

# W.B. Yeats | Topic Notes

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## W.B Yeats, Background information

13 June 1865 - 28th January 1939. (74 years old.)

John Butler Yeats and Susan Yeats

Age 9 moved to London, 1880 at 15 returned to Howth and attended high school.

The Yeats family had aspirations to maintain its wealth and traditions and this shaped WB Yeats and his poetry. Born into a family context that respected culture and art. As he reached manhood, most of his education consisted of private tuition and reading- this accounts for the extreme individualism found in his poetry.

Developed an interest in theosophy (esoteric philosophy - direct knowledge of mysteries of the universe.), ancient civilisations, psychic power, eastern religions, the supernatural, spiritualism etc. He sought symbolisms for his poetry in these topics. These symbolisms account for the difficulty of some of his poetry especially in his later work.

Studied at college of Arts in Dublin, however his interest in art gave way to his enthusiasm for literature.

Mysticism and the occult,( supernatural,symbolic,religious, obscure thought) particularly Indian mysticism.

Drama and literature served Yeats as a cultural vehicle to express his views

Launched the Irish Literary Renaissance - revived interest in Ireland's literary heritage and was inspired by political and cultural nationalism.

1888 - Maud Gonne, married to John MacBride, both of whom were committed Irish nationalists. Great influence. Marriage proposals.

1917 married Georgie Hyde-Lee, 2 children: Anne (1919) and Michael (1921). Automatic writing (writing under influence or guidance of spirits, Yeats used her spiritual writing as material for his theories and poetry).

1896 Lady Augusta Gregory, Assistant and mentor. Mistress of Coole Park estate in Co.

Galway - where he composed many poems.

1917 bought old Norman tower at Ballylee near Lady Gregory.

After establishment of Irish Free State in 1922, took a lively interest in politics and became member of Irish senate. Took a sympathetic interest in facism during the 1930's, particularly in its Irish variety; The Blueshirt movement.

1923 Nobel Prize for literature

There is no record in English literary history of another poet who produced greatest work between age 50 - 74.

**Phase 1:** Romantic era, early phase, early 20's, late teens. 1889-1909. Celtic Myths and motifs, escapist. Nature, the struggle for Irish independence and his unrequited love for Maud Gonne (yellow hair...)

**Phase 2:** Transitional phase, political poetry. 1909 - 1914. He gradually ceased to be a romantic poet and his work became less decorative and musical, more harsh and realistic, above all, more in tune with contemporary realities and public issues. 1916 rising and the revolutionary turmoil had a profound effect on his mind and writings. Political events in Ireland from 1916 onwards confronted Yeats with a series of acute personal dilemmas. On one had, his instinctive Irish nationalism responded with pride to the patriotic surge and heroic endeavor (exertion) that inspired the 1916 rising. On the other hand, he knew that triumphant nationalism was bound to destroy the Anglo-Irish civilisation that he regarded as the ideal embodiment of the aristocratic (high class, exceptional rank) way of life.

**Phase 3:** Best work, Self critical, ironical, last 20 years. 1919 - 1939 4 outstanding books published; "The Wild Swans at Coole", "Michael Robartes and the Dancer", The Tower and The "Winding Stair". Poems feature a comprehensive mythology in which contemporaries who impressed Yeats appear larger than life.

He also draws from the great deposit of history and philosophy (Plato, art of Byzantine empire) and universal symbolism. 'A Vision' - mysticism and his bizzare concept of cycles of history, presented the dualities often expressed in later poetry; subjectivity and objectivity, art and life, soul and body. Helped to explain obscure symbolism of later works.

The civil war led to Yeats's increasing disillusionment with Irish public life and caused him to question patriotic, often fanatical, strivings of friends who had involved themselves in the nationalist cause.

Disillusioned with the ignorance and the conservative cultural attitudes of Dubliners - eg. narrow minded reaction of catholic nationalists to Playboy of the Western world in the Abbey theatre.

The poetry written in the final phase of his life is notable for its vigorous rhythms within a generally plain, unornamented style, with few adjectives and few, if any, of the luxuriant trappings of his earlier work.

In the case of Yeats, there is constant renewal, experimentation and utter dedication to the craft of poetry, leading to the ultimate command of words and images characteristic of his mature work.



# Main Themes

## Theme of death or old age and what it leaves behind

death of patriotism, leaving selfishness as the norm "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, it's with O'Leary in the grave."

Death as useless sacrifice, home rule might be granted; "Was it needless death after all? For England may keep faith, for all that is done and said."

A man in old age alienated vibrant youthfulness

"The young in one another's arms, birds in the trees - those dying generations - at their song."

