golden Dawn. His artistic creative endeavours "to formulate his astrological and occult speculations into a 'system' also date from this time, for his wife had the gift of 'automatic writing', a fact which delighted Yeats" (Cowell 53).

The poet makes the scene more visual and vivid by revealing that fifty-nine swans are floating on the lake. The significance of the image is attested to by the prominent place these magnificent birds come to occupy in ancient Irish legends. It is of special import as well, because Yeats fervently made an attempt to revive, or even to construct an original mythology for Ireland. The archetypal swans are embodied as symbols of beauty, love, fidelity and eternal life in Celtic myths and legends. Yeats's use of the archetype of the swan can be explained through his fascination with the story of two lovers Baile and Aillinn, both died upon being given deceptive reports of the other's death by Aengus, the god of love, youth, beauty, and poetry in Celtic mythology. They were then transformed into swans, well reflected in Yeats's earlier poem "Baile and Aillinn" (1903). The date of the poem's composition corresponds to the time when Maud Gonne married Major John MacBride. By taking the message of the story, perhaps Yeats wanted to show his preference for a supernatural over a natural consummation with Maud Gonne. As flying birds that evoke the idea of up, swans are also associated with "something to be reached for, a hope of attainment, hence in some sense the Good," as Wheelwright proffers (*Metaphor* 112). And the 'Good' for Yeats is unsatisfied longing for sexual consummation.

The swans can be taken as the representative of exuberance and the élan of youth as well, because "their hearts do not grow old, they find the streams companionable despite their coldness, passion and conquest attend them unsought, and their vigor is such that they climb the air instead of flying through it," as Rajan argues (108). Since it is reputedly known that, swans mate for life, fifty-nine swans imply that one has lost a mate. If one divides that nineteen into the fifty-nine – the nineteenth autumn and nine-and-fifty swans on the lake, one gets three with the number two left over. The significance of number three can be explained by the three women to whom Yeats proposed marriage, and the number two by its inherent presuppositions to convey the idea of pair and marriage.

Furthermore, the unpaired swan is destined to be Yeats's bride, Maud Gonne, as Robert W. Caswell argues (qtd. in Levine 419). However, after nineteen years, this time the poet seems unmoved by the solitary swan, signifying that he has managed to "release the nine-and-fifty swans at Coole from his private obsession, freeing them and all later swans in his poetry to become universal symbols for his readers" (ibid., 411). The halo of mystery surrounding number nine can be especially well illustrated regarding Odysseus as the poet's paradigm. Because Odysseus wandered the seas after the Trojan War for 9 years and arrived home to his island kingdom of Ithaca and his beloved wife Penelope on the tenth, Yeats is more hopeful this time that he will marry in the following year.

He tries to emerge as the very prophetic poet who can realize a complete cycle out of fifty-nine, that is to transform it into the number 60 (10 x 6). Because the number ten is associated with "completeness, finality, perfection," and number six designates "unity," it predicts the poet's

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imminent marriage (Hopper 9, 11). Moreover, it seems that Yeats has finally managed to stand in the mystic center of his art. The record of his life gives evidence that he succeeded in bringing order, peace, hope and spiritual salvation to his life despite Maud Gonne's rejection of his last proposal. Yeats's journal shows that he loved Maud Gonne for over 20 years from 1889 when he first met her.

Arguably, the figure of Maud Gonne in both the real world and the poetry of William Butler Yeats can be likened to "the Sophia-virgin," "young priestess," and "the highest feminine wisdom," as Erich Neumann, a psychologist of the Jungian school maintains (75, 295, 326). The Sophia figure, as having the status of spirit mother, is not similar to the Great Mother of the lower phase, primarily concerned with the infant, the child, and the immature man, who stick to her just in some phases (ibid. 331). The healthful life that she imparts is "a life of the spirit and of transformation, not one of earthbound materiality" (ibid.). Maud Gonne and Yeats were also linked through purely spiritual consummation and their passionate feelings for each other had never veered towards a sexual union. Although Yeats and Gonne were held to have physically consummated their love in l907, as Richard Ellmann, American literary critic and biographer of William Butler Yeats found its evidence in one of Yeats's unpublished journals (Finneran 125).

