# The Tragedy in the Creation of the "Mask":

## W. B. Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"*

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In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," the speaker struggles with his adversity. The speaker's adversity is generally associated with Black and Tan Terror in Ireland 1919-21. However Yeats did not depict but imagine the picture of the terror because, as Frank Tuohy points out, the misery as described in this poem in fact did not take place until 1920 (71). By his own imagination, the speaker's anxiety becomes enlarged beyond the actual events. In his enlarged imagination, his struggle against his anxiety climactically becomes violent. It is the fierce struggle of imagination against imagination : the imagination about the tragic history on the one hand and the imagination of the self-assurance against his tragedy on the other.

After all, the latter imagination cannot overcome the former. No matter which of them might win their war, their struggle itself has a significant meaning. This is because it is the creation of the "self." It is Yeatsian peculiar "self" which is called either "antiself" or "mask." Among his poetical works, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" especially contains the process of the creation of the "mask." And the poem is not an mere explanation of the concept of the "mask" but a manifesting practice of the creation of the "mask." This essay aims to examine the process in this poem.

# I

The concept of the "mask" is one of typically Yeatsian ones. In Yeats's doctrine, the "mask" is always related to the concept of the "antiself" which is inevitably associated with the "self" as its opponent. Therefore to deal with Yeats's concept of the "mask" is identical with considering about the problems which are concerned with his "self."

Yeats's "mask" is sometimes a psychological defense against being hurt. However, as Irving Seiden observes, for Yeats, it is not "a cowardly escape from or a mere negation of life," but "a discipline which, if we would be truly happy and truly virtuous, we impose upon ourselves" (60). His "mask" is not the negative means of self-concealment but, on the contrary, the aggressive one by which he could harmoniously get along with others under particular conditions. Accordingly Yeats explains in *A Vision* that the "mask" is like a role which one should undertake in a particular play (84).

There are two significant points which should be remarked in Yeats's doctrine of the "mask." First, according to the discipline, one should adjust oneself to the conditions of objective situations. In this sense, the concept of the "mask" is quite deterministic and even oppressive. One cannot freely create nor select his own "mask." The selection of the "mask" is restricted under particular conditions. Like the roles in plays, the "masks" presuppose necessary norms of performances which should be imposed upon the players.

Nevertheless, in contrast to its deterministic feature, the concept of the "mask" shows its flexibility to a certain degree. Although it is quite restricted, the creation of one's "mask" is solely left to himself. No one else is expected to prepare a "mask" for him nor could impose one on him. It means that the "mask" cannot be supposed without the existence of its wearer. Only one's will, if not entirely free, can enable his mask to emerge.

This is because the "mask" inevitably works together with the "self" as its basis.

In this way, the "mask" is produced under the two opposed factors : the objective conditions from the outer and the subjective will from the inner self. The "mask" is the in-between mental entity which is supposed to emanate in the coflict between the outer world and the "self." But it cannot be easily concluded that the two factors are given equal significances. Either of them should play the prior role to the other in the creation of the "mask." This leads to the question whether there exists the determined "self" which can self-consciously produce or select its own "mask," or the outer conditions peremptorily force the "self" to wear its "mask." Although it is obvious that it depends on the case, as for the case of Yeats, the latter holds true, especially when it comes to his heroic posture.

It is true that Yeats favors the "mask" which can be willingly selected by the "self." But his self-conscious "self" can be hardly found in his works. As the "mask" is called the "antiself," there should be the "self" as its precondition. Nevertheless, the "self" is not depicted in the explicit picture. This fact explains the peculiarity of Yeatsian "self." Concerning this matter, Terence Diggory writes as follows :

> For Wordsworth, the self was given or, at most, discovered ; for Yeats, the self was created. In the process of being created, the self becomes distanced or externalized. It is literally *ex-pressed*, but not as in romantic expression, because Yeats's externalized self differs from the internal self where it originated. Once externalized, the self is viewed not as the poet's content but rather as a form to be entered into ; it is the mask or antiself that must be pursued throughout life. (5)

There are two important points in Diggory's remark. One is that Yeatsian

"self" is not given but created. The other is that the created "self" is "antiself" which should be differentiated from the "internal self."

