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# Irish Nationalism in the Later Poetry of William Butler Yeats

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial  
fulfillment for the Degree of Master in English  
Language, Civilization and Literature

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2009

## Acknowledgements:

Above all, I thank Allah, the almighty for having given me the strength and patience to undertake and complete this work Glory and praise for him.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Brahim Harouni, for his great help, precious advice and patience.

I would like also to express my enduring gratitude to my supervisor, Mr Hamoudi Boughenout for his timely interventions and for his patience thereafter. Thanks for the inspiring exchange of ideas and reading suggestions that helped me so much. I benefited a lot from his acute efforts as a reader and a teacher. My highest praise is merited for his advices.

Heartfelt thanks to all the teachers who trained me all throughout my education. Special thanks to my teachers; Dr Magherbi, Mr Yachir, Mr Azil, Miss Benzahra.

Thanks to all the people of the English Department for their kindness and professionalism over the years.

Many dear friends; Amina, Amel, Nabila, minou, Amine, Mohamed Hichem, Samir, karim...Special recognition is due to my comrades, Djamila, Kamal, Tahar, Youcef.

I owe much to the dearest person to my heart, REDHA ABOUD, for giving me all the support I needed, and for enabling me to collect many of the necessary documentation without which it would not be possible for me to complete this work.

At last I can offer humble gratitude to my dear parents, whose excitement over my educational goals helped me when I would lose sight of what I was doing, they never doubted me, and freely gave unbelievable support of all kinds, and gave me more than they know.

I dedicate this work to my cousins Nour Al Houda, Hanan, Mohamed, Aicha, and to all the members of my family.

## Abstract:

This Dissertation aims to investigate William Butler Yeats's nationalism and his relationship with the issue of Irish nationalism, along with his criticism of the English occupation of Ireland, within the context of a select number of poems. The main argument of this study is that historical events have a great impact on literature, and that the writer may be the best representative when it comes to defend national issues. By means of a close study of three of William Butler Yeats's most famous poems; "The Second Coming", "Easter 1916" and "Sailing to Byzantium," this dissertation shows that he displays a strong sense of nationalism in his works which he almost exclusively devoted to the Irish cause. In spite of the fact that he spent two thirds of his life outside Ireland, his mother country remained at the centre of his imaginative world and a constant source of inspiration in his entire oeuvre.

## Résumé

Ce mémoire vise à enquêter sur le nationalisme de William Butler Yeats et sa relation avec la question du nationalisme Irlandais, avec sa critique de l'occupation Anglaise de l'Irlande, dans le cadre d'un certain nombre de poèmes. L'argument principal de cette étude est que les événements historiques ont un grand impact sur la littérature, et que l'écrivain peut être le meilleur représentant quand il s'agit de défendre les questions nationales. Au moyen d'une étude attentive de trois des plus célèbres poèmes de William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming", "Easter 1916" et "Sailing to Byzantium", Ce mémoire démontre qu'il affiche un fort sentiment de nationalisme dans ses œuvres qu'il consacre presque exclusivement à la cause irlandaise. En dépit du fait qu'il a passé les deux tiers de sa vie hors de l'Irlande, sa mère patrie est restée au centre de son monde imaginaire et une source constante d'inspiration dans son œuvre.

## ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الوطنية في أشعار وليم بتلر بيتس وعلاقته مع مسألة القومية الأيرلندية ، جنباً إلى جذب مع نقده للاحتلال الأنكليزي لأيرلندا ، في سياق اختيار عدد من القصائد الرئيسية الرئيسة لهذه الدراسة هي أن الأحداث التاريخية لها تأثير كبير على الأدب ، وأن الكاتب قد يكون أفضل ممثل عندما يتعلق الأمر بالدفاع عن القضايا الوطنية . تبين هذه الرسالة ان وليم بتلر بيتس يعرض حس القومية في أعماله التي كان على وجه الخصوص تقريداً مكرسة للقضية الأيرلندية . وعلى الرغم من أنه قضى ثلثي حياته خارج أيرلندا ، إلا ان وطنه الام كان مصدراً دائماً للإلهام في أعماله كلها .

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	
Historical Background: Irish Nationalism during the Late nineteenth and Early twentieth Centuries	
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1. How were the Catholics treated in Ireland under the British rule?.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2. The Act of Union.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3. The Great famine and its aftermath.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>4. Irish Revolutionary Nationalism and Irish Parliamentary Nationalism.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4.1The Irish Revolutionary nationalism.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.2The Irish Parliamentary nationalism.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5. The Rise of Fenianism.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>6.The Easter Rising 1916 and its Aftermath.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>7.The Rise of Sinn Féin.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>8.The War of Independence.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>9.The Establishment of the Irish Free State.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>10.The Outbreak of the Civil War and its Aftermath.....</b>	<b>28</b>

**11.Devalera’s Office.....30**

**Conclusion.....31**

**Chapter Two**

**The influence of Irish History and Politics on Yeats's Later Poetry**

**Introduction.....32**

**1.The Influence of the Irish Cause on Yeats's Carrer.....33**

**1.2 The Second Coming.....41**

**2.2 Easter 1916.....48**

**2.3 Sailing to Byzantium.....56**

**Conclusion.....64**

**Conclusion.....65**

**Work Cited.....67**

## Introduction:

William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet, dramatist and a prose writer who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. Because of the nature of his work, he often appears as a writer who marked the transition from late Romanticism to the Modernism which came to dominate literature in the period between the two world wars. W.B. Yeats began his poetic career in the 1880s, and remained an important literary figure until his death in 1939. Probably more than any other writer, he shows in his poems many of the changes which took place in the world he lived in. He was closely involved in the struggle for independence and his own experiences are echoed in his poems.

This dissertation attempts to analyse "The Second Coming", "Easter 1916" and "Sailing to Byzantium" in relation to the poet's historical and biographical contexts. These poems have been selected because on one hand they are among the best poems written in the twentieth century and they best illustrate the changes in Yeats's style. On the other hand, the themes of these poems are closely related to the changes that occurred in Irish history. These poems will also serve to investigate Yeats's passion for his country along with its politics and its political changes. Additionally, this dissertation looks at how Yeats's points of view and attitudes changed, as he grew older, about the subjects of his poems. He shifted from writing about the myths and legends of ancient Ireland, to writing about several events in Irish history.

My interest in the influence of nationalism on Yeats's poetry is motivated by the fact that literature and history are intimately connected, and that writers often



endeavour to transform historical events into works of art (either poetry, prose or drama), therefore, using writing as a tool to defend their own convictions. Yeats is known for this, as far as Ireland is concerned.

The purpose of my research is to show that Yeats's poetry can not be separated from his own experiences and the history of his nation. His long career managed nearly every possible view of the relation between poetry and politics. His views had certainly been shaped by his involvement in the political life of his country.

This dissertation begins with a brief reading of a part of the Irish history, starting from the Great Famine up to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, the same year that saw the death of Yeats, to show the roots of the rivalry between Ireland and England, as well as the issues on which they struggled for a very long period of time (land, religion and nationalism). Without at least a brief historical background, the reader may not really get a full understanding of Yeats's poetry in its relation with Ireland and Irish history. Such a historical background is important to comprehend the world Yeats wrote about.

The second chapter provides a discussion of the poet's career, and the influence that his relationship with many people had on his politics and his beliefs, in addition to the Irish literary development that had been inextricably bound with his career. From love poems to poems of political crisis, the range of Yeats's work makes of him one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. Moreover, the chapter offers a general overview of the influence that the Irish Question had on Yeats's later poetry, and the difference between the early and the later poetry; how he shifted from writing

about folklore and occult to more mature subjects that deal with politics and contemporary issues. This chapter is also devoted to the historical analysis of three poems. "Easter 1916", with its famous refrain "A terrible beauty is born", was written about Irish nationalists who fought against the British in the Easter Rising. "The Second Coming" gives a pessimistic image of the twentieth century when "Things fall apart", and "Sailing to Byzantium" describes Ireland as "no country for old men" in the post-independence era.

Methodologically speaking, the poems are approached from a historical point of view with an emphasis on events that inspired the poet and pushed him to write these and other poems.

Throughout my research, I did my best to rely exclusively on books more than essays and articles, and I relied as well on some electronic sources.

# Chapter One

## Historical Background

### Irish Nationalism during the Late nineteenth and Early twentieth Centuries

#### Introduction:

“The Irish Question”, is a phrase first used in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to refer to the long, difficult and often violent relationship between Ireland and Britain which has been a permanent feature of British political and cultural life. Throughout its history as a British colony, Ireland had periodically rebelled against Britain, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century during which the movement for Irish independence was strong, especially when the political thrust for independence joined with the movement for the revival of Irish culture in the 1890s. Religion, land and nationalism are the three aspects on which Britain and Ireland had been in dispute for a very long period of time. These issues changed both as a result of time and changes in British politics. But at the root of the inability to deal with this issue is Britain's lack of understanding of the complex nature of the Irish question and their refusal to seek durable solutions to it.

This chapter aims to show the evolution of the nationalist movement in Ireland, starting from the late 19th century, until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. However, a basic knowledge of Ireland's long and troubled history is essential for a good understanding of the “Irish Question”. So, the chapter goes back in time to

the 1770s to give the reader an idea about the origins of the struggle between Britain and Ireland. Then, it examines each of the three issues on which the two rivals struggled. After the introducing of these issues, the chapter deals with The Easter Rising, a turning point in Irish history and one of the events that had strongly influenced and inspired W.B.Yeats. The chapter also attempts to show the effects of the Easter Rising on the Irish Nationalist movement and on the future developments of the Irish history starting with the War of Independence that led to the establishment of the Irish Free State. All these events provided the atmosphere to Yeats and motivated him to write some of the best poems of the twentieth century poetry.

## 1. How were the Catholics treated in Ireland under the British rule?

Although a sense of Irishness probably existed in the Gaelic period before the 12th-century Norman invasion, political Irish nationalism developed from the early 16th century, when Protestant government reaction to Counter-Reformation\* Catholicism included measures such as the Plantation of Ireland\*\* by Protestant settlers.

It is important to know how the Catholics were treated in Ireland during the period of the British rule to understand one of the three aspects of the rivalry between Ireland and England. The defeat of James II\*\*\*, King of England and Ireland, had severe and long-term effects on the Irish people. Over the next half century, the Protestant parliament in Dublin passed laws preventing the Catholics from taking any part in national life. They could not become members of the Dublin parliament, as they could not vote in parliamentary elections. No one of them could become a lawyer, neither go to university, nor join the navy or accede to any public post. In this respect, the historian David McDowall says “Catholics were not even allowed to own a horse worth more than £5”<sup>1</sup>. Their children were not allowed to be educated according to their religion, because Catholic schools were forbidden. In 1697 the Banishment Law ordered all bishops and priests to leave Ireland, although many did not. In 1704 Catholic priests were required to swear allegiance to the king. Though their number was much more than that of the Protestants, Catholics had become second-class

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<sup>1</sup> McDowall, David. *An Illustrated History of Britain*. Longman UP, 2006. p113.

