

A Yeats Adventure

The Beauty and the Beast of Yeats

by Angie

Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet
-William Butler Yeats (1865 – 1939)



Why was our series called *Beauty and the Beast*? The answer is simple - it was a title immediately recognized because of at least one movie and many printed re-tellings of the original French story.

Does the series have much resemblance to the original tale? No, and not just because it is set in the present. Our 'beast' was born as we saw him, not under a magical spell - and he certainly wasn't ugly. The woman he saved fell in love with him and visited him willingly. He gave her strength to use in the world she lived in after her assault.

When our hero acted as a 'beast', it was nearly always to save Catherine, or assist the tunnel people who protected him. In the original tale, there are no other people, except Beauty's family, who play any significant role, so the cast of characters is small. The Beast lived in a castle filled with amazing things, set among beautiful gardens, but still it is isolated.

In our series, there is a whole world under New York that becomes special to our series, with well-realized people, a believable set of tunnels and stunning scenery - and a community that lives and works together in relative comfort, even if underground, supported by a network of Helpers. It's a realistic utopia, not perfect, but always trying to attain it, in contrast to the world we know better, the one Catherine inhabits. The tunnel world is home, one its residents return to, and we believe and embrace, even when things go wrong. It's strong, resilient, and democratic.

Rather than try to fit the large world of our series into the narrow one of the original *Beauty and the Beast*, it's far easier to believe that someone among the writers or producers of the series knew the works of William Butler Yeats well. His poetry often seems to track with the episodes, although he is not given credit.

The connection is strongest in the titles of two episodes near the end of Season Two. '*Ceremony of Innocence*' and '*This Rough Beast*', are taken directly from Yeat's poem, '*The*

Second Coming', whose lines could be referring to the overall plot of our series:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

But the initial inspiration Yeats provided for a TV series called '*Beauty and the Beast*', could have come, not from a poem, but from '*The Celtic Twilight*' (1902). Here, Yeats relates his talks with storytellers in his native Ireland, recording the legends they tell him, so they won't be lost or forgotten. In the introduction, he muses on the nature of fantasy. The final paragraphs seem singularly appropriate to our series ...

'And are there not moods which need heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland for their expression, no less than this dilapidated earth? Nay, are there not moods which shall find no expression unless there be men who dare to mix heaven, hell, purgatory, and faeryland together, or even to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or to thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks?

Let us go forth, the tellers of tales, and seize whatever prey the heart long for, and have no fear. Everything exists, everything is true, and the earth is only a little dust under our feet.'

The characters of Beauty and the Beast also seem to derive some of their personalities from Yeats' poetry. One can imagine Catherine relating to '*Chosen*' ...

*'The lot of love is chosen. I learnt that much
Struggling for an image on the track
Of the whirling Zodiac.
Scarce did he my body touch,
Scarce sank he from the west
Or found a subtetanean rest*

*On the maternal midnight of my breast
Before I had marked him on his northern way,
And seemed to stand although in bed I lay.
I struggled with the horror of daybreak,
I chose it for my lot! If questioned on
My utmost pleasure with a man
By some new-married bride, I take
That stillness for a theme
Where his heart my heart did seem
And both adrift on the miraculous stream
Where -- wrote a learned astrologer --
The Zodiac is changed into a sphere'*

Vincent, whose voice and conversation first comforted Catherine, when she awakened in his bed in the tunnels, could very well have whispered 'Words' to himself, when he is alone again.

*'I had this thought a while ago,
'My darling cannot understand
What I have done, or what would do
In this blind bitter land.'*

*And I grew weary of the sun
Until my thoughts cleared up again,
Remembering that the best I have done
Was done to make it plain;*

*That every year I have cried, 'At length
My darling understands it all,
Because I have come into my strength,
And words obey my call';*

*That had she done so who can say
What would have shaken from the sieve?
I might have thrown poor words away
And been content to live.'*

There is no question that the *Beauty and the Beast* series is literate - classical poetry and music, and even favourite plays and children's stories, are all present. How did this come to be? Perhaps Yeats, again, encouraged it 'Those Images' ...

*'What if I bade you leave
The cavern of the mind?
There's better exercise
In the sunlight and wind.
I never bade you go
To Moscow or to Rome.
Renounce that drudgery,
Call the Muses home.
Seek those images*

*That constitute the wild,
The lion and the virgin,
The harlot and the child
Find in middle air
An eagle on the wing,
Recognise the five
That make the Muses sing.'*

As the story in our series progresses, both Vincent and Catherine begin to question themselves and their relationship with each other. In the following poem '*The Lady's First Song*', it could be Vincent expressing his doubts.

*'I turn round
Like a dumb beast in a show.
Neither know what I am
Nor where I go,
My language beaten
Into one name;
I am in love
And that is my shame.
What hurts the soul
My soul adores,
No better than a beast
Upon all fours.'*

'*The Lady's Second Song*' could be Catherine musing in the dark hours of night.

*'What sort of man is coming
To lie between your feet?
What matter, we are but women.
Wash; make your body sweet;
I have cupboards of dried fragrance.
I can strew the sheet.
The Lord have mercy upon us.
He shall love my soul as though
Body were not at all,
He shall love your body
Untroubled by the soul,
Love cram love's two divisions
Yet keep his substance whole.
The Lord have mercy upon us.
Soul must learn a love that is
Proper to my breast,
Limbs a Love in common
With every noble beast.
If soul may look and body touch,
Which is the more blest?
The Lord have mercy upon us.'*

The episode where Elliot Burch comes into her life, teaches Catherine that a fine face doesn't

always indicate a fine heart. Elliot's character, and his obsession with her, might have been inspired by Yeats, as expressed in *'The Mask'*.

