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| **William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)** |
| W. B. Yeats |
| Irish poet, playwright, editor, writer, senator, William Butler Yeats is among the most accomplished authors of the 20th century; in 1923 he was awarded Noble Prize in Literature ‘for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation’ ('The Nobel Prize in Literature 1923' 2016). Yeats’ life spanned a turbulent time in Irish history that began with the rise of the modern home rule movement in the 1860s to the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922. T. S. Eliot noted Yeats was ‘one of those few poets whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them’ (qtd. in Foster 1989). |
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A year after WBY’s birth, John Butler became a barrister-at-law; however, in 1867 he decided to the leave the profession in order to follow his dream of becoming a painter. JBY brought his family to London where he enrolled in art school, a decision that left the family under constant financial pressure. Susan Pollexfen was the daughter of prosperous merchants in Sligo, where she would bring her children—WBY, Susan Mary ‘Lily’ (1866-1949), Elizabeth Corbet ‘Lolly’ (1868-1940) John Butler ‘Jack’ Yeats (1871-1957)—for extended stays with her family. The moments among the Pollexfens on the west coast of Ireland had a profound effect in shaping the young WBY by cultivating a mythical imagination rooted in the Irish countryside and legends of its people. Yeats would publish some of the old stories in the *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888).  The 1880s were a seminal time in Yeats’ Life. In 1884 Yeats’ aunt, Isabella Pollexfen Varley, sent him a copy of A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*, which would ignite in Yeats a life-long interest in the occult and spiritual practices. Yeats enrolled at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, where he would befriend George Russell (AE), who shared with Yeats a strong affinity with mysticism; In 1885, Yeats and AE formed the Dublin Lodge of the Hermetic Society to explore questions of esoteric philosophy; this is the same year Yeats’ first published poems appeared in the *Dublin University Review*. The extent to which Yeats’ mysticism informed his poetry and poetry his mysticism is studied in Leon Surette’s *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*.  Yeats’ first collection of poetry, *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*, was published in 1889, which was also ‘the high point of the political ‘Union of Hearts’ between Liberal English society and the Irish nationalism under the new respectable Parnell’ (Foster 1998, 86). Yeats’ interest in politics was stoked by his meeting of Maud Gonne, an English-born Irish patriot who shared an interest in the occult and with whom Yeats fell passionately in love. Though Gonne rebuffed Yeats’ many marriage proposals for decades, they declared themselves to be in a ‘mystical marriage’; Gonne remained Yeats’ muse for decades.  During the 1890s, Yeats became a seminal figure in the Irish Literary Revival (also known as the Celtic Twilight), a movement championing a distinctly Irish literary identity. Yeats co-founded the Irish Literary Society in London (1891), the National Literary Society in Dublin (1892) and the Irish Literary Theatre (1899).  In 1896, Yeats began a life-long friendship with Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932), with whom he would collaborate on establishing the Irish Literary Theatre. In 1897, along Edward Martyn, Yeats and Lady Gregory published a ‘Manifesto for Irish Literary Theatre’ (1897) attacking the ‘cold and conventional’ state of theatre that had cut ‘itself off from the life around it’ (Foster 1998, 206). This led to the establishment of the ‘The Irish Literary Theatre’ in 1899. Yeats’ career as both a playwright and literary editor began at this time. Yeats play, *The Countess Cathleen*, was chosen for the opening night in May 1899, and he released his first little magazine, *Beltaine:* *The Organ of the Irish Literary Theatre* to accompany the performances. After the final issue of *Beltaine*, Yeats produced *Samhain* and *The Arrow*, ‘occasional publications [that] offered eclectic literary and scholarly content, presented an editorial stance challenging dominant culture, and introduced previously unpublished work’ like other modernist magazines (Reynolds 2003). After the Irish Literature Theatre ran out of money, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Martyn, Æ, and John Millington Synge founded the ‘Irish National Theatre Society’ in 1903. The group was offered space in 1904 at the Abbey Theatre, which would become the namesake for the company. In 1907, the performance of John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* was followed by riots stoked by Irish nationalists who called the play ‘a sordid, squalid and repulsive picture of Irish life and character’ (Saddlemyer 2013). Yeats took to the pages of *Samhain* and *The Arrow* to defend the free expression of art in the theatre. Yeats Nobel lecture, ‘The Irish Dramatic Movement,’ explores the national and literary aspirations of the theatre.  In 1908, Ezra Pound arrived in England seeking ‘the greatest living poet in the English language’; he settled on Yeats (Rees 1975). From 1913 to 1916 Yeats and Pound collaborated together while wintering at Stone Cottage, Sussex. Yeats later acknowledged Pound’s influence on his writing in seeking ‘the definite and concrete, away from modern abstractions’ (Watson 1989). Pound also introduced Yeats to Japanese Noh tradition that would influence Yeats’ plays. Ezra Pound served as witness at Yeats marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees in 1917.  Yeats did not take a public stand after the April 1916 Easter rebellion in Ireland; he wrote ‘Easter 1916’ in September of that year but did not publish the four-stanza, sixteen-line poem until 1920. Once Ireland gained its independence, Yeats accepted an invitation to serve twice as Senator (1922-1928) for the legislature of the Irish Free State. Yeats continued to write celebrated poetry and prose throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and in 1932, he and George Bernard Shaw formed the Irish Academy of Letters.  Yeats died on January 28, 1939 in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, where he was buried until 1948, when what were thought at the time to be Yeats’ bones were disinterred and loaded on the Irish Navy corvette, L.E. Macha, bound for Ireland. The bones where laid to rest shortly thereafter in Drumcliffe Churchyard in County Sligo under a tombstone engraved with the words from his poem ‘Under Ben Bulben,’: ‘Cast a cold eye/On life, on death./Horseman, pass by!’ |
| Further reading:  (Foster)  (Foster, W. B. Yeats: A Life. The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914)  (Rees)  (Reynolds)  (Saddlemyer)  (The Nobel Prize in Literature 1923)  (Watson) |