The Duality of Clowns in W. B. Yeats's "The Mask"– Who is the 'I'?

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Abstract: This article offers a close reading of William Butler Yeats's "The Mask" (1910), a poem that has generated diverse critical interpretations, particularly concerning themes of gender and theatricality. Critics have read the poem through a biographical lens – often situating it within the personal life and romantic experiences of the poet himself. Unlike such interpretations, this study shifts the focus to the poem's rhetoric, visual imagery, and the layered symbolism of the "mask." By following semiotic reading (Ferdinand de Saussure), the analysis decodes the language, decenters the most literal meanings, and examines the figure of the clown through evocative phrases such as "burning gold" and "emerald eyes". In this study, we aim to interpret the clown not merely as a performative or external figure, but also as a metaphor for the fragmented and conflicted inner self – an identity concealed beneath layers of artifice and aesthetic expression. Drawing on the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of otherness, the essay interprets the clown's identity through the dynamics of the big Other and the small other, demonstrating how these forces simultaneously shape and destabilize the 'I'. It explores the conflict between the inner

voice behind the mask and the power imposed by social norms. Ultimately, the essay proposes a philosophically informed reading of Yeats's poem, one that foregrounds its rhetorical texture and symbolic depth rather than limiting its interpretation to personal biography. This act highlights the enduring richness of Yeats's poetic vision and its capacity to engage with the profound questions of selfhood, perception, and representation.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, mask, clown, identity, otherness

Introduction

William Butler Yeats's "*The Mask*" was originally published in 1910 within his collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (Gould 2013, 9). Structurally, the poem comprises three stanzas of five lines each, resulting in a total of fifteen lines.[1] The fifteen-line verse captures the clown's duality through an internal dialogue, marked by the use of quotation marks enclosing the entire poem. This formal choice reflects a tension between the speaker's voice and the projected image shaped to satisfy the social gaze, symbolized by the recurring motif of "emerald eyes." In general terms, Yeats's verse has been examined through a variety of interpretive frameworks, each shedding light on different aspects of his work; for instance, Hussein (2024) argues that Yeats employs the concept of the mask as a literary device to explore the tension between outward appearances and inner emotions. According to Hussein, while the mask gleams with brilliance, it simultaneously acts as a barrier, preventing two passionate lovers from openly expressing their sentiments. These lovers are fully conscious of their emotions, yet the presence of the mask inhibits them from revealing their sensibilities. The critic then interprets Yeats's poetic exploration through a biographical lens, suggesting that the poet's text reflects his personal experiences with love and relationships, as well as his yearning to unveil authentic emotions beneath the surface (2024, 142-157).

In contrast, Jin (2016) provides a broader philosophical perspective, asserting that Yeats's overarching ambition in his poetry is to achieve what he calls "unity of being." This concept refers to the harmony that arises from the reconciliation

1 "Spore." *Phantasmagoria*. Writing@CSU: The Writing Gallery. Colorado State University. 2005. https://writing.colostate.edu/gallery/phantasmagoria/spore.htm

of conflicting forces, such as emotions and reason. Furthermore, Jin views the mask in Yeats's work as a dramatic symbol, representing the constructed social self. That is to say, it functions as both a protective shield and an alluring presence, revealing the complexities of self-presentation (2016, 4). In addition, the mask embodies the poet's theme of the "anti-self" and the interplay of oppositional forces. In other words, Jin claims that Yeats had thought that the unity of emergence through the dynamic tensions between the self and its antithetical counterpart illustrates how personal and universal conflicts can lead to profound harmony and creative synthesis. Besides these critics, Lindy Spore (2005) argues that the poet's representation of the mask suggests that the concept of identity is awakened in both character and the audience through poetic drama, achieved by what he calls "the deliberate creation of the great mask," exploring the distinction between the self and the mask, which suggests that the self is split and that a form of unity can be achieved by setting one part of the self against the Other (2005, 5). Similarly, Levine (1977) sheds light on the concept of the mask, stating that it is related to the theory of anti-self, and the central conviction is that a person finds themselves by searching for their opposite, which Yeats calls "either mask." Through the disguise of an anti-self, the poet reconciles with everything beyond the individual, with what has been concealed from everyday awareness, and with what connects him to a larger, collective consciousness. Levine further states that whether we frame this process in existential, Freudian, Jungian, or classical aesthetic terms is less important than understanding that it represents the core way of imagining in Yeats's work. Although the poet expresses a deep discomfort with the everyday self, he does not propose that adopting a mask is necessary for writing poetry (1997, 11-16). Carberg (1974) thinks that the mask represents the poet's desire, or at least what he wants to present to the world, but it is always shaped by the opposite phase of his nature; for example, the deeply individualistic romantic figure often dreams of returning to a more primal and natural state (144-154). According to Cade-Stewart (2013), this poem presents a reimagined version of the poetic mask—that of the political balladeer. In contrast to the portrayal of O'Rahilly in Stephens's poem, the O'Rahilly depicted here is determined to raise his voice, openly criticizing the leaders of the Rising for excluding him from their plans, just as they had previously marginalized Yeats.