Death of innocence; "The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

Demise of the aristocracy and despair at the vanity of human grandeur

Death and destruction at war

Theme of disintegration, chaos, sudden change

"Scatter wheeling in great broken rings upon their clamorous wings."

"All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".

## Theme of Nature

Transience (lasting only for a short time) in nature's beauty:

"A shadow of cloud on the stream changes minute by minute."

Radiance of nature's beauty:

"I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore."

"The trees are in their autumn beauty, the woodland paths are dry, Under the October twilight, the water mirrors a still sky."

The unattractive side of nature:

"While all about it reel shadows of indignant birds."

Paradoxically, Yeats saw nature as immortal in comparison to humans:

"Their hearts have not grown old; Passion or conquest, wander where they will, attend upon them still."

## **Theme of Immortality**

Politics: the rising has changed politics and this force for change has become an immortal and steadfast national symbol.

Natural beauty: the swans as a species are ageless in comparison to Yeats.

Cycles of history: Perpetually repeating millennial patterns- Sailing to Byzantium

Soul and art transcend time (surpass)

## **Theme of the quest for Truth**

The quest for truth is fundamental, whether experienced through the emotional self, reason, imagination or at the expense of sanity.

Intuitive truth

The pursuit of national ideals at the cost of public ridicule

Pursuit of beauty and the truth by a questioning spirit.

Truth believed in by political fanatics

Truth that is fanatical and yet unemotional

Truth that is emotional, imaginative and philosophical

Truth that is prophetic yet based on historic cycles

Truth attained through educating the imagination with art

Polemical poetry - argument intended to establish truth of a specific understanding and the falsity of the contrary opposition/

## **Various visions of the model Irish society**

Primitive (early), Celtic, peasant, rural

romantic, patriotic, heroic

Pastoral and aesthetic (wild swans)

Explored conflicting dualities, often counterbalancing the ideal and the real

The beauty of nature versus the sombre monotony of city existence

The meanness of municipal policy versus the generosity of patriots

The immortality of political heroes versus the fickleness of politics

Mortality of self versus immortality of swans

Protests against reality

despondency at short sighted and self serving civic attitudes re 1913 lockout and hypocritical religious devotion

Hurt at disrespect for the memory of political martyrs.

Criticism of political fanaticism

Disgust at insincere nationalism, patriotic bluster (aggression)

Disillusion at war, lack of civic responsibility and an apocalyptic spiral

disenchantment at materialism, hedonism (maximize net pleasure, devotion to pleasure- sex etc...) and neglect of art

# Imagery

Contradiction, balance and contrast are central to Yeats' imagery.

Recurring imagery of the heart as a metaphor for emotions or the inner self.

Recurring imagery of water - purity and the medium of time

stone seems to mean something impassive and steadfast that can catalyse change

Conceit - elaborate comparison and metaphor where some concrete object is used to illustrate an abstract reality

Metaphors

Symbols

Analogy - a simile or metaphor that functions as a parallel image

Simile

Paradox - contradicts itself and might be true

Logic - communicates by direct statement and imagery

Hyperbole

Aphorism - an original thought, spoken or written in concise and memorable form - definition, principles, truth

Antithesis (balance)

Compound words & pun

Yeatsian affirmation

## Key quotes

"People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition end by starving the best part of the mind"

"Think like a wise man but communicate in the language of the people."

"All empty souls tend toward extreme opinion."

"Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself."

"Talent perceives differences; genius, unity."

"Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry."

" An intellectual hatred is the worst."

"I am a healthy long lived race and our minds improve with age."

# A personal Response to the poetry of W.B Yeats

Of all the poets on my Leaving Cert course, WB Yeats is easily my favourite. Several aspects of his poetry appeal to me: the political / polemical dimension to his work, his use of nature as a theme and his reflection on old age, the body and the soul. Although I am at ease in engaging with Yeats themes it is also his unique craft that has an impact on me. Yeats is a poet who uses powerful metaphors and images that have a very memorable quality that in my view, makes Yeats the most quotable of poets. Finally, the one thing I love about Yeats' poetry is its dynamic quality. Yeats sets up dynamic contrasts in every one of his poems which for me makes his poetry interesting and thought – provoking. I found these traits particularly evident in "Sailing to Byzantium", "Easter 1916" , "September 1913", "The Wild swans at Coole", "Lake Isle Of Inisfree" and "The Stare's Nest by my window".