Although the "self" and the "antiself" seem to contradict each other, they are not wholly alien to each other. The "antiself" is not so opposite an entitiy to the "self" as the word indicates. On the contrary, during the process of its creation, the "antiself" cannot be distinguished from the "self." At the moment when its creation is finished, the "antiself" is for the first time differentiated from the "self." Then the "antiself" becomes recognized as the "antiself" which can be objectified by the "internal self."

How it should be considered what the "self" itself is like. The "self" is not only undifferentiated from the "antiself" at the beginning of its creation but a very obscure entity along with the "antiself." Then, after the "antiself" has been differentiated from the "self" and clearly objectified, has the "self" itself been made specified ? It is difficult to consider that it has. Even after the completion of the "antiself," the "self" itself is still a vague blank which can just defined as "not-antiself." It does not mean that what the "self" itself is like is elucidated. The "self" still remains the shadow behind the "mask."

The obscurity of the "self" itself, however, designates the significance of the creation of the "mask." While the objectification of the "mask," that is the "antiself," is the recognition of what is not the "self" on the one hand, the recognition, at the same time, works as the delineation of the "self" on the other. Through the creation of the "mask," though indirectly, it is assured that there is the "self" which is different from the "antiself."

The assurance of the "self" through the creation of the "mask," however, causes a tragedy in Yeats's case, especially in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." As Diggory asserts in the passage cited before, the externalized "mask" becomes the ultimate ideal for Yeats to pursue throughout his life. But the "mask" can be never identified with the "self." The delineating

chasm between the two never disappears. When the passion of creating of the "mask" is cooled down, the cynical "self," which no longer appreciates but criticizes the "antiself," emerges. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," this twofold process, the creating and criticizing of the "mask" is dramatized.

## II

As in the study of Otto Bohlmann, Yeats's concept of the "antiself" is often considered in the context of his heroic ideal (130-39). The "antiself" of the speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is the heroic self whose characteristics of his ideal shall be explicated later. It is a hero who faces an adversity with his undaunted courage. The speaker begins the poem by declaring that he is a sufferer. It is widely known that Yeats himself was disappointed with the contemporary state of his homeland in which the movements for its independence was breeding excessive bloodsheds. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," his disappointment is turned into the perilous predicament for the speaker. And as G. J. Watson remarks, the adversity in which the speaker is a sufferer consists the indispensable precondition of the creating of his heroic "antiself" (137).

The speaker's anguish stems from the sense of loss. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" opens with his declaration that his favorite artifacts of Greece have already been lost :

> Many ingenious lovely things are gone
> That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
> Protected from the circle of the moon
> That pitches common things about. There stood
> Amid the ornamental bronze and stone

> An ancient image made of olive wood —
> And gone are Phidias' famous ivories
> And all the golden grasshoppers and bees. (1-8)

"The circle of the moon" in the third line represents "mutability" in Yeatsian symbolism. The "uncommon" artifacts which have seemed indestructible to the speaker have been lost now. This is a kind of nostalgia which is similar to those in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Ancestral Houses," the first poem of "Meditations in Time of Civil War." In the former, Yeats yearns for the spiritually satisfied life in the ancient city of Byzantium, and, in the latter, he dreams of the aristcratic life of the Ascendancy.

The speakers of "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Ancestral Houses" positively make the imaginative reconstruction of their old ideals, and thus they revive them in the poems. On the other hand, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," the speaker's favorite artifacts are completely lost. Therefore they are nothing but the cause of his sense of loss and are no consolation for him. He does not intend to revive them in this poem any more.

The speaker's sense of loss is associated with more emergent loss than the loss of his favorite artifacts. Strictly speaking, the latter is only the metaphor of the former. The emergent loss for the speaker is related to the present misery of Ireland. He sees a collapse of the social order in it. The order which regulated the public minds once existed in his youth and seemed to endure for a long time like the Grecian artifacts. But now it does not work any more because it is neither observed nor respected by the raising scoundrels :

> We too had many pretty toys when young ;
> A law indifferent to blame or praise,
> To bribe or threat ; habits that made old wrong

> Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays ;
> Public opinion ripening for so long
> We thought it outlive all future days.
> O what fine thought we had because we thought
> That the worst rogues and rascals had died out. (9-16)

These lines form the second stanza of the poem which follows the passage in which the speaker declares the loss of Grecian artifacts. The two stanzas are parallels. The wane of the former order, "a law," "habits" or "public opinion" is as fatal for him as the loss of his favorite artifacts.

