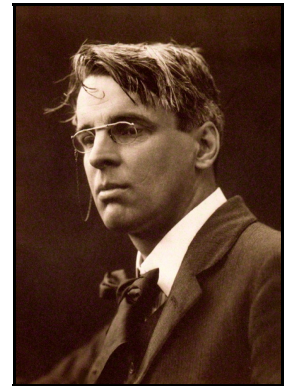


WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

(13 June 1865–28 January 1939)

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The Anglo-Irish poet W. B. Yeats is one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature. His development as a poet was complicated, with many influences and stages, but most scholars distinguish in his poetic career roughly five main (albeit overlapping and sometimes parallel) periods: (1) an early “Romantic” period, lasting until about the turn of the century; (2) an “Irish nationalist” period, where he focused on the aspirations of the Irish people and his obsession with his life-long love interest Maud Gonne; (3) a “country ideal” period, which experimented with rhythm and presented aristocratic elegance as an ordering principle; (4) a “systematizing” period, presenting a cyclic theory of life; and (5) a re-energized “wild” period in his final years. Yeats spanned the transition from a High Victorian world view to 20th-century modernism in much the same way Pablo Picasso did in painting. In 1923, Yeats became the first Irishman ever awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature; moreover, he is generally considered one of the few writers who went on to create their greatest works after being awarded the Nobel Prize. He is still widely regarded as probably the greatest English-speaking poet of the 20th century.



William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born in the Sandymount section of Dublin, Ireland, into a distinguished family of Anglo-Irish descent (“Butler” being added permanently to the family name by his great, great grandmother Mary Butler, a descendant of the first Earls of Ormond, County Kildare). His father’s family, of English stock, had been in Ireland for at least 200 years; his mother’s, the Pollexfens, hailing originally from Devon, were for generations a wealthy merchant family, owning a milling and shipping business in Sligo, County Sligo, in the north of Ireland. Soon after William’s birth the family relocated to the Pollexfen home in Merville, Sligo, to stay with her extended family, and the young poet came to think of the area as his childhood and spiritual home, his “country of the heart.” His father John Butler Yeats, a descendant of the soldier, linen merchant, and well-known painter Jervis Yeats, abandoned the law to take up painting, even though he made only a precarious living from it. Virtually the whole Butler Yeats family was highly artistic; William’s brother Jack became an esteemed painter, while his sisters Elizabeth and Susan Mary—known to family and friends as Lollie and Lily—became involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1867 the family moved to England to aid their father to further his career as an artist. At first the Yeats children were educated at home, but William was soon enrolled in the Godolphin school, which he attended for four years. For financial reasons, the family returned to Dublin toward the end of 1880,

living at first in the suburbs of Harold's Cross and later Howth, a few miles north of central Dublin. In October 1881, Yeats resumed his education at Dublin's Erasmus Smith High School, near his father's studio, but he left high school around 1884 to attend the Metropolitan School of Art (now the National College of Art and Design) in Thomas Street, having decided to be an artist, with poetry as his evocation; but within two years he dropped out, again returning to England, to concentrate on his poetry.

Yeats was religious by temperament but, like his father, was a religious skeptic unable to believe in Christian orthodoxy. He sought all his life for traditions of esoteric thought that would compensate for the loss of conventional religion. The search led him to various kinds of mysticism, folklore, Theosophy, spiritualism, and Neoplatonism, not in any strict chronological order any more than Yeats's childhood and young manhood spent between Dublin, London, and Sligo contributed to his poetic development in any chronological order—he was going to and fro between these places throughout his early life and kept returning to and re-working earlier aspects of his thought. From an early age he was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult, so he began the 1st period of his poetic development with a vaguely Pre-Raphaelite, self-conscious Romanticism, believing that language should be dreamy, evocative, and ethereal. The slow-paced and lyrical poems of his earliest volume, published in 1889, display his debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the poets of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, tendencies that were reinforced in London by the important poets of the 1890s. In late 1890 he helped found (with Ernest Rhys) the famous Rhymers' Club, whose members included Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and many other characteristic figures of the nineties' "Religion of Art." Yeats went on to spearhead the publication of two anthologies of the Rhymers' work, the first in 1892 and the second in 1894. He would later mythologize the nineties coterie as the "Tragic Generation" in his autobiographic memoir *Trembling of the Veil* (1922).



