

# From Irishness to Universalism: An Antithetical Study of W.B. Yeats's Poetry

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## Abstract

Antithesis is an inseparable part of Yeats's poetry. In this study, antithesis is also related to the poet's social life. It gains its true significance when the reader affirms Blake's genuineness in saying that there is no progress without opposition. The use of antithesis dominates almost every individual structure of Yeats's poetry. Yeats's attempt to represent the complex, intense situation where each theme is examined against its contrary culminates in the multiplicity and maturity of his poems. The presence of antithesis is traced in Yeats's poetry in terms of the poet's movement from Irishness to universalism. Among the three stages of Yeats's development, Early Period, Middle Period and Mature period, the movement happens mostly in the Middle Period. In this second period the poet's unique nationalism is examined while, at the same time, his inclination towards universalism is shown through three poems. The significant finding is that Yeats's poetry is seen as a dialectic journey rooted in Irish soil and aspiring towards the cosmopolitan through artistic symbols.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Universal Poetry; antithesis; Ireland; Opposition in Poetry

The faculty of abstracting from the land their eyes behold, another Ireland through which they wandered in dream, has always been a characteristic of the Irish poets. "A.E" [George William Russell]

## Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), the son of John Butler Yeats and an Irish poet and dramatist, was a leader of the Irish Renaissance and one of the lead-

ing poets of the twentieth century. He developed an interest in mystic religion and the supernatural at the School of Art in Dublin. He spent his vacation in county Sligo while residing in London. Sligo inspired his enthusiasm for Irish tradition. At the beginning he wrote lyrical, symbolic poems on pagan Irish themes; "The Wandering of Oisín" (1889) is an example. Then he wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1893) in the Romantic melancholy tone which he believed was characteristic of the ancient Celts. After that he wrote *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) and *The*

*Secret Rose* (1897) dealing with Irish legends.

Once coming back from London to Ireland he met the Irish patriot Maud Gonne whom he loved vainly for the rest of his life. She provided an inspiration for much of his early poetry while, at the same time, he was attracted to the Irish nationalist movement for independence. Yeats's return to Ireland took place in 1896. He became acquainted with Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), a nationalist playwright who entertained Yeats at her estate Coole Park. They cooperated in founding the famous Abbey Theatre. In his poetry of this stage, he tried to abandon his earlier self – conscious softness and to find some sort of clarity. Instances of collections of poetry written in this period are *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), *The Shadowy Waters* (1900), and *The Green Helmet* (1910).

Yeats grew older in the later period while turning to practical politics (he was senator of the new Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928). As a rarity among poets, he deepened and perfected his complex style as the years advanced, that is why his later poetry is considered to be his best. Georgie Hyde-Lees, his wife, was of a great help in making his poetry since 1917. She had the gift of automatic writing. With her help, Yeats wrote *A Vision* (1925), an elaborate attempt in prose to explain the mythology, symbolism and philosophy which he employed in much of his work (Bowra 1943, 205). *A Vision* deals with the eternal opposites, such as objectivity and subjectivity, art and life, soul and body, which are the basis of philosophy. Poetic collection written in this vein are *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917) *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair* (1933).

W.B. Yeats started to write while Romantic elements had the upper hand in his poetry; he ended his writing with a closely interwoven poetic texture, a symbolic texture made of dream and reality, natural and supernatural, myth and fact he began to write as a dreamful aesthete and went through phases of mystical experience, passionate love, nationalistic fervour, political concerns, visionary insights and parliamentary activities. How to comprise all these up? How to figure W.B. Yeats?

Of course, there are different perspectives on the theory of oppositions by Yeats. Seamus Deane in his *Celtic Revivals*, agrees with the idea and that there is tension in his poetry. Deane mentions, as an example, the antithesis of Ireland and England or tradition and modernism. However, this critic also emphasizes the element of continuity in Yeats's poetry. Deane highlights Irish Nationalism which, he claims,

does not fluctuate but is constant in the poet's poetry (1985, 38). So this critic is against the maturation of antithesis in Yeats's poetry. Deane acknowledges Yeats's tensions (Ireland vs. England, myth vs. history), but also emphasizes continuity: that Yeats often displays a stable cultural nationalism, not simply oscillations. Deane sometimes critiques those who see Yeats always as conflicted by arguing that some of his works show a clearer, consistent ideological position. Deane postulates that "In Yeats and Joyce these paradoxes and anomalies are fundamental to the development of their very different discourses. Yeats's poetry and plays ... attempt to resituate ... a reconstituted ideal of the heroic individual at bay in the modern world" (1997, 87).

