

W.B. Yeats

by Declan Kiely



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SCOPE OF TOPIC

This bookmark is an introduction to the poetry of William Butler Yeats and aims to guide you towards an understanding and appreciation of his work.

BOOKS TO READ

Yeats's Poems, edited & annotated by A. Norman Jeffares, with an appendix by Warwick Gould (Macmillan, 3rd revised edn., 1996).

W. B. Yeats, *Collected plays, Essays and Introductions, Autobiographies* - all available in paperback from Macmillan.

Why read the poetry of W. B. Yeats?

Initially, W. B. Yeats's poetry is difficult to understand.

When I first began to read his poems I didn't fully comprehend many of them but this challenge made me persevere and slowly I discovered it was worth the time and effort. But we don't read and admire poetry because it's difficult or obscure, we read because we feel that it communicates something to us personally, or because we respond to it with our feelings as well as our minds. Yeats is a poet who engages both the intellect and the emotion of his readers.

Yeats wrote about love and friendship, growing up and growing older, the struggle to find a personal identity and one's place in the world, the search for meaning and spiritual truth in life. He wrote with passion and verbal artistry, of powerful emotions brought under control by artistic discipline. Yeats experimented with and refined to a higher degree of perfection most of the traditional verse forms in English poetry. His themes are the eternal themes of literature treated with remarkable energy and novelty, vitality and authority.

NOTES

W. B. Yeats was born in Dublin in 1865. He was the eldest child in what was to become an illustrious artistic family. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a barrister by training but abandoned a promising legal career early to become a portrait painter. His artistic inclinations and ideals left the family financially impoverished but were the guiding spirit for W. B. Yeats, with whom he had a close but antagonistic relationship.

W. B. Yeats was, self-confessedly, an inattentive and poor student who didn't learn to read until he was seven years old and never mastered spelling, but encouragingly this didn't prevent him from becoming a great writer. He did not qualify for entry to Trinity College but instead studied art in Dublin for two years while his first writing began to appear in print. By now he had chosen a literary career for himself and devoted the rest of his life to the development and mastery of poetic expression.

Yeats was remarkable for his utter lack of complacency, his inability to remain satisfied for long with either his life or his writing. He wrote and reworked his poems laboriously, referring to the "craft of verse" as "this accustomed toil," in the poem *All Things can Tempt me*. He was an inveterate reviser, so much so that even after his poems had been published he took the opportunity presented by later editions to revise again and seek improvements. An insight into what he set out to achieve by doing this can be glimpsed in the poem *Adam's Curse*, in

which he wrote that "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

His restless energy was not limited to his habit of revision but also involved him in a diverse number of private and public activities and interests, which included Buddhism, Theosophy, Fenian politics, spiritualism, magic, astrology, experimental drug-taking, occult societies, literary societies, drama societies, theatre directing, political activism, literary journalism, essays and criticism, lecture tours, and even a stint as Senator in the newly-created Irish Free State in 1922. He founded the Abbey Theatre with his patron and colleague Lady Gregory, and wrote many plays for its actors. As Yeats re-made himself he re-made his poetry and drama.

His personal life was equally packed with incident and emotion. In his early twenties he fell in love with Maud Gonne, a beautiful and wilful English-born debutante turned revolutionary Irish nationalist, and continued to languish in unrequited love with her for many years. This gave rise to some of his most passionate and powerful love poetry: see, for example, *The Folly of Being Comforted*, *No Second Troy*, and *A Woman Homer Sung*. In his early poetry he idealised her and always regarded her beauty as transcending the merely everyday. As he grew older, especially following his late marriage (he was in his early fifties by the time he married George Hyde-Lees), he had come to regard Maud Gonne in a more clear-sighted fashion and his poetry became more rueful and self-aware (see the poem *Broken Dreams*). He incorporated an enormous amount of personal detail into his poetry: his relationships with women, with family, friends (and enemies), and the artistic, spiritual and political struggle to create a modern Ireland united through the arts and "unity of culture" rather than a country divided by rancorous dispute.

Because Yeats depicted his evolving life in his poems, though not in a directly confessional way, we can chart his growth and development through the poetry. It must be remembered, however, that Yeats transfigures his life into art, so what we read in the poems and *Autobiographies* is often partial or fictive, or at least a re-styled version. It is worth being aware of some biographical details in order to better assess and understand the ways in which he created his finest poetry out of his daily life, "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast." The version of the spiritual autobiography which Yeats wanted his readers to find was that embodied in the *Collected Poems*, the completed poetic oeuvre, with all its attendant Irish and personal mythology, wherein the man and poet "has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete."

