

**W.B. YEATS: REALMS OF THE ROMANTIC  
IMAGINATION**, by John Nkemngong Ngengasong,  
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In this thoroughly researched and stimulating work, John Nkemngong Ngengasong uncovers the intricacies of romantic Imagination that pervade the poetry of Yeats, and argues that albeit the poet emerged and wrote within the era of modernism in British literary tradition, it will be erroneous for any critic to label him solely as a modernist. As has been the case with romantic theorists, there is the on-going debate of what the character of a romantic work is. The problematic is whether romanticism entails the works of a particular literary age, ranging mainly from 1798 with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* to 1830; or any work that

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showcases the tenets of Romanticism despite the period. Nkengasong has thus added his input to this romantic question seemingly aligning with the camp of critics like Jerome McGann and Morse Peckham who aver that there are particular ideological and conceptual representations which characterised the works of the writers of the period that are prevalent in the works of other writers who were not part of the literary movement called Romanticism. The study of these works according to these critics is enriching and enlarges the ethos of Romanticism.

Nkengasong in *W.B. Yeats: Realms of the Romantic Imagination* advocates that there exist numerous tenets of romanticism in the works of Yeats that cannot be ignored. He analyses Yeats's poetry with the framework of romanticism especially Rene Wellek's classic modern definition of the subjects of: Imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and myth and symbol for a poetic style (Nkengasong 1). To get a better glimpse of the author's argument and for the purpose of precision, this review will focus on three cardinal issues: Imagination, nature, and myths and symbols in order.

Imagination according to Romantics is the highest faculty with which a poet can be endowed. It is basically the ability to transcend the present reality to the creation of an alternative non-existent realm. The major romantic poets were all blessed with such a faculty although Nkengasong insists that Yeats takes mostly after Shelley and Keats. He sustains the argument that Yeats idealises the Romantic Imagination in most of his poetry; however, particular catalyst such as frustrated love, political conflicts, infirmity of age and the collapse of science and Christianity propel his poetic imagination even further. The hardship that prevails as the reality in the real world makes the poet to search for an ideal universe, a realm of the imagination characterized

by a blissful existence. Such an ideal universe is registered in the “Byzantium” poems to which the poet hopes to transcend. This world is beautiful and harmonious not like the real world which is “no country for an old man”. The crises of love, especially the unreciprocated love Yeats bore for Maud Gonne is one of the things that makes the real world an ineffective habitation for the old man. The Irish crisis which also claimed the lives of many great patriots is one of the problems that the poet laments. Nkengasong therefore brings in poems like “He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead”, “When You are Old”, “Maid Quiet”, “Easter 1916”, “No Second Troy”, “The Rose Tree” among others to show how unrequited love and political violence made Yeats’s world unliveable. The yearning for an alternative universe is overpowering and shows the poet’s disgust with the current world. Nkengasong avers that Yeats’ “holy city of Byzantium” is symbolic of artistic perfection (141).

Nature is a fundamental attribute of romantic poetry which also finds expression in the poetry of W.B. Yeats. Nkengasong examines the mystical concept of nature within the range of dewdrops: a romantic metaphor, mystical presences and the bounty of nature. Nkengasong observes that there is a constant reference to “dew drops” in Yeats’s poetry which “is a significant agent of the creative imagination attached to sleep and dream, as any other source of inspiration found in Romantic poetry” (58). The dew drops therefore are a romantic metaphor of an attribute of nature which thus endorses Yeats as a Romantic. Also the presences of mystical figures abound in nature in the poetry of Yeats just like in the poetry of other canonical romantics like Coleridge and Keats. Mystical figures like Oisín and his bride Niamh and Fergus are juxtaposed against the ancient Mariner, Christabel and the fairy who seduces the forlorn knight in Keats’ ballads. It is against the potent backdrop of

nature that these mystical romantic figures thrive. Nature's bounty is made evident by the fact that it does not only beautify the landscape but have other important values like "happiness, peace, liberty, harmony and spiritual beauty wrought by spiritual forces" (Nkengasong76). Nature is magical and can inspire bliss to the individual who seeks it; this is a like sentiment to Wordsworth, the chief priest of nature. After a thorough examination of the nature poems of Yeats, Nkengasong draws the conclusion that though there is the pervasiveness of nature in the poetry of Yeats along with a boost of the imagination, Yeats is a less pantheist than Wordsworth who completely transcends to the realm of nature and therefore invites everyone to abandon the toil and trauma of real life and retire to nature.

Nkengasong's reading of some of the myths and symbols which flavour the poetry of Yeats, like his reading of others aspects of Romantic Imagination, is done with a commanding and terse exemplification from selected poems. These myths and symbols are discussed in relation to Celtic, classical and biblical myths and symbols. Yeats is a poet who uses his environment as an inspirational source in his works. Some of the Celtic myths Yeats brings into his poetry include that of Wandering Aengus, "Leda and the Swan", Fergus the king of the Red Branch and "Fergus and the Druid". Classical myths are also invoked with the Trojan War and the beautiful Helen taking precedent. These myths are also symbolic as evident in Helen who is the symbol of great beauty, Yeats's beloved is said to embody Helenlike beauty. The Trojan War is a symbol of destruction which is likened to the 1916 uprising in Ireland. Biblical myths like the tale of great king Solomon and the queen of Sheba are brought to the limelight along with the story of creation especially the Garden of Eden.

Nkengasong's reading of influence and Intertextuality in which he shows how Yeats's poetry dialogues with other great writers of the Romantic tradition like Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats and Blake. Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy" is aligned with Yeats's war poems to show the destruction of war. Yeats's philosophic imagination is also likened to that of Shelley's. His nature poems are read alongside Wordsworth's "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned". His prolific imagination is compared to that of Coleridge and Keats. The close reading of several of Yeats's poems and the dependence on textual evidence is valuable to the understanding of the issues in perspective.

Another major strength of the work results not just from the fact that Nkengasong is a seasoned critic of Yeats's poetry, but also from the fact that he constructs his criticism from a thorough examination of the works of other Yeatsian scholars like Richard Ellman, Edward Engelberg, Dennis Haskell etc. The bearing of Nkengasong's argument is refreshing especially the standpoint that Yeats is a Modernist Romanticist and not a Romantic Modernist, which is supported with the arguments that since his poetry bares strong attributes of romanticism it will be erroneous for anyone to subvert these romantic musings in favour solely of Modernist traits. The study, therefore, bestrides and attempts to reconcile the problematic divide amongst Critics of Yeats. Yeats, for want of a better description, is a Modernist Romanticist. This work is a considerable contribution to the study of the poetics of romantic Imagination, as it is to that of the reception of Yeats within the contexts and traditions of Romanticism and Modernism. Thus, Nkengasong's *W.B. Yeats: Realms of the Romantic Imagination* is an invaluable work for students and scholars of Yeats and Romantic poetry as it captures the best of the

poet's life and works in relation to Imagination, and also exposes the admiration of a seasoned scholar.

### **Note on Contributor**

Louisa Lum is a PhD Researcher in the final stages of a Thesis on Romantic and Modernist British Literature. She is author of one novel, one poetry collection and articles in international journals. She is also Director of Publication at Miraclaire Publishing and an editor, reviewer and blurb writer at 2L Research and Editing Consultancy.