Bartlett, another researcher, shows that Yeats's critical position is motivated by a movement towards unity and coherence around the "poetic impulse." While Yeats engages in opposition, Bartlett argues that Yeats is striving toward a consistent theory of art. Thus, according to Bartlett, while tension is present in Yeats's poetry, it is motivated and led by a critical aim to reach resolution and balance (Bartlett, 1972).

The characteristic feature of W.B. Yeats is his restlessness. In fact, his impatience made him undergo a process of vision and revision that can be observed and studied both in his style of writing and his worldview. The whole life and career of the poet show how drastically he turned to different thoughts and worldviews to meet a satisfying resolution. William Blake has influenced Yeats's idea of opposites as a dominant one in his poetry and life: "This Blakean influence makes itself most keenly felt as Yeats assigns the qualities of 'Concord' and 'Discord' to each of his gyres (Fogarty 2022, 62).

Numerous critics have described W.B. Yeats's restlessness in terms of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Cowell 1971, 18). In one of the most representative poems of Yeats called as such, "self" and "soul" in different ways try to affirm their own claims in a dialogue that is highly dramatized and involving for the poet and hence for the reader. The contradictory claims of self and soul create a tension that runs through the bulk of Yeats's poetry. This tension can be traced in the early career of the poet in poems such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The desire to "go to Innisfree" links Yeats's early poetry to later poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" and other major poems in which the intensified mind of the poet is delineated as a mind searching for a satisfying destination.

Although an understanding of Yeats's theory of opposites is central for grasping the meaning of Yeats's

poetry, some critics have interpreted this oscillation between opposing aspects of personality, whether in his life or art, as an obstacle to many readers and as an evidence of Yeats's insincerity. But we should be on guard to discard speculation and scandal and scrutinize the very bulk of Yeats's living poetry. Although, ostensibly, Yeats is subject to the ebb and flow of moods, and although he deals with internal conflicts within his poetry, and external conflicts with his surroundings, on the whole, he is making progress towards perfection. In this progress he aligns with the doctrine of evaluation by the fusion of opposites of late nineteenth century intellectual current. To reach this aim he exploits various techniques. Sometimes he finds the solution in eternity. In other instances, he talks of a momentary perfection in the sexual act (as a reflection of the eternal resolution). Spiritual union in death is another alternative. This study deals with this matter in terms of themes and style with a simultaneous analytic exploration of symbolism.

Thus it is clear that within the texture of Yeats's poetry one could trace the theory of opposites. A recent study confirming this idea is postulated by the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of W.B. Yeats*. They point out Yeats's "deliberately divided way of thinking" as well as his inclination towards the oppositional structures in not only his poetry but also his politics (Arrington and Campbell, 2023 1-18). Very often than not the two are reflected in each other, although the concern of this study is Yeats's poetry. Of course, here the present researcher is concerned neither with the political paradoxes, nor the gyres representing the historical cycles of opposing energies. The aim of this essay is to identify the literary oppositions rooted in the art and shaped by opposing forces.

### Literature review

As explained earlier, his study will focus on selected poems of Yeats to observe the end-product of the dialogue between nationalism and universalism. How does the poet and the reader perceive the ultimate result of the struggle between these different claims which seem a world apart?

Harold Bloom rightly calls Yeats "the conscious heir of the Romantics" (Bloom 1970, 7). Yeats tried to modify the Romantic tradition; still, he was a Romantic. Bloom had right to call Yeats Romantic because he echoed some of the typical Romantic concerns. He believed that vision and prophecy are necessary elements of great poetry. Old myths and legends give a sort of depth to poetry. Universal mind (Anima Mundi) is a source for patterns of experience for great poetry. The poet assumes a mask

for himself. Finally, poetic language should use patterns of speech.

