

William Butler Yeats, Poetry

We have been told many times that we do not have to take the ideas of Yeats seriously in order to appreciate his poetry; but if this is true, Yeats is the first poet of whom it has ever been true.

Yvor Winters, "Yeats's Silly Ideas"

1. Yeats's origins: "wandering between two worlds"
 - a. Parents were Anglo-Irish Protestants - father a barrister/portrait painter and mother daughter of a Sligo merchant. They were not, however, affluent landholders like many other Irish Protestants, but always struggled financially.
 - b. Yet Yeats, surprisingly, did not identify with the Anglo-Irish protestant minority, but with the Catholic majority, whose folklore/mythology he identified.
 - c. Yeats's split allegiances detached him from both traditions - the Catholics because he didn't share their religion and the Protestants because he rejected their prosperity.
 - d. "Yeats's best hope, he felt, was to cultivate a tradition more profound than either the Catholic or the Protestant--the tradition of a hidden Ireland that existed largely in the anthropological evidence of its surviving customs, beliefs, and holy places, more pagan than Christian."
2. Yeats's youth and early manhood: vacillating between England and Ireland
 - a. Born in Dublin and moved at young age to London, but spent summers in Sligo with his grandparents - a place that became the imaginative and spiritual backdrop of his poetry.
 - b. His parents returned to Ireland in 1867 and he spent the equivalent of high school and university in Dublin, where school itself was less important to him than the circle of artists and thinkers he associated with there. Published his first poem in the Dublin University Review in 1885.
 - c. Returned to London with his parents after graduating from University. Became interested in Theosophy and spiritualism (like many other artists and writers of his generation and before, including William Blake), rejecting traditional religions and researching the cosmology of several visionary traditions, including Platonism, alchemy, and ancient Irish myth.
 - d. First volume of poems, collected in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) was highly mythologized and aesthetic, in keeping with the aesthetic movement already in full swing in Britain and France.
 - e. Involved with the artist, poet, and designer William Morris and W.E. Henley, author of "Invictus." Yeats co-founded the Rhymers' Club, whose members included his friends Lionel Johnson and Arthur Symonds.
3. Yeats's Early Period: Irish Nationalism, the Celtic Twilight, Irish mythology; elaborate allusive lyrical poetry
 - a. In 1889 Yeats met Maud Gonne, and from that defining moment, he wrote, "the troubling of my life began." He fell in love with her, but his love was hopeless, though he

continued to pursue it throughout his life, at one point actually proposing to her daughter.

- i. Maud Gonne liked and admired Yeats but was more interested in Irish nationalism and in political activism. She was not in love with him. Her passion was lavished upon Ireland; she was an Irish patriot, a rebel, and a rhetorician, commanding in voice and in person.
 - ii. Yeats joined in the Irish nationalist cause partly from conviction, but mostly for love of Maud. When Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was first performed in Dublin in 1902, she played the title role.
 - iii. In 1899 Yeats asked Maud Gonne to marry him, but she declined. Four years later she married Major John MacBride, an Irish soldier who shared her feeling for Ireland and her hatred of English oppression: he was one of the rebels later executed by the British government for their part in the Easter Rising of 1916.
- b. Yeats, like many Irish nationalists, was stricken and his idealism dealt a blow by the death of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891. Yeats sought to fill the gap by pursuing literature, art, poetry, drama, and legend.
- i. The Anglo-Irish literary tradition that had flowered in the 18thC (producing Congreve, Swift, Edgeworth, Goldsmith, Berkeley, and Burke) had been moribund for a century; Louise Bogan argues that Irish creativity had been drawn off into politics, with no energy for art.
 - (1) Irish nationalists, having learned from Swift that literature could be used to shake off oppression, had devoted their energies to political agitation.
 - (2) Yeats described the situation: “
 - ii. In 1898, when he met Augusta Lady Gregory, an aristocrat who was to become a playwright and his close friend. She was collecting Irish folklore and their interests converged; he felt he could forge a serious poetry out of the myth of a country whose culture had been nearly wiped out by Christianity.
 - iii. He spent summers at her home, Coole Park, Galway, and eventually bought a nearby Norman castle, Thoor Ballylee, which becomes a dominant symbol in the poems of his old age.
 - iv. Helped found the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin, recruited other playwrights like Synge; wrote and produced a dozen plays himself; the theatre eventually became known as the Abbey Theatre and is still producing plays.
- c. Yeats published several volumes of poetry during this period, notably *Poems* (1895) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), which are typical of his early verse in their dreamlike atmosphere and their use of Irish folklore and legend. But in the collections *In the Seven Woods* (1903) and *The Green Helmet* (1910), Yeats slowly discarded the Pre-Raphaelite colours and rhythms of his early verse and purged it of certain Celtic and esoteric influences.
4. Yeats's middle period: Irish nationalism and politics; poems topical or influenced by his sense that he was losing his youth; influenced by imagism, symbolist movement. Yeats said, at age 52:
- A poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment. . . .

Surely, he may think, now that I have found vision and mask I need not suffer any longer. Then he will remember Wordsworth, withering into eighty years, honored and empty-witted, and climb to some waste room, and find, forgotten there by youth, some bitter crust.

- a. The years from 1909 to 1917 mark a decisive change in his poetry. The otherworldly, ecstatic atmosphere of the early lyrics has cleared, and the poems in *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* (1914) show a tightening and hardening of his verse line, a more sparse and resonant imagery, and a new directness with which Yeats confronts reality and its imperfections.
 - b. Yeats begins raging against the dying of the light, as Dylan Thomas would later put it; the theme persists into his late verse.
5. Yeats's late period (about 1917 to 1939): mysticism and occult, interested in symbolism, occult, unseen, unconscious processes of thought and society; language plain and forms lyrical.
- a. Yeats not only held his imaginative strength into old age, but became stronger: "soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing, for every tatter in its mortal dress."
 - b. In 1917, with *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats reached and maintained the height of his achievement--a renewal of inspiration and a perfecting of technique that are almost without parallel in the history of English poetry.
 - c. *The Tower* (1928), named after the castle he owned and had restored, is the work of a fully accomplished artist; in it, the experience of a lifetime is brought to perfection of form.
 - d. Still, some of Yeats's greatest verse was written subsequently, appearing in *The Winding Stair* (1929). The poems in both of these works use, as their dominant subjects and symbols, the Easter Rising and the Irish civil war; Yeats's own tower; the Byzantine Empire and its mosaics; Plato, Plotinus, and Porphyry; and the author's interest in the philosophy of G.E. Moore and in contemporary psychical research.
 - e. Yeats explained his own philosophy in the prose work *A Vision* (1925, revised version 1937); this meditation upon the relation between imagination, history, and the occult remains indispensable to serious students of Yeats despite its obscurities.