

A CONVERGENCE OF YEATS AND NOH DRAMA: *AT THE HAWKS WELL AND YORO*

Gary B. White

Abstract

In 1916, W.B. Yeats wrote, *At the Hawk's Well*, his first play in six years. He was able to do this after being exposed to the Noh theater through his friend Ezra Pound. Richard Taylor stated that the source for this play came from one of the Noh plays Yeats would have had access to, *Yoro*. In fact, the source for *At the Hawk's Well* had been found much earlier in Morris's medieval dramas, *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. It was not necessary for Yeats to have borrowed from the Noh, nor do we have proof that he actually read the play in question.

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Introduction

In 1916, Yeats wrote *At the Hawk's Well* after being exposed to Noh theater through Ezra Pound's work on Earnest Fenellosa's translations of some fifty Noh dramas that had been given to him, along with other literary materials, by Fenellosa's wife. This was his first play in six years. Something in Noh drama attracted him immensely, and using these dramatic techniques and ideas as described by Fenellosa, Yeats's dramatic fires were again stoked, and he went to work on writing a series of four mask plays of which this one was the first.

What was Yeats looking for in his dramatic developments, and why was his introduction to Noh such a boost in making the creative juices flow once again? What in the theory of Noh attracted him so much? Was it the technical and aesthetic aspects, or did it go farther and provide him with ideas for plots as was suggested by Richard Taylor in his, "Assimilation and Accomplishment: No Drama and an Unpublished Source for *At the Hawk's Well*?"

From an early age, Yeats was intrigued with the possibility of finding a common

thread that ran through all the various religions and philosophies in the world. He first studied Medieval philosophy, then moved on to Eastern tracts, and also probed into Greek philosophy which he felt was half Western and half Asian. He was searching for symbols which were common and traditional to all the various tracts. He referred to them as traditional symbols which could be defined as being the archetype from which others were created and passed on through the race or culture. He was seeking knowledge of ancestral man, whose existence was centered around recognition and understanding of these universal symbols in the landscape around him. This symbolism would be felt, "not only to the dark portion of one's mind, but to the mind of the race." (Wilson, 31)

Yeats was convinced modern man had become numb to his primordial self, being desensitized by technology. Man had become an emotional animal, not a thinking one. This thought was an important distinction for him. He felt there were two kinds of symbolism,

One could follow Shakespeare's general method, and use a merely personal imagery, or one could use a traditional symbolism, accepted with full understanding of its traditional significance, as Dante and the mythological poets had tried consistently to do. Yeats calls these methods the "emotional" and the "intellectual," respectively: the intellectual, he thought, was always to be preferred, because it would bring men into contact with Anima Mundi, and so with something probably quite ineffable.

(Wilson, 30)

Therefore, Yeats was seeking a style of presentation that would enhance his lyricism, and allow him to insert his symbolism as an integral element of the drama, rather than just hanging around the outer edges or only hinted at.

If he was to accomplish this task, he needed to employ actors as types rather than as individuals. He needed a dynamic, compact atmosphere that would intensify and create an immediate impact of his statement or theme. He had already begun experimenting with a spare stage, putting masks on his actors, and employing a chorus. However, for whatever reason, he was unable to exactly create the kind of theater he was seeking. His plays up to that point only began to approach his ideal, and they were still burdened with too much baggage from modern drama.

He felt Eastern mythologies and philosophies still retained much of their ancestral symbolism, so he was constantly probing and digesting them in an attempt to understand

what these symbols might be and how he could present them on a stage and retain their traditional powers. He was more attuned to the East than most Westerners and well-equipped to intuitively grasp its aesthetics, and it was in this frame of mind that he was introduced to Noh through his good friend, Ezra Pound.

Noh

Noh drama evolved from earlier forms of dance, poetry, and festivals that had been influenced by China from around the seventh century in Japan. As time passed, these forms were adapted and transformed into uniquely Japanese styles. Noh as we know it today was developed in the 14th Century by Kanami and his son, Zeami, in the court of the Shogun, Yoshimitsu, in Kyoto.