Unlike these interpretations, this essay follows a different approach to analyze Yeats's "The Mask," deliberately setting aside traditional interpretations

grounded in biographical or historical references. Instead, it adopts a Saussurean linguistic framework to unravel the language and explore the multiple layers of meaning embedded in each line of the verse. In other words, a semiotic approach makes it possible to offer theoretical ways of reading the text (Saussure 1972).[2] Put simply, in this study, we focus on the linguistic codes, metaphors, and the subtler, often hidden, messages within the text. The primary objective of this analysis is to illuminate how the linguistic structures of the language function to reveal the underlying logic and principles governing specific terms and expressions. Through a close reading, the study seeks to uncover the deeper mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. In particular, the analysis focuses on the duality embodied by the figure of the clown, interpreting this dualism through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis of the construction of the 'I'. This theoretical intersection enables a complex exploration of identity, self-perception, and symbolic representation within the poem.

The Lacanian "I" and the Dialectics of Otherness

Yeats's "The Mask" seems to examine the concept of identity as constructed through performance, exploring the tensions between the self and its projected persona. Strikingly, the poetic motif of the mask functions not merely as a disguise but as a metaphor for the self's construction through external images and symbolic expectations. This dynamic resonates deeply with Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly his concepts of subjectivity, otherness, and the symbolic order.

Lacan's earliest references to 'the other' in the 1930s were relatively unspecialized, echoing Freud's usage of *Der Andere* ("the other person") and *Das Andere* ("the more abstract notion of otherness or alterity"). Initially, the term simply denoted 'others' as external individuals. Eventually, Lacan's understanding evolved dramatically, especially after his engagement with Hegelian philosophy – mediated through Alexandre Kojeve's lectures on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in Paris (1933–1939). Kojeve's interpretation of Hegel emphasized the dialectic of recognition and the role of the Other in the formation

2 Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that signs are made up of two components. He described the tangible form of the sign, whether in written or spoken language, as the signifier. This form, in turn, conveys specific mental concepts to the audience, which are represented by the signified (Saussure 1972).

of self-consciousness, which would become foundational to Lacan's own conceptualization of subjectivity (Lacan 2004, 97).

By the 1950s, Lacan introduced a crucial distinction between the little other and the big Other. On the one hand, the little other belongs to the Imaginary order and refers to mirror images, rivals, or ego-ideals – figures through which the subject perceives itself and establishes a sense of identity. On the other hand, the big Other functions within the Symbolic order and represents the locus of language, law, social norms, and the unconscious structure that governs meaning. Crucially, the big Other is not a person but a position; it is the symbolic authority through which subjectivity and desire are constituted (Chiesa 2007, 35). This distinction allows Lacan to theorize the subject not as a coherent, autonomous entity but as fragmented, structured by language, and oriented toward an unattainable ideal. This fragmentation is first enacted during what Lacan calls the *Mirror Stage*, a formative moment between six and eighteen months of age. In this stage, the child recognizes their reflection in a mirror and identifies with it as a unified image. However, this identification is alienating – the child misrecognizes the image as a coherent self, while in reality, it experiences its body as fragmented. Lacan calls this fantasized unity the ideal-I, a projection the subject can never fully embody. Thus, identity is constructed through an "orthopedic," which is an illusion of wholeness that is always deferred.

Then Lacan writes:

> […] it establishes a genetic in ego defenses […] situating the latter as prior to the paranoic alienation that dates back to the time at which the specular I turns into the Social I. (Lacan 2004, 97)

In other words, Lacan articulates the development of the ego through several stages, culminating in the transformation from the specular 'I' of the mirror image to the social 'I' shaped by the Symbolic order. The ego is thus formed through processes of repression, inversion, and alienation, governed not by biological instinct but rather by language and societal norms.