\* The revival of Catholicism in Ireland, as elsewhere in western Europe, was not just a reaction to Protestantism, but the continuation of a movement already visible before the Reformation.

\*\* The Plantations of Ireland were an instrument of retribution and colonization after several Irish rebellions against English rule throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

\*\*\*In 1685 a Catholic, James II, succeeded Charles II. The Irish hoped James would treat them more kindly but he was overthrown in 1688 and fled to France. In 1690, the Protestant king William III (William of Orange) defeated James II, crushed Catholic uprisings at the Battle of the Boyne and thus secured Protestant dominance in Northern Ireland.

citizens in their own land. In addition to this, Catholic families were divided by new laws. The son of Catholic parents who became Protestant could take over his parents' property and use it as he wanted. These actions put the Irish Catholic population in the same position as other colonized peoples which caused a deep feeling of hate between the rulers, the Protestant settlers and the ruled, the Catholic Irish. In the 1770s, however, some of the laws against Catholics were removed, but they were still deprived of their freedom. In Ulster, the northern part of Ireland, Protestants formed the first "Orange Lodges", that is societies which were against any freedom for the Catholics.

Despite the fact that he belonged to the Protestant, Anglo-Irish minority that had controlled the economic, political, social, and cultural life of Ireland since at least the end of the seventeenth century, Yeats insisted on his Irish nationality while most members of this minority considered themselves English people who merely happened to have been born in Ireland.

Later, in 1789 the French Revolution began, and in 1793 France declared war against Britain. The ideas of the French Revolution -liberty, equality and democracy- in addition to the religious matter, influenced the Irish especially when the religious inequality had been abolished in France and a democratic government had been set up. With the purpose of keeping Ireland under its rule, and avoiding all sorts of revolution, Britain introduced the Act of Union in 1801.

## 2. The Act of Union

In order to increase British control, Ireland was united with Britain in 1801 by The Act of Union, under the name of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Daniel O'Connell insisted that the British Parliament repealed the anti-Catholic laws

to justify its claim to represent the people of Ireland. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland lasted for 120 years. British politicians promised Irish leaders equal voting opportunities when Ireland would be part of the United Kingdom. But the King of Great Britain and Ireland, George III, supported by most Tories and by many Protestant Irish landlords, refused to let this happen despite the intended logic behind the 1801 Act of Union through which the British parliament would open up the path for Catholic emancipation, that is the right for Catholics to sit in the Westminster Parliament. However, it was almost 30 years after the Act of Union that Catholics were granted emancipation.

There was an imperial context to the Act of Union as well. Ireland was often viewed as a British colony, and since this was long before the era of decolonization, if Ireland broke away, it would be a bad example for other colonies that seek independence. So, Ireland was not just strategically important, but it also had a symbolic value. In the post emancipation period, Catholics and Protestants drifted further apart; The Protestants increasingly seeking Union, while the Catholics asking for its repeal.

Later on, in the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Protestant Irish asked England to protect them from the Catholic majority. David McDowall notes that “To the Catholics, Irish Protestants were a reminder that England,” being considered a foreign country, “was still as powerful in Ireland as it had been in 1690”<sup>2</sup>. The struggle for Irish freedom from English rule became a struggle between Catholics and Protestants. The first great victory for the Irish was in 1829, when Catholics were allowed to become MPs, which helped to increase the Irish national feeling. Thus we

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<sup>2</sup> David McDowall. p149.

see that in the pre 1870 period questions of religion and nationalism were already beginning to get intertwined. This process is accelerated in the post 1870 period. But there was also the question of land, another crucial factor that was of great importance for the survival of the Irish people.

“Through the eight centuries of British rule in Ireland, Irish nationalist’s sentiment remained strong, though it was often forced underground. Ireland had gained a hundred numbers in the British Parliament when the United Kingdom was formed in 1801, yet on crucial issues they were regularly outvoted by the English majority.”<sup>3</sup> (J.H Dettmar, Kevin & David Damrosch). While the feeling of high nationalism was growing, Ireland suffered the worst disaster in its entire history which was the Great Famine.

### **3. The Great famine and its aftermath**

By the autumn of 1845, there were more than eight million people lived in Ireland. Many of them were miserably poor, managing to live on tiny plots of land, and depending on each year's potato crop. Hunger was not something new to peasant families, because there had been partial failures of the potato crop in previous years. However, these had always been of limited duration. But The Great Famine of 1848 had terrible lasting effects. The potato crop failure lasted from 1845 to 1848, and affected the whole island. The Great Famine brought back the issue of land as never before. The Famine was a catastrophic event not merely in terms of lives lost, but also in terms of the destruction to the rural economy.

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<sup>3</sup> Damrosch, David and Kevin J. H. Dettar, eds. The Longman Anthology of British Literature. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol. 2. New York: Longman, 2006.p 2379.



The cause of the famine was the late blight, a fungus disease which made the potato plants to rot in the ground, by destroying both the leaves and the edible roots, or tubers, causing an unpleasant smell. Scientists were unable to explain and combat the disease. The British government's help was not of a significant scale to relieve the famine\*.

For three years -1845, 1846 and 1847- 1.5 million (about 20per cent of the Irish population) died from hunger. At the same time Ireland produced enough wheat to feed its entire population but its grain, meat, and other products were exported to England by the mainly Protestant landlords because the Irish peasantry lacked the money to purchase them. Joel Mokyr says that “the famine a watershed in the demographic history of Ireland”<sup>4</sup>. As a consequence, Ireland's population had fallen from 8,400,000 in 1844 to 6,600,000 by 1851. About 1,100,000 people died from starvation or from famine-related diseases. As a consequence, the integration of Ireland into the United Kingdom remained a controversial subject. David Ross says that “Agitation for the restoration of an Irish parliament had been strong in the 1830s. For a time it was dimmed by the appalling events of the Great Famine of 1845-49...From 1849, the movement of Irish separatism resumed.”<sup>5</sup> Many Irish people were obliged to leave their homeland because of the great poverty in which they lived. At least a million left during these years, but many more followed during the rest of the century. Most Irish immigrants settled in the United States, some went eastwards to the towns and cities of Britain. The Irish who went to the United States did not forget their mother country, nor did

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\* Robert Peel, the British prime minister, appointed a commission to investigate the problem, he did what he could to provide relief in 1845 and early 1846. And under the Liberal cabinet of Lord John Russell, which assumed power in June 1846, the emphasis shifted to reliance on Irish resources and the free market, which made disaster inevitable.

<sup>4</sup> Mokyr, Joel. "Irish Potato Famine." Encyclopædia Britannica 2007 Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, David. England: History of a Nation. Scotland, Geddes & Grosset, New Lanark, 2005.p 219.

they forgive Britain. Their nationalist feeling grew even bigger and by 1880 many Irish Americans were rich and powerful and were able to support the Irish freedom movement. They have had the influence on British policy in Ireland ever since. In addition to this, strong and highly organised Irish nationalist political movements were born. Some of them were violent and some others were democratic while some were of a more nationalist trend working for greater rights and greater autonomy from Britain.

#### 4. Irish Revolutionary Nationalism and Irish Parliamentary Nationalism

The Protestants, Unionist, strongly argued for a greater integration into the United Kingdom. Whereas the Irish nationalists believed that Ireland is one country and as such it should be ruled as an independent country; they have always strongly opposed British involvement in Ireland and have always wanted to govern themselves and for that matter they believed that the British had to leave Ireland. There were two strands to Irish nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries: revolutionary nationalism and parliamentary nationalism. Militant radical (revolutionary) nationalism received inspiration from the American and French revolutions in the 18th century and continued until the 20th century. However, a constitutional approach was adopted by 19th-century reformist politicians such as Daniel O'Connell\* and Charles Stewart

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\* Daniel O'Connell (1775 – 1847) The Liberator, he is one of the great Catholic Irish political leaders in the first half of the nineteenth century. He campaigned for Catholic Emancipation .

\*\* Charles Stewart Parnell (1846 – 1891) was an Irish Protestant landowner, nationalist political leader, land reform agitator and one of the most important figures in 19th century Ireland and Great Britain.

Parnell\*\*, add to it the literary revival, at the turn of the twentieth century, which promoted Irish cultural nationalism against Anglicization and the Irish Cultural Revival, in which Yeats was a key figure and his contribution to Irish nationalism was significant.

#### **4.1 The Irish Revolutionary nationalism**

Revolutionary nationalists, also termed as militant radicals or Irish Republicans, were those willing to use, or support the use of physical force to achieve their goals. In the 18th and 19th centuries their main campaigns were the Rebellion of 1798 led by Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, the 1848 Young Ireland rebellion, the 1867 Fenian movement's uprising, and the actions of the Land League\* against tenant evictions from 1879, and Yeats's family was one of many Protestant landowning families whose status was diminished by this process. This fact makes it clear why Yeats later would write such poems like "Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation." The main organizations of the revolutionary nationalists in the early 20th century were the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and Irish Volunteers who conducted the 1916 Easter Rising and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In 1905 Sinn Fein, the political voice of the Irish republican movement was established by Arthur Griffith\*\*. This trend of Irish nationalism was opposed by those Irishmen who wanted to achieve home rule by following more constitutional means.

#### **4.2 The Irish Parliamentary nationalism**

Parliamentary Irish nationalists used Parliament and its peaceful constitutional method of elections and debate in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, to achieve their aims. Their first leader was Daniel O'Connell, who campaigned in the 1820s for Catholic emancipation, freedom to vote and be elected to Parliament and for the repeal of the 1801 Act of Union. He

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\* It was an Irish political organization of the late 19th century. Its primary aim was to abolish "landlordism" in Ireland and enable tenant farmers to own the land they worked on. The period of the Land League is known in Ireland as the Land War.

\*\* Arthur Griffith, journalist and Irish nationalist, vice president of the Irish Republic from January 1919, and its president from January 1922, until his death.

managed to achieve Catholic emancipation in 1829. Another Irish nationalist, Charles Stewart Parnell, also led the parliamentary nationalists in the fight for Irish home rule. Charles Stewart Parnell was president of the Irish Home Rule party in 1877, and helped form the Land League in 1879. John Redmond, an Irish prominent Irishman, of the same persuasion, led the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) from 1900 to 1918 and succeeded in getting a home rule bill passed by the House of Lords in 1914, although this was never implemented due to the outbreak of World War I.