Before this transpired, the precursors of Noh were performed by actors who were considered to be second class citizens and were forced to live in isolated villages and forbidden to have contact with the surrounding populace unless granted permission by the authorities. Naturally, such a state of affairs would be intolerable to these performers, and it was their goal to raise the standard of acceptance and be sponsored, patronized, and respected by the ruling classes. So, from an early time, performers in all forms of dance and acting set themselves the task of attaining recognition by the nobility.

This was finally accomplished in Noh by Kanami in the mid-14th Century. He was a brilliant actor and playwright, and his son, Zeami, went on to surpass him in brilliance, and he firmly established Noh as a form of drama worthy of notice by the upper classes.

Then in the 17th Century, during the Tokugawa Shogunate, the samurai class usurped the Noh as its own, and the common people were forbidden to see a performance. It is from this period that one can say that Noh was the drama of the nobility.

Noh is not exactly similar to theater as it is known in the West. There is no conflict. Western drama can be defined as a descriptive representation of a chain of events between two people in conflict. The action resulting from this conflict is the main theme of a drama. This does not exist in Noh. Therefore, in Western terminology, the word drama as applied to Noh may be a misnomer. Fenellosa (69) describes it thus,

The beauty and power of Noh lie in the concentration. All the elements - costume, motion, verse, and music - unite to produce a single clarified impression. Each drama embodies some primary human relation or emotion; and the poetic sweetness or poignancy of this are carried to its highest degree

by carefully excluding all such obtrusive elements as a mimetic realism or vulgar sensation might demand. The emotion is always fixed upon idea, not upon personality. The solo parts express great types of human character, derived from Japanese history.

Another way to express Noh is to say the sum of its parts is greater than only one part, the elements of drama, music, and dance. Noh is cohesive and concentrated.

These three elements are meshed together to create a unified whole that seeks to raise the consciousness of the audience to a higher plane, to have something akin to “an out of body experience” that allows them to enter into the realm of the play and become intimately involved. This is the main goal of Noh - to create such a powerful, intense, focused energy that the spectators are transformed to that spiritual level and can become one with the action as it unfolds, and not just sit passively on the outside. True involvement in Noh requires active participation of actor and spectator at this consciousness level. The dialog and chorus are performed in a sing-song cadence. Music is used to create an image and build suspense. Dancing (acting) is minimalized to the point where the slightest movement speaks volumes in presentation of image and action. It is possible to say that image is Noh. It can be described as total theater with its fusion of music, dancing and action.

Within the plays, allusions are often made to great moments in history, famous persons, or to ancient Chinese poems which were used to stir the imagination of the educated upper classes. In the 14th Century, the elite were required to study Chinese literature. Pivot words are often employed. They trigger two or more images at the same time in the dialog. All of these techniques have a bearing on the resolution of the drama which is almost always psychological in nature, and all Noh plays end in redemption or salvation.

Masks are used not to hide the expression of emotion, but as Komparu (224) says, It is not that facial expressions are completely abandoned in Noh, but that the true intent lies in the sophisticated technique of creating an unlimited number of expressions in the mind of the viewer by denying raw expressions with the use of the mask.

Noh masks, especially, go far beyond the limits of makeup and are thought of as having some spiritual, mystical significance. In this they approach the real meaning of “mask” (which derives from the medieval Latin word for

spectre): identifying the performer with the spirit of the character assumed.

Noh can be divided into three sections, or “Jo, Ha, and Kyu.” They can be translated as introduction, breaking out (development), and climax. In most introductions, a secondary character (Waki), usually a traveling or mountain priest, is on a journey and has just come to a place that is legendary. Taylor (141) describes the closing of the introduction,

The travel- song which ends the introductory section normally describes the journey he is undertaking and introduces much seasonal imagery with its heavy burden of emotional overtones in Japanese culture.

The breaking out (development) section sees the entrance of the lead actor (Shite) who describes a place or state of being, according to the theme of the play. Taylor (141) describes the closing of this section,

..... opens with a maxim or principle of religious doctrine relevant to the central experience, and in discoursing on its application to the present circumstances the protagonist dances out the intensity of the emotion or experience which has been recreated in imagination.