The implications of this theory are particularly relevant to Yeats's "The Mask," where the poetic voice grapples with the tension between the inner self and its outward persona. That is to say, the mask in the poem can be read as a metaphor for the Lacanian Imaginary – a seductive but ultimately deceptive image through which the subject seeks recognition. At the same time, the speaker's longing to be seen 'behind the mask' suggests a desire for recognition that transcends mere performance. Yet,

this desire is mediated through the Symbolic order – what Lacan calls the 'big Other' – revealing the inherent paradox: the self can never be fully transparent, as it is always constituted through external structures of meaning (Lacan 1966). As Lacan asks: "Where is the subject? It is necessary to find the subject as a lost object" (Lacan 1977). The subject, always already mediated by desire and language, emerges only through its relation to the Other – as both rival and symbolic authority.

In this light, Yeats's poetic inquiry into identity and performance mirrors Lacan's notion that the self is constituted not from within, but through an interplay of mirrored images and external symbolic structures. The mask is not merely concealment but a necessary interface – an illusion that enables, yet also destabilizes, the subject's fragile sense of self.

Language and the Fragmented Self in "The Mask"

The title – "The Mask" – essentially seems to initiate a series of unforeseen developments, as the term denotes the meanings of veil or disguise. Etymologically, the word "mask" appeared in the 1530s, referring to a cover for the face with openings for the eyes and mouth, or a "false face." It comes from the French word *masque*, meaning a covering to hide or protect the face, which itself derives from the Italian *maschera*. The Latin root *masca* refers to a "mask, specter, or nightmare," though its origin is uncertain. Alternatively, it could trace its roots to the Provencal *mascarar* or Catalan *mascarar* ("to blacken the face"), possibly linked to a Germanic origin. Another possibility is that it originates from Occitan *mascara*, meaning "to blacken" or "darken," which is believed to derive from mask, meaning "black" in a pre-Indo-European language (EOD 2025).[3]

Semiotically, the title connotes an arbitrary barrier between the signifiers and the signified, which constructs the identity. In this context, the term seems to function as a link between the comic figure, his external world, and the self behind the mask – a mask that, through the "burning gold" color, creates an identity that constantly questions the essence of its being. The opening lines of the verse introduce readers to the ekphrastic scene, describing the painted face of the clown: "PUT off that mask of burning gold / With emerald eyes." Through an internal dialogue, the language shows a conflict within the clown, who seems to be torn between two contrasting identities:

3 Etymonline, 2025, "Mask," Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/mask.

the small other and the big Other. Above all else, the expressions "PUT off that mask of burning gold/ With emerald eyes" depict the image of the clown. The former phrase, written in capital letters, conveys a sense of affirmation and emphasis. The latter expression, "burning gold," on the other hand, can be interpreted metaphorically as referring to the clown's makeup, which obscures the genuine emotions and natural facial expressions. However, the "emerald eyes" also suggest a deeper, more enigmatic aspect of the clown's persona. Pillai (2021) sheds light on the historical context of clowns in the European milieu related to comic theatre, particularly during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Italy, through the masked performances of *commedia dell'arte*. He asserts that these theatrical traditions relied on stylized characters who, through the act of masking and deliberate foolishness, challenged social norms and performed identities that were both exaggerated and unstable. In this context, the clown's mask – specifically the detail of the "emerald eye" – evokes this theatrical heritage, serving not only as a performative surface but also as a conduit for the social gaze. That is to say, the eye becomes a site where the inner voice and the external projection of the self collide, echoing the historical function of the mask in commedia as both concealment and revelation. Eyes are often seen as the focal point of expression and perception, and in this case, they convey a sense of mystery that is a characteristic of the clown figure – an identity that is constructed through the power of gaze. The makeup and eyes collectively serve to mask with the hidden identity of the persona, blending the line between the small other – the voice – and the big Other to whom they perform. In other words, semiotically, the painted face adds another signification.[4] In Lacanian terms, the small other – the authentic voice behind the mask – commands the subject to 'put off' the veil, urging them to discard the constructed persona. Consequently, the clown's identity becomes obscured, leaving only a fragmented, uncertain representation of the self beneath the mask:

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4 The distinction between small and big becomes relevant only when we move away from understanding speech as it is spoken in the moment. This shift is linked to the process of turning the abstract social "big Other" into a fixed object that structures meaning – often mirroring the dynamics of power/knowledge systems aimed at enforcing compliance with certain norms. As a result, signifiers – originally meant to represent a subject to another signifier – are diminished into mere signs that stand for something to someone (Lacanticles 2018).

O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.