For this and other reasons the best way to read Yeats's poetry, when you first come to it, is chronologically and sequentially, beginning with the early poems and moving onto the later ones in due course. His style underwent marked changes as he grew as a person and evolved as a writer and this can be most fully appreciated by reading the early poetry and plays first. As Yeats said, "it was slowly, very slowly, that I made a new style...but now I think my style is myself." For this reason a copy of the complete poems is far preferable to any selection or anthology of his poetry.

Much of Yeats's poetry draws upon Irish myth and folklore, and these references pose difficulties to newcomers. To understand Yeats best he must be seen in his Irish context. In 1896 he declared that "I am an Irish poet, looking to my own people for my ultimate best audience and trying to express the things that interest them and which will make them care for the land in which they live." He did not set out with this determination for he acknowledged that his early style "had been shaped in that general stream of European literature" and at first was convinced that "art is tribeless, nationless, a blossom gathered in No Man's Land." You will find such atypical poems as *Anashuya and Vijaya* and *The Indian upon God* stem from the early period before Yeats had fully adopted his native home as a theme and begun to "Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways."

Yeats explained his decision to turn away from the Greek classical tradition that is so strongly present in the works of English writers such as, Shakespeare, Shelley or Keats, and to write instead of and for Ireland, in his essay *Ireland and the Arts*: "The Greeks looked within their borders, and we, like them, have a history fuller than any modern history of imaginative

events: and legends which surpass, as I think, all legends but theirs in wild beauty, and in our land, as in theirs, there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend; while political reasons have made love of country, as I think, even greater among us than among them."

Living at a time of political ferment (at the end of the nineteenth century Ireland was seeking independence from England through Parnell's Home Rule movement), Yeats could not ignore the competing claims that Ireland and its history, ancient mythology and folklore, and its national destiny, laid upon his imagination and artistic consciousness. To make one's way through the references and allusions drawn from Irish heroic myth and legend it is probably better not to worry too much about them at first. It is worth noting that Yeats, as a driving force behind the Irish literary revival, was attempting to revivify these obscure names and their meanings for his earliest readers, who would also have been unfamiliar with them because Ireland's intellectual and cultural heritage had long been neglected. Understanding grows with familiarity and it is often better to suspend the need for immediate comprehension and attune yourself to the rhythmic and tonal qualities of Yeats's poetry, to hear through reading aloud, before looking for explanations of names and places offered at the back of the book.

In *A Coat*, a poem which attacks imitators (and critics) of his earlier romantic, dreamy, melancholic style, Yeats acknowledged that his use of Irish mythology had sometimes become an over-layering in his poems, that "I made my song a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies." Following many years devoted to writing plays for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, often in close artistic collaboration with Lady Gregory, Yeats's poetic style had undergone a change, becoming more colloquial, forceful, and combatively engaged with contemporary Ireland.

In the first decade of the twentieth century Yeats ceased to be a late Romantic and chose to write in a more direct style, attempting more 'self-portraiture' in his poetry so that his readers could "feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling." It was a very deliberate and conscious process, and Yeats signals his turning away from his earlier style at the end of *A Coat* when he declares: "Song, let them take it, / For there's more enterprise / In walking naked." It is a striking image of self-definition, as Yeats takes a stand against "the blind and ignorant town." (See, *To A Wealthy Man*, September 1913, and *To a Shade*, which are poems of bitter conflict written during his involvement in Dublin controversies.)

Many of Yeats's poems are concerned with what it means to be a poet and to write poetry. In this sense Yeats is a "poet's poet" and many who have followed or been influenced by him, in Ireland and further afield, have expressed their debt. You will notice that Yeats, pre-eminently a lyric poet, often uses the word "song" for poem or poetry. This is an aspect of Romantic vocabulary which he continued to use long after he had abandoned his early style. It occurs in some of his most memorable lines, in the narrative poem *The Grey Rock* where he addresses the poets who were his youthful companions, (members of what he called "the Tragic Generation" because of their early demise), who "never made a poorer song / That you might have a heavier purse." This is a perfect injunction against the temptation to compromise artistic standards.

