

*Revision of Mythical Figures in
Edith Sitwell's Poetry*

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تاريخ القبول: 2009/7/15

تاريخ التقديم: 2009/3/17

Edith Sitwell is the most radical avant-garde British figure of the 20th century. She is truly a Modernist icon. Along with the outstanding musical qualities of her poetry with its social and religious concerns, her greatness lies in the skillfully sketched world she creates in her poems with its various characters.

Since Edith Sitwell was highly cultivated and bred to the ancient traditions of arts,⁽¹⁾ she had naturally created the setting of her world from them and she derived some of her characters. In this special world she created an outstanding variety of characters. Her characters were series of archetype, some of them were imaginative creations of the poet herself, while others were taken from folk and fairy tales. Yet these characters have been “enriched and developed by conscious art until they have grown into a new existence.”⁽²⁾

In addition, Edith Sitwell utilized mythical figures in her poetry since classic myths offered some of the strongest and most influential characters. So she turned to familiar mythical figures revising them and adding to them some fresh meanings and that is to suit the meaning of her poetry.

The use of revision of mythical figures in Edith Sitwell's poetry is prolific. Throughout her life, she adds and

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revises more and more mythical figures. Her poems display a deep knowledge of classic mythology and controlled use of revised mythical figures.

In “*Mazurka*”, a poem from *Façade* (1922), the poet stages the whole poem in Hell, yet it is not a real one, it is a comic Hell. In this scene the poet presents one of the most vigorous mythical figures viz. Pluto. The poem reads:

*‘God Pluto is a kindly man; the children ran:
“Come help us with the games our dames ban.”
He drinks his beer and builds his forge; as red as
George
The fourth his face is that flames tan.’*⁽³⁾

(ll. 1-4 CP)

Pluto⁽⁴⁾, the god of the underworld who is supposed to be great and powerful and even to some degree a scary figure, is revised to be merely a “*kindly man*” who drinks his beer, builds his forge and helps the children playing games their mothers ban. The poet revises Pluto stripping him off of all his greatness and power reducing him to a commonplace figure.

The poet also deliberately mocks him when she uses the capitalization of the word “God” from the very beginning of the poem to lead the reader to build a false assumption about Pluto as an all powerful and divine figure, but she immediately frustrates such assumption when she presents him as an old beer guzzler who is so kind to children. Then she mocks him again when he speaks at the end of the poem addressing two prostitutes quarreling:

*Ladies, though my forge has made me red as George
The Fourth, such flames we know not here, dear!’*

(ll. 31-32 CP)

In these lines, Pluto does not only look like George IV but he also sounds like him. He acts like a real king unaware to the fact that he is simply a forge master who lives in a nonsense world and this world is not above quarreling women as there are no rules to be respected since it is a comic Hell. The revision of Pluto from the god of the underworld to mere old beer guzzler who is so arrogant helps the poet mock and satirize Pluto.

Mocking and satire dominate *Facade*, yet function merely as masks behind which social satire lies. As “*Mazurka*” is a poem from this collection so mocking and satire have been used by the poet to help her convey her vision of the world Modern Man lives in as Hell. In this world, there are only materialism and apathy. Modern Man builds a new ruthless material world. In his pursuit of money and material gain, Modern Man has lost himself, his ties with his fellow beings, nature and even his God; for him nothing is sacred. He reduces even the ancient gods to commonplace pathetic figures.

In “*Elegy for a Dead Fashion*” (1926), the poet exhibits a nostalgia for the sacred, for divine mythology. She sketches an idyllic, paradise-like world populated by nymphs, gods and goddesses and that is only to lament later the loss of this world. The poet states that “*The nymphs are dead like the summer roses;*” (l. 8 CP) and with the death of those divine

maidens, the golden idyllic world vanishes and what replaces it is a ruthless material world.