I have a great interest in Irish history and I must say that I really love how Yeats writes political and polemical poems set in early twentieth century Ireland. This, in my view can be best seen in "September 1913", a highly structured apostrophe where Yeats launches a powerful polemic against the merchant classes. It is a bitter invective against the working classes. Yeats condemns those who "add the half pence to the pence" and "fumble in a greasy till". Yeats writes of how the "marrow" has been figuratively "from the bone of the country". However in my reading, the full thrust of Yeats polemic is felt in the third stanza where Yeats presents a catalogue of Ireland's dead heroes. The names ring out with an almost mythical force: " For this Edward Fitzgerald died, and Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone". This poem is in my view a

memorable and thought provoking apostrophe which I feel is quite relevant in our age of rampant materialism. Yeats work is in my opinion also notable for its honesty and it seems to me that Yeats recants the derision with which he looked on the working classes in "Easter 1916". Yeats was convinced he lived "where motley (was) worn". Yeats recants his scornful opinion of Ireland's nationalists as he declares "all changed, changed utterly, a terrible beauty is born". Yeats feels that even John McBride who had done (him) most bitter wrong" should be "numbered in the song". According to R.F Forester, Yeats "marks a new level of achievement in this poem". In my opinion, these two poems present me with a fresh and Yeatsian concern in relation to the early twentieth century. This sets Yeats apart from any other poet on my course.

I am also attracted to Yeats' treatment of nature. In "Lake Isle of Innisfree" Yeats shares his longing for the calmness and tranquillity of his boyhood haunt Innisfree. This ambition is vividly drawn in the opening line a firm declaration of intent "I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree". Yeats seems here to want an idyllic existence. However, it is Yeats fabulous use of sound that really appeals to me in this poem. Yeats crafts the hypnotic sound of Innisfree's shoreline "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore". This hypnotic feel is created by Yeats blending cacophonous alliterative and assonantal sounds. I just love how he relies heavily on the hexameter to give this line a stately and antiquated feel. Yeats appeals to all my senses in this poem. Whenever I read this poem I feel like I can hear the "cricket sing", smell the "honey-bees" and see "the purple glow". A similar reflection on nature can be found in "The Stare's Nest by my window" where Yeats glances to the abundance in the natural world

for a glimpse of continuity. The lack of unity in the world is vividly suggested in an almost Eliotian reliance on past participles: "The key is turned" "We are locked in". What I like here is how Yeats appeals to the "honey bees" to "come and build in the empty house of the stare". This trait in Yeats poetry really appeals to me. It reminds me that no matter what happens, I can always look to the natural world for a sense of continuity.

The other theme that really appeals to me in Yeats poetry is his reflection on the theme of old age, the body and the soul. This is one of the big themes in literature and I must admit that I love Yeats perspective on it. In "Sailing To Byzantium", Yeats has a vision that "religion, aesthetic and practical life are one" (as he writes in "A vision"). According to Eavan Boland this poem represents " an immortal fury against the tragedy of decay and the inevitability of death". Yeats contrasts "The young / In one another's arms" with "an aged man is but a paltry thing". I appreciate how he calls on the soul to "sing, and louder sing". Yeats, in my view, seems to me to be trying to overcome Cartesian Dualism, the idea that the soul which is "sick with desire" is "fastened to a dying animal". Yeats is in fact a prisoner in his own body which he feels has become fastened and wizened. I also love the immensely original and authentic "The Wild Swans at Coole". In this poem Yeats reflects on the temporal and the atemporal world of the swans. It is a painful reminder that all "has changed" since he first felt "the bell beat of their wings". The swans, for me represent an eternal, youthful vigour. References from Yeatsian cosmology and mysticism: "the water/ mirrors a still sky", "autumn beauty" made me contemplate for a time the issue of transience. I would say that this theme alone makes Yeats' poetry well worth the read.

Although I love Yeats themes it is also his craft that has a huge impact on me. I am of the view that Yeats poems are well worth the read if only for their rich metaphors and images. Two vivid images stood out for me in "Sailing to Byzantium": "The young/In one another's arms, have no enemy but time". Also the scarecrow "a tattered coat upon a stick" is completely the opposite. Of course I believe Byzantium itself is a marvellous image that represents the aesthetic and contemplative domain of the soul. What a marvellous image Yeats uses in "September 1913" to convey his disgust with the mercenary individuals of a consumer society "What need you being come to sense / But fumble in a greasy till". The verb "fumble" here conjures up for me images of men, blinded by greed groping in the dark, men without vision.

There is also a memorable quality to Yeats' work which I find fascinating. I find that many of his lines and phrases resonate in my head a long time after reading. This is more true of Yeats than any other poet I have ever read. This comes from the sheer economy of his language and the rhythm of his lines. In fact I find myself constantly reciting lines such as "The innocent and the beautiful/ Have no enemy but time" "Unwearied still, lover by lover/ They paddle in the cold companionable streams" "An aged man is but a paltry thing" "The falcon cannot hear the falconer". In this context Yeats haunts my memory. This in my view lends Yeats poetry a unique quality which makes him the most quotable of poets.

