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The Inveiglement of "The Stolen Child"

by

Bertram Barnes

An Explication Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Carl Goodson Honors Program.

Approved by

Dr. S. Wink Dr. J. Wink Dr. H. Sanford

May 1985

William Bulter Yeats was born June 16, 1865, in a house called "Georgeville," in Sandymount, Dublin, Ireland. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a first rate Anglo-Irish painter, philosopher, critic and scholar. His mother, however, was introspective and preferred the quiet life of rural Ireland to the intellectual exchange that captivated her husband. In the poetry of W. B. Yeats, there are manifestations of both his mother's and his father's influence. The Yeats family shuffled back and forth between Dublin, London, and Sligo, always short of money but rich in culture, learning and verve.

John B. Yeats, pouring his spiritual energies into conversation and art, was totally unconcerned with religion. As many during his generation, he found his baptism in fresh paint and his salvation at the easel. W. B. Yeats, boiling with religious fervor, indulged in spiritualism, folklore, Theosophism, Astrologism, Buddhism, Neo-Platonism, Esotericism, Hinduism, and other forms of worship at various level and was able to combine his artistic interests with his religious interests, producing a poetry almost unique to himself.

As stated above, Yeats divided his time as a young man between the cities of Dublin, London, and Sligo; at Sligo, he was exposed to the lifestyle and folklore of rustic Ireland, as well as with Irish myth. At London, he began to revolve in poetic circles and rub elbows

with Irish artists of all kinds, which contributed mightily to his poetic cultivation; and at Dublin he conceived the notion of making a literary contribution to the Irish Cultural movement, which was all aflame there in the nineties. These threads visible in his youth appear and reappear in the fabric of his work with considerable complexity, although most scholars agree that there are main periods into which his canon may be divided.

Datelines for Yeats' first phase, or romantic period, are generally given as 1889 to 1904: in 1889 he published his premiere volume which was entitled Crossways; in 1893 he published The Rose; and in 1899 he published the last of his romantic works, The Wind Among the Reeds. Perhaps the most common characteristic of his first publications is a dreamlike atmosphere which was part of the romantic tradition he inherited from Keats and Shelly. Also typical of his romantic phase are what Yeats called the "antinomies" or tensions, that is, human activities in contrast with natural activities, producing the sensation of a supernatural presence (the use of antinomies is a common feature of William Blake, another romantic poet). It is during the nineties that Yeats is introduced to the work of Standish O'Grady and his concerns with the rejuvenation of Irish culture.

Yeats became increasingly concerned with Irish cultural advancements and therefore sought a simpler and more popular style. This he felt was more fit for the telling of the Irish facts of Life. He also sought to express himself in more concrete images, avoiding the jaded and worn out imagery of the abstract. In this second period

we become aware of a more personal beauty, conversational tones, a matured passion and logical argument. Publications in the second period were In the Seven Woods (1903), and The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910).

During these years, two women became very much a part of Yeats' literary and personal life. A radical Irish nationalist, Maude Gonne, became his symbol for feminine beauty and destruction, while Lady Gregory became an intimate companion and aristocratic model. Gregory's home was always open to Yeats; and Gonne's[†] heart was always closed, as is dramatized in his poetry. Together, Yeats and Gregory founded the Irish National Theatre in 1899, which is the national theatre of Ireland and still in operation today.

The management of the theatre, and the fact that he was elected to the Irish Senate, further affected his style of poetry and made itself manifest in a volume called Responsibilities. Yeats had by this period developed a great deal of impatience with bourgeois illusions current in Ireland at the time, and publicly announced his dissatisfaction poetically and politically. He found nobility of spirit, dignity, and understanding above the middle class and below the middle class but not in the middle class. He served as a senator from 1922-1928, promoting the interests of the arts and the Protestant landed upper classes, and in 1923 received the Nobel Prize for literature.

Yeats married a most remarkable woman in 1917 by the name of Georgianna Lees Hydes. She was capable of automatic writing, and much influenced his work, providing him with insights from Spiritus

Mundi. This phenomenon is elaborated upon in his book A Vision (1925-1937). A Vision detailed systems concerning the movements of history and the relationship of personality with phases of the moon. The work of this period is touched with an epigrammatical as well as a metaphysical emphasis.

