

Spiritual Symbolism in W. B. Yeats's 'The Phases of the Moon'

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Abstract

William Butler Yeats (1865 - 1939) was both a cosmopolitan and an Irish poet. He absorbed most of the known cultures and religions of the world into his poetry because these constitute the basis of his imagery and symbolism. He was particularly interested in having the mystical appeal of these religions broaden his poetic and philosophic prospects. His interest in symbolism led him to create his own special system to interpret human personality and the movement of history via symbols. His poem, "The Phases of the Moon" reveals the basic elements of this system.

This paper focuses on Yeats's symbolism in this poem and how these symbols contribute to the entire Yeatsian philosophy regarding spirituality, mystical wisdom, perfection, and beauty. It discusses his classification of personality based on the phases of the moon, the effect of astrology, and the rendition of the major character in the poem, Michael Robartes. The discussion consults Yeats's book, *A Vision*, to explain the ambiguities in this poem and provide a broader background for the poem.

The Moon, Sun and Stars Cult and Its Mythology

The natural phenomena such as rain, fire, rise and sunset of the sun, moon shining-- all these are natural phenomena that were worshiped by the ancients who considered them gods such as the moon-god, sun-god, rain-god, thunder-god, etc.. They have tried to interpret ambiguities in their lives according to the movement and behaviour of the elements and natural forces. They resorted to supernatural forces when they failed to find the answer in the natural forces and thus created their myths and religions.

The Sun cult was dominant from the dawn of humanity and it developed into a kind of religion especially in the ancient Egypt and Inca civilisations¹. The Moon cult was subordinate or complementary to the Sun cult and sometimes promoted to be equal or even higher than it was, especially in the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia. The Babylonians developed an astral religion in which they worshipped the Sun, Moon and five planets².

Their cult related to the phases of the moon in their epic, *Atrahasis*³. In this epic, the sacred days of the lunar month for the Babylonians were the first, seventh, and fifteenth⁴. The first and fifteenth phases are also relatively distinguishable in Yeats's 'The Phases of the Moon' as they are considered not human and thus somehow related to the supernatural world. In the Cabbalistic Tree of Life, 'Yesod' Sephirah, the foundation of this tree, resembles the Moon and is like the Moon in reflecting both the inner and the outer worlds⁵. Some of Yeats's poems, such as 'The Two Trees', adopt the Cabbalistic tree as a symbol or a structure of the poem. In Druidism, the Moon constitutes an essential part of their magical rituals along with the oak tree⁶. Stone was added as a third element in this faith as represented by Stonehenge.

W.B. Yeats's Symbolism

In the dedication of his book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, to Yeats, Arthur Symons asked the poet whether he was a representative of the Symbolist movement in the UK. Symons confirmed this response by referring to the 'transcendental' art and

‘mysticism’ which are ‘essential in the doctrine of Symbolism’⁷. Yeats’s work demonstrates that his symbolism is profoundly related to these two terms. Symons describes the French Symbolist Movement as an attempt to ‘spiritualise literature’ and rebel against the more common views of ‘exteriority’, ‘rhetoric’, and a ‘materialistic tradition’⁸.

Yeats did not adhere to any particular culture or religion. He went wherever he could find a possible potential route to universal truth. He remained largely in agreement with Blake’s maxim that ‘all religions are one’⁹. In his book, *A Vision*, Yeats promoted a highly complicated system of symbolism. His poem ‘The Phases of the Moon’ communicates the core meaning of that book.

Symbolism in ‘The Phases of the Moon’

The essence of Yeats’s book, *A Vision*, is found in this poem. The poem is not merely a story; it formulates the structure and deep meaning that formed Yeats’s philosophy and his personal system regarding the circular movement of history. The importance of this poem also emerges in its links to the other poems of Yeats that relate to the Moon and his major fictional character, Michael Robartes.

The poem is structured as a dialogue between Robartes and the other imaginary character, Owen Aherne. Through this dialogue with a reference to the poet in the poem, who is actually Yeats himself, Yeats reveals his thoughts directly or symbolically. These two characters are seen as visiting a poet who is seeking mystical wisdom in his lonely tower by reading a book or a manuscript:

The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
And now he seeks in book or manuscript
What he shall never find.