Revolutionary and parliamentary nationalists had the same basic aims, but used different methods. In fact, the threat posed by the revolutionary nationalists often acted in favour of the parliamentarians who had some of their demands satisfied by the British government. As a result of the division in means, Irishmen remained divided. Other groups of Irishmen were as well involved in the fight for the independence of Ireland. One of the most famous of these groups was the Fenian secret society.

## 5. The Rise of Fenianism

Among the exiles and immigrants, the Fenian movement spread widely. It was a secret revolutionary society named for the Fianna Eireann, the legendary band of Irish warriors led by the fictional Finn MacCumhaill (MacCool) in legendary times. The Fenian movement aimed at securing Ireland's political freedom by taking advantage of every opportunity to harm English interests. In 1858, the society was founded in the United States by John O'Mahony and in Ireland by James Stephens. Many factors helped in the creation of the Fenian Irish Independence Movement. According to Christopher Harvie and H. C. G. Matthew "The inheritance of the 1798 rebellion, the failure of Daniel O'Connell's attempt to repeal the 1800 Act of Union in the 1830s and 1840s, and the catastrophe of the Famine of 1845–6 and 1848, produced the Fenian Irish independence movement of the 1860s, which

attempted risings in the USA, Canada, and Ireland”<sup>6</sup>. Yeats himself was a supporter of Fenianism, in his poem “September 1913 he laments the death of O’Leary with the line: “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone; it’s with O’Leary in the grave”

During the next years, plans gradually developed for a projected nationwide rising, financed mainly by funds collected in the United States. In 1867 the movement astonished England by a series of bomb explosions, notably one at Clerkenwell Prison in London, in which over 100 persons were killed. As a matter of fact, “The Fenian movement in no sense represented Irish opinion generally, but the danger that it might come to do so encouraged Liberal politicians, especially Gladstone, to concessionary action.”<sup>7</sup> (Harvie & Matthew)

The British prime minister, William Ewart Gladstone, who said when he held office in 1868 “My mission is to pacify Ireland”<sup>8</sup> (“Northern Ireland”), at last recognised the necessity for radical reforms. Gladstone had long been troubled by foreign criticism of the way that Britain governed Ireland. Gladstone began in 1869 by disestablishing the Anglican Church in Ireland. He considered it unjust that a church with only 700,000 adherents out of a population of five and three-quarter million should continue to get state support. Next, Gladstone put through a Land Act in 1870. Actually, the Act was not much use and proved its failure, but at least Gladstone had established the principle that Parliament should do something to protect tenants as well as uphold the rights of landed property.

Certainly the most valuable measure for Ireland in these years was the introduction of secret ballot in all elections in 1872. At last Irishmen could cast their votes as they wished without fear of eviction or retaliation. Secret ballot was first put to the test in the general

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<sup>6</sup>Harvie, Christopher, and H. C. G. Matthew. Nineteenth-Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. p113.

<sup>7</sup> Harvie, Christopher and H. C. G. Matthew. 113.

<sup>8</sup> “Northern Ireland”. [bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland) Thursday 16 Jul. 2009. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland>. html>.

election of 1874. The results had dramatic consequences for both British and Irish politics. Liberal representation in Ireland received a few number of votes and been displaced by 59 MPs who described themselves as “Home Rulers”.

For nearly a quarter of a century the issue of repeal of the Act of Union failed. Nevertheless, it was revived by an alliance of Liberals and Conservatives, former repealers, and Fenians searching for an alternative to futile revolution. Seeking support for a Catholic university, members of the hierarchy, after some hesitation, also gave their support to the Association. In any case, the election of 1874 put Gladstone out of office and he was succeeded by Disraeli.

Benjamin Disraeli now headed a Conservative government more interested in imperial adventure than in Ireland’s problems. Isaac Butt\*’s polite attempts in the House of Commons to get Ireland back on the agenda failed. Then on 22 April 1875 Charles Stewart Parnell, a Protestant landlord from Co Wicklow, made his first appearance in the Commons, and soon transform the Irish political landscape. “Parnell assembled a powerful coalition in parliament, bringing other businesses to a halt until Irish issues were considered. After years of negotiation, the Liberal Prime Minister Gladstone agreed to introduce a Home Rule bill in 1886. The bill was defeated, but passage was believed to be just a matter of time.” (J.H Dettmar, Kevin & David Damrosch)<sup>9</sup>

There followed twenty years during which Irish nationalist ambitions seemed frustrated, partly because Conservative-Unionists were mainly in power and partly because bitter internal rivalries harm the reputation of the Irish Nationalist Party after Parnell's involvement in a

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\* Isaac Butt (1813 –1879) was an Irish barrister, politician, MP in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and the founder and first leader of a number of Irish nationalist parties and organizations, including the Irish Metropolitan Conservative Society in 1836.

<sup>9</sup> Damrosch, David and Kevin J. H. Dettmar.p2379.

divorce affaire; In Victorian Britain, divorce was still seen as a scandalous issue and marriage as sacred and anyone involved with interfering in someone else's marriage was considered to be guilty. As a result of this, there was a split in the Irish parliamentary party, and the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland turned against him, declaring him unfit for public office (which hastened his early death), whereas others, especially in Dublin, remained fiercely loyal to him. ( 44 against him vs 26 loyal to him)

After the fall of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891, Yeats hoped to fill an apparent political vacuum with cultural work. He argued that all Irish writers should write about native places and subjects: he himself rooted his imagination in the landscapes of Sligo and the West. By contrast, he was international in his influences, taking lessons from French Symbolists, Swedish mystics and German philosophers. He admired powerful men like Parnell. His early nationalism was predicated on hatred of British rule and on the struggle with Young Ireland, but was also rooted in his Anglo-Irish origins. Mainly, he stressed the equal importance of literature and politics. Home-rule was the goal of the Irish Nationalists; and Yeats, though Anglo-Irish, knew well the history of Ireland and had strong nationalistic sympathies. He wanted to demonstrate the importance of the Irish history writing about the events surrounding him using the myths and legends of Ireland's antiquity to produce strong feelings of patriotism.

The struggle for home rule continued and dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth century British politics. David McDowall writes "Irish nationalists had decided they could only win their freedom by fighting for it."<sup>10</sup>

At the close of the century the Conservatives started introducing constructive reforms in Ireland. Their most important achievement in this field was the Land Purchase Act of 1903,

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<sup>10</sup> David McDowall,p150.

which affected government mediation the transfer of landownership to the occupying tenants, by providing generous inducements to landlords to sell their estates. In the last years of the century, as a reaction to political frustrations, a cultural nationalist movement, (The Gaelic League) developed, led by Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill to revive interest in the speaking and study of Irish language, the fact that was influential for Yeats.

## **6. The Easter Rising 1916 and its Aftermaths**

Before the beginning of the First World War, there was a fear that the Protestants in the north would start a civil war in Ulster if home rule was introduced. For this reason, when war began in 1914, the government delayed the introduction of home rule, and called on Irishmen to join the army. Many thousands did, encouraged by their MPs who hoped that this show of loyalty would help Ireland win self-government when the war ended.

However, there was another group of Irishmen who did not see why they should fight for the British, who had treated Ireland so badly. They wanted full independence. At Easter 1916, these republicans rebelled in Dublin. They knew they could not win, but they hoped their rising would convince other Irishmen to join the republican movement. When the rising took place on Easter Monday, only about 1,000 men and women were actually engaged. A provisional Irish government was proclaimed. The general post office and other parts of Dublin were seized; street fighting continued for about a week until Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse, and other republican leaders were forced to surrender. The “Easter Rising” was quickly put down. The British executed ten leaders, which was a serious mistake because sympathy for the use of force to achieve independence as well as support for an independent Irish republic were also increased. Martin Wallace says that “By 12 May the total of executions had reached fifteen, including Connolly and the three other signatories. Another seventy-five rebels had the death penalty commuted to penal servitude, including Countess



Constance Markievicz, who would later become the first woman elected to the Westminster parliament.”<sup>11</sup>

In these circumstances, the appeal of the moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party declined further. It was also damaged by its continuing failure in wartime to achieve Irish self-government. This event was a shock for Yeats and his family and friends, the fact that pushed him to write "Easter 1916" one of the best poems that deals with the Irish struggle for independence. The public was shocked as well, not only in Ireland, but also in London. Irish Americans were also angry, just at the moment when America had joined Britain in the war against Germany. The “Easter Rising” was a turning point in Irish history; it resulted in the decline of the moderate nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party, which was also damaged by its continuing failure in wartime to achieve Irish self-government. It was the Sinn Féin party which eventually displaced the IPP. It was the oldest political movement in Ireland whose objective is to end British rule in Ireland.

## **7. The Rise of Sinn Féin**

The principal beneficiary of the 1916 rising was Sinn Féin (We Ourselves), a political movement founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith. It worked for the right of Irish people as a whole to attain national self-determination and sought the unity and independence of Ireland as a sovereign state.

Griffith, who opposed the use of force, argued that the Irish MPs should quit Westminster, set up their own assembly in Dublin, and make British government unworkable. Sinn Féin won several by-elections in 1917, because public opinion turned against the Irish parliamentary party after the Easter Rising. Among its successful candidates was Eamon de

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, Martin. Charles McGuinness, Irish Republican “The Easter Rising 1916” <<http://www.sailoroffortune.com/irishrepublican.html>>.

Valera\*, a surviving leader of the Easter Rising. When a general election was held in December 1918, Sinn Féin won seventy-three of the 105 Irish seats, most of the rest going to the Unionists. They won in almost every area except Ulster. Instead of joining the British parliament, however, the republicans set up their provisional government, the Dáil Éireann, the “Irish Assembly,” in Dublin, on 21 January 1919 and announced that Ireland was now a republic.

## **8. The War of Independence**

The War of Independence began in January 1919 when two policemen were killed by Volunteers in County Tipperary. The Volunteers, who now became known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), continued to arm themselves through attacks on police barracks and army depots. Irishmen joined the IRA and soon engaged in guerrilla fighting against the British police, while the government retaliated with cruel punishments. Large proportions of the Irish police resigned, and in 1920 the British government reinforced the Irish police with ex soldiers known as Black and Tans, wearing a mixture of police and army uniforms, and later with ex-officers known as Auxiliaries. Violence was committed by both sides and much property was destroyed, including those owned by Anglo-Irish gentry. Michael Collins\* was a principal figure in the IRA who was involved with a group that assassinated British intelligence officers and some Irish detectives.

By 1920 the British government, led by David Lloyd George, was prepared to seek a compromise which would keep Ireland within the British Empire but with making concessions to Irish nationalism at the same time. The Government of Ireland Act of 1920

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\* Original name Edward de Valera. Irish politician and patriot, prime minister (1932–48, 1951–54, 1957–59), and president (1959–73). An active revolutionary from 1913, he became president of Sinn Féin in 1918 and founded the Fianna Fáil Party in 1924.