Yeats was influenced by such Romantic poets as Blake, Shelley, Keats and Hallam. He formulated many of his critical concepts with their help. He was also influenced by J.B. Yeats, John O'Leary, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Nietzsche. In fact, Yeats's maturity was augmented and his sensibility enriched by an organic restructuring of these various influences.

His father, J.B. Yeats, suggested the germ of his son's "theory of the mask" and the necessity of the contraries for great art. J.B. Yeats considered his marriage to one of the Pollexfens as mingling of contraries. He believed that his wife's family was "inarticulate as the sea-cliffs" (Yeats 1923, 92). That family was almost completely forgotten. Then Yeats's joyous family reawakened it. This was greatly realized when Yeats established himself as a gifted poet. W.B. Yeats believed that the capacity to meet the opposite is the basis of excellence in poetry. He further elaborated on his idea in some of his essays.

William Blake used the term "contraries", while before the mature period Yeats devised the term "extremities" and "antinomies", constructing his theory of opposites. In this regard, Bradshaw points out:

Yeats's mind tirelessly produced images of antithesis ... In the persona of Michael Robartes, in 1919, Yeats sketched one extreme version of vacillation ... In his sixties, however, writing 'Vacillation' in 1931-32, Yeats casts a cold eye of estimation on his own system of contraries .... (196).

Later the poet searches for something more valuable, a sort of resolution that could emerge in form of words or themes of his poetry. Thus the theory of Yeats has been with him from an early time: "Without contraries is no progression ... They are necessary to Human Existence" (Jeffares 2005, 154). This shows both early Blakean influence and the movement toward what might be considered more mature, integrated poems (e.g. *The Tower*) where the tension is aesthetically articulated.

There are so many passages which show how Yeats's concept of opposites developed over time, from early works such as *The Tower* to later poems such as "Vacillation," where Yeats keeps modifying his earlier ideas and develop them to find a way for revolving all antinomies. Another example is found

in Arkins's book titled *The Thought of W.B. Yeats*. Arkins mentions the reason he begins his book, by writing on the theory of opposites, as "opposites are central to Yeats's thought" (1). Here Arkins explores how Yeats's engagement with opposites introduces different aspects of his work. These aspects include religion, sex, history and politics. This book convinces the reader through deep analysis that these dualities are essential to Yeats's worldview and poetry among other genres he has practiced.

### Theoretical Framework

Yeats's doctrine of cycles and antinomies is present in individual poems not only in their subject matter but also in their structure and design. It seems that this doctrine appeared after 1914. He meant to center his poetry on the image of a dying and resurrected earth god (Seiden 1975, 148). He wanted to introduce a complicated pattern for his poetry and consequently for human feeling and thought. This complicated pattern, particularly in his later poetry, with its antinomies and their resolutions can be well deciphered with the help of *A Vision*. This book provides an aid for the examination of Yeats's poetry.

Morton Irving Seiden remarks about the antinomies within the poems:

The structural antinomies within a given poem may be implied or stated. They may be juxtaposed with or superimposed on each other. Nevertheless, I can not name one poem in which they are not somehow present ... Many of the poems are written as dialogues or antiphonal chants between two people who are either psychological opposites of Yeats's own divided self. Such poems as "ego Dominus tuus" (1917) "The Saint and the Hunchback" (1919), and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Seiden 1975, 150).

The present writer attempts to follow, in this study, the path of scrutinizing antinomies within certain poems. In Yeats's early poetry there is seldom any attempt to resolve these antinomies. He introduces, implicitly or explicitly, a personal conflict or a paradox with no reconciliation. Nevertheless, in Yeats's mature poetry the conflict is followed up to a resolution. Some intricate symbols become the means for resolving the antinomies. Seiden calls these symbols the "unifying symbols" (1975, 159). The most

important unifying symbols are objects of art, such as "Attis's image" in "Vacillation." In this poem the antinomies of nature and Anima Mundi are resolved (Hillman 1998, 43). Other examples include "dancer" in "Among School children", "Stone" in "Easter 1916", and the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium".

The aforesaid specific problems are coped with through concentration on the most representative of Yeats's poems. This study is not an analysis of the process of vision and revision that is seen in Yeats's life and art; rather, it is devoted to the survey of the end-product of this process as it is dramatized in Yeats's later poetry. These questions concern Yeats's theory of opposites at different stages; it also considers the maturation of this theory up to his final poetic output. In brief, studying the poetry of Yeats, we focus on the major structural element of the dialogue between contradictory forces (here nationalism and universalism) and the tension it raises in Yeats's poetry to see what we come up with, to see what the final outcome of such a dialogue is, and how it is illustrated in the poems we study.

