

“Yeats’s poetry is driven by the tension between the real world and the ideal world that he imagines.”

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This statement delineates the very essence of Yeats’s work. His exploration of conflicting dualities; objectivity and subjectivity, mortality and immortality, the ideal and the real; comprise the fundamental structures of his various paradigms and theories. It is this tension between the real world and Yeats’s ideal world that constitutes the basal elements of his various poetic masterpieces and is perhaps his main undertaking as a poet. This factor of Yeatsian theosophy is evident in each poem I have studied, including *Sailing to Byzantium*, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *The Second Coming*, *September 1913*, *Easter 1916* and *The Wild Swans of Coole*.

Yeats’s interest in mysticism, the occult, ancient civilizations, eastern religions, theosophy and Celtic myths and motifs are highly influential in supporting this tension between the real and the ideal. This statement exemplifies Yeats’s adage; “People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition end by starving the best part of their mind.”

Sailing to Byzantium is perhaps one of Yeats's best poems, written in the third phase of his career. As Eavan Bland once said, "this poem represents an immortal fury against the tragedy of decay and the inevitability of death." Sailing to Byzantium 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. It is a definitive statement about the agony of old age. Yeats is out of place in a world teeming with youth and vitality where "the young" are "in one another's arms," where "the salmon falls" and where there are "mackerel crowded seas." The tension between his reality and his concept of paradise is created through the antithesis of the young and old, his frustration with the process of age.

Yeats develops this concept of the emptiness of old age in relation to the life of the sense. Confronted with youth, animation, energy and vitality, the old man is "but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick." We see the imaginative and spiritual work required for him to remain vital, even though his heart is "fastened to a dying animal." His attempt to overcome the paradigm of Cartesian Dualism, the idea that his heart is alive, ongoing and functional, but confined to the "mortal dress" of his decaying body, is perhaps the main antithesis which establishes such a constriction between reality and the world of Byzantium.

He feels obliged to choose between two worlds - the world which he rejects is the cruel world of birth and death, splendidly evoked in the first stanza. The world which he embraces is that in the heavenly city of Byzantium, where he will acquire a shape that will ensure him an eternity of freedom from change and decay where he will become an "artifice of eternity." The bird of "hammered gold and gold enamelling" rests upon the golden bough, blurring the distinction between physical and spiritual rebirth. This is the potential solution for the trauma of watching his own body deteriorate, one where he can reside with peace in Byzantium, the aesthetic and contemplative domain of his soul. It is the bleak reality of deterioration, the descent into old age and Yeats's knowledge of this that contributes to the tension between both worlds.

The influence of Georgie Hyde Lee's gift of 'automatic writing' (writing under the influence of spirits) is evident in both *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Second Coming*. Yeats nourishes his rich imagery and mystical metaphors and ideations with the spiritualism associated with his wife's gift, as well as his own interest in theosophy. Both of these poems correlate with his theory that "religion, aesthetic and practical life are one," as quoted in his book, *A Vision*. *The Second Coming* is based on Yeats's cyclical view of history and gives a frightening account of the birth of the anti-christ, bestial anti-civilization and the brutal fate in store for post-Christian society.

The transition into a new era is centred on a diagram of two conical spirals or 'gyres,' one inside the other, so that the widest part of one spiral centres around the narrowest part of the other. This point of contact heralds the beginning of a new era. This theory captures the contrary motions inherent within the historical process. Yeats describes the moment of transition, "turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer." It is a vivid, intellectual though complex and esoteric account of a terrifying paralysis - one on the threshold of apocalyptic revelation as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began to move along the inner one. Chaos begins to set in, everything loses order as "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is loosened upon the world." The image of the "Rough Beast" or antichrist, slowly approaching mankind, destroying christianity is one that is tediously terrifying. The sphynx is the ultimate encapsulation of the tension between two opposing worlds and the unstoppable approach of an era of corruption and anarchy.

"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 it's slow thighs." This is another exemplification of Yeats's poetry being driven by the tension between two worlds, his genius antithesis and the possibility of such a second coming is both terrifying and fascinating.

In contrast to the above, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* is a poem of simplicity and tranquility. However, like *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Second Coming*, there is both a contrast and tension created between two completely different macrocosms. *The Lake*

Isle of Inisfree celebrates a common and deep human impulse: the desire to find a way to escape 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 speaker delights in exploring his idyllic world, one in which "there's midnights all a glimmer and noon a purple glow and evening full of Linnet's wings." The movement, rhythm, repetition, alliteration and assonance amalgamate into a soporific dreamy and hypnotic poem reminiscent of much Victorian escapist poetry in which ideal landscapes and states of living are evoked as alternatives to the unpleasantness of life, such as the drabness of London.

The simple imagery of the quiet, serene life the speaker longs to live as he enumerates each of its qualities "the lake water lapping with low sounds against the shore," all lulls the reader into his idyllic fantasy. The senses are blurred, a synaesthesia as one can see the "purple glow" of the heather's reflection on the water and hear the low sounds of the water under the crickets and sweet song of the linnets. The beauty is almost overwhelming until the penultimate line jolts us back to reality, infuses the poem with the tension between Yeats's real world and his ideal one; "While I stand on the roadway or on the pavement's grey, I hear it in the deep heart's core."

Similarly, in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the tension is created in Yeats's epiphany of the passage of time and the disintegration of beauty and youth whilst longing for the immortality represented by the "nine and fifty swans," "upon the brimming water

among the stones." The transience of the swans, the water and their environment antithesises the poet's own sense of mortality. In their world, everything seems still as they enjoy their seemingly perpetual youth, unaffected by fast paced mortality as they float "under the October twilight" as the "water mirrors a still sky." The swans are "unwearied still," they are as energetic and passionate as ever. "Their hearts have not grown old." Their animated movements underline the speaker's all too evident decline in vitality. They are not inured by their past. They are faithful and loving, symbolic of the younger speaker / as young, when he used to walk energetically and with a happier heart. They are free from aging and disintegration. The speaker is a victim / prisoner of the process. The speaker's longing for this and the tension between the world of mortality and that of the swans, makes his heart "sore."

As is the case for these poems, Yeats centres September 1913 on the tension between a romanticized past in which Irish nationalists / heroes who "weighed so lightly what they gave" and that of the Catholic bourgeoisie, blinded by greed and driven by money, fumbling in "a greasy till." Yeats offers a nobler vision of Ireland through the refrain "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" against the presentation of crass materialism allied to debased religious practice. He calls on Irish people to remember the ideas of freedom and martyrdom that motivated Irish heroes of the past. His frustration and resentment of the Irish society infected with materialism, creates this tension as he longs for the bravery of past revolutionaries such as Emmet, Wolfe Tone and John O'Leary.

This tension is also seen in Easter 1916 as Yeats questions the achievement of the Rising, bought at the expense of life, when England may have "kept faith." The tension between the coarsening revolutionaries and their inflexibility and dreams which have deprived them of life and the fast pace change and dynamism battles between the ideal and the real.

In conclusion, I think it can be said that this statement stands as the epitome of Yeatsian ideation. This tension applies to each poem and is one with which Yeats became preoccupied in his quest for truth and understanding of the mechanisms of life, history and the imagination. He uses powerful imagery, antithesis and mythical symbolism, which combine to create poetry of intellect, inspiration and genius.

Without a doubt, this lends a memorable quality to his work and contributes to his huge legacy of one of the greatest Irish writers. I will now leave you with my favourite Yeatsian affirmation, which summarizes his intellect and ultimate command of language.

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