\* Michael Collins the hero of the Irish struggle for independence, best remembered for his daring strategy in directing the campaign of guerrilla warfare during the intensification of the Anglo-Irish War (1919–21).

(sometimes called the Fourth Home Rule Act) provided for a measure of home rule to be exercised by two parliaments in Ireland. Since Sinn Fein was unwilling to enter the new Dublin parliament, Lloyd George offered de Valera negotiations on the future of Ireland. The two sides agreed on a ceasefire, and on 11 July 1921 the War of Independence ended. The negotiations led to The Anglo-Irish Treaty that was signed between the British and Irish governments on 6 December 1921. It recognised Irish independence in 26 of Ireland's 32 counties, 6 north-eastern ones remaining part of the British Empire. According to David McDowall "It was agreed to the independence of southern Ireland, but it also insisted that Ulster, or Northern Ireland as it became known, should remain united with Britain."<sup>11</sup> Most of Ireland was now independent and Northern Ireland was born. However the Treaty did not satisfy all of Ireland's soldiers and politicians and there was a split over the treaty as it did not recognise Ireland as a full republic but only a free state, and the oath of allegiance to the English crown was still necessary.

During the time of the revolution, Yeats wrote in order to revive an interest in the history of Ireland, which had been suppressed by the English colonial system, and by weaving in current political themes, he was a propagandist who promoted an interest in the present situation of Ireland.

## **9. The Establishment of the Irish Free State**

The Anglo-Irish Treaty, provided for an "Irish Free State" with dominion status, (Ireland should have the same constitutional status in the community of Nations known as the British Empire as the Dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, the Dominion of New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa). The Anglo-Irish Treaty also provided for an oath of allegiance to the crown, which de Valera refused to accept. John Oakland said that "This

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<sup>11</sup> David McDowall, p163.

attempted solution of the historical problems has been at the root of troubles ever since.”<sup>12</sup> When in January 1922 the Dáil approved the treaty by sixty-four votes to fifty-seven, de Valera gave up the presidency to Griffith. Collins was appointed head of a provisional government. Though unsatisfied with the treaty, he believed it opened the way to greater freedom and independence. The Sinn Féiners, together with Collins, made an agreement on 20 May 1922, known as the Pact in which it was settled that government and republican candidates would not oppose each other and that de Valera would work within the electoral arrangement. But the Pact could not unite other parties.

Yeats was a Senator in the first Senate of the Irish Free State in 1922. In 1923 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He made much of the honour as a public relations effort throughout the world for the newborn Irish Free State.

## **10. The Outbreak of the Civil War and its Aftermath**

The establishment of the Irish Free State was marked by a civil war that started in 28 June 1922 and lasted until the anti-treaty republicans were defeated in 24 May 1923. The conflict was between the government which was willing to accept the settlement and the republicans who believed it was a betrayal. Griffith and Collins decided that no further compromise was possible, and military operations began. Griffith was so tired with all this and he died suddenly on 12 August 1922, and Collins was killed in a trap in County Cork on 22 August 1922. The Dáil met on 9 September and elected William Thomas Cosgrave as the new president, and, in the absence of the republican representatives, “quickly passed the clauses of the constitution defining the relations of the Irish Free State with the British crown and

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<sup>12</sup> Okland, John. British Civilization : An Introduction. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2003. p107.

outlining arrangements for imperial defence.”<sup>13</sup> Both before and after the ratification of the constitution, the government resorted to strong measures to control disorder and violence. Its decision to execute those found in unauthorized possession of firearms embittered Irish politics for years afterward. Although republican opposition was at first bitterer than ever, it was less organized and did not enjoy the support of most people; by May 1923, de Valera recommended to end armed resistance to the Irish Free State.

The Civil War was reflected in the collection The Tower that included poems like “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, “Meditations in Time of Civil War” “Sailing to Byzantium” and others, which deal directly with the years of struggle and violence in Ireland.

At the end of August 1923 the fourth Dáil was elected, and de Valera’s party won more than one-third of the seats. Cosgrave's party won less than half the total number of seats, but, as The Republicans boycotted the Dáil, Cosgrave, supported by a coalition of parties, retained power. In 1926 Éamon de Valera formed Fianna Fáil (Soldiers of Destiny) and the next year nearly won the General Election.

Kevin Christopher O'Higgins, who was vice president of the Executive Council and one of Yeats's friends, was assassinated by republicans on 10 July 1927, which suddenly revived old disputes, and led Cosgrave to pass the Public Safety Act, declaring all revolutionary societies disloyal. He forced the republicans to acknowledge allegiance to the crown before being seated in the Dáil. Partly as a result of the failure of the government to cope with domestic difficulties brought on by the world economic crisis of the early 1930s, Cosgrave's party lost several seats to the Republicans in the elections of February 1932. Fianna Fáil won enough seats for de Valera to be able to form a new government. The party remains in power until

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<sup>13</sup> "Ireland." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 22 May. 2009 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293754/Ireland>>.

1948. Ireland became officially recognized as a republic in 1949 and left the British Commonwealth.

## **11. Devalera's Office**

Eamon de Valera, entered office, he began to undo the Treaty and abolished the oath of allegiance to the crown and withheld payment of certain land purchase annuities that the British claimed were legally due them (under the Land Acts of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) and Ireland declared neutral in World War Two by the Irish Government.

While in power they soon ignored the treaty clauses; the oath of allegiance, the British representative, and the treaty ports (Ports used by the British Navy). In another significant move, de Valera secured repeal of a law restricting the activities of the IRA and in 1937, he declared southern Ireland a republic, and the British Crown was now no longer sovereign in Ireland and the office of governor-general was replaced by that of a president elected by national suffrage. The first president of the Republic of Ireland was Douglas Hyde. de Valera's relations with the republicans who still refused to recognize the Irish Free State also worsened, and many were arrested and imprisoned in the mid-1930s.

The new constitution did not proclaim an independent republic, but it replaced the title of the Irish Free State with the word Éire (Ireland). The new constitution was ratified in the 1937 general election (in which de Valera won again) and became operative on 29 December 1937. An agreement in April 1938 ended British occupation of three naval bases that had been left in British hands by the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. At the outbreak of World War II, de Valera announced that Ireland would not become a base for attacks on Great Britain.

conclusion:

Ireland and Britain today find themselves in the strange position of being entirely separate states, but by agreement their citizens are not considered foreigners in one another's country. Within the Republic of Ireland the majority have continued to believe that all Ireland should one day be united, but without the use of force. A minority, however, has remained since 1921 ready and willing to use violent means to achieve a united Ireland.

So all these events profoundly affected Yeats's poetry, especially the Easter Rising of 1916 which represented a historical turning point in his poetic career, and motivated him to write his famous poem "Easter 1916". Add to this the Establishment of the Irish Free State and the violent developments afterwards in Irish public life and politics, as well as in Europe. The two factors pushed Yeats to write two of the best poems in the twentieth century; "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Second Coming".

## Chapter Two

### The influence of Irish History and Politics on Yeats's Later Poetry

#### Introduction:

William Butler Yeats (13 June 1865-28 January 1939) is often thought of as one of the key poets of the Irish independence movement. He ranks among the most widely admired and intensively studied writers of the twentieth century. He attracts such an interest because, as T. S. Eliot suggested, “his history is also the history of his time”<sup>14</sup> (qtd. in Holdeman). He belonged to the Protestant Anglo-Irish minority that had controlled the economic, political, social, and cultural life of Ireland since at least the end of the seventeenth century. Most members of this minority considered themselves English people who merely happened to have been born in Ireland, but Yeats insisted on his Irish nationality. Yeats began his career as a late-Victorian and ended it as an influential contemporary of modernists such as T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound and others. Throughout his life he remained the best representative of the political and cultural disorder associated with Ireland’s struggle for independence and with the decline, in Ireland and elsewhere, of traditional beliefs such as art, religion, empire, and social class.

This chapter shows how Yeats’s poetic style underwent a number of transformations as he grew older and illustrates the reasons behind this transformation. But in order to show the difference between the earlier and the later poems, it is necessary to understand some aspects of the earlier poems to make it easier for the reader to notice that difference.

Thus, he was influenced and inspired by historical events the fact that motivated him to produce some of the best poems of the twentieth century.

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<sup>14</sup> Holdeman, David. The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.p259.



## 1.The Influence of the Irish Cause on Yeats's Carrer

"iam of Ireland,  
And the Holy Land of Ireland,  
And time runs on," cried she.  
"Come out of Charity,  
Come dance with me in Ireland" W.B.Yeats<sup>15</sup>

Few modern writers have had careers as long, varied, and complex as Yeats. He produced works that belong to each of three major literary historical periods and movements: the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modernist. As Marjorie Howes states "He repeatedly remade himself as a writer, as a public figure, even as a person"<sup>16</sup>. His life and work circled around central themes especially the Ireland of his day, the occult, and the power of art to work in and change the world. His poetry bridged the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As a matter of fact, the phenomenon of a poet who enjoys continued development into the beginning of old age is in itself rare, usually this development comes to a full stop. But Yeats, who produces his greatest work between the ages of 50 and 75, made the exception. Yeats's work of this period takes its strength from his long experiments in a variety of forms of poetry, drama, and prose; and from his spiritual growth and his gradual acquisition of personal wisdom. At the age of seventy-three, he was still standing with the great poets of the period, still active, and the poems he wrote then are, generally, as vigorous as the poems written during the years ordinarily considered to be the period of a poet's fertility.

In his early poetry, Yeats took his inspiration from the myths and legends of ancient Ireland in order to create a distinctively Irish literature, but later, he took several events and

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<sup>15</sup> Unterecker, John, ed. Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays. London UK: Prentice-Hall, 1982. p79.

<sup>16</sup> Howes, Marjorie and John Kelly, ed. The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005 .p1.

Irish politics as subjects for his poems. Using his own sense of nationalism, Yeats contributed to the literary world poems and plays that represent Irish native legends.

Through reading Yeats's poetry, one notices that nationalism run through his veins. From the age of twenty-two, Ireland was the imaginative setting in almost all of his poems. Throughout his career, he explored the themes of Irish folklore and myths to create a modern sophisticated poetry. These themes range from the memory of the glorious past, the myths and legends, the landscape, the heroes, the politics, to the criticism of English occupation. It is worthy to mention that his personal life cannot be separated from his career. He always tried to bring his private, poetic and occult interests together with his public and political interests in his poetry. His regular use of Irish elements in his poetry can be the result of a number of reasons:

First of all, his childhood experience is very influential. Yeats's childhood was not quiet, as David Holdeman claims, because his "youthful anxieties originated in the tensions that troubled his family and in the social and political divides of late-nineteenth-century Irish life."<sup>17</sup> He continues to say that as a child whose time was divided between London and Sligo, Yeats "grew sharply conscious of the conflicts that alienated colonial Ireland from imperial Britain and that, within Ireland, divided Protestant descendants of British settlers from their usually less powerful and poorer Catholic neighbours."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Yeats's mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen, shared with her son an interest in folklore, fairies, and astrology as well as the love of Ireland, particularly the region surrounding Sligo in western Ireland where Yeats spent much of his childhood. He grew up surrounded by a family of artists who love the country. Thus, though he spent the major part of his life outside his motherland, Yeats's poetic self was deeply rooted in Ireland. By 1880, however, money was terribly short and the family returned to Dublin, where they stayed for six years before moving back to London.