Taylor (141, 142) succinctly describes the final section as,

The climax of the play opens with a temporizing reintroduction by the deuteragonist, a waiting song for the appearance of the transformed protagonist which leads directly to a narration accompanying the climactic dance of the main character, who now relives the emotion or experience in his own person. A choral finale concludes the performance.

This description of Noh illustrates an important fact of the drama, i.e., “[it] is an event to be experienced directly and personally.” (Komparu, xxi) It is an art of image, requiring active participation and intimate involvement of the spectator through attainment of a higher plane where all of the human senses can be utilized to move in the same rhythm as the action unfolding on the stage.

Yeats and Noh

It may have been true that the early Western aficionados of Noh were unable to see a play firsthand, but for Yeats and Pound, at least, the power, vividness, and universal appeal of the Noh theater was certainly evident in Fenellosa's writing. Not only was he in love with his subject, but he was also extremely knowledgeable about Chinese and Japanese art and literature. His descriptions and elucidations on Noh, particularly for

Yeats, struck a sympathetic chord.

This passion and erudition Fenellosa used in describing Noh clearly enunciated the etherealness, austerity, and state of sublime transcendence that accompanies a Noh performance, and it was just the kind of surreal atmosphere he was seeking in his own drama. He (151) relates,

I hope to have attained the distance from life which can make credible strange events, elaborate words.

Using Noh techniques, Yeats felt self-confident in being able to create a form of drama that would allow him to cast his portrayal of traditional symbolism in a central role.

Regarding the elements he would incorporate into his own drama can best be illustrated in his own words,

There will be no scenery, for three musicians, whose seeming sun-burned faces will I hope suggest that they have wandered from village to village in some country of our dreams, can describe place and weather, and at moments action, and accompany it all by drum and gong or flute and dulcimer.

(151)

..... the music, the beauty of form and voice all come to climax in pantomimic dance.

(151)

As he describes, he has fused the three main elements of action, music, and dance into a single vehicle to impart his symbolist themes. He assimilates the use of a sparse or bare stage in much greater depth than he had ever attempted. He uses masks as a way of universalizing his characters and in creating a state of being rather than focusing on individual characteristics. However, it appears he does not utilize his masks in exactly the same way as found in Noh, but rather, he adapts them to his own unique use. Finally, he employs a chorus in similar manner as Noh; even including the final choral refrain after the climax has occurred, possibly to create a lasting impression and infuse his audience with some weighty symbol or explanation that will linger in the mind long after.

In his search for the perfect dramatic vehicle to portray his vision of what drama should be, Yeats hoped to create an atmosphere within the action that would push the spectator into a state of transcendence or "stillness" (Wilson, 37) as he described it. Certainly, he was impressed by the rigorous concentration and elevation to a higher plane as required of the spectator in Noh. Attainment of this sublime state would open

his audience's primordial feelings, allowing them to intuitively grasp the symbolism embedded in the drama.

Yeats liked the fact that Noh was theater only for the upper classes. Audiences were knowledgeable, educated, and eager to enter into total involvement of the drama. By staging his plays before a small, select, erudite audience in a small, intimate barebones space, he hoped to be able to tap into their ancestral consciousness.

He was also impressed by the love of place and history the Japanese expressed in Noh, stating,

These Japanese poets too feel for tomb and wood the emotion, the sense of awe that our Gaelic speaking country people will sometimes show when you speak to them of Castle Hackett or some Holy Well; and that is why perhaps it pleases them to begin so many plays by a Traveller asking his way with many questions, a convention agreeable to me;

(159)

Symbols are manifest in our immediate physical surroundings such as the flowing of a river, a special stone in a special place, the sea, birds, sites of famous legends, and so on. Yeats was concerned about whether the Irish people were losing their "Irishness."

Yeats made no direct reference to the structure of his play along the prescribed Noh convention of introduction, breaking out (development), and climax (Jo, Ha, Kyu), but he must have been familiar with it and may have applied it to his own drama. Fenellosa was certain to have known about it, because he studied Noh theater with Umewaka Minoru who almost single-handedly revived Noh after it had almost been lost in the Japanese head-long rush to adopt things Western during the Meiji Era. One cannot study the art of Noh without understanding the importance of Jo, Ha, Kyu, and how it relates to the structure of Noh.