The Tower (1928) and the Winding Stair (1933) are the two publications of Yeats' fourth and supposedly most exquisite period of production. One finds winding stairs, spinning tops, and gyres. Through images such as these, Yeats confronts the paradoxes of growth and identity, time and change, love and age, life and art, and of madness and wisdom. Life is symbolized by a trudge up a winding staircase; progress is determined by the number of steps one has taken.

His final phase was characterized by revision, production, and reorganization. Indeed, it might be said that Yeats never had a winter poetically. He commenced in the green heat of late summer and left off in mid harvest. William Butler Yeats died in 1939 near Roquebourne, France, and rests in County Sligo, Ireland.

The Inveiglement of "The Stolen Child"

Every blue moon or so I encounter a painting, or a piece of music, or a landscape, or perhaps a woman who appeals to me for seemingly inscrutable reasons: this magnetism operates quite out of the province of reason and is ungoverned by logic. William Butler Yeats' poem "The Stolen Child" struck me this way initially. But it doesn't stop here; there are many other alluring features of the work as well: its straightforwardness, simplicity, mystical suggestions, double dimensions, and abundance of music to cite a few.

The piece was first published in Crossways in 1889; the poet was twenty-four years old at the time. The setting is the city of Sligo, which is located in County Sligo, on the north-western coast of Ireland. His mother, Susan Pollexfen, was said to have whiled the summers away telling tales to young Willie about the mythological creatures who inhabited the rustic region. The author himself spent much of his youth wandering and dreaming in the "emerald countryside" of Sligo.

I'd like to regard the poem in this explication from the angle of spirit and by that I mean the intangible nuance evoked by allusion, symbol, irony, and connotation.

STANZA I

Where dips the rocky highland
 Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
 There lies a leafy island
 Where flapping herons wake
 The drowsy water-rats;
 There we've hid our faery vats,
 Full of berries
 And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Stanza one introduces us to the location and activities of the faeries who proposition the child to go away with them to the delectable land of the faeries. Notice the chorus.

Come away O human child!
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

I put the question: who is it among us that holds hands, apart from lovers? Children. If you look on an elementary school playground, you will find that many of the children walk hand in hand if they are truly friends. And of course adults hold the hands of children to protect them. The point is that the faeries imply that they are friends indeed in this offering of sanctuary from a world "full of weeping." Let's return at this point to line three and proceed down the poem toward our present position, the refrain.

There lies a leafy island	3
Where flapping herons wake	4
The drowsy water-rats;	5

Trees and leaves figure prominently in Yeats' poetry. I illustrate with a quote from the play "Purgatory," one of his finest achievements. (An old man teaches his son the symbolical significance of a tree that stands before them.)

Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,
Fat, greasy life. Stand there and look.

So the leaf, it is clear, symbolizes life and living. And the flapping herons in line four longevity. I quote Yeats again, this time from "Lapis Lazuli".

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,	37
Are carved in Lapis Lazuli,	38
Over them flies a long legged bird	39
A symbol of longevity;	40

And then the following lines:

There we've hid our faery vats,	6
Full of berries	7
And of reddest stolen cherries.	8

What a temptation they have put before the child mentioning the cache of gastronomical ecstasy they have tucked away back in Faeryland (my grandmother used to stoop to the same sort of tricks when I was a child). The cherry itself is replete with connotations of its

own, without compounding the joy with the adjective "stolen". Dare I mumble that it is associated with innocence amongst females of our culture. But more pertinently, Yeats' had studied quite a bit of Eastern philosophy. And in the orient, especially Japan, the cherry is associated with the brevity of life. The cherry tree is almost worshipped there. The beautiful blossoms hang upon the boughs for about a week each spring. And their very presence calls for something like a national holiday. The Japanese troop by the thousands to sit on the grass beneath the light of the moon in the scented shade of the cherry, drinking, feasting, and sighing at the beauty and transience of life which is symbolized by the lucid white blossoms dangling in fragrant doom above their heads. All the streets, and all the shops, and all the people are lit up with the blossoms. And then one morning you awake and they are gone. The spring torrents arrive; and they are washed away as if they never were.