W. B. Yeats 1890s

During the latter part of this 1st period, Dublin literary circles sent him to Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland: Heroic Period*, where he found the great stories of Irish history, and to George Sigerson's and Douglas Hyde's translations of Gaelic poetry. He later became heavily involved with the Theosophical Society and the eclectic Rosicrucianism of the Golden Dawn. Although he had a distaste for abstract and dogmatic religions founded around personality cults, he was attracted to the type of people he met at the Golden Dawn and was involved in the Order's power struggles. But the heroic legends of old Ireland and the folk traditions of the modern Irish countryside (as in Sligo) provided Yeats with something much more vigorous and earthy—a knowledge of the life of the peasantry and of their folklore—which stiffened his early dreamlike imagery and melded the dreamlike with a quiet

precision of natural imagery and themes from the folklore of his Sligo experiences. This clarity and control gave a haunting quality to his poetry of this period, which often contrasted human activities with the strangeness of nature, and kept romantic fuzziness largely at bay.

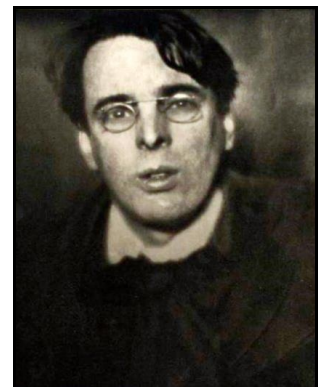
Nevertheless, Yeats's outlook for the remainder of his life was perhaps most heavily informed by late 19th-century Irish nationalism, which was so vivid in Dublin and which in fact directly disadvantaged his Anglo-Irish heritage. It sent him in search of the consistently simpler and more popular style of what might be called his "2nd period," a style to express the elemental facts about Irish life and aspirations.

His family was broadly supportive of the changes Ireland was experiencing, and while he was often in disagreement with those wishing to use literature for crude political ends, he nevertheless learned to see his poetry as a contribution to a rejuvenated Irish culture. From roughly 1900, although he still remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks as well as with cyclical theories of life, Yeats's poetry grew more physical and realistic, largely renouncing the transcendental beliefs of his youth. It was a shift that led him to the visceral concrete image, assisted in 1902 by reading Nietzsche's work, which prompted the search for a more active stance, a more "masculine" style, as if persuading the passive love-poet Yeats to "get off his knees." Looking back in 1906, Yeats reflected that "Without knowing it, I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty" but should instead "carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole." This conviction gets reflected in his collections *In the Seven Woods* (1903) and *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). In "The Folly of Being Comforted" and "Adam's Curse" particularly, Yeats seeks to marry beauty's ideal with the passionate self and in the process combine the rarified formal with the gritty colloquial.



W. B. Yeats 1903

By this time (since 1889, in fact) Yeats had met and fallen desperately in love with the beautiful actress, English heiress, and violent Irish nationalist Maud Gonne, who would have a profound and enduring effect of his life and poetry. His quasi-obsession with Maud Gonne is reflected in many of the poems of this "second period." He proposed to her first in 1891, then again in 1899, 1900 and 1901, being refused each time; in 1903, to Yeats's horror, she married the Irish nationalist John MacBride, whom he loathed and frequently derided, and converted to Catholicism, a religion Yeats despised. As virtually everyone had predicted, the marriage was an early failure. After the birth of their son Seán MacBride in 1904, Maud and MacBride agreed to end the marriage but did not divorce, being unable to resolve disputes over the child's welfare. Yeats's friendship with Maud persisted, and in Paris in 1908 they finally consummated their



W. B. Yeats 1908

relationship, although soon afterwards Gonne wrote to him that, despite the consummation, the physical part of their relationship could not continue.

