



## Septimus's Ark in W. B. Yeats's The Player Queen

Inst. Fawziya Mousa Ghanim<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Arts-University of Baghdad, Iraq

[Fawziya.ghanim@yahoo.com](mailto:Fawziya.ghanim@yahoo.com)

**Abstract.** W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) wrote many plays which dealt with the statue of the poet in his community or society and his relation with the whole world around him and how he reacted towards some of the critical issues in Ireland particularly. He believed in the power of words and how people and their countries would change positively to liberate themselves and their societies. Yeats's poet could be a visionary, an activist, a dreamer and a wonderer. The Player Queen was one of plays which exposed the poet's crisis and his vulnerability. He was frustrated by both his beloved and his community. The problem: The recent paper explores the dilemma of a poet in a hostile society. It discusses how he will be deprived of his right to highlight and declare his valued ideas and actions as a poet. Hypothesis: The poet has a noble role. He/she could save the art, the beauty and its dignity. Findings: Septimus, the hero of the play takes the road which wasn't taken by anyone. At last he picks up the hat of art and saves it from bad artists and the corrupted mob. Comparing his story with Noah's at the Deluge. His final reconciliation is achieved particularly when he rejects the social and political corruption. Results The poet is loyal to the image of the Unicorn instead of his wife's aggressive beauty. His spiritual strength is inspired by his own vivid image of beauty, love and poetic purity. Septimus's ark of salvation is inside and he insists to be in.

Keywords: Septimus, Decima, Nona and Noah.



## Introduction

The play Queen was performed by the Stage society on 25 May 1919 at the King's Hall Covent Garden (Jeffares & Knowland, 1975, p. 146). The setting is removed from Ireland to a nameless country whose only visible political institutions are a queen, mob, and a comic Prime Minister. Yeats claims that the scene of The player Queen was not laid in Ireland, the controversy over the Irish national image reappears in Septimus's argument with the "bad, popular poets", while a rumor linking the Queen with a unicorn provides the play with its own context of political interpretation (Dorn, 1984, p. 143).

The play is divided into two scenes, the first short scene opens at the meeting of three streets, two old men are leaning from the upper windows, one on either side of the street, they wear 'grotesque masks'. They exchange a simple speech which is a brief exposition of the play's coming events: that "the sun is now rising over the Queen's castle...on its great rocky hill", that a crowd of "fifty men passed by an hour", (Yeats, 1982, 388), that "the young are at some mischief – the young and the middle aged", (Ibid, 388), and that "the world has grown very wicked". They see everything and grasp nothing.

Septimus, the poet staggers on the stage, drunk and exhausted after searching for Decima who has run away from playing the degraded part of Noah's wife whom a foul husband beats with a stick because, she would not clamber among the other brutes into his cattle boat. He tries to find a place to sleep but he is refused everywhere, and explodes into his own brand of image; "That Septimus, who has played before Kubla Khan, like this! Septimus, dramatist, and poet, " (Yeats, I: p. 390). As he lies there, various characters approach, the first one is a pair of "bad, popular, poets", he exchanges insults with them.

Next comes a mob of citizens and countrymen most of them are bent on killing their Queen, they say that she has never been seen outside her castle during the seven years of her reign, she must be a bad, evil living witch; there is a story told that a goat – herld has looked through her window and saw her "coupling with a great white unicorn" (Yeats, I: p. 390).

Septimus is eloquently thought others regard his language as absurd, defends the honor of the unicorn, then the "Big country man" gives him an angry blow. 'An Old Beggar' now appears who at the hour when there is to be a new King or a new Queen, will turn into the donkey, that carried 'Christ into Jerusalem', and will bray its annunciation of the great change. He seeks straw



to roll about, when the moment comes his donkey's back begins to itch. The second scene is set in the throne room of the castle. The dominant elements of this scene are farce and intrigue. Yeats himself states that The player Queen is a farce (A. S. Knowland, 1983, 174). The scene opens with an angry prime minister demanding that the missing Decima should be found;

Prime Minister: I know her sort; would pull the world to pieces to spite her husband or her lover.

I know her – a bladder full of

dried peas for a brain, a brazen, bragging baggage.

(Yeats, II: P. 404)

So far, all the players who have been invited to the Queen's palace to present 'The Tragical History of Noah's Deluge', try to find Decima in order to perform the play. The Real Queen appears as nun-like and drabs, hoping for martyrdom. Decima is discovered by Nona, another actress in the troupe, hiding under the Queen's throne. Decima asks Septimus to leave Nona and return to her. When he refuses, she changes places with the Real Queen, who flees to a convent. The poet begins his inquiry all the night to find his wife, who has escaped the role of Noah's wife.