Edith Sitwell complains of Modern Man's materialism stressing that "civilizations as well as individuals can become moribund, lapsing from sacramental unity with God and nature to a sterile and degraded materialism."⁽⁵⁾ Modern man "erects a thriving commercial system" on the shore of the old vanishing world and in this world "what once was sacred is now for sale."⁽⁶⁾

In this poem the nymphs, gods and goddesses of the ancient idyllic world "drift in a scene which has been overlaid by the deathliness and decay of the modern world"⁽⁷⁾, as in the following lines:

*Rich as tomb each dress !oh, pity these!
I think the rich died young, and no one sees
The young loved face show for a fading while
Though that death-mask, the sad and cynic smile.*

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*These living skeletons blown by the wind
Were Cleopatra, Thais. . . age unkind
Has shrunken them so feeble and so small
That Death will never comfort them at all.*

*They are so poor they seem to have put by
The outworn fashion of the flesh !They lie
Naked and bare in their mortality
Waiting for Death to warm them, childishly.*

(ll. 87-94 CP)

Here the poet presents them as fashionable ladies wearing Victorian clothes and as the clothes they wear they are outmoded. They are out of date and lost and irrevocable just like the clothes they wear.

One of the goddesses the poet has revised in this poem is Venus, the immortal goddess of love and beauty who is now simply “..... *a statue mouldering on the wall /Noiseless and broken now. . . .*” (ll. 316-317 CP). This icon of physical beauty has been revised; she is no longer immortal, beautiful or powerful; she is now subject to the destructive power of ruthless Time. The poet addresses her saying:

*Venus, you too have known the anguished cold
The crumbling years, the fear of growing old!*

(ll. 320-321 CP)

Venus has been revised to an ordinary figure, she is just like any woman, experienced the fear of getting old, the fear of the inevitable cold death. Years affected her, Time took away her youth, her power and her beauty. Time is to be feared, not only by Venus but also by all the other gods and goddesses who had been reduced to earthy creatures who have no power over their destiny. Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul, has turned to “. . . *become a kitchenmaid;*” (l. 363 CP), while other gods have been revised to puppets mocked by Time, the poet states that:

*The gods, Time-crumbled into marionette.
Death fray their ageless bodies, hunger frets
Them, till at last, like us, they dance
Upon the old dull string pulled now by Chance.*

(ll. 374-377 CP)

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Time had a tremendous effect on those gods who used to be immortals, powerful and divine. Gods had been crumbled into puppets; they turned to be just “*like us,*” since in this new world the gods are “*..... no larger than Ourselves,*” (l. 367CP). They have been revised to marionette or puppets who share human beings a dance since they are all equal now. Both are the victims of ruthless Time and Chance. The ancient powerful gods came to share the ordinary human beings their fate. Time was really unconquerable and Death was inescapable.

In another poem entitled “*O Bitter Love, O Death. . .*” (1940s), a poem about aging and the final fate of man (i. e. death), the poet revises a well known mythical figure (i. e. Helen); The poem begins with the following lines:

*I Draw a stalk of dry grass through my lips
And heard it sigh
'Once I was golden Helen... but am now a thin
Dry stalk of quaking grass... What wind, what Paris
now world win
My love?—for I am drier than a crone.’*

(ll. 1-6 CP)

In these lines, the poet presents golden Helen reducing this icon of physical beauty to a blade of grass that is dry and old. Helen is sighing since she has lost her beauty and power and with the loss of these two features she has become undesirable thing. No one would fight for her love anymore, not even Paris. She is now weary old and subject to the power of destructive Time. She is expecting Death which will overcome everything even love. The poem ends with the

realization of the immense power of Death that comes to steal all that she owns.

Another symbol of beauty who has been used recurrently in Edith Sitwell's poetry is Venus, who reappears again in a poem entitled, "*Tears*" (1942). In this poem, Venus is presented as a symbol of the chaos that prevails the modern age. The poet states that among the things that she laments is Venus's body which has been revised to become a metaphysical city as in the following lines:

*I weep for Venus whose body has changed to a meta-
Physical city*

Whose heart-beat is now the sound of the revolutions.