In this poem, Yeats tries to recall and compare two visits that he made to Coole Park, Lady Gregory's country estate: once in 1897 and the second one nineteen years after in 1916. Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats's friend and patron, for whom he felt indebted for paving the way to regenerate Ireland's national identity, was responsible for bringing persistent nobility to his uncertain thoughts (Cowell 26-7). Lady Augusta Gregory seems to be a projection of the 'Good' aspect of the mother archetype. She is "the protectress, the good mother, who feeds man with fruits and tubers and grains" and she is "mistress of the East Gate, the gate of birth" (Neumann 52, 170). As the result of her patronage, the influence of the Celtic Renaissance is vividly felt in Yeats's early poetry centering on Irish folklore, legends, and traditions.

One such symbol which Yeats borrowed from Irish legend was the swans, and *The Wild Swans at Coole* owes a great deal to the influence of Irish tradition. In his quest for timelessness, Yeats strives impatiently to solve the challenging riddles and pass the insurmountable obstacles; one of them is the passage of time. Being change-sick and aware of human and cosmic transience, the poet writes of his disappointment of old age, as well as the melancholy loneliness and mutability he has underwent in his own life most notably seen in line fifteen "All's changed" (lll. 15). Feeling a fearful warning of change in this phase of life, Yeats idolizes the swans although they are "empirical presences like himself," as Raymond Younis contends (25). The only difference is that "they can never be aware of weariness, of transience or of decline, which the speaker feels quite acutely at this stage of his life" (ibid.). Yeats's first task "is to cultivate a cold, austere control so that he does not succumb to the commercial spirit, to sentimentality, or to philosophies that imprison either will or intellect" (O'Brien 2). His heart is torn with anguish for his friends' death and the wound of Maud Gonne is not still healed, yet "he skillfully guides his emotion and thought into artistic molds" (ibid.). He undergoes this superhuman feat by presenting an image of the idyllic and serene country landscape in the first stanza of the poem, making out of nature a resort, where no materiality and concerns can enter the domain of human life and thus torment his mind.

While distancing himself to represent an impersonal description of natural scenery, from the second stanza to the fifth, the poet succeeds in making his voice heard. That is interpreted as Yeats's dynamic juxtaposition of his own experience of fleeting existence with the elixir of the eternal life he aspires in nature. On the one hand, the spiritual and transpersonal beauty pictured

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in the final stanza of the poem "Mysterious, beautiful" (V. 26) exhibits the poet's burning desire to pursue the ideal of permanent beauty in temporality. On the other hand, Yeats still persists on the permanence of Gonne's idealized beauty, and thus realizes "his prophecy by immortalizing in verse its continuing renewal" (Hassett 81). However, as part of the temporal life cycle, fifty-nine swans "All suddenly mount / And scatter wheeling in great broken rings / Upon their clamorous wings" (ll. 10-12) before the poet can finish his counting. Even in their very stillness and tranquility, these wild swans "harbor the instinct of flight" and "inherent in their tableau of permanence is the element of change" (Hahn 420).

The swans form a ring that in the East it is considered as a symbol of "the persistent cycle of deaths and rebirths from which release is sought" (Wheelwright, *Metaphor* 126). Perhaps this reminds Yeats that while he is doomed to change, he has a chance to get out of the continuous cycle of existence. All of these images constitute a special message wherein the poet attempts to make the vision of immortality. Here, however, Yeats breaks the overwhelming sense of immutability of nature. While the poet looks into the possibility for temporal entities to surpass transience and impending decline, he does not disregard that like all entities in the natural world, the swans enjoy spatio-temporal existence.