*'Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.'
'O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.'
'I would but find what's there to find,
Love or deceit.'
'It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind.'
'But lest you are my enemy,
I must enquire.'
'O no, my dear, let all that be;
What matter, so there is but fire
In you, in me?'*

Vincent, when Catherine is away, might tell himself something like this, the first stanza from *'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'*.

*'My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
Upon the breathless starlit air,
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;
Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done:
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul'*

Vincent, who knows the danger of Catherine's work, and can sense when she is in danger, worries about her. He would understand the banked passion in *'The Countess Cathleen In Paradise'*

*'All the heavy days are over;
Leave the body's coloured pride
Underneath the grass and clover,
With the feet laid side by side.*

*Bathed in flaming founts of duty
She'll not ask a haughty dress;
Carry all that mournful beauty
To the scented oaken press.*

*Did the kiss of Mother Mary
Put that music in her face?
Yet she goes with footstep wary,
Full of earth's old timid grace.*

*'Mong the feet of angels seven
What a dancer glimmering!
All the heavens bow down to Heaven,
Flame to flame and wing to wing.'*

And who could not say that 'Adam's Curse' reminds us of our favourite couple, sitting on Catherine's balcony at night, reading, musing, enjoying each other's company:

*We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.'
And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, 'To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not talk of it at school—
That we must labour to be beautiful.'
I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'*

*We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.*

*I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.*

After Season Two, Vincent changes, for Catherine is gone and he must find their son - and then find the courage to live on. Yeats has a poem or two for that too. From *'The Grey Rock'*:

*'I have kept my faith, though faith was tried,
To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot,
And the world's altered since you died,
And I am in no good repute
With the loud host before the sea,
That think sword-strokes were better meant
Than lover's music -- let that be,
So that the wandering foot's content.'*

And later still, when he is alone, Vincent might well muse, as in *'When You Are Old'*

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;*

*And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.*

In the depths of his despair, Vincent might well bewail the Fates and remember *'Cold Heaven'*

*'Suddenly I saw the cold and rock-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?'*

Some of us have written a happier ending for our favourite couple, when perhaps Father would acknowledge their love and even comment now and again. Yeats gives us that too, in *'The Folly Of Being Comforted'*.

'One that is ever kind said yesterday:

*'Your well-beloved's hair has threads of grey,
And little shadows come about her eyes;
Time can but make it easier to be wise
Though now it seems impossible, and so
All that you need is patience.'
Heart cries, 'No,
I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.
Time can but make her beauty over again:
Because of that great nobleness of hers
The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs,
Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
When all the wild Summer was in her gaze.'*

*Heart! O heart! if she'd but turn her head,
You'd know the folly of being comforted.'*

And surely, if Catherine had had her 'happy life', this poem, *'The Heart Of The Woman'* would speak to her.

*'O what to me the little room
That was brimmed up with prayer and rest;
He bade me out into the gloom,
And my breast lies upon his breast.*

*O what to me my mother's care,
The house where I was safe and warm;
The shadowy blossom of my hair
Will hide us from the bitter storm.*

*O hiding hair and dewy eyes,
I am no more with life and death,
My heart upon his warm heart lies,
My breath is mixed into his breath.'*

Or if, as some in our fandom like to imagine, Vincent and Diana remained friends for the remainder of their natural lives, Yeats has a lovely stanza that might speak to Diana's last hours, with Vincent by her side - *'Upon A Dying Lady - Her Courtesy'*

*With the old kindness, the old distinguished grace,
She lies, her lovely piteous head amid dull red hair
propped upon pillows, rouge on the pallor of her face.
She would not have us sad because she is lying there,
And when she meets our gaze her eyes are laughter-lit,
Her speech a wicked tale that we may vie with her,
Matching our broken-hearted wit against her wit,
Thinking of saints and of petronius Arbiter.*

Finally, Yeats summed up the essence of 'Beauty and the Beast' fandom, now over three decades on, in the last stanza of the conversation in *'The People'*.

*'You, that have not lived in thought but deed,
Can have the purity of a natural force,
But I, whose virtues are the definitions
Of the analytic mind, can neither close
The eye of the mind nor keep my tongue from speech.'*

*And yet, because my heart leaped at her words,
I was abashed, and now they come to mind
After nine years, I sink my head abashed.'*

Too much of a stretch, all this Yeats? Mere coincidence that our TV series seems inspired, or mirrors, so many of Yeats' poems? It may be so. When our imagination is triggered by poetry, we are fulfilling the highest hopes of the poet. Every reader sees something different, built on their own experiences or readings.

Poets see the world differently, finer, succinctly. What they put into words must be concise, a pure concept in few words. There is no room for heavy rhetoric or long descriptions of place, time or person. The message is everything and requires our attention.

So to with TV. Our series did not dwell overlong on dialogue. The images we saw and the movements and expressions of the characters, were deliberately keyed to tell us what words could not. We did not need to be told, any more than a poet needs to tell us everything to get the point across. We saw, we understood and we always wanted more. Where it did not exist, we in this fandom created images of our own or wrote fantasy stories.

We continue the legacy of Yeats and other poets, as well as other tellers of tales, whether real or imaginary. We are not limited by space or time, and if we want to, as Yeats said, *'to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or to thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks'* - we can and do, just as the writers of *'Beauty and the Beast'*, our TV series did.

For that gift, we must be always grateful.

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