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<sup>17</sup> David Holdeman.p1.

<sup>18</sup> David Holdeman.p2.

The poet's father rented a studio and William went to Erasmus Smith High School. His father's studio became a meeting place for Dublin's intelligentsia, and therefore for philosophical, political and literary conversation. William and his father read poetry to each other every morning. They disputed about art, because it was a subject of supreme importance to each of them. Yeats left the High School in 1883 and attended the Metropolitan Art School. There he met George Russell\* or AE\*\*. George Russell was interested in mysticism which inspired Yeats. During this period, the teen-aged Yeats started to formulate some responses to the conflicts that were taking place in his country and his family. This turn was a surprise to his father, who had tried to raise his son without encouraging him to think about such questions, but had given him Blake's poetry to read, Edward Larrissy says about this point "It is not an exaggeration to say that Yeats was one of the first serious scholars of Blake."<sup>19</sup> Yeats was fascinated by reincarnation, communication with the dead, mediums, supernaturalism and oriental mysticism. This fascination lasted for the rest of his life. Charles Johnston, a High School friend and brilliant scholar, introduced him to the theosophy of Madam Blavatsky<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, which encouraged yeats's fascination with the occult.

Secondly, his personal interest in mythology and the oral traditions of folklore combined with a high sense of nationalism inspired him to create poetry rich in the treatment of Celtic folklore and mythology. So, the subject matter of his poetry (especially the early poetry) consists of the traditional Celtic folklore and myth. By including the stories and characters of

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\* George Russell (1867 –1935) George William Russell wrote under the pseudonym Æ (sometimes written AE or A.E.), was an Irish nationalist, writer, editor, critic, poet, and painter. He was also a mystical writer, and centre of a group of followers of theosophy in Dublin, for many years.

\*\* Nicholas Drake explained that this was a "printer's error on an early book of poems that reduced his mystical pseudonym from AEON" (6)

<sup>19</sup> Larrissy, Edward. Blake and Modern Literature. Hampshire: St. Martin's Press, 2006.p37.

\*\*\* Helena Petrovna Hahn, Russian spiritualist, author, and cofounder of the Theosophical Society to promote theosophy, a pantheistic philosophical-religious system.

Celtic origin into his work, Yeats tried to summarize something of the national character of his beloved Ireland.

Another important cause was during his early years, there was an ongoing literary revival of interest in Irish legend and folklore. The Gaelic Athletic Association promoted traditional Irish sports, the Gaelic League taught and advocated the use of the Irish language, and authors like W. B. Yeats and John Millington Synge represented the desire to create a typically Irish style in literature. They consciously chose to see themselves as Irish rather than to remain detached and try to be British. Yeats saw this revival as something positive and his poetry was a way to make his audiences aware of what is happening around them, so he read many books about Irish legend and folklore, and he was deeply affected by them. This inspired him to write on Irish themes.

Another reason behind Yeats's fascination for Irish elements was his meeting with influential people. He met the Irish nationalist Fenian John O'Leary in 1885 who was helpful in arranging for the publication of Yeats's first poems in *The Dublin University Review*. O'Leary influenced Yeats and pushed him to take up the cause of Gaelic writers at a time when much native Irish literature was in danger of being lost as the result of England's attempts to "anglicize" Ireland through banning the Gaelic language. Then, he met Maud Gonne in 1889, later he referred to his meeting with Gonne, famously saying, "All the trouble of my life began"<sup>20</sup> (qtd. in *Maud Gonne: "Yeats' Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Ireland's Joan of Arc"*). Gonne helped Yeats found the National Literary Society of London in 1891. He was attracted to her political ideas, though at times their violence troubled him. Gonne had a great feeling of nationalism, she made speeches, organized protests, and, did everything she could to hasten the overthrow of the British from her country.

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<sup>20</sup> *Maud Gonne: "Yeats' Cathleen Ní Houlihan, Ireland's Joan of Arc"* Friday 5Jun.2009  
<<http://www.irelandessays.com/Yeats'cathleennihoulihan,ireland'sjoanofarc.html>>.

It is undeniable that Drama attracted Yeats from the start, he believed that poems and plays are able to change the Irish nation by provoking a national unity, and that his vision of Ireland's destiny might be publicized more effectively on the stage than in books appealing to small audiences of poetry readers. The opportunity to act first emerged in the summer of 1896, when he met Edward Martyn who played a crucial role in founding the new theatre: when the first performances took place in Dublin in 1899 he supplied the financial support. In 1896 as well, Yeats met the Irish playwright, poet, prose writer, and collector of folklore John Millington Synge.

In the same year, Martyn introduced Yeats to a neighbour whose part in the project and in Yeats's life was very influential. This was Lady Augusta Gregory, an Irish aristocratic, writer and promoter of Irish literature. Lady Gregory was so impressed by Yeats, and was much more than a partner; she provided the attentive maternal care he rarely received from Gonne (or from his actual mother). David Holdeman adds that "She listened to his troubles, loaned him money, sent him food, bought him a comfortable armchair, and made sure he consulted the dentist."<sup>21</sup> Lady Gregory also made a deep impact on Yeats's politics. They were alike in that they both possessed an intense desire to work for the country's good. Her views appealed to Yeats, and despite the fact that he had grown up unsatisfied about the Unionist Ireland inhabited by his ancestors; he understood the anxieties of the Irish Protestants who belonged to the middle- and upper-class in aftermath of the Land War, when their own fortunes declined in parallel with the growth of a Catholic middle class.

Yeats, Martyn, Synge and Lady Gregory spent much of these Galway summer visits planning the project they named the Irish Literary Theatre, and their aim was to unite art and nationalism. The Irish Literary Theatre gave its first performance in Dublin in 1899 with

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<sup>21</sup> David Holdeman.p37.

Yeats's play The Countess Cathleen. To the end of his life Yeats remained a director of this theatre, which became the Abbey Theatre in 1904.

When Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1925, he said ,in the course of his address to the Swedish Royal Academy: “ When your king gave me medal and diplomas, two forms should have stood, one at either side of me, an old woman sinking into infirmity of age and a young man’s ghost. I think when Lady Gregory’s name and John Synge’s name are spoken by future generations, my name, if remembered, will come up in the talk, and that if my name is spoken first their names will come in their turn because of the years we worked together. I think that both had been well pleased to have stood beside me at the great reception at your place, for their work and mine has delighted in history and tradition”<sup>22</sup> (qtd. in M. L. Rosenthal xxv) Lady Gregory and John Synge came particularly to Yeats’s mind on this occasion because of the role these two played in the Irish Renaissance.

His connection with another society, the Contemporary Club, was another important factor. It brought Yeats into contact with a circle of nationalist intellectuals. Yeats’s tribute to the Irish literary revival is important though, from the 1890s to the end of his life, he was sharply criticised for his ignorance of Irish (he could neither speak nor read it), and this draws attention to the paradox at the centre of his poetic achievement: his poetry, at least in the first decades, proclaimed its profound connection with the country, and yet he could only get at this material through interpretation and translation. He began to read Irish literature in translation, and became interested in it. By the early years of the twentieth century, Yeats had risen to international prominence as a proponent of the Gaelic Revival and had published numerous plays and poems. In the light of all this, we can notice that Yeats strongly believed that Ireland’s future must come from its past. He was a poet fascinated by the past and curious about the future.

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<sup>22</sup> Rosenthal, M. L., ed. “The Poetry of Yeats” Selected Poems And Two Plays of William Butler Yeats. New York: Mcmillan, 1962.pxxv.

Yeats believed in the idea that poetry should be changed to adjust the changes in the world. His poetry deepened and became stronger, more physical and realistic as he grew older. In the verse of his middle and late years, he abandoned his early transcendentalism and reverted to writing about contemporary politics, legal questions, rebellion, and other issues.

Yeats's later work was engaged with more contemporary matters. His style also underwent a dramatic transformation; Yeats began by writing epic poems: "The Isle of Statues" and "The Wanderings of Oisín". His other early poems dealt with the themes of love or mystical and obscure subjects. Yeats transformed himself from a fin de siècle poet to a poet, who paved the way for Modernism through his connections with Modernists such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce who affected the development of his later poetry and critical thought (though unlike most modernists, Yeats was a master of the traditional verse forms). Yeats gathered together the major elements of nineteenth-century culture – translation from the Irish, the influence of English Romanticism and the Arts and Crafts Movement, the tensions for an artist between an English audience and his Irish origin – and employed them to create some of the best poems in the English language. While arguing in favour of tradition over individualism, like Pound and Eliot, Yeats made his own poetic autobiography the history of his country. It is quite significant, according to Justin Quinn that "the finest biography of the poet was written not by a literary critic, but a historian, R. F. Foster."<sup>23</sup>

In the early decades of the 20th century, when Irish nationalist feeling was high and a cultural literary revival was flowering, Yeats was already a creative representative of Irish nationalism and his writings were a mixture of mysticism and nationalism. He even personified Ireland in his poetry and plays as an old woman named Cathleen Houlihan\* who needs the help of young Irish men willing to fight and die to free Ireland from colonial rule. However, during

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<sup>23</sup> Quinn, Justin. The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry 1800-2000. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.p60.

the later part of his career, his writings were more critical of the nationalistic ideology; He became more mature due to long experiences. The profound political changes that Ireland underwent from the turn of the century to the establishment of the Free State are linked to Yeats's development; they affected him and led him to produce some of his most influential works like "Easter 1916", "Sailing to Byzantium", "The Second Coming" and others. Thus Yeats's poetry breathes Ireland in every line, and there is no doubt that Yeats loved this unique land, and wanted to share that love with the readers of his works.

In 1922, on the foundation of the Irish Free State, Yeats accepted an invitation to become a member of the new Irish Senate: the upper house of the Free State parliament- the first independent Irish parliament since the eighteenth century- and, he served for six years. Until his death in 1939, he was a public figure at heart of Irish life and in the most important period of modern Irish history. His eminence was such that when a member of the Dáil questioned his right to be elected, Oliver St John Gogarty, the Irish literary figure and politician, replied, as reported by Nicholas Drake "If it had not been for W.B. Yeats, there would be no Irish Free State."<sup>24</sup> (qtd.in Nicholas Drake)

The following poems "The Second Coming", "Easter 1916," and "Sailing to Byzantium." are examples of the change in Yeats's style, from writing epic poems to a more mature part of his career in which modern and political issues became subjects of his poems.