His reproach of this loss, however, is directed not to the obsolete order itself but to the volatileness of the people's minds. The social order does not change by itself, nor do the ancient artifacts, regardless of their material durability. It is attributed to the human mind to make the social order out of use and to burn up or sell away the inheritance of the humankind. What has changed is the human mind. The third stanza of "Nineteen Hundredand Nineteen" depicts how the corruption of the human mind has emasculated the once-valiant army :

> All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,
> And a great army but a showy thing ;
> What matter that no cannon had been turned
> Into a ploughshare ? Parliament and king
> Thought that unless a litte powder burned
> The trumpeters might burst with trumpeting
> And yet it lack all glory ; and perchance
> The guardsmen's drowsy chargers would not prance. (17-24)

Indeed the cannons of the army have not been turned into ploughshares. The physical appearance of the army itself is still maintained : the number

of soldiers, the horses, the cannons and powder which should not be burned for the unnecessary use. But the people including "parliament," "king" and the soldiers have already lost their morale. It is the human mind that has neglected "all ancient tricks" and made the great army "but a showy thing."

It is a kind of morality that the speaker of this poem laments for as what was lost in the decline of the people's minds of his time. It is the morality which observes the social order, keeps the evilness out and preserves the inheritance of the humankind. Now the morality disappears from the people's minds and the cruel disorder diffuses :

> Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
> Rides upon sleep : a drunken soldiery
> Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
> To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free ; (25-28)

As the study of Yeats's manuscripts by Curtis B. Bradford shows, Yeats sticked to the image of the murdered mother in the process of his writing of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (64-80). The female figure is essential to this poem as the sacrifice of the soldiers' immorality.

The loss of morality in the people's minds is decisive to the speaker's sense of loss. This is because the immorality deprives him of any hopes of recovery, that is, the recovery of the social order which is related to the peaceful society in the actual sense and consequently the tranquility of the speaker's mind. But the recovery is no longer possible. Thus his sense of loss make a hole in his mind which could be never compensated any more.

Moreover, what is cruel for the speaker is that the time seems to get worse. This ominous presentiment is based on Yeats's view of cyclical history which was about to result in as *A Vision* at the time of his creation of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." In this poem, the speaker observes

the image of cyclical human history in the gyrating ribbon of the Chinese dancers :

> When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
> A shining web, a floating ribbon of Cloth,
> It seemed that a dragon of air
> Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
> Or hurried them off on its own furious path ;
> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead ;
> All men are dancers and their tread
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (49-58)

According to Sylvia C. Ellis, the Chinese dancers were in fact Japanese (161-62). Yeats seems to have made an mistake in his recollecting of Fuller's performance. But whether their nationality might be Chinese or Japanese, their esoteric whirling of ribbon must have reflected in his eyes as the revolving of histrical gyre of his symbolic system.

As P. Th. M. G. Liebreghts points out, it is not impossible to read a hope into the whirling of the "Platonic Year," that is the "hope for the inevible return of better times" (325). As "new wrong" comes, "new right" might well come. But the whole atmosphere of this stanza cannot allow such an easy optimism to emerge. The "dragon of air" evokes "The Book of Revelations of St. John the Divine" in which a ferocious dragon is cast out from heaven at the time of judgement and terrifies the world. It is hardly possible to observe any hopes in the "furious path" of the dragon. Moreover, the image of men's tread which is accompanied by "the barbarous clangour of a gong" presents no sense of hope. As if the uncanny sound of the gong might prophesy their misfortunes, their tread seems grave.

Although what they are is never clarified, the speaker of this poem obviously feels a premonition of coming threats. The threats are weirdly putting pressure on his mind. At the same time, he also feels the sense of loss. Therefore the coming threats can easily take advantage of his sense of loss. It is no difficult task for the oppressive anxiety to rush into the hole of loss. Thus the speaker's mind is about to be suffocated by the sense of loss and the coming threats.

## III

Then, the speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" converts his predicament into the opportunity in which he could assure his heroic self. He translates his predicament into the source of his motivation of creating his "antiself." He accomplishes this translation of his predicament by employing the peculiar mixture of Yeatsian solipsistic heroism and the purgatorial concept.