VP, ll, 17-20

As it is mentioned in *A Vision*, The poet has received the mystical book from Robartes,¹⁰ who admits that the poet will not find what he is looking for, simply, because ‘mysterious wisdom [is] won by toil’. Unlike Robartes, who experienced practical wisdom from too much travelling, especially to the East, the poet has confined himself in a tower with his books to read. Robartes asserts the significance of the reaction between theory and practice to discover a full vision of life and the afterlife. Aherne also knows this truth as is clear in his suggestion to Robartes:

Why should not you
Who know it all ring at his door, and speak
Just truth enough to show that his whole life
Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
Of all those truths that are your daily bread;
And when you have spoken take the roads again?

VP, ll, 21-25

The comparison between the poet and Robartes reveals that the poet, by his isolation, cannot reach the truth, whereas Robartes, by taking 'the roads again' can easily find it. Robartes, as Yeats states, "has but lately returned from Mesopotamia, where he has partly found and partly thought out much philosophy"¹¹. Mesopotamia is not only known for its study of philosophy, but also for astrology, another area that Yeats is highly interested in using to build his system that depends on the related movements of the Moon and the Sun. The twenty-eight phases of the moon, which Yeats borrowed from the Arabs¹², were reshaped into the twelve gyres of his own system. He then turned them into ten divisions representing the ten Sephiroth of the Cabbalistic Tree of Life.

Yeats's philosophy is based on the unity of the opposites as a reflection of the Unity of Being. The opposite movement of the Sun and the Moon is identified on his wheel and depicts his primary idea regarding the behaviour of man who 'seeks his opposite or the opposite of his condition'¹³. Yeats's concept of perfection is exemplified by regarding man as a microcosm and the precise movement and arrangement of the universe as a macrocosm. Unlike the traditional wheel of the Zodiac, which contains the twelve signs of the stars, Yeats's wheel encloses both the lunar and solar signs as the Arabic Zodiac does. He also refers to the Arabic influence on designing his wheel as a kind of magic as follows:

Even when I wrote the first edition of this book I thought the geometrical symbolism so difficult, I understood it so little, that I put it off to a later section; and as I had at that time, for a reason I have explained, to use a romantic setting, I described the Great Wheel as danced on the desert sands by mysterious dancers who left the traces of their feet to puzzle the Caliph of Baghdad and his learned men.¹⁴

Yeats's imaginary character, Michael Robartes, lives with the Arabs for some years and learns their philosophy, magic and astrology:

Sing me the changes of the moon once more;
True song, though speech: 'mine author sung it me.'
VP., ll, 29-30

In his, *Autobiographies*, Yeats points out the difference between the song and the speech: 'I shall, however, remember all my life that evening when Lionel Johnson read or spoke aloud...They were not speech but perfect song...'¹⁵ The song relates to poetry and the speech to prose, but here the song also embodies the spiritual truth, while the speech explores the Other. Through the voice of Robartes, Yeats explains his philosophy on the movement of life and death, movement of history and civilisations, and the identification of personalities according to the phases of the moon:

Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.
VP, ll, 31-35

The first phase, which is *primary* or objective, is not human as the fifteenth phase, which is antithetical or subjective, because of absoluteness; absolute objectivity and subjectivity respectively. These two phases are interchangeable as Yeats clarifies that 'the old

antithetical becomes the new *primary*' and the reverse is true due to the cyclical motion of the Great Wheel.¹⁶ Through these two phases, the poet links the mortal with the immortal, the physical with the spiritual. The first phase points out the beginning of life and the shaping of the human by the hands of Nature or the supreme Divine power. The dough, which 'cook Nature' deals with, is the body in its formation or the soul in its unity with the body.¹⁷ So, the realistic beginning of life starts at the second phase:

From the first crescent to the half, the dream
But summons to adventure and the man
Is always happy like a bird or a beast;
But while the moon is rounding towards the full
He follows whatever whim's most difficult
Among whims not impossible, and though scarred.
VP, ll, 36-41

Happiness in this stage 'from the first crescent to the half' is ascribed to the enjoyment found in discovering the world; however, the poet does refer to the sensuous life of a bird or a beast to designate the major characteristic of this stage. The beauty of the body does prevail:

As with the cat-o'-nine-tails of the mind,
His body moulded from within his body
Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then
Athene takes Achilles by the hair,
VP, ll, 42-45

Juno, the Greek Moon-Goddess, sent Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, to calm Achilles's anger¹⁸. The cycle of history in this poem begins with Trojan War and the beauty of Helen of Troy, which was the cause of that war. The Twelfth phase is characterized by heroism, as it relates to its symbols-- Hector from ancient history and Nietzsche's modern theory of the superman:

Hector is in the dust, Nietzsche is born,
Because the hero's crescent is the twelfth.
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.
VP, ll, 46-49

The consecutive birth and death or rebirth recalls the idea of reincarnation as Yeats calls out that concept in each phase. The image of 'helpless as a worm' might refer to either the baby or the very old man. However, the progressive soul in these phases also suffers a war with the body:

The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
In its own being, and when that war's begun
There is no muscle in the arm; and after,
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,
To die into the labyrinth of itself!
VP, ll, 50-55

The poet may here be referring to the effect of the fourteenth phase of the Moon on the psychology of the animate beings, but the same is also true for the fifteenth, or rather this same phenomenon is ascribed to the full Moon. The human physical power is at its climax, so sexual love is significant in this period, as it may cause the death of the soul. The poet describes the struggle that occurs in the phases that lie between the twelfth and eighteenth as a search for unity or the Unity of Being¹⁹. There is a search for balance between the antithetical and primary elements of life, except during the fifteenth phase, which is absolutely antithetical²⁰. This phase is defined as 'complete beauty,'²¹ where the soul and the body are united or they dissolve into each other to be invisible and out of our world:

All thought becomes an image and the soul
 Becomes a body: that body and that soul
 Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,
 Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
 Body and soul cast out and cast away
 Beyond the visible world.

VP, ll, 58-63

The beauty in phase fifteen is divine; however, as the poet explains in *A Vision*, the greatest human beauty is attained in phases fourteen and sixteen²². The antinomy of beauty versus ugliness or deformity moves on through the second half of the wheel, and the poet gives to the 'cook Nature' the tasks of kneading and producing a new generation in the first phase of the Moon when the cycle starts once again. However, when 'cook Nature' divides the dough and allocates it to every individual's fortune of physical beauty, 'cook Nature' doesn't forget that his task can be balanced by the beauty of the mind. The poet explains this equation in prose to those who are fated to be deformed: 'here also are several very ugly persons, their bodies torn and twisted by the violence of the new *primary*, but where the body has this ugliness great beauty of mind is possible'²³. According to Yeats's philosophy, which can be perceived from reading his poetry in general, the beauty of mind is mostly a spiritual quality.

To conclude, Yeats's 'The Phases of the Moon' is a highly symbolic poem, which introduces this poet's thoughts and philosophy on life, history, and personality. Influenced by the French symbolists, Yeats formulated his ideas in prose to initiate his own type of symbolism. His mystical experience and his interest in many religions provided him with rich symbols and deeper concepts that then affected his thoughtful and poetic discourse as a writer. The importance of this poem is that it is considered a key to understanding most of his other prose and poetic writings. In this poem, Yeats applies the Arabic mansions of the Moon to build his theory on the cycle of life, history, civilisation, and human character. He uses these symbols in a way that is different from their concrete realities. Yeats's concern is with poetry and absolute thought, not solid facts. This poem can be easily considered as the culmination of his poetic career and also the answer to his long philosophic inquiry.

Notes

1. Alison Jones, *Larousse Dictionary of World Folklore* (New York: Larousse PLC, 1995), p. 406.
2. Ibid., pp. 12-13.

3. Alasdair Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p.39.
4. Stephanie Daley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 15.
5. Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, *The Kabbalistic Tree of Life* (London: Tree of Life Publishing, 2009), pp.47-48.
6. Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain* (Great Britain: TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall, 2009), p.14.
7. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Constable & Company, LTD, 1911), pp. v-vii.
8. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
9. F.A. C. Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 16.
10. George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood (eds.), *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1978), p. xix.
11. A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (California: Stanford University Press, 1984), p. 173.
12. Harper and Hood (eds.), *A Critical Edition of Yeats's 'A Vision' (1925)*, p. 12.
13. W.B. Yeats, *A Vision (1925)* (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1974), p. 12.
14. Ibid., pp. 80-81.
15. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* ((London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1973), p. 301.
16. Harper & Hood, *A Critical Edition*, p. 88.
17. Yeats, *A Vision (1925)*, p. 183.
18. Harper & Hood, *A Critical Edition*, p. 60.
19. Ibid., p. 60.
20. Ibid., p. 69.
21. W.B. Yeats, *A Vision (1925)*, p. 131.
22. Ibid., p. 140.
23. Sarah E. Simons (ed.), *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. William Cullen Bryant (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), p. 10.