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\* Kathleen Ni Houlihan (Irish: *Caitlín Ní Uallacháin*, literally, "Kathleen, daughter of Houlihan") is a mythical symbol and emblem of Irish nationalism found in literature and art, sometimes representing Ireland as a personified woman. The figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan has also been invoked in nationalist Irish politics.

<sup>24</sup> Drake, Nicolas. The Poetry of W. B. Yeats. London: Penguin, 1991.p8.



## 1.2The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in 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, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? William Butler Yeats<sup>25</sup>

“The Second Coming” is one of Yeats’s most famous poems; it is considered a major work of Modernist poetry .Written in January 1919, but first printed in *The Dial* (November 1920) and afterwards included in his 1921 verse collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the poem describes the atmosphere in post-war Europe using Christian imagery regarding the Apocalypse and second coming .

“The Second Coming” is a turning point in Yeats's career as a poet. It is both interesting and powerful. At the time it was written, Yeats made out a shift from one age-old religion to a new, forthcoming faith. Yeats's obsession with the occult presented a division between his spiritual state and the religious state of Ireland, which was intertwined with the Roman Catholic Church. In "The Second Coming", these issues are touched on.

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<sup>25</sup> Classic Poetry Series: William Butler Yeats –Poems.N.C: the World's Poetry Archive, 2004. p443.

This famous poem, written just after the end of the First World War, is apocalyptic in tone, darkly pessimistic in mood, and so it reflects the common atmosphere of pessimism that prevailed in Europe and much of the rest of the world after the Great War. This is the historical context in which the poem takes its place, and we can add to that the influence of Nietzsche\* on Yeats. Nietzsche's philosophy of "death of God" and his own interpretation of the consequences of Nihilism\*\* seemed to be born from the horror of the War.

Yeats saw great social troubles all around him, and the world was spinning out of control. "The Second Coming" was intended to describe the current historical moment in terms of gyres, which is a circular or twisting turn, in which one gyre is situated inside the other, so that the widest part of one cone occupies the same plane as the tip of the other cone, and vice versa. Around these cones he imagined a set of spirals. Yeats claimed that this image of the gyre, represents history, and he divided each gyre into different regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods. Thus, for Yeats each cycle of history is represented by such a gyre and the gyre widening means it is time for the next phase.

Yeats believed that the world was on the doorstep of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre and began moving along the inner gyre. Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

"In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes

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\* Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) a 19th century German philosopher and classical philologist. He is famous for his rejection of altruism, his attacks on Christianity (he declared that "God is dead") and for his predictions of a great war.

\*\* Nihilism is the philosophical doctrine suggesting that values do not exist but rather are falsely invented.

mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre.”<sup>26</sup> (qtd in “The Metamorphosis of W. B. Yeats”)

The main idea of the poem is the decline of civilization; it shows the disintegration of the western society. Through reading the poem, one can imagine the world in a miserable situation; things are out of control, guns and weapons are everywhere. Cohesion does not exist anymore; people no more come together, nor does identity or unity of good purpose survive. Order is lost and chaos takes over. Violence and hatred spread, the evil advances, and the only law the world obeys is that of disorder.

The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker’s vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the spirit of the new world. Thus, the poem is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern and the ancient world. The passionate language of the poem is powerful enough to ensure its value and its important place in Yeats’s work as a whole.

In the first stanza the speaker is complaining about the world situation. It opens with the image of a falcon wheeling about in the sky. The falconer has lost control of his falcon, who is circling so far away from him that the bird cannot hear his instructions any longer. To describe the bird’s flight, the poet uses the word “gyre”. Governments are falling, and bloody revolutions are killing people. Ordinary life is “drowned” in all that blood. The loss of control (represented by the falconer and the breaking away of the falcon) shows that the present cycle is near its end: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” The poet now wonders if the Second Coming of Christ is likely to happen soon.

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<sup>26</sup> **Jessica Goodwin** “The Metamorphosis of W. B. Yeats” Tuesday 12 Aug. 2009. <[http:// www.associatedcontent.com](http://www.associatedcontent.com)>

There are many interpretations for the image of the falcon and the falconer; one of these is that the falcon here is mankind and the falconer is Christ. Mankind has moved so far away from its roots, it can no longer hear the call of its creators. This is the case for the Irish people who moved far away from their origins and roots, far away from the Irish legends and folklore, they have given up the standards of their parents and grandparents for the new art, the new literature, the new music, and for the British rule.

Then the speaker makes the observation that “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”(7-8). This also suggests dissociation between the best, the intellectuals, and the worst, which Yeats associates with the mob who are those who react with passionate intensity not with careful intellectual study and expression. The influence of Ezra Pound is clear here, because this idea of the head and the body echoes the concept Elitism.

At the beginning of the second stanza Yeats calls for a revelation, saying “Surely some revelation is at hand.”(9) He gives us a powerful image for The Second Coming. The speaker believes something is revealed to the world, and it must be the second coming of Christ, or Judgment Day. The speaker sees a sight “out of Spiritus Mundi,”(12) or out of the Christian beliefs.

Spiritus Mundi comes from the Latin phrase for “World Soul” or “World Spirit”. The concept originates in the philosophy of Plato as a description of the sameness we all have which links us to the universe and living nature. Yeats used the concept of a World Soul to describe a connection between all souls in a Great Memory, or a universal subconscious through which humanity stores its past memories. In this way, the World Soul becomes a resource from which an artist can gather images\*.

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\* This evokes the Transcendentalist concept of the "over soul". For more information see Emerson.

He sees a sphinx, the "shape with lion body and head of a man" (14) (it has the head-intellect of a man and the fierce emotions and body intelligence of a beast) awake from 2000 years of "stony sleep" (19) while the human race is living in a world of wars, technology and evolution. Furthermore, Yeats suggests that the body movement of the beast, the "slouching" movement, is what is moving the Christ closer and closer to "Bethlehem" or birthplace. Yeats uses imagery ( the body movement of the beast, the "slouching") to show the sphinx slowly coming to bring the end of the world, while "desert birds" or people who try to stop the sphinx fail.

Unlike the first line, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre", the last line, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" leaves readers with the image of the sphinx heading towards the birthplace of Jesus, and the fear of the end of the world.

Yeats describes the Sphinx as "A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" (16) because spiritual masters are known to gaze blankly as they transmit "the message" to their followers. This makes him a modern future teller or prophet. Then, he links the gaze and the transmission with the Sphinx, which he also uses to symbolize the Second Coming of Christ.

After Yeats presents this visionary image, he says "The darkness drops again." (19) His vision ends and he starts thinking again. He concludes that "twenty centuries of stony sleep /Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle." This is Nietzsche's influence, and the Second Coming is not to be that of Christ. "That twenty centuries of stony sleep vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle" (19-20) seems designed to affirm Nietzsche's condemnation of Christianity as a disguised Nihilism. If anything, the "rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born" (22) is an inverted form of Christianity that has itself lost the transcendent dimension and aspiration, and has become itself the Beast - self-devouring Nihilism and Anti-Christ. It is not the second coming of Christ which we are told about in the

Bible, not that of the Jesus we first knew, but of the Anti-Christ, a “rough beast,” the slouching sphinx moving itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem.

The repetitions and echoes of the first section (“Turning and turning”, “loosed . . . loosed”, “falcon . . . falconer. . . fall”) are emphasised at the beginning of the second section: “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming!” (9-10-11). The phrase used in the drafts was “The Second Birth”, but the mention of Bethlehem in the last line reinforced the idea of the Second Coming of Christ. Moreover, the speaker of the poem fears that the “god” of the Second Coming, preceded as he is by anarchy and bloodshed, may well offer the opposite of salvation.

The poem portrays a dark atmosphere that serves as a warning to what may be waiting for humankind if they continue on the current path. From the title of W.B. Yeats poem, “The Second Coming”, one might expect to read about the glorious return of Christ to save his followers. However, Yeats portrays a miserable world where anarchy reigns over the innocence of man. This is the case for post-independent Ireland, because things did not work as they were expected to do.

It is mentioned in The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry that:

“The landmark work of poetic imagination that Yeats started to consider in 1917, *A Vision*, revels in the dimensionality of this unprecedented event of World War. A model of world history that is based upon periodic crisis and conflagration, imaging a framework of historical action on the grandest scale of cosmic years and universal types, it draws the force of catastrophic gigantism from the close spectre of total war and its unprecedented destruction. The horrific extremity of the day-by-day events on the Continent, some of their colossal novelty and atrocity, shows in the schemes and tropes of grandiose disaster in the prose book, in the rhetoric and emphases of breathless sublimity in the poetry it helps to generate.”<sup>27</sup>

In fact, it is the poet's wish that the Second Coming is at hand; because of the turmoil and the conflicts in Ireland he is deeply affected. Besides, Yeats opinion on the politics of the day

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<sup>27</sup> Kendall, Tim, ed. The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.p 206.

is chaos and anarchy. This idea that God would come down to earth is one of the most crucial ideas in Hinduism and Yeats was influenced greatly by the mystic east. In the Bhagawad Gita\*, Lord Krishna\*\* tells Arjuna, the warrior-prince, about how God will take on incarnations to protect the Good and destroy the evil.

“The Second Coming”, is affected by the First World War together with the Russian Revolution. “The Second Coming”, as Tim Kendall thinks “echoes Burke on the French Revolution.”, and he continues to argue that “the millennial advent that Yeats now expects is neither cosmic revelation nor the apotheosis of Irish nationhood” (473) but rather the triumph of the Marxian principles and values as the head of materialism. He declares that Ireland might give itself to “Marxian revolution” to get rid of the British control.<sup>28</sup>

Yeats poem prophesizes the World War II and the autocracies created by Hitler and Stalin. Unfortunately, the rise of the Nazi and Fascism in the 1930s proved him largely correct, and many find the poem prophetic in light of the later wars of the twentieth century. Furthermore, David Holdeman says that “the poet’s drafts allude to the execution of Marie Antoinette and the Russian Revolution... ‘The Second Coming’ encapsulates the era’s mood of crisis”<sup>29</sup>.

In 1958, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe used the statement “Things Fall Apart” as a title of one of his novels, and even now this statement becomes widely used to refer to the decadence of the world.

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\* "Song of God" is one of the most important Hindu scriptures. It is revered as a sacred scripture of Hinduism, and considered as one of the most important philosophical classics of the world.

\*\* Lord Krishna was a deity worshiped across many traditions in Hinduism in a variety of perspectives.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Kendall pp 473-474.

<sup>29</sup> David Holdeman p77.