At first the speaker of this poem overcomes his sense of loss by his solipsistic heroism. His heroism enables him to take a decisive posture which can stand face to face with the fact of loss :

> He who can read the signs nor sink unmanned
> Into the half-decceit of some intoxicant
> From shallow wits ; who knows no work can stand,
> Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent
> On master-work of intellect or hand,
> No honour leave its mighty monument,
> Has but one comfort left : all triumph would
> But break upon his ghostly solitude. (33-40)

As his declaration that he is not "unmanned" shows, confronting the loss of the morality of the people, he never shuts his eyes to nor turns his back on it. On the contrary, he fixes his eyes on it like a hero.

He knows that the masterpieces which have been produced with great pains cannot last for a long time after their creators die and that even the crowns which are gained by bold braveries cannot be maintained after their masters pass away. Whether they might been broken down, thrown away or merely forgotten, their memories cannot remain in the people's minds. The speaker feels that a certain evilness has already intruded into their minds.

As he asserts, he can "read the signs" which indicates the present but unrecognizable disaster. Although the ominous "signs" themselves are the very causes of his uneasiness, he never deceives himself by taking "some intoxicant." This proves his manly decision that he would never participate in the immoral conducts nor allow the people with immoral minds to come around him. He declares that he is not a coward with "shallow wits" but a heroic man with the decisive courage. By defining himself as such he differentiates himself from the immoral people.

Yeats's solipsistic heroism has some peculiarities. At first, it is connected with the act of "being defeated." He finds his heroic significance not in the result as being defeated but the process in which heroes fight without any hopes of triumph. This means that what counts for his heroism is not the match itself but the cause for the fighting. Yeats's belief in the Irish legendary hero Cuchulain clearly proves it and so does the negation of "all triumph" which is expressed by the speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

As remarked before, the speaker's recognition of the differentiated status never allows others to share his role. He never qualify anyone to do that. This is partly because the other people are not only unable to "read

the signs" but also the very criminals of the immorality who destroyed and cast away the precious memories of human history. In this way, he is alienated from others by alienating them.

Moreover, he must fight alone because this struggle is solely for himself. The appreciation of the cause for onself is also significant in Yeats's heroism. How he stresses on the personal cause can be explicated by the comparison of his heroism with the concept of public heroes. Alex Zwerdling remarks both the differences and the common points of the two heroisms. Zwerdling says that, for Yeats, the public heroes, the patoriots, warriors or statesmen, are hardly themselves and completely the crowd because they lead public lives, and their actions are "connected with certain larger and impersonal issues, opinions, and political points of view" (106). Yeats scorned them because they are least themselves.

But there are some exceptions in his unfavorite heroes. He admitted and admired those who have their own causes and, at the same time, act for the public profits. But, in this case, the public profits must be consistent with their personal causes. The latter are given absolute priority to the former. When they act for themselves, they are most themselves. What is significant for Yeats is whether their acts are for themselves or not. And it is also true of the the speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

By this solipsistic heroism, he is trying to overcome his sense of loss. He alienates himself from the other people who have been already tainted by immorality and transforms the hopeless struggle into the testimony of his undaunted bravery. As long as this struggle is for himself, it is his self-assurance in the sense that he is most "himself" in the struggle.

But the suppression of the sense of loss does not become the sufficient consolation for him. Indeed the speaker asks himself right after his declaration of the heroic posture, "But is there any comfort to be found ?" (41). As Thomas R. Whitaker points out, his waver to the heroic solitude

can be seen in this anxious soliloquy because his "ghostly solitude" lacks its firmness (225). As the ambiguous word "break" implies, his "ghostly solitude" apparently seems to reject the worldly triumph, but in fact the triumph never ceases to distress him.

But the speaker's self-confidence aginst his predicament has not been fully established yet. It is still in the climactical process of its formation and is going to be reinforced by the purgatorial concept. In the third section of this poem, the speaker's soul against his predicament is presented in the firmer metaphor, this time, not in the image of a shadowy ghost but a vivid swan :

> Some moralist or mythological poet
> Compares the solitary soul to a swan ;
> I am satisfied with that,
> Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,
> Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,
> An image of its state ;
> The wings half spread for flight,
> The breast thrust out in pride
> Whether to play, or to ride
> Those winds that clamour of approaching night. (59-68)

"Some moralist or mythological poet" in this passage is assumed to be identical with Yeats himself and, at the same time, the speaker of this poem. Either of them finds the metaphor of his solitary soul as a gallant swan.