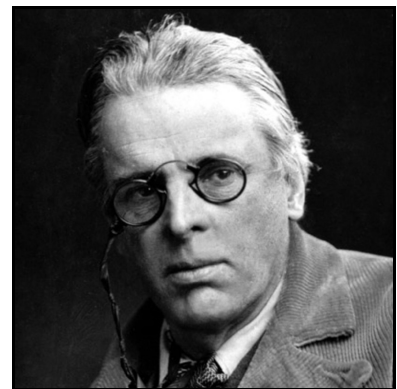
In 1896 Yeats had met Lady Gregory, Irish writer and promoter of Irish literature, and she invited him to spend the following summer (and many subsequent holidays) at her country house Coole Park in Galway. There he saw in an aristocratic life of elegance and leisure a method for imposing order on chaos; he also saw in the “country house ideal” a symbol of the Neoplatonic dance of life, which he expresses many times in the poetry of his “3rd period” and later. Yeats detested the middle classes, with their Philistine money grubbing, and was disgusted with its shopkeepers, who seemed to him to be without any dignity, understanding, or nobility of spirit. For his ideal characters he looked either below the bourgeoisie, to peasants and beggars, or above them, to the aristocracy. His animus against the middle class produced some of the most effective poems of this 3rd or middle period. Lady Gregory encouraged Yeats’ nationalism—he became one of the people most responsible for establishing the “Irish Literary Revival” movement—but also simultaneously urged him to continue focusing on writing drama. In 1899, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and George Moore founded, based on the ideals of French avant-garde theater, the Irish National Theatre, forerunner of the famous Abbey Theatre, for the purpose of performing Irish and Celtic plays. In 1909 Yeats’s theater interests indirectly received support from the American poet Ezra Pound, who had traveled to London at least partly to meet Yeats (whom he considered “the only poet worthy of serious study”) and stayed on acting as his nominal secretary. Pound’s scholarship on Japanese Noh plays provided Yeats with a model for the aristocratic drama he intended to write.

Yeats heavy participation in both the Irish National Theater and the Abbey Theater some 2 years later, where he faced the problems of play production, had an effect on his style: to the precision—and the combination of colloquial and formal speech—that Yeats had achieved early in the century he now added a “metaphysical” and epigrammatic element, evidenced in the later poems of his 3rd period. It was his way of responding to the change in poetic taste immediately before and after World War I, represented in the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot and Yeats’s friend Pound. In the meantime Yeats also continued his experiments with different kinds of rhythm, as well as his esoteric search for a more all-inclusive language of symbols. He was a master of the traditional forms, unlike many of the other modernists experimenting with free verse, yet the impact of modernism is clear in his increasing abandonment of the more conventional poetic diction of his early work in favor of more austere language and a more direct approach to his themes, which increasingly characterizes his poetry and plays between 1903 and 1916; his middle work is supple and muscular in its rhythms and sometimes harshly modernist. While Yeats’s early poetry draws heavily on Irish myth and folklore, his later work is more engaged with contemporary issues and evinces sparser imagery, finding new imaginative inspiration in the mystical system he was working out for himself under the influence of spiritualism. His later poetry and plays are also written in a more personal vein,

invoking his son and daughter and meditations on growing old.

Yeats was now becoming more and more of a national figure, highly visible in part due to three public controversies that had moved him to channel his anger into poetry (involving reaction to nationalist hero Parnell, the Philistine outcry against John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of The Western World* in 1907, and a dispute over pictures alluded to in his poem "September 1913"). In each case, the cause for which he fought was defeated by representatives of the Roman Catholic middle class, causing him to move to England in bitterness. The heroic Easter Rising (see "Easter 1916"), mounted by members of the same class and religion that had so long opposed him, inspired him to return; Maud Gonne (whose estranged husband was one of the executed leaders of the rising) argued that "tragic dignity had returned to Ireland." To mark his new commitment, he rented, refurbished, occupied, and renamed "Thoor Ballylee," the Norman Tower on Lady Gregory's land that was to become one of the central symbols of his later poetry. In 1922 he was appointed a senator of the recently established Irish Free State, subsequently playing an active part promoting the arts as well as in general political affairs.