Yeats portrays the state of Septimus who suffers from the unawareness of his wife, and his humiliation under the hands of his countrymen. He is a possessive lover, and Decima refuses to submit to him either by playing a demanding role on the stage or by being his wife.

## 1. Septimus's Ark of Salvation

At the beginning of the play, Yeats exposes his hero in a declining state, which is due to his wife's cruelty. He becomes a tramp, who lacks shelter, and peaceful mind. He searches for a place to sleep or rest, but there is no place. Throughout Septimus and the third Old Man conversation, Septimus expresses his wife's behavior;

Third Old Man: Who are you? What do you want? Septimus: I am Septimus. I have a bad wife; I want come in and sleep.

Third Old Man: ou are drunk.

Septimus: Drunk! So would you be if you had as bad a wife.

(Yeats, vi: p. 389)

As a poet, Septimus defends his status and dignity. He distinguishes himself as a guide and a leader in the society, He differs from other 'bad, popular poets', he remarks that he is "a player, a playwright, and a most famous poet in the world" (I: p. 391). He thinks that the mob has been led astray by



those poets, he wishes to lead the people straight but he is "captured by his world of drunkenness and words. Drunkenness allows him to see the difference between good and bad"(Norman Newton, 1958, p. 182) Thus, he attacks those poets, who are being jealous of his fame and he accuses them of having "stirred up the people" (Ibid, I: p. 400).

He is unlike them, he belongs to an eternal and divine kind of poetry, he also challenges them that he has the ability to be a popular poet, but his world is inhabited by "Venus and Adonis and the other plants of heaven" (Yeats, I: p. 391). The hero wants an impossible Utopia, in other words, he sees the futility and stupidity of the mob, that is "uncharitable" according to Septimus's opinion. Septimus represents the image of a poet who seems as a victim of various circumstances, one of them is his wife's coldness, fierceness, and ambition, the other is the hostility of his society, he is misunderstood by it, because all the time, he is in a drunk state, and he is humiliated by the city's citizens. In the journey of finding his wife, Septimus meets the crowd of citizens who gather to kill the Queen, he is treated badly by them.

Eventually, the artist or the poet becomes subject of the mob's hostility, when they roll him towards a corner in the street. There is a kind of distrust between Septimus and the people, the latter do not understand the former nor does the former care for the latter. The poet once declares that he played not to the applause of a popular audience but, to the approval of Kubla Khan. As Norman Newton asserts that Septimus is a poet who can regain strength of innocence only by resorting to the weakness of intoxication . In spite of his drunkenness, he defends the unicorn's chastity "Did I hear somebody say that the unicorn is not chaste/ It is a most noble beast, a most religious beast...It is the most chaste of all the beast in the world". (I: p. 395).

Through Septimus-Unicorn relationship, Yeats discusses the poet's dilemma in his society, especially when he sees what others cannot see. He struggles for the unicorn's image, though the countrymen offend him for his drunkenness;

The big countryman: pull him out of that, he's is drunk.  
Septimus: Yes, I am drunk, I am very drunk, but that is no reason why I should permit any one to speak against the unicorn. (I: p. 397)

Septimus's drunkenness is regarded as a social stamp by the countrymen, while it is seen by him as a kind of insight and inspiration. In fact, there is no connection between the poet's state of mind and the daily habit of his drunkenness. It is a relief and an escape from a corrupted wife, and the hostility



of society. The protagonist despises "the philistine world for its complement mindlessness and seeks salvation in the transcendent realm of art(John Rees Moore, 1971, p. 165). To attain this realm, he announces that he will fight for the unicorn's chastity, for he affirms that "its [unicorn's] chastity is equal to its beauty" (I: p. 397), indeed, he expresses himself as "no longer drunk, but inspired" (I: p. 397).

He is inspired and his strength exists only by his refusal to compromise with the way of the world. The poet's mind is occupied by the unicorn's image after Decima's hiding, as Brenda S. Webster states that Yeats turns Septimus interest, away from Decima towards the mythical beast"(Brenda S. Webster, 1973, p. 133). Now the unicorn becomes a kind of an inspirational source to Septimus's imaginative power. Decima's personality is shaped by Septimus's poetry. His poetic kingdom is ruled by Decima's image of inspiration, though he has pictured her with a 'divine discontent' that gives her a status of a queen. She is a born opportunist, but it is poetry that supports her with the imaginative power to control reality. Septimus has made a queen out of a woman "born in a ditch between two towns" (II: p. 408).