It is obvious that the solipsistic heroism, which has been discussed before, can be perceived in the metaphor of the swan. The picture in which the swan is about to fly aginst the approaching stormy night is similar to that of the undaunted hero who puts himself into a fight with no hope of triumph.

With the brave swan, at the same time, the implication of death is associated : "Before that brief gleam of its life be gone." The connotation of death has already been seen in the phrase "his ghostly self." However, as the metaphor of the swan is so manifesting that the contrast between the lively swan and its death seems more distinct and impressive. Moreover, it can be said that the strength of the swan are reinforced by the connotation of its death. In this reinforcement, there works the complemental role of the purgatorial concept to Yeatsian solipsistic heroism. The purgatorial concept enables his ideal heroism to convert the inevitable death which it necessarily predicates into more positive end.

The purgatory is the purification by means of death. As F. A. C. Wilson points out in his study of Yeats's later play "Purgatory," Yeats's purgatorial concept is based on his theory of soul's purification which is presented as "The Soul in Judgement" in his A Vision (137-61). By this concept he establishes the beatitude after death which is similar to the access to godlike existences. And this beatitude which is promissed for the pious, this time the brave hero, nullifies the fear of death. The speaker of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" expresses his hopeful appreciation of the death as follows :

> A man in his own secret meditation
> Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made
> In art or politics ;
> Some Platonist affirms that in the station
> Where we should cast off body and trade
> The ancient habit sticks,
> and that if our works could
> But vanish with our breath
> That were a lucky death,
> For triumph can but mar our solitude. (69-78)

At this stage of this poem, the repetitive rejection of the worldly triumph becomes no longer a show of courage but an essential clause of his self-assurance.

For the purification of his soul, the secular triumph like fames and monuments is merely his burden. Even if it has been created by himself, the worldly triumph hinders his way to the purification like a "labyrinth." Moreover, it is even assumed to fetter him when he should take "a lucky death." There seems to be no frastration that the worldly triumph has brought his "ghostly self" in the former stage. Now the speaker manfully rejects it.

In addition, as a natural result, the purgatorial concept enables the speaker to accept the eschatological atmosphere more positively. This is because the approaching moment of the apocalyptic judgement could be turned into even a lucky opportunity for him. By the very judgement, he can purify himself and gain the beatitude of his soul. The apocalypse is both the end and the beginning at the same time. For the speaker, it is sure that the moment should announce the end of his uneasiness and the beginning of his beatitude.

In this way, his self-assurance is reinforced by the purgatorial concept along with his solipsistic heroism and, finally, it becomes an autogenous force accompanied with self-destructive fierceness :

> The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven :
> That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
> To end all things, to end
> What my laborious life imagined, even
> the half-imagined, the half-written page ;
> O but we dreamed to mend
> Whatever mischief seemed

To afflict mankind, but now
That winds of winter blow
Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (79-88)

The speaker feels in himself so strong a passion as to overthrow his own half-made products by himself. And he completely denies the hopeless dream of mending what "afflicts mankind."

Harold Bloom identifies the speaker's repulsive rage against his predicament with that of Percy Bysshe Shelley when he is struggling with "a violence from without" at the overwhelming sight of Mont Blanc (358). The speaker's self-conscious rage now gives him a strong self-assurance. This self-conscious posture, which has been created in this way, is undoubtedly his "mask." Thus the speaker completes his self-assured "mask" which is fiercely "expressd" in the form of a swan.

## IV

Although his ideal "mask" has been accomplished, the "mask" is not identical with the speaker's "self." As discussed in the first section, the "mask" should be differentiated from the "self." Accordingly, the speaker's solipsistic heroism as his "antiself" becomes objectified by his "self" and criticized as an indifferent posture. After the speaker mocks at "the great," "the wise" and "the good" all of whom were powerless before the inhuman force of history, his mockery is directed toward his indifferent posture itself :

Mock mockers after that
that would not lift a hand maybe
To help good, wise or great

> To bar that foul storm out, for we
> Traffic in mockery. (108-12)

His strong self-assersion as seen in his "antiself" disappears in this passage, and his voice merges into ecstatic "we." And the indifferent mockers including his "antiself" become the objects of his self-mockery because he now realizes that they are worse than the powerless persons.