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- Anon., 'The Tinctures', at <http://www.yeatsvision.com/Tinctures.html> [accessed 5 May 2011].
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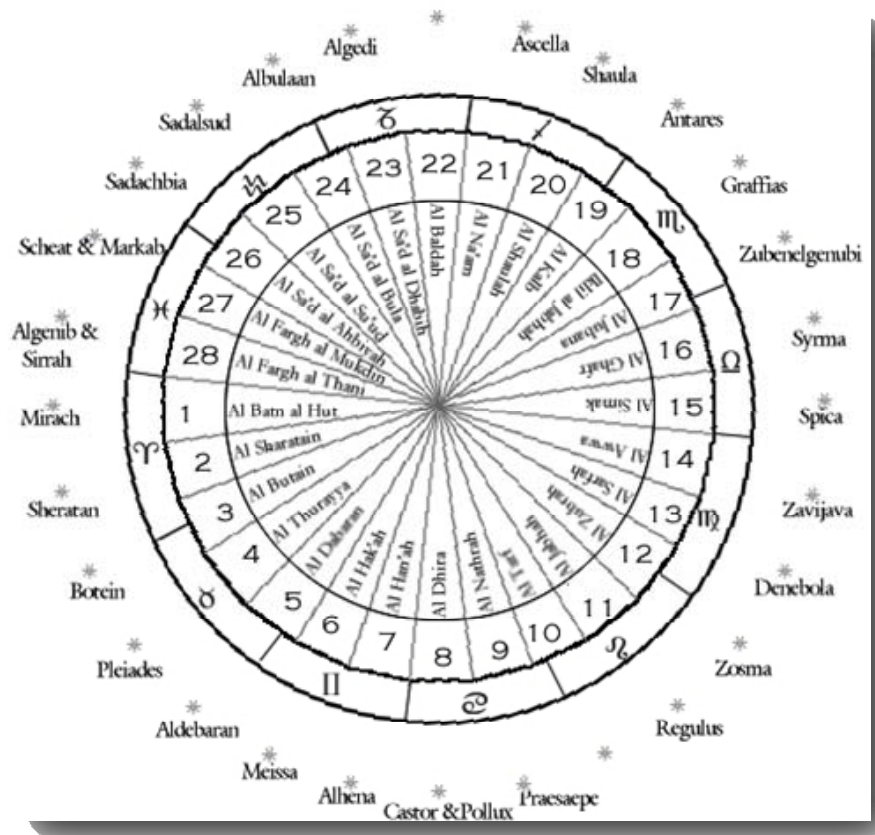
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FIGURES

Fig 1. Arabic Zodiac diagram: p.4 - below this sentence: 'of their feet to puzzle the Caliph of Bagdad and his learned men.¹⁴'



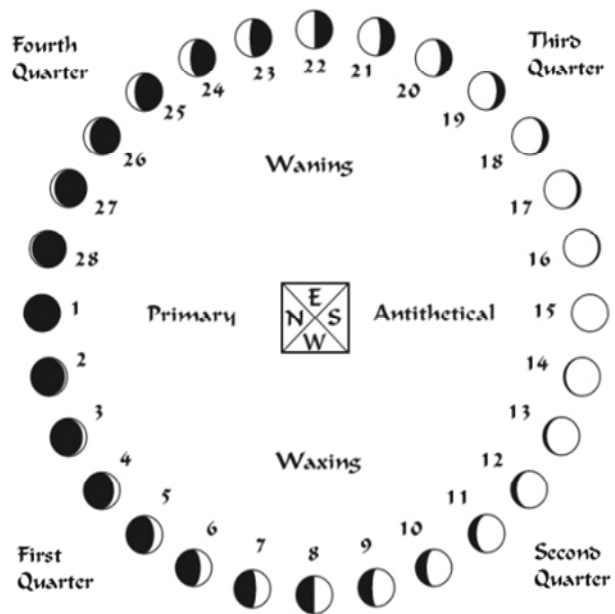
Arabic Zodiac

<http://www.yeatsvision.com/Mansions.html>

Fig 2

And above this: 'Yeats's imaginary character, Michael Robartes, lives with the Arabs...'