(ll. 17-19 CP)

Venus is no longer the symbol of beauty and love since modern man has lost his sense of beauty; he is indifferent to other human beings. Beauty and love mean nothing to him since he is indulged in his meaningless life with a sole goal in his mind viz. gaining money and power by any means possible even if this leads to the death and destruction of his fellow beings. What causes the change of Venus causes also the change of love itself. The poet says that:

... love changed

To hospital mercy, the scientists' hope for the future,

And for darkened Man, that complex multiplicity

Of air and water, plant and animal,

Hard diamond, infinite sun.

(ll. 20-24 CP)

Love changes due to the darkness that fills man's heart. The economic and scientific advance and all the available

resources that man exploits, are not enough for him since his ambition is merely for money ignoring the fact that all this advance is supposed to be for the welfare of Man.

In “*The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age*” (1945), and “*Eurydice*” published in the same year, Venus is revised in two different ways. In “*The Poet Laments the Coming of Old Age*” Edith Sitwell compares herself with Venus; she presents herself as an old, wise woman who should bring back sight to the blind who lost their sight by their materialism and apathy saying:

*I saw great things mirrored in littleness,
Who now see only that great Venus wears Time's filthy
Dress—*

A toothless crone who once had the Lion's mouth.

(ll. 17-20 CP)

Venus is now an aging woman, a toothless crone. She yields to the tremendous power of Time which affects everything even Venus herself. Yet old age in this poem is associated with gaining of wisdom; the poet says:

*The weight of all Time's filth, and wisdom is not a hare
in the golden sack
Of the heart. . . . It can never be caught. Though I
Bring back sight to the blind
My seed of Folly has gone, that could teach me to bear
That the gold-sinewed body that had the blood of all the
Earth in its veins
Has changed to an old rage of the outworn world
And the great heart that the first Morning made
Should wear all Time's destruction for a dress.*

(ll. 43-52 CP)

Though Time has destructive effects that cause the loss of youth, beauty and power, yet it provides some people with wisdom needed to bear aging and the follies of the world drift out of its natural course due to materialism.

In “*Eurydice*” Venus, who is presented earlier as an old wise woman, is turned by the freezing hands of death to “. . . a handful of dry amber dust;” (l. 46 CP). Yet death is not portrayed as all powerful or grandiose; it is just a part of the cycle of life; it is not to be scared but willingly accepted.

Edith Sitwell, in this poem, has revised the whole myth not only Eurydice figure. In the original classical version of the myth, “Eurydice” tells that Orpheus’s young wife Eurydice died of snakebite and Orpheus went to the Hades to fetch her and through his love and charming singing she was allowed to return to earth. Yet Orpheus was told not to look back to the realm of Hades or he would have lost his wife again, but he looked back and that was how he lost his wife forever.⁽⁸⁾

In this myth Eurydice is a victim of Orpheus’s mistake. Yet in the revised version of this myth she has been revised, she is not a silent figure, she has been given a voice. The whole poem is in Eurydice’s voice. She tells her own experience of death and the underworld, an experience that endows her with wisdom and a better understanding of the cycle of life, she says:

*For as the Sun buries his hot days and rays
To ripen in earth, so the great rays of the heart
Are ripened to wisdom by Death, and great is our
forgiveness.* (ll. 14-16CP)

Eurydice compares between the sun with its creative energy and Death. For her, Death is like the sun, Death helps her gain wisdom and cope with her painful departure from her lover, Orpheus. So Death is by itself as necessary as the sun to the plant and to the whole world. Moreover, she states that one should not lose sight of truth, and despite the fact that death is an essential part in the cycle of life, Love is more important and powerful than Death as the lines suggest: “...All the weight of Death in all the world /Yet does not equal Love” (ll. 3-4CP). She continues saying that Love:

*... shines like fire. O bright gold of the heat of the Sun
Of Love across the dark fields--- burning away
rough husks of Death
Till all is fire, and bringing all to harvest !*

(ll. 7-9CP)

Love's regenerative power is like the heat of the sun that helps the seeds to grow out of their rough husks; Love is what helps Eurydice to survive her experience of death and the underworld and through her love to Orpheus she is led away from Death by her lover. So the power of love allows a rebirth out of Death.

