



Smithsonian Associates

W. B. Yeats and the Ireland of His Time

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W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) was one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. Born in Dublin and growing up in an artistic milieu, he was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival, the cultural movement that preceded Ireland's political independence from Britain. Influenced at first by important English poetic precursors – both from the Romantic and Victorian periods – Yeats would soon become immersed in Irish themes and political realities, combining his love of the landscape and culture of the West of Ireland with the stimulation of Dublin's growing artistic scene. Spending time there and in London as a young man, he made friends who would exert a lasting influence on his life and work: John O'Leary, George Moore, Katharine Tynan and, of course Maud Gonne. These connections would be vital to his creative development and are often represented directly in his poems.

Yeats's interest in occult elements – in the supernatural and the otherworldly – began early and continued throughout his life. He was a member of the Golden Dawn and invested considerable time and attention in theosophical reading and occult practices. In the first decade of the twentieth century he became increasingly taken up with the burgeoning theatre movement and, together with Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn, founded the Irish Literary Theatre, the precursor of the Abbey Theatre. Yeats's deepening involvement in this work drew him into the practical matters of theatre management and fund raising, but the experience he gained influenced his poetry in important ways. He moved away from lyrical and pastoral modes towards a more direct idiom and a greater sense of a public role for poetry. Following the upheaval of the revolutionary period in Ireland, Yeats's work became more complex in its engagement with philosophical and spiritual questions, though there were important continuities with his earlier ideas and aesthetic practices too. Throughout his life, Yeats remained acutely aware of the relationship between individual experience and collective histories, and his body of work explores this dynamic during a period of significant political change both in Ireland and further afield.

- 1865** W. B. Yeats born in Sandymount, Co. Dublin, the first child of John Butler Yeats and Susan Pollexfen.
- 1867-81** Yeats family move between London, Dublin and Sligo; Yeats schooled in Hammersmith, London.
- 1881** Family return to Dublin to live in Howth; Yeats finishes his education in Erasmus Smith High School.
- 1884** Yeats enrolls in the Metropolitan School of Art, where he meets George Russell.
- 1885** First poems published.
- 1888** Begins work on an edited project in collaboration with Lady Augusta Gregory – *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*.
- 1889** *The Wanderings of Oisín*, published; meets Maud Gonne for the first time.

- 1900** Yeats's mother dies after a prolonged period of illness
- 1902** *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, a play written collaboratively with Lady Gregory, produced with Maud Gonne in the title role; the Yeats sisters, together with Evelyn Gleeson, initiate an arts and crafts collective, the Dun Emer Industries.
- 1903** Maud Gonne marries John McBride; Yeats undertakes lecture tour in America.
- 1904** Abbey Theatre opens – this is a development of the Irish National Theatre Society.
- 1907** Riots over Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*; Synge dies two years later.
- 1908** Eight volumes of Yeats's *Collected Works in Verse and Prose* published by Shakespeare Head.
- 1910** *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* published.
- 1912** Involved in Abbey Theatre business; writing poems of *Responsibilities* (1914).
- 1913** Begins collaborative work with Ezra Pound and absorbs modernist influences.
- 1916** Writes 'Easter, 1916' in response to the Easter Rising in Dublin, though it doesn't appear in book form until its inclusion in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921)
- 1917** Purchases Thoor Ballylee in Co. Sligo; marries Georgina Hyde Lees.
- 1919** Birth of Anne Yeats. A new version of *The Wild Swans at Coole* appears, the first having been published in 1917.
- 1921** Birth of Michael Yeats.
- 1922** Dáil ratifies the Anglo-Irish Treaty, creating the Irish Free State, with six counties from Ulster remaining part of the United Kingdom. Death of Yeats's father.
- 1923** Yeats awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and travels to Stockholm for the award ceremony.
- 1924** Beginning of a sustained period of ill health and recuperative travel to France, Italy and Spain.
- 1926** Yeats chairs Senate committee on coinage design.
- 1928** Resigns from the Senate; publishes *The Tower*, his first major collection since the awarding of the Nobel Prize.
- 1932** Death of Lady Gregory; Yeats moves to Riversdale, near Dublin.
- 1933** Undergoes a Steinach rejuvenation operation and establishes intimate friendships with a number of young women over subsequent years; publication of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.
- 1938** *New Poems* published.
- 1939** Yeats dies at Roquebrune, France.
- 1948** Remains moved to Drumcliff churchyard, Sligo

Key Poems

'The Stolen Child'; 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'; 'Who Goes with Fergus?'; 'To Ireland in the Coming Times'; 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven'; 'Adam's Curse'; 'Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland'; 'No Second Troy'; 'The Fascination of What's Difficult'; 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation'; 'September 1913'; 'To a Child Dancing in the Wind'; 'The Wild Swans at Coole'; 'The Phases of the Moon'; 'Demon and Beast'; 'Sailing to Byzantium'; 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'; 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz'; 'Coole Park, 1929'; 'Lapis Lazuli'; 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited'; 'The Statues'; 'A Bronze Head'.

Easter, 1916

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone

Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one
Time out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best? Although
Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall,
How should their luck run high enough to reach
The gifts that govern men, and after these
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease?
(1910)

Who Goes with Fergus?

Who will go drive with Fergus now,
And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,
And dance upon the level shore?
Young man, lift up your russet brow,
And lift your tender eyelids, maid,
And brood on hopes and fears no more.

And no more turn aside and brood
Upon love's bitter mystery;
For Fergus rules the brazen cars,
And rules the shadows of the wood,
And the white breast of the dim sea
And all dishevelled wandering stars.
(1892)

In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.
But a raving autumn shears
Blossom from the summer's wreath;
The older is condemned to death,
Pardoned, drags out lonely years
Conspiring among the ignorant.
I know not what the younger dreams –
Some vague Utopia – and she seems,
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
An image of such politics.
Many a time I think to seek

To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse splashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.
Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
(1917)

One or the other out and speak
Of that old Georgian mansion, mix
Pictures of the mind, recall
That table and the talk of youth,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

Dear shadows, now you know it all,
All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right.
The innocent and the beautiful
Have no enemy but time;
Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch;
Should the conflagration climb,
Run till all the sages know.
We the great gazebo built,
They convicted us of guilt;
Bid me strike a match and blow.
(1929)

Further Reading

- Karen Brown, *The Yeats Circle, Verbal and Visual Relations in Ireland, 1880-1939*. Ashgate, 2011.
- Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. Penguin Books, 1987 (rev. edition).
- R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. Vol. 1: *The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914*. Oxford University Press, 1997. Vol. 2: *The Arch Poet, 1915-1939*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- David Holdeman and Ben Levitas, editors. *W. B. Yeats in Context*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- John S. Kelly and Marjorie Howes, editors. *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- James Quin et al., *W. B. Yeats, Works and Days: Treasures from the Yeats Collection*. National Library of Ireland, 2006.