By 1916, Yeats was 51 years old and became fixated upon marrying and producing an heir. When John MacBride was executed for his role in the Easter Rising, Yeats thought that widow Maud might remarry and made his final proposal to her (his 5th) in mid 1916, albeit this time in an indifferent manner, with conditions attached, apparently more out of a sense of duty than genuine desire. When she once again declined him, he turned to the 21-year-old Iseut Gonne, Maud's second child (allegedly conceived on a French church altar, with Lucien Millevoye, in an attempt to reincarnate her short-lived brother). Iseut had once proposed to Yeats, when she was 15, but when Yeats proposed to her in 1917, she rejected him. He then proposed in September 1917 to 25-year-old Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he had met through former lover (from 1894–97) Olivia Shakespeare. Despite warnings from her friends, Hyde-Lees accepted. Their marriage proved to be a success, in spite of the age difference, not least by producing 2 children, Anne and Michael, although in his later years Yeats had romantic relationships (and affairs) with other women. His wife proved so sympathetic to his imaginative needs that for several years she ostensibly produced "automatic writing" (believed by Yeats to have been dictated by spirits), which gave him—during what might be considered his 4th poetic period of development—the elements of a symbolic system he later worked out in his book *A Vision* (1925, 1937).

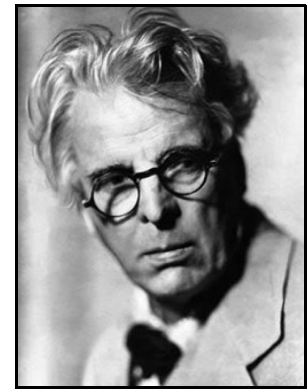


William Butler Yeats 1923

This sometimes baffling esoteric system—from sources that were common to Blake and Shelley and went back into pre-Platonic beliefs and traditions—was both a theory of history and a theory of personality, each historical movement and personality type being related in various complicated ways to a different phase of the

moon. Under Yeats's vision life is a repetitious and progressive journey up a spiral staircase. As we grow older we cover the ground we have covered before, only higher up, measuring our progress by the number of places where we were but no longer are. Through symbolic images of this kind Yeats explores the paradoxes of time and change, growth and identity, love and age, life and art, and madness and wisdom. Some of Yeats's poetry is almost unintelligible without a knowledge of *A Vision*; but the better poems can be appreciated without such knowledge, their patterned imagery being reinforced by the incantatory effect of the rhythms. His new system certainly injected additional power and resonance into his poems. During this period, his poetry volumes *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933), containing such poems as "Sailing to Byzantium," "Leda and the Swan," "Among School Children," and "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," represent the mature Yeats at probably his very best—a realist-symbolist-metaphysical poet with an uncanny power over words. Appropriately, during 1929 Yeats resided at Thoor Ballylee, the tower near Gort in County Galway (where Yeats had his summer home since 1919). He spent much of the remainder of his life outside of Ireland.

Beginning his 5th and final poetic period Yeats, at age 69, underwent in 1934 an "rejuvenating" operation to increase his sexual potency, an operation which he believed produced for him a new vigor in the last five years of his life, evident in both his poetry and his romantic relations with a number younger women. As he had throughout his life, Yeats found erotic adventure to be an impetus for creative energy, and certainly his last poems demonstrate a controlled yet startling wildness. Yeats's "return" to the wellspring of life, to "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart," is one of the most impressive final phases of any poet's career. Upon his death Yeats left a body of verse which, in both its variety and power, has made him, in the eyes of many scholars, beyond question the greatest 20th-century poet in the English language. Despite age and ill-health, Yeats continued to be a highly prolific writer, right up until his death at the Hôtel Idéal Séjour, in Menton, France, on 28 January 1939. After a discreet and private funeral, he was quickly buried at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, in accordance with his wishes. In September 1948, also according to his wishes, Yeats's body was dug up and moved to Drumcliff, County Sligo. Ironically, the person in charge of this operation for the Irish Government was Maud Gonne's son Seán MacBride, then Minister of External Affairs.



W. B. Yeats 1936



Drumcliffe Cemetery, Sligo