Otherwise, Decima's character is characterized by her aggressive ambition as well as inheriting her mother's dream that Decima "was born to wear a crown" (II: P. 407), she realizes that she can play a queen part "the only part/in the world [she] can play is a great queen's part" (II:p. 408). Nona, another actress, accepts the role of Noah's wife, by accepting this role Nona "accepts the transcendental reality, perceived by the poet" Edward L. Shaughnessy, 1984, p. 167) . She is an understanding woman not proud or has some sense of sin, she gives more than asks, and Septimus has turned to her because he is unable to cope with Decima.

Nona describes Septimus as a man who "comes to [her] with his trouble" (II: P. 414). Decima gets advantage of her attractiveness as a means to obtain another lover instead of Septimus, "I will choose a new man, shall it be you, Turkey-cock? Or you, Bullhead?" (II: P. 415). She gloats the thought if she refuses to play Noah's wife, Septimus will go to prison, where he would be forced to think of her every time "he felt the hardness of stone floor every time he heard the chains clank" (II: P. 409). Nona, whose view of love is gentle and protective exclaims that he would hate Decima and she answers her by making a comparison between Septimus's love for her and Nona's love for God, because "If that Holy Image of the church where you [Nona] put all those candles at Easter was pleasant and affable, why did you come home with the skin worn of your two knees?" (II: P. 409).



Decima knows that Septimus's love prospers over her coldness, and she will not discard her mask. Helen Vendler points out that lovers and poets (like nuns and mothers) are worshipping images, and images break hearts (Helen Vendler. 1986, p. 33). But Decima, who has been regarded as an inspirational source for Septimus's imagination and his creativity, by refusing to give Septimus the right to remain faithful to her in his own way, descends to the human level. She tries to compel his loyalty, to restrict his imagination;

Decima: I will unlock this gate when

You have taken an oath to drive her [Nona] From the company, an oath never to speak With her or look at her again, a terrible oath. (II: p. 421)

The dramatist, Septimus prefers the artistic's freedom. He rejects the aggressiveness of social and human ties, particularly when he sacrifices Decima's image of inspiration for the Unicorn's image. There is nothing that will prevent him from taking the swan's flight into divinity. He will be loyal to the voice of Delphi "That cold/ rocky voice of Delphi" (II: P. 422). He wants to protect the divinity and chastity of the unicorn, and to be alone with it in a lonely place;

Septimus: My breast-feathers thrust out and

my white wings buoyed up with divinity? Ah! but I can see it now-you are bent upon going to some lonely place where uninterrupted you. You can speak against the character of the Unicorn, but you shall not, I tell you that you [Big Countryman] shall not. In the midst of this uncharitable town. I will protect that noble, milk-white, flighty beast. (I: . 398)

Septimus imagines that the unicorn represents the purity and divinity of art. Here, as a poet he suffers the fate of an artist who (as Yeats regards himself) is 'out of phase' with his time. He proclaims values that his philistine and materialistic society rejects. He realizes his kinship with the 'Old Beggar', "You are inspired then we are indeed brothers" (I: p. 401). In order to be loyal to his art, Septimus should be loyal to the image that is created by him.

Usually, the images are the main concern of the poet's work, he is the master of images as F. A. C. Wilson states, "all men to some degree unite with images (1968, p. 184), while Septimus announces that "man is nothing until he is united to an image" (II: P. 420), the unicorn's chastity and purity is related to Septimus himself "which is regarded as a justification of his own ideal" (A. S. Knowland, p. 167). The achievement of an artistic strength and integrity is



attained, because Septimus is "un forsworn [he is] strong, a violent virginal creature" (II: P. 423). He is distinguished as a man who knows the truth, but lacks courage and energy for the measureless consummation, therefore, he piles the images of his art upon his back and chooses a woman who is not, as Decima is 'terrible' to him.

The poet is interested in the problem of preserving the implements of art and indeed of the function of art (Ibid., p. 69). He claims that "we must carry into safely the clock of Noah" (II:P. 420). The unity of body and image is Septimus's main concern, when they are united; there is a kind of rebirth. Yeats manifests that all human beings engage in a great struggle to become united to their images of themselves, as Richard Elmann affirms, the moment of unification the temporal and permanent are one. (Richard Ellmann, 1964, p. 108). At the end of the play, Septimus takes nothing with him but Noah's hat;

I will save the noble high-crowned hat of Noah. I will carry it thus

With dignity. I will go slowly that they may see I am not afraid. (II: P. 423)

Noah's hat symbolizes the dignity of poetry, he values it "which only can survive the destruction at a reversal of the gyres" (John Rees Moore, p. 166). His ideas and beliefs are supported by Nona's argument, who is regarded as the voice of common sense, she always reminds him of his social function.

The poet should accept the responsibility of preserving his art, that is symbolized by the properties of Noah;

Septimus: You [Nona] are right. I accept the reproach.