The small other now addresses the mask that is projecting the big Other with the affectionate phrase "my dear." This tone, however, also carries an assertion of boldness, which reflects the small other – the clown's ego. This dual gesture conveys a quiet confidence in the clown's performance while highlighting the audacity involved in assuming an artificial identity. Wearing a painted face and stepping into a role exposes a certain vulnerability, and the phrase captures the courage required for such an act.

The expression "to find if hearts be wild and wise" presents not only the image of the clown, but also a deeper philosophical layer. That is to say, the term "heart" initially appears as a reference to emotion, but semiotically, it also signifies essence or core, suggesting another layer of signification where the clown's identity is rooted, or at least where he continually seeks to locate it. Put simply, it explores not only the relationship between the clown, the persona, and the self behind the mask, but also the connection between the clown and the audience, which creates an agency of all social norms and appearances – the big Other. As the clown seeks to provoke two emotional states: "wild," which stirs the audience's emotions, potentially causing excitement or passion, and "wise," suggesting that the performance also invites contemplation or reflection. Through a combination of serious and humorous actions, the clown guides the audience through a range of emotional experiences. The mask, therefore, permits the persona to evoke emotions that are "cold. It prompts reactions such as laughter. In this way, the clown is caught between the symbolic order of the big Other and the constitutive lack embodied in the small other – aligned with the Imaginary order, as both participate in constructing the 'I': an identity that is, paradoxically, also dispersed across and lost between them. This act of observation transforms both the clown and the audience, blurring the boundary between performance and reality: "I would but find what's there to find, / Love or deceit."

The words now shift back and forth between the clown's internal duality – the struggle between authenticity and performance. The clown's identity seems to differ from the persona behind the "mask," raising philosophical questions about authenticity and artifice. That is to ask, who is behind the

painted face? The language reveals a tension between the id and the superego[5] – a voice driven by a compulsion to "find what's there to find." Through a Lacanian lens, this expresses the fundamental lack at the heart of subjectivity – an endless search for meaning or fulfillment that remains unattainable.[6] Moreover, the desire/ lack is integrated with the "emerald eyes" – the gaze that operates between the clown and the audience, where both are mutually transformed by this shared act of observation. In other words, the clown's performance, driven by the big Other – a projection of societal norms, prompts the audience to react emotionally. The terms "love" and "deceit" underscore the contradictions within the clown's emotional state, pointing to the tension between the big Other's societal expectations and the clown's primitive desires in the Imaginary order.[7] The mask, then, embodies the conflict between internal desires and the external gaze that shapes them. Dramatically, this conflict appears to be the source of the clown's frustration, as the mask increasingly serves as a barrier that conceals the small other:

> It was the mask engaged your mind,
> And after set your heart to beat,
> Not what's behind.

At this point, the mask plays a pivotal role in both constructing and deconstructing the 'I'. It mediates the shifting movement between the fictional persona, anchored in the symbolic horizon of social participation, and

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5 Although Lacan at times aligns the concept of the big Other with something resembling the Freudian superego – as a source of law, prohibition, obligation, and guilt – his interpretation of the superego notably diverges from Freud's. In his work "The Moral Goals of Psychoanalysis," Lacan engages deeply with the Oedipus myth and challenges the idea that the superego functions as a moral conscience. He contends that the imperatives imposed by the superego, or the big Other, cannot be straightforwardly aligned with the principles of any established moral philosophy (May-Hobbs 2023).

6 Lacan's notion of lack is central to his understanding of subjectivity and desire. In his view, lack is an essential aspect of human existence, emerging in early development and closely tied to both language and the construction of the self (Lacan 1977).

7 According to Žižek, the "big Other" refers to the social substance that exceeds individual control, meaning that the subject can never completely master the consequences of their actions, as the results inevitably diverge from their original intentions or expectations (Hook 2008, 5).

the raw, unfiltered voice of primitive desires. Tobias (2007) explores the clown's identity by emphasizing their marginal status in society, portraying the clown as an outsider who perceives, understands, and behaves in ways that challenge the "normal order of things" (2007, 38). From this perspective, the clown is not only "engaged" with "[his] mind," but also with the "heart to beat" – the phrase here suggests a tension between rationality and emotional or instinctual drives, which seems to be related to the "wild and wise." This internal conflict mirrors a confrontation between the superego and primitive desires, both of which contribute to the construction of the 'I' behind the mask, though paradoxically, the mask conceals precisely "not what's behind." Here, the language reveals itself as a binarism between the painted face, the symbolic performance, and the unheard voice, which is aligned with the small other, underscoring the fragmented nature of clown identity. Eventually, these lead the clown to a complex riddle: "But lest you are my enemy, / I must enquire."