### A Movement from Nationalism to Universalism

Yeats's fairyland has become a symbol for imagination. In Yeats's early poetry the world of imagination is pictured as greatly delightful, seductive and drunkening, a world which cannot be outdone by any other world, particularly our actual world which is "full of weeping" beyond our understanding. Yeats discovered in Irish mythology and folklore a treasury of artistic content with which even the Irish readers were not acquainted. Therefore, he found himself a special advantage. Edmund Wilson, in this respect, emphasizes in his *Axel's Castle* Yeats's use of Danaan Children, the shadowy Horses, and Fergus with his brazen cars (1931, 28). He reflects the mysterious and magical aspects of these beings which play so large a part in Yeats's poetry. Wilson admits the fact that these elements and the moods of his complex sensibility have a more satisfactory character than the mythology of the French symbolists such as Mallarme. Yeats's moods constitute a world of which one can to some extent get the hang. Wilson, in some other place, adds:

If we do not ordinarily think of Yeats as primarily a symbolist poet, it is because, in taking symbolism to Ireland, he fed it with new resources and gave it a special accent which lead us to think of his poetry from the point of view of its national qualities rather than from the

point of view of its relation to the rest of European literature (1931, 28).

In fact, Yeats felt that his age is at a loss for a tradition. He realized that the scientific Victorian has failed as a tradition and also weakened religion to the extent that Yeats, unlike T.S. Eliot who chose Christianity, embarked on making himself a system of his own. Regarding this point, David Daiches asserts about Yeats that, “He does not wish to escape from orthodox religion but to find a substitute for it” (Daiches 1940, 131-32). To compensate for the lack of a tradition, Yeats went first to Romantic literature, different kinds of mysticism, folklore, theosophy, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism, and ultimately he devised a symbolic system of his own. This system was based on various sources. Through this system he could give pattern and coherence to the expression; rather, he needed a mode of expression to put his thoughts in. Yeats’s problem was not what to say, but how to say it. His restless mind provided him with various subjects, and he wanted to give order and proportion to these subjects.

Yeats was trying to solve two problems at the same time. The first problem, as we mentioned before, was that of symbols in literature of the Victorian age which lacked a common tradition. The second problem was the specific subject of Ireland and its state of confusion. In connection with this David Daiches remarks:

He was no politician and did not feel called upon to solve the practical problems of his time. But he was impelled to find a way of putting Ireland into some mental order, so that cultural symbols of dependable significance would be at the disposal of the artist. This double task one posed by the cultural problem of his time, the other resulting from his relation to Ireland was faced boldly by Yeats, and his development as a poet is the record of how he attempted to carry it out (1940, 133-34).

It became very obvious to him that only by Ireland and giving a definition to his relation to Ireland and using the symbolic Irish heritage and shaping it in his thoughts, he could realize the achievement and the kind of poetic system he was eagerly searching for. In this path, he exploited the Neo-Platonic ideas which he had picked up from Spenser and Shelly in

order to give meaning and pattern to the Irish heroic themes which appeared increasingly in his poetry. As an instance we can mention *The Rose*, an early collection of poems whose general theme is the symbolization of Platonic ideas by means of figures from Irish mythology and Irish early history. Examples of this relatively early stage, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, that will be discussed later, and “The Rose of the World” whose first stanza is quoted here:

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?  
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,  
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,  
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,  
And Usna’s children died.

Daiches speculates that perhaps this is the most perfect of Yeats’s early poems. A poem which shows a careful discipline in language and control over form. These features are going to be the outstanding features of Yeats’s later poems (Daiches 1940, 143). It is very clear how the poet parallels Irish mythology with the long-established classical one of the Homeric Legend. Usna (Usnach, Uisnech on Uisneach) is a hill which was regarded as the center of Ireland, the meeting place of the original five provinces. Naoise and his brothers Ainnle and Ardan were sons of Usna (Jeffares 1991, 407).