- The Great Wheel of the phases of the moon diagram: p.3-



The Great Wheel of the Phases of the Moon

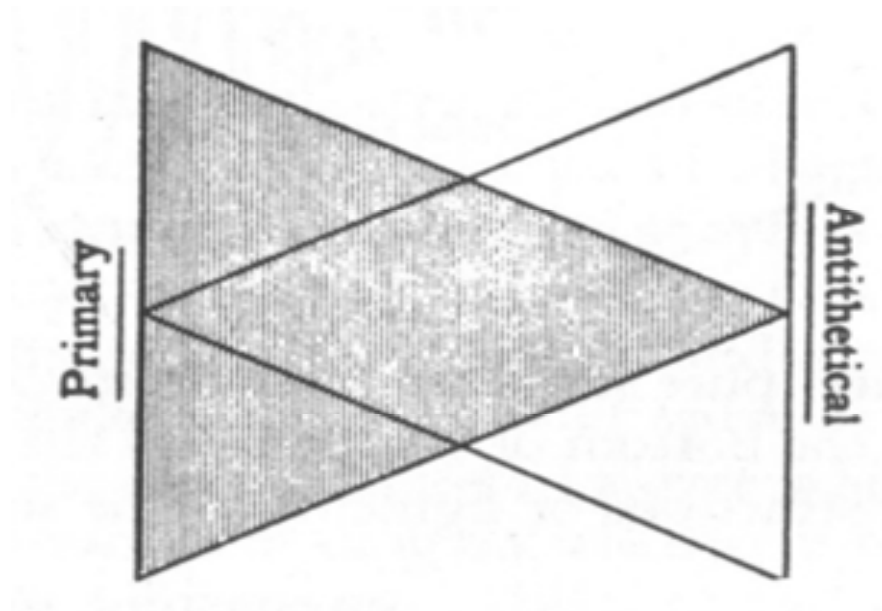
<http://www.yeatsvision.com/Phases.html>

Fig 3

after this

sentence: 'He then turned them into ten divisions representing the ten Sephiroth of the Cabbalistic Tree of Life.

- The antithetical and primary gyres diagram: p.5 – above this sentence:



The Antithetical and Primary Gyres

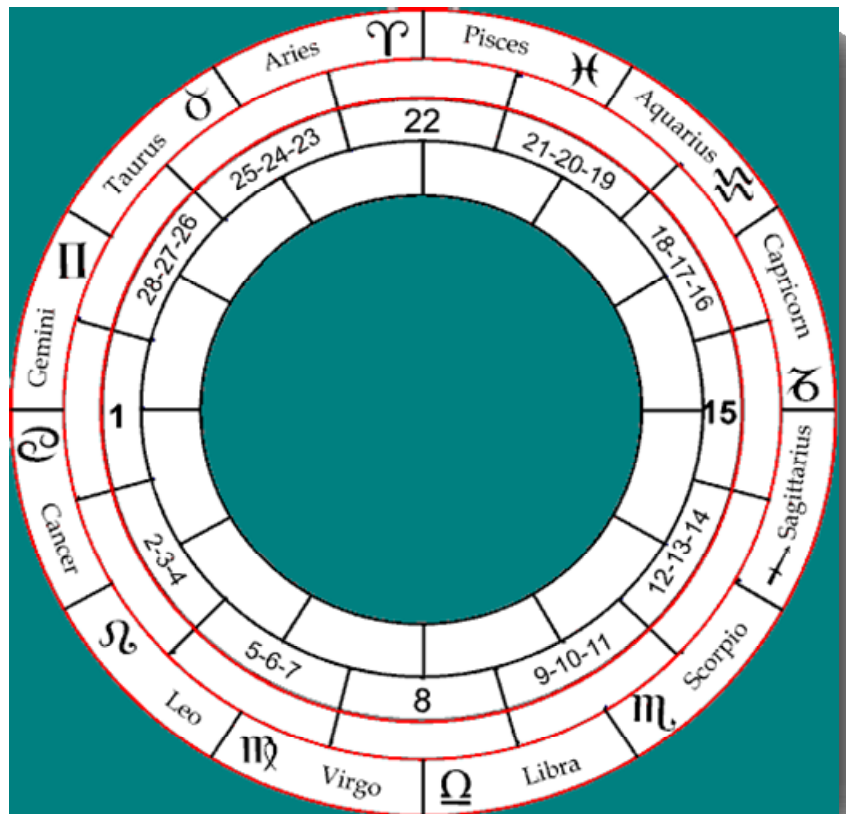
<http://www.yeatvision.com/Tinctures.html>

Fig 4

'The first phase, which is primary or objective,'

- Solar and lunar signs of the zodiac diagram: p.6 – above this sentence:

'The poet may here be referring to the effect of the fourteenth phase of the Moon...'



Solar and Lunar signs of the Zodiac

<http://www.yeatsvision.com/Principles.html>