

William Butler Yeats

He was born in Dublin in **1865** into an anglo irish protestant family, when he was a child his family moved to London but he used to spend many holidays in Sligo, a town in Western Ireland that he loved and wrote about.

He grew up feeling as much Irish as English and in Sligo he developed a passion for the Celtic past and also an interest in the occult and the mystical.

In **1880** his family moved back to Dublin where he studied art but he soon realised that his real passion was poetry. He abandoned art as a profession in favour of literature.

In **1889** he met Maud Gonne, she was a beautiful actress and she was his first love, he deeply fell in love with her but his love was not returned, she admired his poetry but she refused his offers of marriage. She came to represent for Yeats the ideal of beauty.

In the **1890s** he became involved in the **Irish nationalist movement**, he met Lady Gregory, an Irish nationalist and playwright, they became close friend and together they founded the **Abbey Theatre** in Dublin in 1904 which became the most important cultural centre of the Irish literary renaissance.

In addition to his poetry he devoted significant energy to writing plays, but his theatrical production lacked dramatic values, the essential qualifications of a dramatist.

In **1917** he got married with Georgie Hyde Lees, she was a medium who shared his interest in the occult and soon after their wedding she developed the power of automatic writing. She began to utter strange phrases and she thought that these phrases were dictated by spirits from another world.

Yeats copied down these fragments and he incorporated them in his prose work *A Vision* in 1925. In this work he also exposed his complex system of ideas.

Between 1922 and 1928 he became a senator in the Parliament of the recently established Free State.

In 1923 his greatness received international recognition with the **Nobel Price for literature**. He died in France in 1939 just before the outbreak of World War II.

We can divide his literary production into 3 periods:

1. **Early Period** (1886-1900): influence of Romanticism, Aestheticism and French Symbolism, they are also pervaded by a Celtic mysticism, he looked for his themes in Irish

legends, interested in the simple impulses of men. The best remedy for the emptiness of the present seem to lie in a return to the simplicity of the past.

2. **Middle Period** (1900-1916): his poems became more and more rooted in reality, in particular in the political situation of Ireland, which was under the British rule. It is in this phase that he becomes a true modern poet, his poetry is no longer concerned with the representation of a personal suggestive dreamlike world. His poetry became concerned with the search for truth. He confronted reality and imperfection, his poetry showed a gradual movement away from Escapism of his previous works. He shows a growing carriage in considering the modern problems.
3. **Late Period** (1917-1939): it is his maturity. His poems became more introspective, meditating on memory, old age and death. Symbolic interpretation of history and man's destiny. He was a symbolist and his poet is not simple, he adopted a complex system. This was developed from his study on mystic ancient philosophy, esoteric, astrology and magic. After his marriage he started to experiment automatic writing, they used to sit together for writing sessions during which they believed to be guided by a spiritual world. He wanted to resolve the contradictions of the modern world.

Themes

He deals with a wide variety of themes, one of the reasons for his greatness is that we can identify many different aspects in this author. He is a multidimensional poet, not characterised by a single approach to poetry.

The faith in beauty and eternity of art

This was developed under the influence of the Romantic poets Keats and pre-Raphaelites.

Relationship between the poet and Irish people and tradition

This developed from a very early age, he felt a deep connection to Ireland, with a strong interest in Irish mythologies.

Age

Yeats was almost obsessed with age.

His preoccupation with old age is based on the contrast between the failing body and the willing heart.

Death

It's another key theme. Yeats view was that unlike the animals, that dies once and forever, man dies many times before his real death.

Every defeat, as well as every victory, represents a series of death and rebirth, prefiguring the end of life.

This continuous cycle of Death and Rebirth is promoted by an incessant and endless process of change and renewal

Idea of the heroic individual

Loneliness is a feature of his hero; he has superior qualities, that distinguish him from the common men.

Yeats develop the image of the solitary soul.

Polarity between opposites concepts

such as the physical and the spiritual, the real and the imagined.

Deep fascination for occultism

Yeats was a believer in magic and similar arts, he was a visionary, he was religious by temperament but he was unable to believe in christian orthodoxy

All his life he tried to compensate his lost sense of religion, and this search led him to various kind of mysticism and spiritualism, neoplatonism, and also to **theosophy**.

In London he joined the Theosophical society, whose mysticism appealed to Yeats; this mysticism was based on a form of imaginative life.

Theosophy is the belief in a deeper spiritual reality.

According to Yeats people can come in contact with this deeper reality through

- intuition
- meditation
- revelation
- use of symbols

Yeats develop its own symbolic system, which is exposed in his book *A Vision*. This book represents the full exposition of his philosophy and his ideas. It is still a very obscure book, and in fact it led to describe Yeats as one of the most difficult among the modern poets.