But, actually, Yeats’s view of Ireland did not follow a constant path. This view sometimes was blurred by some sorts of abstractions such as wishful thinking, sentimentality, and enthusiasm. Louis MacNeice in his book *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* accounts for this fact:

In his early days he tried to equate Ireland with a Celtic Utopia – a land of beautiful dreams. During this period his nationalism was orthodox and romantic. During his middle years some experience of public life and politics disillusioned him. The kind of nationalism he admired, represented by John O’Leary, was in a decline. The nationalism dominant seemed to him to involve a shocking waste of energy and to have ruined the lives of a number of his friends... Ireland now seemed the enemy rather than the patroness of poetry... (1967, 46).

In this state of confusion, however, Yeats was influenced by Lady Gregory, who revived his admiration for the Anglo-Irish landowners, and J.M. Synge, who strengthened his old admiration for the Irish peasantry. “Till the end of his life”, MacNeice says, “Yeats found the two finest types of Ireland in the peasant and the aristocrat” (1967, 47). As an example, he quotes “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited”:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory,  
thought  
All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil,  
from that  
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew  
strong.  
We three alone in modern times had  
brought  
Everything down to that sole test again,  
Dream of the noble and the beggarman  
(VI, 42-8).

After a period of time, working with Maud Gonne for the Irish cause, he felt that their activity was in vain (MacNeice 1967, 47). In 1913 a poem (September 1913) appeared that deplored the lack of daring and imagination in Ireland of that particular time. What follows is the first stanza of the poem:

What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence  
And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
You have dried the marrow from the  
bone;  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.

Of course, when Easter Rising of 1916 occurred it brought back the Romantic Ireland with its new leaders. It is very hard to conform Ireland by definition. MacNeice believes that the Irish character could best be expressed in a set of antinomies (1967, 51). To clarify this, he exemplifies it. If we notice the popular English conception of the Irishman as a “character” then we say that the Irish genius is personal; if we see the translations of early Irish poetry, then we gather that the Irish genius is impersonal. Considering another aspect, Ireland is a land of tradition (consider the Irishman’s notorious long memory), and it suffers from a lack of tradition (Yeats’s own idea). We can easily add to such antinomies. This might need some explanation. Yeats believes that Ireland has a

tradition and lacks a tradition at the same time (Yeats 1961, 91). An example here explains the meaning of this classic antinomy. If Ireland is considered with tradition, it implies that Ireland possesses rich folklore, myth, literature and poetic culture. However, when Ireland is said to lack a tradition what is meant is a political and cultural tradition. In this sense, Ireland has been a colony of Great Britain, also fragmented, and unable to sustain a continuous scholarly tradition. So, as in a paradox, both statements are true and thus Yeats sees Ireland as an antinomy.

The discussion is led on the basis of what was said and quoted in the preceding paragraphs. We saw the origins of Yeats’s Irishness; we also witnessed the antinomies of the Irish people. Through the following pages these antinomies are to be resolved in terms of the treatment of some poems. The poems are exposed so that they will help in finding a clear solution to this problem.

### *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*

First “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, Yeats’s first properly Irish poem as he himself claims is examined:

I will arise and go now, and go to  
Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay  
and wattles made:  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive  
for the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.  
And I shall have some peace there, for  
peace comes dropping slow, dropping  
from the veils of the morning to where  
the cricket sings;  
The midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon  
a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.  
I will arise and go now, for always night  
and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low  
sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the  
pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

Louis MacNeice proposes that Innisfree was actually a protest against London:

I see no reason to disbelieve Yeats’s own statement that at the time when he wrote it. He was longing for county Sligo. County Sligo is not a Never-

Never land. The poem is a mannered poem and in a sense, escapist, but the escape which Yeats here hankers for is not merely a whimsical fiction, it is an escape to a real place in Ireland which represented to him certain Irish realities (1967, 57).

In “Innisfree” and some other poems of this kind, Yeats is obviously not just presenting us with a traveler’s guide to Ireland; on the contrary, Ireland becomes the medium through which he will explore the large issues in his poetry. His pattern, in fact, is a search for order, stability and meaning in a world of confusion. To put this argument in one simple question we may ask: Is Ireland Yeats’s inspiration and subject matter?