If you choose to accept the oriental allusions in stanza one, we have longevity and brevity juxtapositioned and a terrifying proposition as well.

STANZA II

Where the wave of moon light glosses	13
The dim grey sands with light,	14
Far off by furthest Rosses [†]	15
We foot it all the night,	16
Weaving olden dances,	17
Mingling hands and Mingling glances	18
Till the moon has taken flight;	19
To and fro we leap	20
And chase the frothy bubbles	21
While the world is full of troubles	22
And is anxious in its sleep.	23

<u>Come away O human child!</u>	24
<u>To the waters and the wild</u>	25
<u>With a faery, hand in hand,</u>	26
<u>For the world's more full of weeping than you</u> <u>can understand.</u>	27

In the first line of the stanza, we find the light of the moon. On how many millions of scenes has this ancient orb spilled her golden light, poetically? And how many maddening thoughts has it promoted? Here it hints of the cryptic, the festive--and yes--the diabolical. I delight in the thought of a wave of yellowest moonlight breaking on the beach like ocean spray in the first lines. Listen:

Far off by furthest Rosses ¹	15
We foot it all the night	16
Weaving olden dances,	17
Mingling hands and Mingling glances	18
Till the moon has taken flight;	19

Again something very old and familiar is introduced by the faeries.

I have still another silly question for you: How often have we heard children chanting, or chanted ourselves when young, this old forgotten song or that, while skipping a primitive dance? There is something very spooky about "Ring Around the Rosy" when played beneath the full of the moon! Knowing how they adore such sport, the faeries tempt the child with a new version of an old game. Follow me further into the stanza, if you will.

To and fro we leap	20
And chase the frothy bubbles,	21
While the world is full of troubles	22
And is anxious in its sleep.	23

This is not the first time I've heard troubles, faeries, moons and bubbles conniving together to concoct rhyme. Permit me to sing to you from Shakespeare:

Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing,--
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

All

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire, burn; and, cauldron, bubble.

Third Witch

Scale of dragon; tooth of wolf;
Witch's mummy; maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark;
Liver of blaspheming Jew;
Gall of goat; and slips of yew
Sliver'd i' the moon's eclipse;
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips;
Finger of birth strangled babe
Ditch deliver'd by a drab,--
Make the gruel thick and slab;
Add there to a tiger's chaudron,
For th' ingredients of our cauldron.

All

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire, burn; and, cauldron, bubble.

Second Witch

Cool it with a baboon's blood
Then the charm is firm and good.

Enter Hecate

Hecate

O, well done! I commend your pains;
And everyone shall share i' the gains:
And now about the cauldron sing,
Like elves and faeries in a ring,
Enchanting all that you put in.

Second Witch

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes:--
Open locks,

Whoever knocks!

Macbeth Enters

How now, you secret black and midnight hags!
What is't you do?

All

A deed without a name.

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

Could it be that these "three weird sisters" who were so instrumental in Macbeth's demise are here, four-hundred years removed, in this innocent looking poem by Yeats? John Butler Yeats, Willie's father, read (according to the biographers) Shakespeare aloud over the Rice Krispies every morning. Indeed the possibilities do seem overwhelming. Yet one can never be absolutely certain; here is a poem by Yeats himself in which he makes the same persuasive argument as in "The Stolen Child", taking an almost grandfatherly tone in comparison.

To A Child Dancing In The Wind

Dance there upon the shore
 What need have you to care
 For wind or water's roar?
 And tumble out your hair
 That the salt drops have wet;
 Being young you have not known
 The fool's triumph, nor yet
 Love lost as soon as won,
 Nor the best labourer dead
 And all the sheaves to bind.
 What need have you to dread
 The monstrous crying wind?

Note that this work is written in trimeter as is "The Stolen Child"; thus one may associate the two rhythmically as well as sentimentally.