The speaker's self-mockery indicates a significant problem which Yeats's concept of the "antiself" entails. It is, again, the fact that the "antiself" is not the "self." Although the "antiself" originates from the "self," the former cannot be identified with the latter after they are differentiated from each other. And because the "self" is after all an obscure and incomplete blank which cannot be defined, the creation of the "antiself" must always result in the production of the "not-self." Therefore the creation of Yeatsian "antiself" must "traffic" in the unceasing production of the "not-self."

What fills the blank of the speaker's "self" after his "antiself" has been objectified is the terror of the violent inhuman force which only the speaker can predict :

> Violence upon the roads : violence of horses ;
> Some few have hand some riders, are garlanded
> On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,
> But wearied running round and round in their courses
> All break and vanish, and evil gathers head :
> Herodias' daughters have returned again,
> A sudden blast of dusty wind and after
> Thunder of feet, tumult of images,
> Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind ;
> And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter

All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,
According to the wind, for all are blind.
But now wind drops, dust settles ; thereupon
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks. (113-30)

As Georges Denis Zimmerman remarks, the whirlwind-like dancing of the daughters of Herodias in this passage represents destructiveness in contrast to the dancing in the end of "Among School Children" which symbolizes Yeatsian notion of unity (60). And after the destructive wind settles, an unearthly being, Robert Artisson, advents like the "rough beast" in "The Second Coming." Concerning with the replacement of Herodias' daughters by Robert Artisson, M. L. Rosenthal points out the advent of the fiercer inhuman force (243). The speaker is again forced to realize that the time gets worse.

But the speaker has already abandoned the resistance against the overwhelming inhuman force of history. This is the moment of Yeatsian "tragic joy." It is not the sensation which is perceived in the rageous struggle against the tragic predicament but the paradoxical pleasure which is felt when he accepts the tragedy as it is. As B. L. Reid defines it, the emotion "purifies the *merely* sad and conducts its transcendence" : "That is the elevating and liberating emotion which transcends pathos" (89-90). Now the speaker just leaves himself ecstatically in the paradoxical joy.

The moment of ecstacy is an inevitable result which the creation of the "mask" must bring about. And the fiercer its creating passion is, the more grave the apathy after the creation must be. It is a tragedy in the sense that

the speaker never becomes assured of his true "self" and endlessly goes through the drastic exhaution of his passion of creating his "antiself." In this way, the true tragedy of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" rests not in the misery of the contemporary Ireland but in the speaker's resultant apathy of his creation of the "mask."

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## Synopsis


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W. B. Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"

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This essay aims to examine how "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" dramatizes Yeatsian concept of the "mask." The concept of the "mask" is one of typically Yeatsian ones. As the "mask" is alternatively called the "antiself," the concept is connected with the problem of the "self." Terence Diggory asserts that Yeatsian "self" is not given but created. In the creation of the "self," the "externalized self" becomes differentiated from the "internal self." The "externalized self" is so-called the "antiself."

While the "antiself" is explicitly defined, the "internal self," which should be called just the "self" in contrast to the "antiself," remains obscure. The "self" can be only defined as the "not-antiself." On the other hand, however, the creation of the "antiself" is important in the sense that it is the delineation of the obscure "self."

But the delineating chasm between the "self" and the "antiself" never disappears. This fact causes a tragedy in Yeats's case, especially in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." For Yeats, and for the speaker of this poem at the same time, the "mask" should be the ultimate ideal. Nevertheless, their "selves" can never be identified with their ideal "antiselves."

After the explication of the concept of the "mask" in the first section, the following two sections are dedicated to the examining of the speaker's "antiself" in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." His "mask" is a heroic "self." It is the hero who faces an adversity with his undaunted courage. And the heroic "self" is created by the repulsive force of mind against the adversity. In the second section, the speaker's adversity as the preconditions of the creation of his "antiself" is classified into "the sense of loss" and "the apocalyptic threat."

The third section exemplifies how the speaker overcomes his adversity. He

employs two strategies. One is Yeatsian heroic concept and the other is the purgatorial one. The two concepts brings out the speaker's repulsive force of mind against his predicament, and, in the sensation, he assures his heroic "self" as his "mask."

In the third section, the objectification of the "antiself" by the "self" is examined. The speaker's heroic "self" becomes eventually criticized by the "self" as a indifferent posture. His heroic "mask" becomes recognized as the "not-self." The tragedy of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is the speaker's realization of the unceasing production of the "not-self."