Many of Yeats’s poems and particularly “Innisfree” and the two which the present writer is going to discuss here reveal that he is an Irish poet. However, those poems that make reference to Ireland in their titles show Yeats’s Irishness very obviously. In fact, defining the exact role of Ireland in Yeats’s poetry is not an easy task. It is not something that can be summed up and theorized but needs to be examined by a close scrutiny of the evidence of this poems.

Some ideas about Yeats’s attitudes toward Ireland can be derived from the quoted poem which was written in 1890. The poet longs to escape from the city to Innisfree or from London to Ireland. The implicit tension here is between the reality of the city and the simplicity of Innisfree. The first stanza of this poem gives the impression of idyllic and harmonious Innisfree. The images create a picture of a blissfully peaceful and happy rural retreat. Simplicity is dominant; nevertheless, this simplicity includes self-sufficiency. The speaker wants to make this own home. He will also have the natural self-made food such as honey. The poet pays great attention to the details of this life (nine bean-rows) in order to present a very precise sense of this visionary life. Therefore, it becomes clear that Yeats is inspired by Ireland and the fact that he particularly seems to have an interest for the old rural Ireland.

As we go on reading the poem our proposed pattern gets clearer. In the third stanza, Yeats effectively and with regard to economy draws a distinction between the city and the isle of Innisfree. An image of the city is conveyed in the single line about the roadway and pavements. The word “grey” is used to give a sense of depression, dullness, and a colorless and insipid life. This sense itself becomes more obvious

when contrasted with the attractiveness of Innisfree which is pictured in the image of the lapping water. The image of the heart seems to sum up all this when the poet exploits it expressing his desire to escape to the heart and the heart land of Ireland. This image seems more alive than life in town.

What is just said in the previous paragraph further proves the centrality of Ireland. Ireland is central and it is definitely the poet’s inspiration. But is it his subject matter? His subject matter is not particularly Irish. A universal theme in modern poetry is the desire to escape from the harshness of modern life to a gentler and more peaceful life. Therefore, Yeats is scrutinizing a subject that is perennially used by poets from time to time, despite the fact that his way of establishing this theme is through having Ireland in mind.

The overall structure of “Innisfree” can be considered as one based on opposition. “Now” (The world today) and the implied “here” (meaning the city) are opposed to the implied “then” (the imagined time of “Innisfree”) and “there” (that is, the setting of Innisfree). “Now” appears twice (lines 1/9) while there occurs four times (lines 1/3/5/7). It is true that the now/there antinomy dominates the poem; nevertheless, there is another adverb that reconciles and unites the two partners of the antinomy. It is “always” (line 9) which resolves the antithesis through introducing the element of imagination. The speaker is looking for peace and “peace comes dropping slow/Dropping from the veil of the morning...”; “veils of the morning” introduces imagination.

The world of there and then becomes the world of here and now. This task is accomplished through reconciling the modern world of London and the old world of Innisfree. The means to this conclusion is imagination. The speaker’s journey starts again, this time in imagination. The clue to resuming the journey is the repeated: “I will arise and go now”. This journey which has started in the immense morning closes in “the deep heart’s core”. Imagination is an element in which “always night and day/ ...lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore” is heard. “Always” unites the opposition of “night and day”.

### *Easter 1916*

“Innisfree” is an early poem of Yeats whose tension is greatly complex. The attitude of Ireland versus universality can be better shown in “Easter 1916”, a poem printed privately after “Innisfree” in 1917 and then in 1923. Another factor is that it deals with the violence of civil unrest. Yeats talks of the people that he had known in Dublin streets. A dispar-

ity of meaning appears when we compare the time when these people once were scorned by Yeats, and the time of their death in Easter Rising which made them heroes and martyrs. Let us have a close examination of some parts of the poem:

A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song...