Finally, it is the dynamism in Yeats' poetry which really engages me. Yeats is always present in his poems and brings them to life with contrast. Yeats, in my experience, sets up dynamic contrasts and dichotomies in nearly every one of his poems. In "Sailing to Byzantium" Yeats contrasts youth and old age, the body and the soul, time and eternity. In "September 1913", greed clashes with generosity, the past with the present and contempt with admiration. In the "Wild Swans at Coole", youth old age are set apart, the temporal with the atemporal. These contrasts provide Yeats' poetry with a unique dynamic quality which gives him a unique voice, a voice which makes me listen. In fact, it is this conflict between form: ( Appolonian – ordered) and content: (Dionysian – conflict) which critics like Denis Donohue maintain provides Yeats' work with a poetic energy and power.

By way of conclusion, Yeats is my favourite poet. His ability to write political/ polemical poetry, use nature as a theme and his reflection on the soul, body and old age really appeal to me. Yeats is a poet who takes his own feelings and using the raw material of his own life creates powerful and memorable, dynamic poetry. Yeats' themes and craft amalgamate to produce a beautiful and transcendent body of work. To sum up all that Yeats is really about I will leave you with one of my favourite Yeatsian affirmations: "Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry" (WB Yeats)

# Sailing to Byzantium

Escapist - confronts the problems posed by advancing age. Yeats found the idea of bodily decay and decrepitude intolerable and in this poem he outlines a means to escape - to travel in imagination to an ideal place in which he will be exempt from decay or death, a civilization in which he can spend his eternity as a work of art.

Uses a journey to Constantinople or Byzantium as a metaphor for a spiritual journey.

Literal and metamorphic journey

Explores his thoughts and musings on how immortality, art and the human spirit may converge - pursues his vision of eternal life as well as his conception of paradise.

Definitive statement about the agony of old age and the imaginative and spiritual work required to remain a vital individual even when the heart is "fastened to a dying animal".

The sages refer to ancient Byzantine martyrs - his solution is to leave the country - abundant and full of life and travel to Byzantium where these sages will appear and take him away from his body into an existence outside time, where, like a great work of art, he could exist as an "artifice of eternity".

The ageing man is falling victim to the ravages of time, is in a quest for timeless existence in a timeless paradise of art.

Develops uselessness of old age in relation to the life of the sense. Confronted with the teeming life of youth, the old man is as good as a scarecrow - becomes more cruel as poem progresses - he goes from 'old man' to 'scarecrow' to 'a dying animal'. But if the condition of

the body is a source of despair, the soul can rise above the sad condition of its 'mortal dress'  
- by listening to the immortal singing of the Sages of Byzantium.

Byzantium is a beautiful world that transcends human limitations

He feels out of place in a world where vitality and energy are the supreme values.

By shaking off his human nature and becoming an inhabitant of this heavenly city - the speaker will take on a shape that will ensure him an eternity of freedom from change and decay - the golden bird on the golden bough is an ageless, incorruptible thing, the antithesis of the dying animal in first stanza.

This gold bird will be singing of the past, the present and the future.

He feels obliged to choose between 2 worlds - the world he rejects is the cruel world of birth, generation and death, splendidly evoked in the richly concrete first stanza - life is celebrated.

The world he embraces is the timeless world of art - we wants to spend eternity after he has cast away his mortal body, as an imperishable artifact which will sing away the passing time for the nobility of this place.

The feeling of the poem however suggests that the speaker, despite his longing to escape from reality, finds that the alternative fails to compensate for the vigorous excitement of actual life. - through rhythm/rhythmic vitality and sensual music

The real theme is that art is not a substitute for life. The speaker's metamorphosis into a golden bird seems an elaborate triviality when compared with the scenes from the real world in stanza 1.

Transformation/Change - life gives way to death - youth turns into age. He is frustrated by the cruelty of natural cycles - tries to initiate a new dynamic by leaving his homeland in search of spiritual rebirth/ reincarnation

Old Age - poem begins as a meditation on the things which ages leaves behind - sex, bodily pleasure and regeneration. As death approaches the speaker turns towards the possibility of rebirth as a potential solution for the trauma of watching his own body deteriorate. The line between physical and spiritual rebirth becomes indistinct as the speaker imagines placing his soul into an art object - can outlast mortality.

Struggle to Find truth - where the heart belongs, understand the fusion of body and spirit and art - what happens after death?

Eavan Boland - This poem represents "an immortal fury against the tragedy of decay and the inevitability of death."