Finally, Taylor, has this to say about how Noh influenced Yeats's dance plays,

1. That Noh is concerned with an intense emotion fixed upon idea and not personality; a service of life, not the analysis of a set problem.
2. That unity of image through repetition and variation brings focus and intensification to the emotion expressed.
3. That Noh is a complete art in which poetry is assisted by music, dance, and mime in expressing intense emotion.

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At the Hawk's Well and Yoro

Richard Taylor's article attempts to persuade the reader that Yeats used the plot of the Noh play *Yoro* as a direct source for the plot of *At the Hawk's Well*. While he does an admirable job of describing the Noh influences on Yeats, I am not persuaded that Yeats adapted the plot of the Noh play to his own. By claiming Yeats's play is simply an inversion of the Noh one, Taylor does a disservice to Yeats's dramatic genius by implying he would need to seek dramatic plots from other genres. Clearly, Yeats's problem was one of presentation and not plotting.

Yeats had long had an idea for creating a series of plays based on the life of Cuchulain, and when he spoke of this new play, he alluded to having had a thematic structure already in mind when he stated,

I shall hope to write another of the same sort and so complete a dramatic celebration of the life of Cuchulain planned long ago.

(151)

The well in Yeats's play is not an inversion of the eternal spring in *Yoro*. The idea for the well came from Morris's medieval romances, *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Yeats's principal literary influences were Shelley, Blake, Pater, perhaps Balzac, and Morris. (Bloom, 294) When Morris died in 1896, Yeats wrote a memorial review of *The Well at the World's End* and acknowledged his influence on his work. This influence surely would not have diminished over the intervening years to be revived by the spring of youth in *Yoro*.

Yoro is classified as a God-Noh play which is intended to celebrate the divinity of the Emperor with the nature gods. It is meant to be spiritually uplifting and praise the successful reign of the Emperor. Taylor (151) argues his case for inversion saying,

Yeats's vision of the human condition is much bleaker. Instead of a celebration of order in the universe and harmony between supernatural and temporal powers, *At the Hawk's Well* projects an image of man's fall from the state of undivided being through conflict between the heroic aspirations of the individual and the threatened unity of godhead. The myth is inverted; the trees are stripped, the Well is dry and guarded against trespass.

However, Bloom (296) comments,

The Guardian performs the role she has in Morris, and yet for Cuchulain she

is only a prelude. Morris describes how she liveth yet, and is become the servant of the Well to entangle the seekers of her love and keep them from drinking thereof; because there was no man that beheld her but anon he was the thrall of her love, and might not pluck his heart away from her to do any of the deeds whereby men thrive and win the praise of the people.

Here, we have proof of Yeats's inspiration in Morris's drama. Both the atmosphere of austerity surrounding the Well and the Guardian's role were clearly in Yeats's thoughts by 1896. What he did was to make the landscape even bleaker and intensify the symbolic nature of the play. The possession of the Guardian is illustrated by the shape of a hawk, another strong symbol representing death or supernatural powers. In this respect, Yeats's symbolism dovetails with Noh, but I think the invention is pure Yeats. He had no reason to seek plots in the translations of the Noh plays by Earnest Fenellosa.

We must also remember there were more than fifty translated plays in Fenellosa's papers, and there would have been no reason for Yeats to peruse all of them. If he had read *Yoro* and was so affected by the plot, why don't we have any direct references about the play and its impact in his writings? He made several references to *Nishikigi* which appeared to have affected him strongly, so why nothing about *Yoro* ?

I agree with Taylor's (153) assessment that,

At the Hawk's Well is a very accomplished piece of assimilation

But I do not agree that Yeats borrowed the plot from *Yoro* . *At the Hawk's Well* is an effective presentation of Yeats's vision of what drama should be, and with the incorporation of various Noh techniques and elements, he was able to create a form of drama uniquely his own, allowing him to represent and present his symbolist view of the world.

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