Yeats talks of a man whose offense to him has been twofold. He has offended the poet personally because of his treatment of the poet's intimates. Yeats is bewildered because this man who has been disgusting for him suddenly becomes a renowned hero:

He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

Actually, the rebels, including this drunken lout, shatter the calm of Ireland and the intellectual calm of Yeats's mind. But what is so important about these people that makes them heroes? They are celebrated in the poem because there is something inspiring about them. They embody heroism and the promise of a new dawn of freedom for Ireland. They long for a new order different from that isolated order of Yeats. Even the phrase "terrible beauty" is a contradictory phrase: "terrible" refers to the violence and disorder of the rising, while "beauty" conveys the romantic and glorious aspect of this rising because it is above the ordinary prejudices and convictions. Therefore, again, Ireland is central to the poetry of Yeats; nevertheless, like "Innisfree", although Ireland has provided the inspiration for the poet, the subject is that of investigating the possibility of creating a new social order. Ireland becomes the background for this universal subject.

The speaker is completely puzzled; he is confronting different questions. But here how important the deaths of these people are:

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?

Love of Ireland was their drive and this very love has resulted in their own death. This seems to be he-

roic. But can this bloodshed of theirs be the cause for a new freedom and civilization? The circumstances of Ireland, definitely, were essential to the writing of this poem but as the words "love" and "death" suggest the subject finds universal dimensions. Yeats wonders whether any order can replace the reality that we are born into. In "Innisfree" there is a straightforward escape towards an idyllic island, while here exists an antithetical exploration of the culmination of political hopes and aspirations. The poem starts with events in Ireland; it continues as a more universal situation of the complex realities of political and social life. Yeats uses the real events and the real people of Ireland in order to explore a theme which is relevant not only to Ireland but it also is applicable to other settings. This is the main point of the power of the poem. Thus it becomes clear that Ireland is Yeats's inspiration but his subjects are those that have obsessed the minds of all poets at all times. It is also realized how the poet deals with the problems of the real world while introducing the dream or desire of a simpler world or one with more order. Our third example is concerned with an antithetical pattern and a consideration of the poet's complexity at his work.

### *Sailing to Byzantium*

**This is the opening stanza of the poem:**

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.

This poem like most of Yeats's other poems reflects indirectly the tension the poet has lived throughout his political and cultural life. Such interpretations of the poet's writings are frequently cited by writers who link Yeats's restless aesthetic to political and cultural turbulence (Wood 2010, 227).

Right from the beginning the speaker seems to turn his back on Ireland. Ireland is forsaken for the sake of Byzantium. There is in this poem the conflict of the real Ireland and the ideal Byzantium. Through the rest of this stanza the poet expresses his abhorrence towards anything Irish and gives a picture of the physical process of relevant life. A sense of abundance of the physical life is outstanding in this



stanza. Therefore, it seems paradoxically strange to despise the physical world while at the same time describe it in a favourite way. This phenomenon is characteristic of Yeats's great poetry. He does not try to force an idea on us, but gives us the opportunity to face the disorder of life. The poet seems to accept all the diversity of life and somehow celebrate it. Therefore, Ireland again provides the poet's inspiration, but as always is the case this nationalistic inspiration is transformed into a universal theme. This particular poem starts with Ireland but soon expands into the exploration of a perennial and universal theme, that is the theme of the desire to escape. The poet wants to give up a world of age and death; he dreams of himself as the court poet of Byzantium.

Sing [ing]  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

In this way the poet aspires to be an advisor of the Byzantine "lords and ladies".

Richard Ellman remarks that Yeats found his fame as an Irish poet. However, he adds:

Yeats's Irishism is of a special kind. Like Joyce's prose, his poetry makes use of national and local borders only to transcend them. He is Irish; he is also anti-Irish in an Irish way; and his interest in Irishmen is always subordinated to an interest in men. His method of treating his Irish background and subject-matter is therefore exceedingly complex. Ireland is his symbol for the world, and he is caught between estrangement and love for both (1954, 4-5).

Yeats's ultimate function of nationality in his poetry is to transcend it (Ellman 1954, 15). He claims that everything the greater poets see is related to the national life and ultimately to the universal and divine life:

Nothing is an isolated artistic moment; there is a unity everywhere; everything fulfills a purpose that is not its own, the hailstone is a journey man of God; the grass blade carries the universe upon its point. But to this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveler, your village and the cobwebs on your

walls. You can no more have the greatest poetry without a nation than religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand – that glove is one's nation, the only thing one know even a little of (1954, 15-16).