The word is used again in the late poem *A Prayer for Old Age*, "He that sings a lasting song / Thinks in a marrow-bone...O what am I that I should not seem / For the song's sake a fool?" Here the "lasting song" means poetry that will continue to be read and valued in the future for what it has to say and the way it is said, and Yeats uses the metaphor of a "marrow-bone" to mean the most essential part of one's being, what he referred to earlier as "the deep heart's core." If necessary, the poet goes so far as to adopt the persona of a fool for the sake of the effectiveness of a poem.

As you will see when you read more of Yeats's poetry, he believed that the poet adopted certain masks or personae in order to write his thoughts in the most meaningful and understandable way, to make the personal into the universal. In the essay which should be a starting point for any reader of Yeats's poetry, *A General Introduction for my Work*, he explained that in order to find "adequate expression" he "tried to make the language of

poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech." To do this most effectively "I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men...talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing."

It is likely that it was the experience and discipline of writing dramatic verse for plays that expedited Yeats's stylistic development. He had turned to drama as a more direct means of shaping his country's cultural revival and enjoyed a great success in 1902 with his popular political allegory *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* which presented "the perpetual struggle of the cause of Ireland" and fuelled nationalist fervour. Yeats agreed with Victor Hugo, who said that "it is in the theatre that the mob becomes a people," and the theatre was seen by Yeats as perhaps the best opportunity to advance the aims of cultural nationalism in Ireland. This was one of the reasons behind the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, the first "national" theatre in the world. Yeats continued to write and direct plays for the Abbey until his death in 1939.

The poems of Yeats's poetic maturity are masterful, meditative and personal; as he grew older he reflected upon his past. Many of his poems consider the effects of old age and physical decay upon love and relationships, imagination, creativity and poetic inspiration. His searching spirit continued to propel him towards further investigation and contemplation of death and what may lie beyond it. Though frequently troubled by illness in later years he continued to write poetry which is full of energy and forceful directness. He assessed his achievement in poems such as *The Tower*, *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, *Vacillation*, *The Man and the Echo*, and *The Circus Animals' Desertion*. He believed that "we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" and after the rhetorical, embittered, disillusioned poems published in volumes such as *Responsibilities* (1916) and *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) Yeats increasingly made poetry out of the quarrel within, and out of the esoteric system of mystical philosophy he evolved into the book *A Vision*, which provided him with "metaphors for poetry."

He never allowed himself to become self-satisfied, suggesting in *The Choice* that "the intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work" and arguing that it was impossible to have both. The poem *What Then?* provides a compelling and illuminating summary of his artistic life and his attitude towards what he had achieved. The insistent, questioning refrain that follows each quatrain of the poem resounds and builds in intensity until finally suggesting an overpowering sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness:

'The work is done,' grown old he thought,
'According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought';
But louder sang that ghost, 'What then?'

In a similar later poem, *Are You Content?* he states even more emphatically and bleakly in the closing line that "I am not content," There are unresolved issues in Yeats's late poems, an optimistic desire to believe in another existence after death coupled with an understandable unwillingness to submit himself to it. There are fine poems in which Yeats suggests that the soul of man is eternal, that existence is cyclical. The poem *Mohini Chatterjee* concludes triumphantly, that "Men dance on deathless feet," while Yeats's funereal poem, *Under Ben Bulbin* suggests a transformative process:

Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.

The searching and yearning spirit which informs much of Yeats's poetry is perhaps what attracts most readers to his work; whether the search for wisdom or insight, some unattainable perfection, or the shared sense of loss and desire in poems such as *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, or the wish to return to a more perfect past as exemplified in the final poem in the *Collected Poems*, *Politics*, which ends:

But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

FURTHER READING

Roy Foster's *W. B. Yeats: A Life* volume 1 (Oxford, 1997) is the most definitive biography of Yeats, up to 1914. Volume 2 is due to be published in 2000. In the meantime Richard Ellmann's *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* and A. N. Jeffares's *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography* are both excellent and available in paperback. Also worth reading for an introduction to Yeats's work are Alasdair D. F. Macrae's *W. B. Yeats: A Literary Life* (Macmillan 1995) and John Unterecker's *A Reader's Guide to W. B. Yeats* (Syracuse, 1996). Yeats was a subtle and insightful critic of his own work, so reading his *Essays and Introductions* is an invaluable guide to his poetry, plays and thought.

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