## 2.2 Easter 1916

I HAVE met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,  
And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent  
In ignorant good-will,  
Her nights in argument  
Until her voice grew shrill.  
What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
She rode to harriers?  
This man had kept a school  
And rode our winged horse;  
This other his helper and friend  
Was coming into his force;  
He might have won fame in the end,  
So sensitive his nature seemed,  
So daring and sweet his thought.  
This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road.



The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;  
The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor-cocks call;  
Minute by minute they live:  
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven's part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse -  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.      W.B. Yeats<sup>30</sup>

“Easter 1916”, published as part of a collection of poems titled Michael Robartes and the Dancer in 1921, is one of William Butler Yeats's most popular political poems. It is one of many poems that Yeats composed during the Irish national struggle for independence against the English which lasted until the creation of an independent Irish state in 1922. “Easter

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<sup>30</sup> Classic Poetry Series: William Butler Yeats –Poems\_N.C: the World's Poetry Archive, 2004. p151.

1916” is Yeats’s way of mourning the people killed in the 1916 Easter Rising. It is praise for the martyrs and for all that Ireland suffered during and after that rebellion.

As mentioned in chapter I, the rebellion was an Irish nationalist uprising that had been planned for Easter Monday, 1916, and although the German ship that was bringing munitions had been seized by the British, the attempts to postpone the uprising failed. The Easter Rising of 1916 had no chance of immediately freeing Ireland from British rule, but it was a powerful symbolic gesture, and the subsequent execution of its leaders quickly turned them into martyrs for the cause of Irish nationalism. The years of guerrilla warfare which followed led ultimately to the emergence in 1922 of the Irish Free State, comprised of twenty-six of Ireland's thirty-two counties.

As discussed before, British retaliation was severe. Between 3rd and 12th May, fifteen leaders of the rebellion were executed. Martial law was imposed and 3,500 people were arrested (more than twice the number which had actually taken part in the Rising.) In the British House of Commons on Wednesday 3 May 1916, the English prime minister announced that a court martial had been held and that Patrick Henry Pearse, Thomas James Clarke and Thomas MacDonagh had been tried, sentenced and shot. He added that sentences of three years' penal servitude had been passed on “three others”. (“First World War, Easter-Rising-Ireland”)<sup>31</sup>

Yeats, Lady Gregory and her circle reacted with shock for the news to the events of Easter Monday. The Rising was the first decisive event that pushed Yeats to defend the Irish cause from his base in London, where he had lived a large part of his life, published his early

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<sup>31</sup> Wallace, Martin. Charles McGuinness, Irish Republican “The Easter Rising 1916” Saturday 6Jun. <<http://www.sailoroffortune.com/irishrepublican.html>>.

writings, and founded many societies such as the Irish Literary Society (1891), and the Gaelic League (1893). “Even if he complained of being a stranger in London,” Tim Kendall says, “Yeats held the privileged position of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy.”<sup>32</sup>

Yeats’s reaction to the Rising can be seen in his correspondence with Lady Gregory, his sisters, and many other friends. He sympathized with most of the rebels, despite the fact that he did not like them, and he became sharply critical of the English government. In an important letter to Lady Gregory, in which he explained the reasons that motivated him to write “Easter 1916”, wrote:

If the English conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no rebellion. *I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me*—and I am very despondent about the future. At this moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature & criticism from politics. . . . I do not yet know what [Maud Gonne] feels about her husband’s death. Her letter was written before she heard of it. Her main thought seems to be ‘tragic dignity has returned to Ireland’. She had been told by two members of the Irish Party that ‘Home Rule was betrayed’. She thinks now that the sacrifice has made it safe. ( qtd. in “The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry” )

And he adds: “I am trying to write a poem on the men executed—‘terrible beauty has been born’.”<sup>33</sup>

After a brief visit to Dublin in June 1921, Yeats spent the summer in Normandy. At the end of August, Lady Gregory asked Yeats to go back to Ireland and took him straight to Coole Park. It was there on 25 September 1921 that Yeats finished “Easter, 1916”. He tried to write a poem on the Rising that Gonne might admire and that would also satisfy the Dublin public and convey his own ambivalence toward the events of 1916. As a poet, whose

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<sup>32</sup> Kendall, Tim, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of British & Irish War Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. pp 229-230.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Kendall p 230.

readership was large, Yeats faced the difficult challenge of presenting an event like the Easter Rising that was considered to have major importance.

Using the first-person voice, Yeats begins the poem describing his relationship with the people he is going to praise. "I have passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words" (5-6) Showing that the people he would "number him in this song" (35) were not his close friends. Yeats concludes the first stanza saying that "All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born" to say that everything has "changed utterly" for him, for the martyrs of the Easter Rising, who became agents of a dramatic change, and for Ireland. This statement becomes a refrain for the poem and a commentary on Ireland itself and its physical beauty which is impossible to be separated from its bloody history.

In the second stanza, Yeats talks about the history and character of some of the people involved. But those men are not named until the last stanza, except for the Countess Georgina Markiewicz, a childhood friend from County Sligo, who is described as a woman whose "days were spent in ignorant / her nights in argument." (17-9) through his description, we understand that she is an upper-class lady who did charity work by day and defended Irish cause by night. The next people honored are three who were executed after the rebellion ended (Georgina was given life in prison because she was an upper-class woman, then pardoned in 1917).

In stanza three, Yeats argues that we are not going to live forever and death is inevitable and natural. Yeats introduced the concept of change, but this time it is different from that in the refrain of the first two stanzas. Normally, change is gradual, "Minute by minute" (48) and a "shadow of cloud on the stream" (49). As symbols of the transitory nature of such a life, the horses and riders, clouds and streams, moor-cocks and moor-hens of the third stanza live "minute by minute," (54) but "The stone's in the midst of all" (55), is unchanged and immovable. He makes two references to a stone that never changes: in lines 44 and 55, first to

establish that the stone was there in the beginning "to trouble the living stream" and it is there in the end "in the midst of all." This can be understood as a direct reference to the land itself that is Ireland and the fact that it will always be there through all the wars and revolts.

A stone metaphorically represents also, those who refuse to sacrifice their ideals to the "living stream." It symbolizes the insistence and the determination of the patriots, that the "troubling" of the revolution is necessary for the "change" in the life of the nation. Through their efforts to start change in Ireland, and by rebelling against the British; the martyrs of the Easter Rebellion overcome their former weaknesses and create their memory as heroes; Their hearts became united by one purpose, which made them unchanging as stone. Maud Gonne many years before had referred to herself as a stone claiming that she could not give up her political mission for the ordinary life that women used to live.

In the fourth and last stanza, Yeats claims that sacrifice "can make a stone of the heart" (58), but it does not necessarily do so, and as a matter of fact, by refusing to change, the rebels have changed everything (even if Yeats is still not convinced that they were right). The statement "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (57-58) is followed by the question "O when may it suffice?"(59) We have to take the poet's confusion into consideration. Yeats puts the duration and value of the Irish struggle in question together with the trustworthiness of England's promise of independence and notes the possible results of such commitment. He fears that "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart," intimating that the purpose that drove the martyrs may have "bewildered" them as well. Perhaps the English would have granted freedom without the bloodshed of the Easter rising; all that can be known is that "they dreamed and are dead."

In this stanza, Yeats equates death with sleep. The nightfall of the rebels is not that of the peacefully sleeping child of lines 62-4. The insistent "No, no, not night but death" explodes that image and leads to the terrifying question, "Was it needless death after all?" This is the

question asked about all revolutions and wars: was the death “worth it”? The poet is here debating and asking himself whether it is not just possible that “England may keep faith /For all that is done and said”.

Who can tell? And there is still another question on the poet’s mind: “what if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?” Here Yeats seems to be thinking of his own experience with Maud Gonne. In a similar sense, the rebels’ excessive love for their cause, their fanaticism, may have “bewildered them”, hastening their noble but empty gesture and thus their death. “O when may it suffice?” Only after his fourth question, that Yeats steps back and memorialize the patriots, now for the first time naming them.

He concludes the poem by stating the names of the three men he has described; Padraig Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, a university lecturer and literary critic, and John MacBride, Maud Gonne’s husband, and James Connolly, an actor at the Abbey Theatre and the leader of the rebellion. The poet tells us that we now “know their dream; enough/To know they dreamed and are dead.” (lines 70-1) .The death of these men changed the course of Irish history by uniting the country to fight for independence; the dead men, “Wherever green is worn/ Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born.” Yeats pays tribute to the executed patriots by naming them with the tenderness of a mother naming her child. He finishes by repeating the refrain but this time preceding it with "Now in time to be,/ Wherever green is worn" (lines 77-8) to state that Ireland will never be the same.

The Easter uprising was terrible because “not night but death” (66) awaited the rebels and many innocent victims, a “needless death” (67) if England would have granted independence without the violence of 1916.

In this poem, Yeats does not only succeed in expressing his ambivalence about patriotism in general and about the Irish cause in particular, but he also allows the reader to follow sympathetically the shifts of thought and feeling in the troubled mind of a poet who is both critical and compassionate.

### 3.2 Sailing to Byzantium

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

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

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

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. W.B. Yeats<sup>34</sup>

If the Irish Sea separated Yeats and Ireland from the First World War, it became symbolic of the divide between Ireland and England in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. Such a divide, as Yeats wrote in a letter in 1922, would mean exile from both Ireland and England- for the sake of his family and his work. But when England sent its forces (the notorious Black and

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<sup>34</sup>Classic Poetry Series: William Butler Yeats –Poems.N.C: the World's Poetry Archive, 2004. p151.



Tans and later the Auxiliaries) to Ireland in 1918 to enforce British rule, “the poet and his family did not escape the dangers and stresses of these troubled times in Ireland. Georgie and he spent the summer of 1922 at work on the renovation of the tower which Yeats always referred to as Thor Ballylee.”<sup>35</sup> Yeats bought the Tower, which he had known since his first visits to Galway; he renovated it and used it as a summer retreat where he created one of his greatest works The Tower. Thoor Ballylee was Yeats's monument and symbol and it satisfied his desire for a rooted place in the countryside. After the Yeats family moved out in 1929, the tower was abandoned, but was restored as “Yeats Tower” in 1965 became Yeats’s museum, containing an interesting collection of first editions, some original documents, as well as furniture.

W.B. Yeats’s The Tower, published in London on 14 February 1928, is a political collection of poetry that contains poems mostly written in an important period of time in the Irish history. The collection serves as a type of exposition of Ireland’s chaotic decade, a period that marked Ireland's emergence from the shadow of imperialism into the light of postcolonial independence, and within which two major events took place; The Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921) and the Irish Civil War (1922-23).