Overcome Cartesian Dualism; the idea that the soul which is "sick with desire" is "fastened to a dying animal."

Byzantium represents the aesthetic and contemplative domain of the soul

Yeats has a vision that "religion, aesthetic and practical life are one." - book; A vision

"That is no country for old men, the young in one another's arms"

"The salmon falls, the mackerel crowded seas."

"An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick."

"mortal dress.".. (the condition of the body - decay)

"O sages standing in God's holy fire, As in the gold mosaic of a wall, come from the holy fire,  
the perne in a gyre and be 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."

"...of hammered gold and gold enamelling, to keep a drowsy emperor awake."

# Easter 1916

May be read as a retraction from the more cynical view of Irish public life expressed in "September 1913"

The central antithesis (balancing of opposing ideas) is between the speaker's attitude to the people who were secretly planning the 1916 rising and his attitude to the same people after they had displayed an unexpected heroism and became nationalist martyrs.

Shows Yeats's progression/ development of opinion re Irish politics

Clever anecdotes, fascinating metaphors, antithesis, dualities, paradox

He evokes the spirit of pre- revolutionary Ireland, when he could detect no serious commitment to patriotism, he couldn't take either the patriots or their cause seriously. To him, their cause was insignificant, they were merely posing as revolutionaries, completely ineffectual. Before this, he seemed to have thought that the planners of the revolution were merely planning and weren't going to actually carry it out.

Profoundly ambiguous poem - "A terrible beauty is born.". It is not a single minded celebration of what the leaders have done. The beauty of what has been achieved has been purchased at the expense of life. The patriots have transcended the changing world, but only by making themselves immune to normal human impulses, their concentration on one purpose alone has turned their hearts to stone.

He catalogues the Irish revolutionaries he once undermined with inspiring use of anecdotal language.

His presentation of Countess Markiewicz is based on an antithesis. He contrasts her younger days as a beautiful aristocratic woman of leisure and one who had a sweet voice with her later ones as a fanatical nationalist, with a shrill voice and less attractive. There is both a loss and gain here; her earlier good will was ignorant but her later patriotism involves a coarsening of voice and appearance.

Thomas MacDonagh (& Padraig Pearse) had the qualities of mind and imagination that might have brought him fame as a writer had he lived.

Major John Macbride is characterized as a drunken lout, boastful who had wronged people whom Yeats hold dear.

He considers these 4 figures as characters in a drama, no longer do they play trivial parts in the "casual comedy" of life, in half hearted and faintly ridiculous patriotism. They have resigned these parts and transformed themselves into noble, beautiful actors in a new drama. This drama is tragic rather than comic - violent, redemptive revolution leading to the deaths of all but the countess.

The rising is terrible as well as beautiful in its act of self sacrifice - it involves great loss and waste as well as the regeneration of Ireland's soul.

Idea of change is dominant as Yeats revises his opinion of the revolutionaries.

The notion of change is counteracted with the unchanging reality of patriotic devotion. The stone standing in the stream is a powerful image which evokes the static nature of patriotic devotion. Their obsession with the cause has drained them of life, their inflexibility struggles to stay rigid amidst the constantly changing world and this struggle blinds them to the joy of life.

It raises the question, is their sacrifice worth it? They are as dead as stones because of their inflexible heroism. Their dreams have deprived them of life.

The third stanza is a celebration of the joys of life to which the patriots have blinded themselves. He asks a controversial question, was the lives of the 1916 rebels wasted, as he suggests that independence may have been granted by England anyway had there been no 1916 rising - as promised in Home Rule Bill

He retains an impersonal attitude and refuses to pass judgment on the prudence or otherwise of what the rebels have done, preferring to leave this to the deeper wisdom of providence.

"And thought before I had done of a mocking tale or gibe."

"All changed, changed utterly, A terrible beauty is born."

"Hearts with one purpose alone, through summer and winter seem enchanted to stone to trouble the living stream."

"Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart."

"Was it needless death after all? For England may keep faith."

# The Lake Isle of Innisfree

Romantic phase 1 in Yeats's early career, which was dominated by a quest for beauty in nature and in life.

Poem evoking escapism, which was often associated with his early career.

It celebrates a common and deep human impulse: the desire to find a way to escape from the sordid realities of city life into a pastoral Utopia where, free of care, the fortunate recluse can enjoy the simple, peaceful life amid the beauties of a natural landscape.

The powerful attractions of the ideal island of Innisfree are heightened by the contrast with the drabness of London.

Radiance of nature's beauty

Pursuit of intuitive truth

Inner self - image of the "deep hearts core"- the implication that the truths of the deep hearts core are essential to life is one that preoccupies Yeats for the entirety of his career, the struggle to remain true to the deep heart's core may be thought of as Yeats's primary undertaking as a poet.