As such, Byzantium stands for a place of eternal existence for a mature individual, where the poet's persona wishes for a timeless shape: "Gather me / Into the artifice of eternity" (lines 23–24). This movement stands for Yeats's exploration of universal themes such as aging, immortality, and the quest for spiritual transcendence, reaching beyond the limits of Irishness. Pearson highlights how Yeats switches away from the natural and sensual as well the Irish nationalist sense: "In 'Sailing to Byzantium,' Yeats stages a struggle between tides, floods, winds, and rain – augurs of natural, universal forces that are embodied in the movements and desires of masses inside and outside of Ireland..." (2024, 3). This analysis ushers the movement towards universal themes which overall reflects a shift in Yeats's poetic focus. Moreover, The idea of movement is also highlighted in the well-known book by Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*. Here Vendler treats "Sailing to Byzantium" at length. She elaborates on the shift from the sensual, Ireland-bound imagery to the poem's quest for an artifice of eternity (2007, 32-33).

### Conclusion: A Specific Kind of Irishness

There are some points to make about Yeats's specific kind of Irishness. Writing poetry on the basis of whatever is Irish is useful in various ways. Yeats himself prescribes this technique for originality and sincerity in poetry. He believed that in this way the poet will have less competitors, and one is supposed to "love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one's life" (Ellman 1954, 12). In 1889 Yeats, then twenty-four, gave this fatherly advice to an aspiring poet.

As it is well-known, Yeats was influenced, in his Irishness, by John O'Leary. In his early Romantic poetry, Yeats preferred the old Arcadia and India but later the scenery of his poems was exclusively Irish. Yeats was patriotic but he did not like sentimental nationalism. Unlike the Victorians who were interested in the exotic scenes, Yeats turned to the native familiar scenes.

Thus Yeats turns back to the Victorians and gets an inclination towards symbolism. It is his belief that the poet works with a series of concentric circles.

Ellman likens this aspect of him to Stephen Dedalus who begins with his home, his village, his nation, and ends with the universe. Every detail in one circle matches its correspondence with the other (1954,16). According to Yeats, thoroughly known objects and, together with their symbolic significance, are found in his poems. He is familiar with his native landscape and in this landscape he finds a group of symbols which are closely related to him. In Yeats's opinion the world cannot be approached without the "clothing of familiar symbols (16)."

Yeats was convinced from the very beginning of his dealing with poetry that it implied a pre-existence of conflict. In this respect his emphasis on antithesis or conflict acquires significance. It is quite easy to gather from reading Yeats's poetry that it is not the linear expression of a specific mood either of dejection, despair, or excitement. Victorian poetry did not attract him since it was either the linear expression of a mood or treatment of the world's problems. There existed, for Yeats, the consciousness of conflict. He was interested in this consciousness. Heterodox mysticism was a philosophical basis of the conception of conflict.

This interest to consider poetry as the conflicting feeling is particularly applicable in modern times. It is in modern times that man is conscious of the lack of a harmonious world. The contrasting poles force themselves on the mind of the poet so that the poet extracts poetry out of this divided nature of the self. There is a conflict also for the saint but he tries to reconcile two warring poles of the soul. The saint is after peace. The poet, on the other hand, cannot ignore experience.

Yeats was quite aware of the existence and importance of these warring voices in poetry. These voices are important because they direct Yeats in creating his poetry. Yeats considered English poetry to be lyric. Its language enjoyed greater subtlety. In comparison, Ireland witnessed the epic kind of poetry. Yeats was Irish but was also aware of the English poetry. His personality was a creative double personality. Ireland was a contrast. In Ireland there was optimism, energy and a love of life. According to Yeats, the two kinds of poetry had their own limitations. Of course, this attitude of Yeats was rooted in his dissatisfaction with nationalism and the related conflicts within Ireland and between Ireland and England.

Thus this study has highlighted poems that show Yeats's evolving energy for the transition from a poem like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" with more Irish color towards more universal themes, found in

poems such as "The Second Coming" and "Sailing to Byzantium." It has also clarified how these poems could explore far-reaching human experiences with an eye of philosophical questions and spiritual meanings. The essay's discussion has led to the culmination in the universal richness and maturity of Yeats's poetry. This has been possible only through Yeats's attempt to represent the complex, where each theme is examined against its contrary. Yeats's poetry is seen as a conflictual journey rooted in Irish soil while aspiring towards the universal through artistic texture.

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