Influenced by "the seeming permanence of the swans and the drastic decline of his own strength" (O'Brien 2), Yeats continues: "I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, / And now my heart is sore." (lll. 13-14). Yeats is haunted by the impression of change; that's why he uses "All's changed" (lll. 15) since his first visit, when he "trod with a lighter tread" (lll. 18), not yet drown in a sea of time-bound existence. Now sore at his heart, he envies the swans that he thinks they can defy time. Unlike the poet, they are "Unwearied still, lover by lover" (lV. 19) "Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still" (lV. 23-24). Since swans are always devoted to their partner, as if attached together forever by a golden chain like Baile and Aillinn, their hearts are still young. Devoid of companionship, passion or conquest, the poet may think that these are the elements that can eternalize happiness in his heart, now old and wearied.

Hesitantly, but nevertheless willingly, the poet acknowledges his inevitable mortality in the final stanza, ". . . when I awake some day" (V. 29). The poet, thus, makes out of himself a sacrificial scapegoat so that with the alchemy of his art, here poetry, "Delight [of] men's eyes" (V. 29) rests upon his artistic creation. He must die to atone for the pall of time-bound interactions hanging over his entire earthly kingdom. His death leads to the rebirth of younger swans, younger generation, young poets, and young Irishmen. So youth and immortality are happily wedded to Irish nation, represented "as 'soft wax' which could be given shape, purpose and beauty by a literary renaissance" (Cowell 22). The poem concludes with a question to highlight the uncertainty of the future against the dominant image of eternity: "Among what rushes will they build, / By what lake's edge or pool / Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day / To find they have flown away?"(V. 27-30).

The last image of the poem leads the reader to this conclusion that the poet willingly opens a more optimistic window to the world, letting the breeze of hope caress his cheeks on an autumnal day by his art of poetry. He comes to embrace an image of permanence by the fifty-nine swan pattern: "the old swans are replaced by younger ones, ... A swan dies, but the swans live, and as the new are indistinguishable from the old, the swans become an intricate symbol of youth, forever passing yet forever renewed" (Gilbert 47). They even highlight this sense that for all living organisms except humankind, "the individual representative embodies the whole" (Glancy 254). Interestingly, this eternity is not confined to the swans since in the context of his poem, when he awakes one morning, the wild swans have flown away to thrill the eyes of other people.

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Moreover, the image of the swans gives integrity and meaning to the seemingly nonsensical "great broken rings" of change (ll. 11). While the protagonist of the poem feels the totality of loss, the swans will go on to convey their consistent idea of beauty and eternity to other eyes (Hahn 420). Seen from another angle, this image of ephemeral timelessness can represent the state of blissful immortality enjoyed by Adam and Eve before their Fall into the world of corruption and death. Aware of the passing nature of life as Yeats anticipates his death at the end of the poem, he passionately prays for the transformation of mortal life into eternal life. The poet leaves the birds for the delight of other eyes, for all the people influenced by his symbols and art

In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats articulates his thirst for eternity through timeless, archetypal images. As a result of the confrontation with nature, examining it as a source of ideas, motifs, and myths, Yeats sheds light on his interior state of self bewildered by sufferings of the past. Aware of predetermined dynamism of symbols and images, he draws them from nature, Irish folklore and mythology to illuminate his sense of the plight of the modern artist exposed to the tragedy of the collapse of modern civilization due to extreme and unexpected brutality of the First World War. Knowing of more crisis in the offing, the poet attempts to curb all the disasters, whether natural, national or global through the healing power of nature and his imaginative art. Tormented by the atrophy of old age, however, the poet aspires to defy time through his quest for passionate desires. Thus, he makes no demur to tap into the heavenly perfection of nature as his ideal self to embody a fuller picture of reality comprehended by his entire new earthly and spiritual being. Surviving from an emotional crisis, this time he tries his best to absorb the élan of the world of symbolism in order to grasp the powers of eternity. Through his portrayal of the swans, Yeats artistically attempts to draw his mind away from the contemplations and consideration of the inevitable changes brought about by the aging process and thus keeps the changes both emotionally and physically at arm's length.

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