The poem ends with Eurydice being led away from the underworld. She describes her meeting with Orpheus saying:

*I with other young who were born from darkness,
Returning to the darkness, stood at the mouth of the
Tomb
With one who had come glittering like the wind
To meet me ---- Orpheus with the golden mouth,
You like Adonis born from the young myrrh-tree, you,*

The vine-branch

*Broken by the wind of love.... I turned to greet you---
And when I touched your mouth, it was the sun.*

(ll. 76-82CP)

The coming of Orpheus to the mouth of the Tomb is like the coming of spring that brings with it life and rebirth. He leads her away from the darkness of the underworld into the light and this is the real power of Love that overcomes even Death.

To sum up revision of mythical figures is one of the forms Edith Sitwell chose to help her convey her ideas. She also utilizes revision to create her social satire and to convey her messages that she embodied in her poems. The revision of great, all powerful figures to commonplace and even pathetic figures reveal the poet's vision of a world that crumbled into dust due to materialism, a world populated by careless material people who have no faith or belief in anything. People reduced their gods to mere puppets since for them nothing is sacred.

In the landscape sketched in her poems, Edith Sitwell stresses that civilization is rotting away and through revision of mythical figures the poet hopes that she could awaken Man by taking the strongest mythical figures and revise them to help him realize his dilemma and attempt to find solutions and to adjust his life. This is the pivot of the poet's mission as the poet's aim is to produce poetry that endowed Man with wisdom he needs to overcome the crisis of his life.

Notes

1. Maurice Bowra, *Edith Sitwell* (Monaco: The Lyrebird Press, 1947), p. 16
2. Bowra, p. 17
3. Edith Sitwell, *Collected Poems* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958), p. 141. All quotations from Edith Sitwell's work, unless otherwise noted, are from this edition, and will be indicated by **CP**, and only lines' number will appear in parentheses.
4. For more information about all the mythical figures discussed in this paper see Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardo, *Classical Mythology* (New York: Longman Inc., 1977).
5. John Ower, "Edith Sitwell: Metaphysical Medium and Metaphysical Message", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 16 (1970), 258.
6. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. , "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell" in *Chicago Review*, vol. 14(1961), p. 46.
7. Dergh Rees Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Nourthumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2005), p. 56.
8. See Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardo.

Reference

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تحويل الشخصيات الأسطورية في شعر إيدث سيتويل

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المستخلص

يعد التحويل في الشخصيات الأسطورية لدى الشعراء تقليداً سائداً في شعر القرن العشرين.

وتعد الشاعرة إيدث سيتويل رمزاً للحدثة حيث يعكس شعرها اهتماماً كبيراً بالأساطير الكلاسيكية إذ قامت الشاعرة بدمج الشخصيات الأسطورية في شعرها الحديث إلا أنها حورت تلك الشخصيات مضيفة إليها معاني جديدة بما يتلاءم مع الفكرة التي تحاول إيصالها للقارئ.

يتناول هذا البحث كيفية استخدام تحويل الشخصيات الأسطورية في شعر إيدث سيتويل فضلاً عن مناقشة مجموعة من القصائد المختارة في ضوء تحويلها الشخصيات الأسطورية والدوافع الكامنة وراء ذلك التحويل والأهداف التي تسعى الشاعرة لتحقيقها من خلال التحويل. علماً أن القصائد المختارة في هذا البحث مرتبة حسب تسلسلها الزمني في الظهور.

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