David Holdeman states that “Whether they term him a modernist or not, critics generally agree that Yeats produced one of the modern era’s definitive books of poetry in The Tower (1928)”, he continues to argue that “ this volume’s reputation derives from its epic scope: it includes the poet’s principal artistic responses to Ireland’s War of Independence and Civil War as well as such memorable forays into ancient times as ‘Leda and the Swan’ and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ ”<sup>35</sup> and may allow critics to position him as a postcolonial poet. The Tower contains some of the poet’s best-known works, including “Sailing to Byzantium.” Since its

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35 Roberts, Neil ed. A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry. Oxford Blackwell, 2003:p 439

<sup>36</sup>David Holdeman p 81.

publication, critics have agreed that this poem successfully joins structure and content. It was written during a crucial time in Yeats's artistic development and marks a break from his previous style in form as well as in subject matter, a shift away from references to Irish mythology, toward an increasingly political consciousness.

“Sailing to Byzantium” was composed in August-September 1926, three years after Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It contains four stanzas and is considered to be one of Yeats's most inspired works, and one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century. It was the most recently written of the poems in The Tower when it was published in 1928; but Yeats placed it at the beginning of the volume. Historical contextualization is also demanded on a broader level.

In this poem he tries to come to terms with the changes his country is undergoing. As Yeats aged, he saw Ireland changing in ways that he did not like; The Anglo-Irish Treaty gave partial independence to twenty-six counties of southern Ireland and established the parliament in which Yeats served as Senator until September 1928. In the early summer of 1922 a group of Irishmen who had fought for Irish freedom in the Anglo-Irish war rose in arms to attack the new administration claiming that the republic declared by the rebels of 1916 had been betrayed by a settlement which still required Irish parliamentarians to swear an oath of allegiance to the English sovereign. Hostilities ended by spring 1923 with the government victorious. The Civil War caused enmity in the Irish body politic. The government had responded to guerrilla tactics with executions of prisoners. In December of the same year, when Yeats had accepted to be a senator, bullets were fired into his Dublin residence and an armed guard was placed at his door to deter assassins and bombers. Furthermore, Yeats had not enjoyed a major public triumph since winning the Nobel Prize in 1923. Moreover, he had been shocked by the assassination in July 1927 – by some remainders of the anti-Treaty IRA – of his friend Kevin O’Higgins, the Free State Minister for Justice and External Affairs.

A few months later he had also suffered from a congested, bleeding lung, necessitating an escape to warmer climes in southern Spain and France.

Even while the title of the poem suggests a kind of isolation, Yeats could not escape the radical changes that his country underwent in the 1920s, which was a time of a fast-living youth culture, besides the World War I, which ended officially in 1918, which is generally considered to be the primary cause of the new movement known as “Modernism”.

In his poem, Yeats wrote of Ireland saying, “That is no country for old men.” (1), recognizing that Ireland had undergone much change since the earlier days of his life, and that it held no place for the things he might have still held dear to him. The poem features a speaker who may be thought of, as a symbol of Yeats himself as a man, or as a poet, and it examines the conflict between youth and age through a journey for spiritual knowledge. This poem tells us about a man who, feels a stranger in his own country because of his aging body, thinks of, as Jhan Hochman says in Poetry for Students, “a kind of retirement”<sup>37</sup> and expresses his desire to leave his country because that country neglects “monuments of unaging intellect” (8). He sails off to a land where emphasis is not on the physical achievements of a person.

Curtis Bradford talks about Yeats’s interest in Byzantium, he says that it “began in the nineties and continued throughout his life. The first issue of ‘Rosa Alchemia’ (1896) refers to the mosaic work at Ravenna work which Yeats probably saw when in 1907 he travelled in Italy with Lady Gregory. Unfortunately, Yeats has left us no account of his visit to Ravenna”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jhan Hochman, in "an essay for Poetry for Students", Gale, 1997.  
<<http://www.answers.com/topic/>.html>.

<sup>38</sup>Untercker, John, ed. Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays. London UK: Prentice-Hall, 1982.

However, even in the opening verse, it is clear that the speaker loves what he leaves. He wishes to go to Byzantium, which was the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire from 476 to 1453, and the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy. Surviving the fall of Rome by a thousand years, the city became a major Islamic and cosmopolitan centre, known as Istanbul. Justin Quinn, however, thinks that “Paradoxically, once he has reached that stage he will turn to look on all that he has left behind him, the whole world in which creatures are born and die.”<sup>39</sup> <sup>9</sup>

The reasons that he may have thought this actual city could be used to represent a refuge for the aged can be found in one of his earlier writings: in his book A Vision, he says, “I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religion, aesthetics, and practical life were one.” It is important to note, as well, that the poem is not autobiographical; Yeats did not travel to Byzantium, but he did argue that, in the sixth century, it offered the ideal environment for the artist. The poem is about an imaginative journey, not an actual one.

The conflict of the poem is addressed when the speaker distances himself from this world and this country: this “country” is a land of birth, death, change, and sensuality; it is full of youth and life, and the salmon swimming in the waters. In doing so, they both work with nature (the act of reproduction), and against nature (swimming upstream, which goes against nature). However, all this is nature is just a brief life, it is not eternal. The end of this stanza emphasizes the conflict of the poem. Youth, caught in the “sensual music” (7) of the natural world that makes the young neglect the old, whom the speaker describes as “Monuments of unageing intellect.” (8)

The second stanza introduces the world of the speaker as very different from the “country” of the previous stanza. An aged man is described as a scarecrow, while youth is represented

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<sup>39</sup> Justin Quinn p 71.

by singing birds. This “bird” image is interesting because it both describes the man physically, and also contributes to the description of the spiritual in the natural world. The speaker concludes the stanza by saying that only in an ideal country, like Byzantium that he can learn the songs of the soul. The speaker describes Byzantium to a “holy city” (16) and considers it to be the centre of the spiritual world.

In stanza three the speaker is in Byzantium, gazing at the “sages standing in God’s holy fire” (17) asking them to make him immortal like the glorious works of art in Byzantium, but his body must be destroyed to reach this. The mosaic is probably based on the wall painting of the holy martyrs in the church of the San Apollinaire Nuovo, Ravenna\*, which Yeats visited in 1907. He wants these sages to teach his intellect or his soul to sing in perpetuity and to take his impermanent heart away in exchange. Here the speaker’s heart, the home of his once youthful passions, is consumed by a cleansing fire along with his body which is described as a “dying animal.”(22) Without the body, his soul, like the sages, is held in the “artifice of eternity.”(24) The holy fire associated with the gold mosaic is strong. These sages or martyrs in gold fire, then, died by fire but were reborn both in eternal heavenly fire and the eternal gold tiles of 1500-year-old mosaics, just like the Irish martyrs who are immortal.

In stanza four, the journey becomes fully imaginative, a daydream of life after death. Yeats characterizes death as “out of nature,” (25) perhaps because he understands nature (life) as change and death as eternal. Here, the speaker decides how he will be reborn: as either a golden object from ancient Byzantium or as an object, probably a bird, placed on a “golden bough” (29) in the emperor’s palace at Constantinople. The speaker wishes to become a timeless work of art made “of hammered gold and gold enamelling”(28) and he chooses to

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\* Ravenna is a city and comune in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. The city is inland, but is connected to the Adriatic Sea by a canal. Ravenna once served as the seat of the Western Roman Empire and later the Kingdom of the Ostrogoths and the Exarchate of Ravenna. It is presently the capital of the Province of Ravenna.

recreate himself in the form of an immortal golden bird perhaps because the bird symbolizes the soul and the Irish nationalism which, above all, remains high. The speaker has now completely transformed himself into a work of art, on a golden tree, unable to decay.

Yeats mentioned that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, with artificial birds that sang," but he might have also had in mind Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Nightingale"\* with its gold and bejewelled artificial bird. The golden bough signifies eternity through its eternal golden colour and its mythic role as insurance policy against death even through the labyrinth of Hell. In the first stanza the birds of the natural world sing of "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies," and also die themselves at the hands of nature, but in "the holy city of Byzantium", the ideal world, the speaker sings of "what is past, or passing, or to come," (31) thus indicating the immortality of the ideal Ireland that the poet wants to live in. It is necessary to mention after all that the voyage in the poem is a journey in time at least as much as space. It is a voyage backwards, "a search for a golden age whose memory radiates like those gold-coated mosaic stones"<sup>40</sup> (Harper's Magazine).

At this age, the poet is already feeling the burden of the plenitude of being and seeks to turn into an inhuman artifice in order to achieve eternity. From a letter Yeats wrote six years before the publication of The Tower, as quoted by Richard Ellmann in The Man and the Masks, the poet says: "I am tired & in a rage at being old, I am all I ever was & much more but an enemy has bound and twisted me so I can plan & think as I never could, but no longer achieve all I plan & think". This painful dialectic sheds a gloom over the poem.

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\*"The Nightingale" is a literary fairy tale by Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen (1805 – 1875).

<sup>40</sup> "Yeats's Sailing to Byzantium". Harper's Magazine. Sunday 2Aug.2009 <<http://www.harpers.org/archive.html>>.

The poem is profoundly criticizing the present state and looking back with a mixture of bitterness and nostalgia toward an idealized past. Yet a rejection of the present does not necessarily entail a desired return to a more stable, that is, colonial moment in Ireland's past.

**Conclusion:**

Through this historical analysis of the three poems; “The Second Coming”, “Easter 1916” and “Sailing to Byzantium,” the high sense of nationalism in Yeats’s works is obvious, and it is clear that his beliefs are represented and reflected in his works. The Irish Question affected Yeats and motivated him to write many poems that are considered ones of the best written poems in the twentieth century.



## Conclusion :

William Butler Yeats who is considered to be one of the twentieth century's greatest poets, devoted himself to building Irish culture and literature and had profound sense of nationalism. In the early stage of his career, Yeats made of the myths and legends of ancient Ireland the essential themes of his works, but later, he took several historical issues and Irish politics as subjects for his poems.

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to inform his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively affected Irish politics and social life. His early poems were devoted to the beauty and mystery of the Irish countryside, but as Yeats became more involved in Irish politics—through his relationships with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Maud Gonne—his poems increasingly resembled political manifestos. Yeats wrote numerous poems about Ireland's involvement in World War I and the Easter Rebellion, as well as the post independence era. Yeats believed that art could serve a political purpose.

Additionally, his concern with Irish subjects evolved as he became more closely connected to nationalist political causes. As a result, Yeats shifted his focus from myth to contemporary politics. Throughout his literary career, Yeats used his writing as a tool to comment on Irish politics and the home rule movement and to educate and inform people about Irish history and culture. In the poems that have been chosen to illustrate Yeats's commitment to the Irish cause, a sense of cultural crisis and conflict is quite noticeable, even though these poems may not seem explicitly about Ireland. By using images of chaos, disorder, and war Yeats engaged in an understated commentary on the political situations in Ireland and abroad.

Finally, one can say that Irish history and politics had a great influence on Yeats's later poetry, and that the issue of nationalism can be clearly seen throughout his work as a whole.

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