

The Poetry of William Butler Yeats

(Written to Be Interpreted Aloud)

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The home of William Butler Yeats was in London during most of his youth. He was born in Dublin, however, and as he grew up his negative feelings about England grew more and more pronounced. He became associated with the cause of Irish Nationalism, and with the movement to create and popularize an Irish literature and theater. At the same time he nourished an interest in mysticism and the supernatural by joining certain occult clubs. These two diverse strains of his character had great influence on his poetry. He was ambitious, and he felt that his fate and his poetry's fate were linked to the fate of Ireland. And he was right.

One of Yeats' most famous early lyrics, written before the turn of the Twentieth Century, is "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The poem is about his nostalgia for a remote wood and lake in Sligo, a county in Western Ireland where Yeats spent many of the summers of his youth. The poem presents a romantic, idealized version of life in rural Ireland.

2

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of ^{the} linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Early in this century Yeats adopted a new conversational manner and more critical point of view, turning to unhappiness in his poems. "Adam's Curse" establishes one of his obsessive themes: happiness fades before the onrushing years. The poem is one of the first of the dramatized conversations Yeats was eventually to make his most characteristic form. The poem is a discussion of three parallel labors: the poet's, the beautiful woman's, and the lover's, and the function of technique in their production of the fine things of life.

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is harder work than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters and clergymen
The martyrs call the world."

And thereupon
That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, "To be born a woman is to know--
Although they do not talk of it at school--
That we must labor to be beautiful."

said, "It's certain there is no fine thing
since Adam's fall but needs labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough "

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had ^a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

Being vitally concerned with Ireland's political and cultural life, Yeats adopted the role of public accuser. In "September, 1913," he exalts the old Ireland and upbraids the Irish middle class ^{of the day} for failing to house the French paintings recently acquired by Hugh Lane. O'Leary and the other men the poem refers to were Irish patriots of the past who were betrayed, hanged, or exiled. They were members of the Irish Protestant nobility, like Yeats, who were nevertheless fervent nationalists.

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

5

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmett and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, "Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son":
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
But let them be, they're dead and gone,
They're with O'Leary in the grave.

In "The Fisherman," Yeats describes his ideal man, the man whose mask he himself wished to wear. The ideal mind was for Yeats a combination of passion and precision. He also has something to say of the purpose of his own art in "The Fisherman."

Although I can see him still,
The freckled man who goes
To a grey place on a hill
In grey Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies,
It's long since I began
To call up to the eyes
This wise and simple man.
All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped 'twould be
To write for my own race;
And the reality:
The living men that I hate,
The dead man that I loved,
The craven man in his seat,
The insolent unproved,
And no knave brought to book
Who has won a drunken cheer,
The witty man and his joke
Aimed at the commonest ear,
The clever man who cries
The catch-cries of the clown,

The beating down of the wise
and great Art beaten down.

Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began
In scorn of this audience,
Imagining a man,
And his sun-freckled face,
And grey Connemara cloth,
Climbing up to a place
Where stone is dark under froth,
And the turn-down of his wrist
When ^{the} flies drop in the stream;
A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, "Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn."

Stressing again the balance of his perfect man, Yeats, in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," lets his young man choose a hero's death in a war which is otherwise meaningless. The poem was written about Robert Gregory, an RAF fighter ace killed during World War I. For Yeats he was a symbol of the patriotism of Protestant Ireland, his patriotism being intellectual because of the choice involved in his death. Gregory chose to fight for reasons other than for his nation or religion, and his death is made meaningful by that choice

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those I fight I do not hate,
Those I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Byzantium symbolized for Yeats the realm of art; he saw it as a place and a time more suitable for an old man than his modern world. In "Sailing To Byzantium," Yeats transports his imagination out of the world of flesh, birth, death, and sensuality into a world where he might make himself, his actual life, into a dignified work of art.

I

That is no country for old men. The young
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees
 --Those dying generations--at their song,
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unaging intellect.

II,

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
 Nor is there singing school but studying
 Monuments of its own magnificence;
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
 To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing masters of my soul.
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

"The Tower," one of Yeats' longer poems, was written in anticipation of death. In the first part of the poem's final section he returns to one of his favorite themes- that of politics, bequeathing Pride to the young men similar to ^{the fisherman and} the Irish airman who foresaw his death,

III

It is time that I wrote my will;
I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at their side
Of dripping stone; I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and of Grattan
That gave, though free to refuse--
Pride, like that of the morn,
When the headlong light is loose,
Or that of the fabulous horn,
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.

Yeats' last song was sung in "Under Ben Bulben," written in 1939, the year of his death. Directed to his fellow Irish poets, these lines from the final two sections of the poem contain Yeats' advice that only by returning to themes of peasant and aristocrat, only by turning to the past, can they create work which will make them great in the future. Yeats returns to his past, as well. Ben Bulben is a mountain in Sligo, to which he comes back after beginning his work there half a century earlier.

V

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

VI

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.

17

An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death.

Horseman, pass by!