Universal appeal in that we all at some point have shared the poet's desire to escape to a world of beauty and tranquility.

Idea from the poem as he walked along The Strand street in London and heard the sound of a water fountain in a shop window.

Lake of Innisfree celebrates simplicity, the ideal world that Yeats imagines isn't one of glamour and wealth.

In the first stanza Yeats imagines building a tiny hut on the island of Innisfree. He dreams of living on honey and beans which he will cultivate himself. He wants to get away from people; "live alone"

In stanza 2 he imagines finding harmony on the island.

He dreams further of living in a delightful climate.

He dreams of listening to songbirds at dusk.

In stanza 3 the thought and action develops. Yeats states his decision to leave the "pavements grey" of London. He is obsessed with or crazed by the sound of the lake water and so he has to leave the city.

Finally he admits that he has a profound exigence to live in a beautiful place, encompassed by the sounds of the lapping water, the crickets, the bees and the songbirds.

Simplicity in language and word choice in keeping/ correlating with the humble, simple desires of the poet.

The choice of words such as 'small' to describe the cabin, 'nine' rows of beans and 'hive for the honey bee' are indicative of the desire for an uncomplicated, natural existence, in close contact with nature.

Reference to "the deep heart's core" is the reference to the need to be true to one's self, to that which one believes to be essential and authentic to life.

Imagery of this is influenced by the transience of life itself - also the radiance of nature's beauty.

Sensuous imagery enables us to picture the beauty of Innisfree and sense its silence - synesthesia

Assonance is particularly effective in conveying the placidness of this idyllic world, this rural paradise.

It is pleasant, fluent, not particularly demanding and rich in texture.

The movement, the rhythm, repetition, alliteration and assonance combine to give the poem a soporific, dreamy quality reminiscent of much Victorian escapist poetry in which ideal landscapes and states of living are evoked as alternatives to the unpleasantness of life.

wants to escape from the grime, the hustle and bustle, the stress, fatigue and pressure of fast paced city life.

The language evokes the serenity which the poet so strongly desiderates/ craves.

Allows one to dwell in self paradise, unaffected or bothered by others, without any obligations, no external factors to destroy or manipulate way of living, relaxed.

hypnotic and tranquil hexameters recreate rhythmic pulse of the lake lapping over the rocks and barren landscape.

Simple imagery of the quiet, serene life the speaker longs to live as he enumerates each of its qualities, lulls the reader into his idyllic fantasy until the penultimate line jolts both the speaker and the reader back to reality, out of idyllic reminiscence, "While I stand on the roadway, or on pavements grey".

"noon a purple glow" - reflection of the heather on the water, purple glow to the light

The desire to commune with nature and hear again the water lapping is not just a passing fancy, he hears it in the deep heart's core.

"I will arise and go now to Inisfree"

Prodigal son's "I will arise and go to my father"

Biblical overtones depict Inisfree as holy place and bring to mind the prodigal son's relief when he resolved to leave his chaotic life and return to his childhood home, a place of serenity and simplicity.

Romantic, Idyllic, timeless way of life - no hint of modernity, sounds of nature as he rejects the hustle and bustle of urban life.

Discontent leads him to imagine this perfect place

longing to go back to nature and live self sufficiently - reduce dependency on others/  
modernities

Search for peace, wisdom and intuitive truth

"I will arise and go now to Inisfree."

"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."

"There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow, and evening full of the linnets  
wings."

"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 grey, I hear it in the deep heart's core."

# September 1913

Expresses his detestation for the middle class Catholic Bourgeoisie

Laborious to interpret some of his references here

Glorifies Ireland's revolutionaries and damns all those who are not willing to do what is right for Ireland.

He praises Ireland's old revolutionaries, notably John O' Leary, an Irish Separatist is mentioned all four refrains. His political stance was much less self interested compared to Yeats's contemporaries.

He calls on the Irish people to remember the ideas of freedom and martyrdom that motivated the Irish heroes of the past

The central impulse behind the poem is the disparagement ( speak of with disrespect) of the present by setting it in opposition to a romanticized past.

He mockingly and ironically addresses the nationalist and merchant class, Catholic bourgeoisie.

He characterizes them by the qualities of religious devotion and attachment to money. The image of the merchant "Fumbling in a greasy till" conveys just the right note of contempt Yeats has for the class as a whole, making its activities appear sordid, mean and squalid.