Yeats distinguish between two kind of symbols: emotional and intellectual;

- **emotional symbols** evoke emotions
- **intellectual symbols** evoke ideas

Symbols are of primary importance to Yeats, since they contribute to the definition of a collective consciousness.

In this regard Yeats develops the concept of the great memory, that is a concept that is strongly connected to Jung's concept of the Collective unconscious.

They both believe that we interact with the world through a system of archetypes, which express a set of human truths, that are passed on from generation to generation

The reader's difficulties in reading Yeats arise mainly from Yeats's use of the same symbol to represent a variety of things.

One of his main themes is the falcon which represents a violent break from any form of control but it also represents grace

Another important symbol is the swan. On one hand it represents a perfect unchanging ideal while, on the other hand, it becomes a symbol of destructive power.

The tower is another famous symbol. The tower can be an intellectual shelter but sometimes it becomes a vision of the dark future of humanity

Style

His style is characterized by a great variety of forms, rhythms and tone.

Stylistically Yeats is at the same time a traditionalist and an innovator: he worked with traditional genres, but he disrupted conventions by breaking the coherence of this more traditional form.

Also stylistically Yeats tries to convey a tension between opposite concepts, by making a large use of antithesis, oxymoron and paradoxes.

T: *Easter 1916*

- p. 198

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From **counter** or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
5 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 done¹
10 Of a mocking tale² or a **gibe**
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But³ lived where **motley** is worn:
15 All changed, changed **utterly**:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument⁴
20 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
25 And rode our wingèd⁵ 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,
30 So **daring** and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout⁶.
He had done most bitter wrong⁷
To some who are near my heart,
35 Yet I number him in the song;

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice¹⁷?
60 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 wild¹⁸.
65 What is it but nightfall?
No; no, not night but death;
Was it needless¹⁹ death after all?
For England may keep faith²⁰

He, too, has **resigned** his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn⁸,
Transformed utterly:
40 A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted⁹ to a stone
To trouble the living stream¹⁰.
45 The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range¹¹
From cloud to tumbling¹² cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
50 Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim¹³,
And a horse plashes¹⁴ within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive¹⁵,
And hens to moor-cocks¹⁶ call;
55 Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

For all that is done and said.
70 We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them²¹ till they died?
I write it out in a verse –
75 MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn²²,
Are changed, changed utterly:
80 A terrible beauty is born.

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- 1 **before I had done**. Prima di andarmene (*lett.*: prima di finire).
 - 2 **a mocking tale**. Un racconto beffardo.
 - 3 **But**. Solamente.
 - 4 **argument**. Discussione.
 - 5 **wingèd**. Alato (riferimento a Pegaso, il cavallo alato nato dal sangue di Medusa dopo la sua morte).
 - 6 **A drunken, vainglorious lout**. Uno zoticone alcolizzato e vanaglorioso.
 - 7 **most bitter wrong**. Il torto più doloroso.
 - 8 **in his turn**. A sua volta.
 - 9 **Enchanted**. Incantati, ammaliati.
 - 10 **stream**. Flusso, corrente.
 - 11 **range**. Si muovono liberamente, vagano.
 - 12 **tumbling**. Che si agita.
 - 13 **A horse-hoof ... brim**. Lo zoccolo di un cavallo scivola sulla sponda.
 - 14 **plashes**. Sguazza.
 - 15 **moor-hens dive**. Le gallinelle d'acqua si tuffano.
 - 16 **moor-cocks**. Galli di brughiera.

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- 17 **suffice**. Bastare.
 - 18 **On limbs ... wild**. Su membra che hanno corso all'impazzata.
 - 19 **needless**. Inutile.
 - 20 **faith**. La parola.
 - 21 **Bewildered them**. Li ha disorientati.
 - 22 **Wherever green is worn**. Ovunque il verde sia indossato (il verde è il colore nazionale dell'Irlanda).

This poem was written after the Easter Rising, an insurrection which took place in Ireland in 1916.

During the Easter week in 1916 some rebels decided to seize Dublin strategic point while the British were fighting in WWI

But the British troops were able to intervene and to repress these protests. Some were executed and many citizens were arrested. This rebellion didn't directly lead Ireland to reach independence but it represented an important step in order to reach it.

After the execution carried out by the British the Irish became increasingly hostile towards the British Rule and so they started to further promote the cause of their independence.

In the election of 1918 the Sinn Féin party won the largest proportion of the Irish seats in the British Parliament. This Party decided to form its own government, with the help of IRA. This was led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty, that marked the birth of the Irish Free State.

This poem expresses the poet's contrasted feelings respect the uprising which took place in Dublin in 1916.

The themes are

- heroism
- bravery
- public sacrifice
- death
- mourning

Yeats uses a chain of multiple unanswered questions to express his difficulty in finding the appropriate response to this historical event.