It is necessary that who are the last artists-all the rest have gone to the mob-shall save the images and implements of our art. (II: P. 419)

Despite of his weakness, which is due to his drunkenness, Septimus has a spiritual strength, as T. R. Henn interprets that in order to have strength in the spiritual world, he has made himself weak in the natural one, even a little disgusting (T. R. Henn, 1966, 208). He remains loyal to his inspiration and principles, true to his essential nature as a poet. He welcomes his own destiny and rejects the pain of impossible marriage which is accompanied by humiliation. The mysterious divinity of the unicorn leads Septimus to face the risk of death "let us prepare to die" (II: P. 417).

Septimus's action can be interpreted on two levels, literally and figuratively, as A. S. Knowland assumes that in a society hostile to art, the artist risks being beaten up, rejected, banished or killed "we will hang him in



the morning", says the prime minister. Figuratively the death involves that the sacrifice of personal experience on the alter of form which is endlessly renewed in the creative art (A. S. Nowland, p. 79), which is chosen by the prime minister only to give an idea about the obstinacy of woman.

According to this belief, he chooses it instead of Septimus's poetical work; "You object to the play I have chosen. You want some dull poetical thing, full of long speeches" (II: P. 403). The play is elected to satisfy the mob's interest. The mob wants not the elevated simple art, but the untrue, and vulgar – 'Happy tom' and 'Peter of purple pelican'. Septimus is physically weak, but he has a spiritual strength, that is enhanced by his rebel against the social and political restriction.

Courageously, he fights for the Unicorn's image. A. S. Knowland asserts that for the romantic poet the unicorn exists in the mind not in the world of action and at aesthetical level (Ibid., p. 70).

He identifies himself as the last artist real one, who will bear the responsibility of saving the art's spiritually and dignity. Later on, Septimus announces his refusal to accept the authority of the new Queen, his wife Decima. Septimus-Decima relationship conveys two kinds of power, the former represents the power of poetry and creativity, the latter represents the political power. These two powers cannot be reconciled. Decima ascends the throne and a "New dispensation" has been born only by the poet's mind.

The play-within the play is never acted. As Septimus says to the stage manager the Unicorn's "unborn children are but images, we merely play with images" (II: P. 417). Moreover, Septimus picks up with difficulty the hat of poetry, leaving the mask of Noah's wife behind. John Rees Moore elucidates that Septimus still possesses a spark of nobility the world can ill effort to lose (John Rees Moore, p. 166). He longs for the transcendent which is pure enough for him, and the chastity in his only ideal. His drunkenness is a symbol of his bewilderment and his alienation from earthly interest. John Rees Moore remarks that he tries to persuade himself and others that it is a divine intoxication which both provide a vision of reality and guarantees its authenticity.

As a matter of fact, the voice of poetic and artistic divinity have be denounced by Septimus's faith and love. The conflict between the corrupted art and the divine art is endless and there is no reconciliation in the world of Septimus's life. But he finds his solace in the Unicorn's image of chastity and purity, besides Nona who believes in his integrity and fidelity which become the base of his Ark of dream and imagination.





## References

- [1] Dorn Kare. Players and Painted Stage: The Theatre of W.B. Yeats (New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1984), p. 143.
- [2] Ellmann Richard. The Identity of Yeats, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.108.
- [3] Jeffares, A. Norman & Knowland .A.S., A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W.B Yeats (London: Coxed Wyman Ltd., 1975), p.146
- [4] Knowland, A. S. Yeats: Dramatist of Vision, (Totoway: Barnes & Noble Books, 1983), p. 174
- [5] Ltd, 1968), p. 184.
- [6] Moore John Rees. Masks of Love and Death: Yeats as Dramatist, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971) p. 165.
- [7] Newton Norman. "Yeats's Dramatist, the Player Queen", A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism, vol.8, 1958. p. 182.
- [8] Parkin Andrew. The Dramatic Imagination of W.B. Yeats, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1978), p.112
- [9] Shaughnessy Edward L. "Masks in the Dramaturgy of Yeats and O'Neill", Irish University Review, (Dublin; 1984), p.
- [10] T. R. Henn, The Harvest of Tragedy. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd), p.208.
- [11] Ure Peter. Yeats, (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1967).
- [12] Vendler Helen. 'The Player Queen', Modern Critical View, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p.31.
- [13] Webster Brenda S. Yeats: a Psychoanalytic Study, (London: The Macmillan Press, 1973), p.133
- [14] Wilson, F. A. C. W. B. Yeats and Tradition, (Methuen: Methuen & Co.
- [15] Yeats, W.B. The Collected Plays of W.B.Yeats, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1982). All references to Yeats's plays are taken from this edition, p. 151.