STANZA III

Where the wandering water gushes	28
From the hills above Glen-Car,	29
In pools among the rushes	30
That scarce could bathe a star,	31
We seek for slumbering trout	32

And whispering in their ears	33
Give them unquiet dreams;	34
Leaning softly out	35
From ferns that drop their tears	36
Over the young streams.	37
Come away, O human child!	38
To the waters and the wild	39
With a faery, hand in hand,	40
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.	41

There is something frighteningly prodigious about the land-of-the-faeries. Ponder these lines:

In pools among the rushes	30
That scarce could bathe a star,	31

Our earth and all her sister planets revolve around a star, the sun. And yet we learn in lines thirty and thirty-one above that it is possible to submerge that whole hulking heavenly body in a single pool of this devilish paradise. But perhaps Yeats also intends us to imagine pools so terribly small that they can't quite catch the entire reflection of even one of the tiny specks of a sparkle we see flung haphazardly across a night sky, and refer to as stars as well. Thus, looking into the pool in line thirty, one glimpses infinity--the infinitely small and the infinitely vast. The frolic resumes at line thirty-two.

We seek for slumbering trout	32
And whispering in their ears	33
Give them unquiet dreams;	34
Leaning softly out	35
From ferns that drop their tears	36
Over the young streams.	37

The mischievous faeries take a ruthless pleasure from disquieting the napping fish. This appears a significant notion in the piece when one considers the irony at play. They are whispering--braggadociously--to the child about whispering in the ears of the trout. And why do they do it? Just for the hell of it. Imagine lying tranquilly in your bed dreaming of whatever folks dream of--naughty or nice--and having those dreams invaded by sooth-saying faeries chanting in flawless trimeter. Young in "young stream" may be associated by a bit of extension with the child; the trout slumbering in the streams become comparable to what slumbers in a child. And with an even greater extension, I think perhaps the soul swirling among a million other things might be said to slumber in children. The faeries give the child, as they do the li'l fishes, equally unquiet dreams.

"Leaning softly out/ from (the) ferns that drop their tears" informs us that there is misery in faery land as well as here, although Yeats skillfully muddies its meaning. One can take the line to mean ordinary dew dripping indifferently from ferns to streams, or take it to mean both ordinary dew and literal tears.

We looked at the chorus briefly in the first stanza; here, it may well be expedient to view it again, in that, in stanzas one, two, and three, it is precisely the same. It undergoes a change in the fourth and final stanza. We are, of course, in stanza three at present (the refrain resumes at line thirty-eight).

STANZA IV

Away with us he's going
The solemn-eyed:

42
43

He'll hear no more the lowing	44
Of the calves on the warm hillside	45
Or the kettle on the hob	46
Sing Peace into his breast,	47
Or see the brown mice bob	48
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.	49
<u>For he comes, the human child,</u>	50
<u>To the waters and the wild</u>	51
<u>With a faery, hand in hand,</u>	52
<u>From a world more full of weeping than he can</u>	
<u>understand.</u>	53

Obviously, the solemn-eyed child takes the faeries up on their fine offer. Yet, what he is leaving sounds quite good, quite beautiful and thoroughly enchanted with the magic of home sweet home. Listen:

He'll hear no more the lowing	44
Of the calves on the warm hillside	45

And how pacific these lines!

Or the kettle on the hob	46
Sing peace into his breast,	47
Or see the brown Mice bob	48
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.	49

In summation, the child elects to escape this world too full of misery, for one of rollick, moonlit dances, stolen hoardes, fathomless pools, leafy islands and aquatic birds. Though he heads for a peculiar realm, he has left a peculiar realm. In the stanza above, the kettle took the melody and the cows took the bass line, while a brown mouse danced a waltz.

The child chooses without the mention of a moment's delay. Now, I'd rather myself to be the last one to question the infinite wisdom

of children, but a body can't help wondering exactly what is meant by the word "stolen" in the title?

FOOTNOTES

¹Rosses refers to Rosses Point near Sligo.

²Glen-Carr is located near Sligo, a small city of 16,836 inhabitants. (This makes the third successive stanza to open with a reference to an actual geographical location near the celebrated city.)

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