The **first stanza** is based on a series of contrasts:

1. between two different subject's pronoun: "*I*" (**line 1**) refers to Yeats, he was a witness [testimone] to the Easter Rising; "*them*" (**line 1**) refers to the Irish insurgence, that Y. used to meet at the end of the day
2. between the insurgence *vivid faces* (**line 2**) and the *grey Eighteenth-century houses* (**line 3-4**)
3. there is a contrast between these people and the poet, because the *vivid faces* of these people might have easily revealed some internal agitation, but when meeting them, the poet proved unable to take their passion seriously, he didn't feel close to their internal agitation: he just acknowledge them with a nod, or he exchange some meaningless small talk, just to be polite; sometimes he even mocked them with his friends; for Y. all these people were just living their normal life, but then something happen, and everything change

In the **second stanza** the poet became more specific about the people he used to meet, he provides us with some details and personal information about some of the rebels.

The **third stanza** opens with a reference to the hearts that have only one aim, referring to the rebels and to their single-minded dedication. Y. is suggesting that those people who totally devote themselves to some unchanging goals, may finally lose their ordinary human feelings, to the point that their heart is like a stone travelling the *living stream*.

This *living stream* (**line 44**) stands for the flowing of life while the hearts with one purpose refers to the rebels, who dedicate all their energy to one single goal.

This *stone* (**lines 43-47**) might also be read as an allusion to the anglo-irish conflict. Y. is developing the idea that everything changes in nature, in order to adapt to the situation, whereas stones simply exist to the same state on a endless basis.

People who devote themselves to unchanging goals might finally end up in being like stones, because they lose their most peculiar human feature, that is the ability to change and to adapt for their own survival.

In the **fourth stanza** the poet wonders whether the rebels sacrifice was useful and worthwhile.

Maybe it is possible that England, would have granted Ireland its independence without this violent rebellion.

Many people were killed.

Y. affirms that it is not up to him to establish this. It's God who has to answer this question, and our duty is just to honor the rebels memory, and remember the rebels with respect.

To emphasize the respect that people should owe to the rebels, Y. uses a symbolic image. He says that our attitude towards the death rebels should be the same attitude of a mother when taking care of her sleeping child, looks at him and says name, with the utmost love and utmost seriousness.

Y. is also making an association with this symbol, establishing a link between death and sleep, which reveals a comforting idea of death, and which has christian implication.

Then Y. immediately rejects this idea, because the rebels are truly dead, and this is not something temporary, so it is not the case to soften the harshness of the reality.

At **line 74** Y. states the act he is performing. He wrote this line to celebrate the rebels who sacrificed their lives to a dream.

This line bridges the poet, the heroes and the readers.

At **line 75-76** he mentions some of the insurgence, and by directly naming them, we see how, through the poem, these insurgence have gone through a radical process of transformation to the eyes of the poet.

From the idea of ordinary people, they ended up as heroes to be honoured at the end of the poem, because they nobly die for their cause, and they deserve being remembered.

The poem ends with a line which is repeated at the end of the first and the second stanza. These lines contain an oxymoron (*terrible // beauty*). This line is a sort of refrain [ritornello] that clearly conveys the feelings of the poet about the sacrifice implied in the change.

Y. attitude oscillates between a feeling of admiration for their bravery and a feeling of conflict for the cost of their commitment.

In the end he cannot say if the rebels' sacrifice was worth the cost.

His attitude is ambivalent and characterised by approval and disapproval at the same time. This line perfectly registers the contrast between the nobility of the rebels' cause and the devastating price they paid for it. This line also perfectly registers the poet's uncertainty about how to make sense of what happened.

Yeats was a symbolist, and in this poem he proves his ability as a symbolist, by recurring to some symbols that convey powerful meanings, sometimes contrasting each other:

- the **stone**: it may stand for the Anglo-Irish conflict, it may stand for the rebel's heart: this association can have both negative and positive connotations
 - the positive connotations refer to the idea of strength that a stone implies
 - the negative connotations refer to the static nature of stones: to the steady focus on the cause for independence, although it is actually a noble dream, has made the rebel's heart stone-like; their fixation ended up bringing violence and destruction;
- the **stone** might also symbolize both the admiration and the criticism for the rebels by Yeats
- the **sleeping child**: this image is used to refer to the death of rebels; sleep is a common metaphor for death in poetry, and the image of child implies an idea of innocence; just like children can sometimes unintentionally produce some harm, so the rebels are not guilty, because they didn't intend to cause any harm for fighting for their independence
- the **mother**: it can be read as a symbol for Ireland itself; according to this interpretation, the rebels can be imagined as Ireland's children

T: *The Second Coming*

- p. 200

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,
5 The blood-dimmed tide¹ 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;
10 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,
15 A gaze blank and pitiless² 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
20 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle³,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards⁴ Bethlehem to be born?