Offers a nobler vision of Ireland through the refrain against the presentation of crass materialism allied to debased religious practice. This is represented by the Fenian John O' Leary who had a vital influence on Irish cultural nationalism. In Yeats's personal mythology, O' Leary represented all that was finest and most idealistic in the Irish poetic tradition. O' Leary's

devotion to Irish independence forced him into exile in France for 15 years where Yeats got to know him.

In the scheme of the poem the tradition represented by the dead O' Leary belongs to a vanished age.

The patriots of the heroic past contrast sharply with the preoccupations of the speaker's contemporaries and modern Ireland's imperfections. He wonders whether the sacrificial deaths of such heroes were worthwhile if the only result is a nation of prayerful materialists.

Wild Geese - Irish soldiers who served in armies of Europe after treaty of Limerick 1691

Edward Fitzgerald: 1798 rebellion, died of wounds sustained while being arrested for treason

Robert Emmet: spent personal fortune on weapons to be used against British government, hanged in 1803 after failure of the rising he led

Wolfe Tone: ordered a french military expedition to Ireland in support of a planned revolution, committed suicide in prison while waiting to be hanged.

His choices of models of Irish patriotism are significant in the fact that Emmet, Tone and Fitzgerald were all members of the protestant ascendancy, in which Yeats was proud to belong.

"Delirium of the brave" - their sacrifice was emotional and instinctive rather than calculating and rational. If they had been rational they would, presumably have prayed and saved like the merchants, instead they gave their lives for the dream.

Yeats imagines a return to life of the heroic dead to confront the unheroic living, who would probably dismiss the sacrifices of the past as mere madness, inspired by the romantic love for

a woman, they would find it ridiculous because these heroes gave everything they had without calculating the cost.

He imagines the merchants thinking that past heroes are best forgotten since they are safely dead and buried with O' Leary.

Offers a dispiriting vision of an Ireland lacking in spiritual values

Rouses celebration of a past patriotic glory and reflects Yeats's strong, anti-democratic feelings, his elitist (belief that certain classes deserve favored treatment) view of Irish history and lack of faith in the possibility of a wise and civilized democratic government.

"A little greasy huckstering nation groping for halfpence in a greasy till"

Huckstering: sells small items, stalls

"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?"

"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."

"They weighed so lightly what they gave."

"Some woman's yellow hair has maddened every mother's son."

"For this Edward Fitzgerald died, and Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, All that delirium of the brave?"

"Yet they were of a different kind, the names that stilled your childish play."



# The Second Coming

Based on Yeats's cyclical view of history and his conviction that the Christian era was ending. Prophetic poem written in 1919 after war, collapse of a political order that survived for centuries.

Gives a frightening account of the fate in store for the post Christian society.

Provided with an account of the Antichrist's birth in Bethlehem. - the rough beast. He makes this more sinister with its location being Bethlehem, somewhere associated with forgiveness, peace, mercy, gentleness over the course of 2,000 years. The slouching, revolting figure of the beast who's birth will herald a new age of anarchy.

In his philosophical, mystical work, *A Vision*, he foretold the birth of a new, violent, bestial anti-civilization and the simultaneous destruction of the 2,000 year Christian cycle.

He thinks of each period of history as overthrown by some massive upheaval, symbolized by the gyre - conveys the visionary, mystical concept. A cone shaped spiral movement, begins at a fixed point in history and expands to its fullest circle, the middle of the circle is the point at which the next historical phase begins, the new age that will be the antithesis of all that has preceded it. Represents the cessation of an era. He believed the 20th century would mark a violent end to Christian phase.

"The falcon cannot hear the falconer" emblemizes humanity losing contact with Christianity - the falconer. The falcon is the image of man kind moving along the gyre, the cycle of time.

As the gyre widens, there is a collapse of order. The end of the Christian age is granted the revelation of the next age. The tide of violence, social and personal revolution has begun to move and in doing so, drowns the obedience and harmony that once stood in its place.

Evil will triumph in the public sphere because those leaders of nations have become corrupted, have grown cynical and skeptical, they might be expected to defend humane values but lack the determination to resist those who preach violence and intolerance. - turmoil.

He makes it clear that the world is already experiencing a foretaste of the grim future heralded by the birth of the rough beast. - wars etc...

He understood this to mean the birth of a violent, beastly, anti civilization which is soon to be revealed.

Spiritus Mundi - Yeatsian favourite - a storehouse of ideas from the great universal memory of humankind, prophecy, history repeats according to predestined cycles.

The diction is exquisite when understood.

Uses biblical echoes both in style and reference, gives an immediacy. This draws on the cultural context or scheme in which we read it, giving the impression of millennial dread and the feeling that we live in times of unprecedented upheaval, whether or not we actually do.