The voice seems to persist in its internal dialogue, now labeling the Other as "[its] enemy." This choice of words carries connotations of opposition and antagonism, suggesting a deep conflict. What is particularly striking is the shift in how the Other is addressed – first as "dear," then as "enemy." This linguistic contradiction reveals the clown's fractured identity, caught between opposing forces that simultaneously attract and repel. The self appears to be formed not through a unified identity, but through an ongoing oscillation between attachment and aversion – between what is desired and what is rejected. Such a dynamic reflects the Lacanian idea of the divided subject, whose identity is shaped by an irreconcilable tension between the symbolic and the unconscious. The line ultimately prompts a deeper question: To what extent does the clown genuinely wish to remove the mask and confront the raw, unfiltered desires of the unconscious? Or is the mask itself a necessary mediator that both conceals and sustains the self? Strikingly, the pronoun "I" in the phrase "I must enquire" presents a kind of riddle or ambiguity. As one reads the line, a critical question emerges: Who, exactly, is this "I"? Is it the clown as a subject, the internalized projection shaped by the audience's gaze? Or the reader momentarily inhabiting the voice of the text? From a semiotic perspective, the "I" appears not as a stable, unified speaker but as a point of convergence – a horizon where multiple voices intersect, overlap, and ultimately lose their original

source.[8] In this sense, the self is not a fixed identity but a shifting signifier, suspended in the interplay between presence and absence, self and the Other.[9]

> "O no, my dear, let all that be;
> What matter, so there is but fire
> In you, in me?"

Following the reference to the big Other as an "enemy," it is later addressed as "[its] dear," demonstrating the continuous fluctuation between the conscious and unconscious realms – the otherness. This shift also reflects the dynamic between the persona behind the mask and the one with "emerald eyes." The phrase "let all that be; [w]hat matter" suggests a dismissal of the essence of the small other, effectively disregarding the value of the self that has been constructed outside the constraints of social rules and standards. The expressions "so there is but fire/ In you, in me?" are linked to the imagery of "burning gold," which in turn connects to the concept of the mask itself. In this context, both the voice behind the mask and the clown are merged within the bar – the face – in order to construct an identity tailored to the expectations of the audience. Therefore, the mask becomes a central symbol, embodying both the thesis and antithesis of the clown. On one hand, it presents the antithesis by symbolizing love and deception, as well as the concealment of reality. On the other hand, it represents the thesis by integrating both identities within the metaphorical "fire," which signifies the coexistence of conflicting identities – those of the mask-wearer and the character being portrayed. In other words, the duality of identity is portrayed through both literal and figurative language, exploring themes of laughter and tragedy, as well as truth and obscurity. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Yeats's verse presents itself to readers as a preliminary, pre-analytical exploration of the formation of identity and the ongoing conflict between the 'I' and the Other. This struggle is depicted as an essential,

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8 In "The Death of the Author" (1967), Roland Barthes argues for the erasure of the author's authority over a text, emphasizing that the voice within the text disrupts any notion of a singular, original source (Barthes 1977).

9 In Lacan's theory, the fundamental question posed by the psychoanalytic subject to the Other is: "What do you want?" This inquiry mirrors the subject's own internal question – "What is it that I truly desire?" – since both stem from the original longing for unity with the mother, who represents the primary and foundational "real Other" of desire (May-Hobbs 2023).

persistent dynamic, illustrating the complexities inherent in self-construction and the interplay between individual identity and external influences.

Conclusion

In this essay, we conducted a semiotic analysis of William Butler Yeats's poem "The Mask," aiming to uncover the deeper meanings embedded within its imagery and symbolism. Our study revealed that the poem does not necessarily present biographical references, as traditionally has been read; rather, it presents a more complex figure – one resembling a clown – who finds themselves caught in a perpetual struggle between the self-concealed behind the mask and the other that exists within it. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of otherness, we situated the concept of identity within a broader philosophical framework, emphasizing how subject formation was shaped by unconscious structures. Specifically, our interpretation highlighted the ongoing tension between what Lacan calls the small other and the big Other, a conflict that emerged from the "Mirror Stage" and continued to shape the subject's relationship with their own image and social reality. Through this lens, the poem's exploration of masking and self-presentation could be understood as a deeper commentary on identity, alienation, and the fragmentation of the self.

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