1 The blood-dimmed tide. La marea velata dal sangue.
2 A gaze blank and pitiless. Uno sguardo vuoto e spietato.
3 rocking cradle. Culla a dondolo.
4 Slouches towards. Avanza pigramente verso.

This is one of Yeats' most famous poem, belonging to the last period of his career.

It was written in 1919, and it was published after a series of bloodshed:

- two years after the Russian revolution
- the end of WWI
- the conflict between Irish patriots and English government was at its pick

Its conclusion also seems to predict the rise of Hitler and the nazi party.

Portraying a world on the edge of catastrophe, this poem is deeply pessimistic about the new phase that the world is entering.

To fully understand this poem, it is useful to look at Yeats' view of history. He is influenced by the cyclical theory of the Italian philosopher Gian Battista Vico.

Yeats always professes to see the world as in a state of perpetuale flux: in this regard, his idea of history was based on what he called **gyres**.

A gyre is a geometric figure composed of two cones, rotating in opposite directions.

According to Yeats history is made of different historical phases, which he calls gyres, usually contrasting with each other.

Each historical phase is followed by an other one which has contrasting elements, in comparison to the previous one. Each dominant historical phase always contains its antithesis.

The title of this poem evokes the second coming of Christ, predicted by Matthew in the Bible. According to it Jesus Christ is supposed to return, and save those who deserve being saved, the true believers, bringing them to heaven.

The second coming described by Yeats is not referred to Christ: he perceives that some rough beast, which he cannot name, is waiting to be born. This image of the **rough beast** clearly suggest that this second coming will not be that of Christ, but that of an Anti-Christ.

The **first stanza** describes a world characterized by anarchy and blood. The picture introduced is one of violence and change.

- **line 3:** *Things fall apart*: chaotic world
- **line 3:** *the centre cannot hold*: society lacks of foundations
- **lines 4-5:** idea of blood, physical pain and violence, idea of mass destruction
- **line 6:** humanity supposed arc of progress as being a pure illusion
- **line 7:** *The best lack all conviction*: best people are not motivated
- **lines 7-8:** *while the worst Are full of passionate intensity*: worsts are eager to act; the worsts are those who react with passionate physical intensity and not with careful intellectual study

These two lines suggests a dissociation between best people (intellectual) and the crowd

The lines of this stanza can be read almost as a commentary on the times. The first stanza expresses the disintegration of our civilization. To describe this disintegration Yeats uses a series of images

- **the falcon** *turning and turning in the widening gyre* represents the cycle of history that is disintegrating
- **the falcon** who *cannot hear the falconer* stands for lack of communication

The **second stanza** describes a nightmarish picture connected to the second coming. It predicts the beginning of a new age, a sort of anti-christian age, characterized by violence, lack of values and lack of communication.

- **lines 9-10** are rich in repetitions.

All these repetitions create a sort of onomatopoeic effect, that suggest the repetitive movement of the gyre.

The poet is sure that there will be soon some revelation, the **second coming**, a new cycle in history

The poet has a vision, an image coming from the *Spiritus Mundi* emerges in the poet's mind. This *Spiritus Mundi* it's the soul of the universe to which men are connected through the great memory: it's a sort of universal subconscious, were the memories of the human race are preserved: it's similar to Jung's idea of the Collective Unconscious.

The main symbol we find here is the **rough beast**. Many critics remark that this poem is deeply concerned with the drama of modern war.

Yeats himself described his poem as a reaction to the growing murderousness of the world. This concern with war marks this poem as a modern work.

- **lines 13-17:** describes a creature which is half human and half lion (it's a vision of the poet); it has the body of a Lion and the head of a man. This creature appears in the desert, and in the poet's eyes it has a blank and pityless look.

The rough beast that has the intellect of a man and the fierce emotion of a beast.

Some critics have also connected this **rough beast** with the figure of Hitler, and it is prophetic, since it predicts the rise of Nazism. Perhaps connecting this image to a single historical figure or event is reductive, because for Yeats this rough beast is fearful image which arises out of the collapse of the existing order.

This creature arises from the fact the *Things fall apart and the centre cannot hold* (**line 3**). Yeats's vision offers a more general vision of evil.

- **line 18:** poet's vision ends and the poet starts thinking again
- **line 19:** it refers to the christian age: the poem is about the disintegration of the christian age
- **line 20:** it's a puzzling line because the "rocking cradle" suggests the manger where Jesus was laid
- **lines 21-22:** the poem ends with the image of the rough beast going to Bethlehem to be born; the creature is going to desecrate the holy play where Jesus was born.

This poem is an apocalyptic vision of the future of mankind.

The poem is meter irregular, and it doesn't have a fixed rhyme scheme. Describing a world of chaos, anarchy and confusion, it make sense that the poem doesn't follow a standard scheme or fixed rhyme pattern, which would convey an idea of order, balance and linearity