The new Bethlehem will reverse the significance of the Bethlehem of Christ's birth - prophet of evil and universal anarchy. (lawlessness)

Stunning, violent imagery, terrifying, ritualistic language - one of Yeats's most anthologized poems - terrifying slouching beast rousing itself in the desert and slowly but definitely moving toward Bethlehem - inescapable, paralysis

Theory centers on a diagram of 2 conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one spiral centers around the narrowest part of the other and vice versa - captures the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods.

Describes the current historical moment - a kind of purgatory or terrifying paralysis - on the threshold of apocalyptic revelation as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre.

The world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy and heterogeneity is now diminishing, the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre - opposes mysticism, primal power and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre.

The rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age

Magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world.

Aesthetic experience and passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and importance in Yeats's work as a whole.

Rough iambic pentameter - loose it seems so close to free verse.

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer."

"Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."

"Mere anarchy is loosened upon the world."

"Somewhere in the sands of the desert A shape with lion body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, is moving its slow thighs."

"And what rough beast its hour round come at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

## The Wild Swans at Coole

In stanza 1 the speaker describes a sweet autumn scene. The weather is dry and calm. The trees are covered in multicoloured leaves. Coole lake reflects the still sky, the water gently laps over the little stones at the edge of the lake. 59 swans float on the water.

In stanza 2, he admits that it has been 19 years since he first counted the swans on Coole. By repeating the word autumn here, it indicates that the speaker is in the autumn of his years, near the end of a life cycle, yet to encounter a bleak winter, one of old age. He remembers the swans flew away loudly as a group in huge broken circles. Here the swans resist the speaker's attempt to define them in terms of number and to make them finite beings, instead they assert their independence in a ritual flight symbolising their freedom from the constraints of time. This sudden flight disturbs the tranquility of the scene and he begins to feel emotional and he begins to explore the conflicting duality; mortality of self versus immortality of swans.

He contrasts his own sense of mortality and the perpetual youth and vitality enjoyed by the swans.

Third stanza emphasizes the changeless character of the swans and the all too evident decline in the speaker's vitality, which their animated movements underline for him. Much in Yeats's life has changed during those 19 years, when he first heard the beat of their wings he walked more energetically and with a happier heart. The speaker's

response to this contrast of mortality and the ageless vitality of swans is a self regarding sorrow. - heart is sore.

He likes to observe the swans at twilight or dusk because these times mirror each other as they show beauty or light fading and are a reminder of time moving on.

Unlike him, the swans have not grown weary, they remain faithful to their lover or partner and they paddle and swim together as companions. They are not alone and aren't exposed to the cruelty of rejection and betrayal. Their hearts are still young and they still have passion and desire for success. The swans defy time, they may age but they give the illusion of immortality, they are a Yeatsian symbol of eternity as they rise from the lake to wheel above him. Still water is mirrored in the still sky, suggested the stillness of time/ timeless nature the swans live in. They are mortal but they give the impression of immortality. Free from ageing process, speaker is a prisoner of this ageing process

In the final stanza he gazes fondly at the swans, they are mysterious and beautiful and he questions the future. In the final stanza raises complex question - when he awakes to realize that their eventual flight from his life will signal his decline into old age and approaching death. Throughout this poem he is coming to terms with his own mortality, his age. Awakened in eternity - death, what other men will enjoy the youth and passion he has lost?

Wistfully remembers how young and carefree he used to be and mourns the fact that he is ageing. Conscious of the passage of time, the disintegration of beauty and youth.

He feels weighed down by obligations and care, weary with age and no longer has the same passion for life as the swans do.

Simplicity of diction

Yeats is conscious of the gulf opening up between himself as the slave of time and timeless nature represented by the swans.

The meaning on the poem depends largely on the relationship the speaker establishes between the swans and himself.

"Under the October twilight, the water mirrors a still sky."

"Upon the brimming water among the stones are nine-and-fifty swans."

"Scatter wheeling in great broken rings upon their clamorous wings."

"I have looked upon those brilliant creatures and now my heart is sore."

"By what lake's edge or pool delight men's eyes when I awake some day to find they have flown away?"

"Their hearts have not grown old."

"Unwearied still."

Nature as immortal in comparison to humans

Radiance of nature's beauty

Theme of immortality explored in sphere of nature

Pursuit of beauty and the truth by questioning spirit - intuitive truth. Quest of truth - emotional self and imagination

Exploration of conflicting dualities, mortality of self versus immortality of swans

Disintegration, sudden change

Theme of old age

Personal nostalgia

escape

Imagery:

water - purity, symbol of time - still sky reflected in the still water - timeless nature of swans - conceit of swans and their movement, their flee all to conjure image of reality