

“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”

"A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is a famous poem written by W.B. Yeats. It was published in 1933 and the rhyme scheme of the poem is ab ba cd dc. It is an autobiographical expression of a conflict between the soul of the poet and his mind or intelligence. The poet's self opposes the advice of the soul to withdraw from life by pointing to Sato's sword symbolizing life, war, love and sex. The poet's soul tells the poet to climb the spiral staircase, then climb to the top to fix the purity of thought through the fact that they are there. In a word, he calls for hard work to find knowledge, wisdom and truth. The soul further says that heavenly bliss lies in the midst of eternal meditation. Which reveals the truth and through it our hearts are enchanted. In spite of all misfortunes and misfortunes, the poet is sincerely embracing the life of the world, excluding the life of asceticism and escapism.

Stanza#1

My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
Upon the breathless starlit air,
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;
Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done:
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

Stanza#2

My Self. The consecrated blade upon my knees
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass
Unspotted by the centuries;
That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn
From some court-lady's dress and round
The wooden scabbard bound and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.

Stanza#3

My Soul. Why should the imagination of a man
Long past his prime remember things that are
Emblematical of love and war?
Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

Stanza#4

My Self. Montashigi, third of his family, fashioned it
Five hundred years ago, about it lie
Flowers from I know not what embroidery—
Heart's purple—and all these I set
For emblems of the day against the tower

Emblematical of the night,
And claim as by a soldier's right
A charter to commit the crime once more.

Stanza#5

My Soul. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
For intellect no longer knows
Is from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*—
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
Only the dead can be forgiven;
But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.

Stanza#6

My Self. A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;

Stanza#7

The finished man among his enemies?—
How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?
And what's the good of an escape
If honour find him in the wintry blast?

Stanza#8 and 9

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse

So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

Personal Involvement

William Butler Yeats was born into a **middle-class Church of Ireland family**—that is, he was a **product of Protestant and English descent**. His grandfather and great-grandfather were members of the clergy. His father, however, **rebelled against the family's religious life**, so Yeats was not reared in the traditional Christian faith, although Christian imagery and beliefs, especially moral, remained a continuing and powerful element in his poetry. For instance, his **Crazy Jane** poems thematically echo the conflicts between Christian morality and human desire which are the concerns of "**A Dialogue of Self and Soul**" Too,

Yeats used the form, which he used in "**A Dialogue of Self and Soul**", in the seventh section of "**Vacillation**," although in the latter poem the debate is between the **Soul** and the **Heart**. Certainly, a knowledge of the story of the conception and birth of Christ, as well as of that birth's religious significance, is necessary for the reader of the antithetical images of Yeats's "**The Second Coming**." However, Yeats's own religious life was a committed interest in, faith in, and even practice (largely synthetic) of various occult beliefs, from his early involvement with the Rosicrucian's and Theosophy to his acceptance of aspects of Eastern religions. He was far from being a rationalistic unbeliever.

"**A Dialogue of Self and Soul**" is also built upon traditional patterns: Most of the lines are **iambic pentameter**, although with great variants, plus rhyme, although not all the rhymes are perfect; the effect is to emphasize the chanting human voice. The rhymes are **abbacddc**, a modification of another traditional pattern, the **octave rima**. Thus, if this pattern of repetitions controls as well as emphasizes the emotion, behind the intensity of the imagery the pattern tells us there is order in the world. Still, that order is problematic: **Is it divine or is it simply imposed by humankind?**

Summary of the Poem:

The poem is divided into **two main sections**. In the **first section**, the **Soul and the Self** alternate, the Soul beginning and ending the exchange. The first part is the actually **dialogue between self and soul**. The soul is driven by the past or ancient events. The self is the reaction to the soul.

The dialogue is between a **Soul** that calls the poet to an '**ancestral night**' of escape from the wheel of life and death, and a **Self**, which even in old age and sickness affirms the blessedness of life, and calls upon as its symbol.

In this poem Yeats **soul** can be describe as "**think of ancestral knight, that can, if but imagination scorn the earth and inflect its wondering**." The self of Yeats in this play is describe as "**the wooden scabbard found and wound, can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn**." In the **second part** of this poem his self is only expressed. The self and soul have become a whole. You can conclude from this poem that a person has matured, self-actualization is obtained.

In giving the **Soul an extra stanza**, Yeats would seem to be coming down on the side of the Soul, but the **second part** of the poem is one long speech by the Self alone, emphasizing that it chooses, has chosen, to live life in all its pains and difficulties, since that is what life is. The Self would be **“content to live it all again.”**

Dialogue of Self and Soul was published in the **Winding Stair** and other poems, in **1933**, when Yeats was already in his sixties. Yeats had survived an illness that almost cost his life, a factor that is profoundly reflected in this dialogue. The **conflict between Self and Soul** in this poem has variously been described as between **intellect and lust, mind and body, life and death**.

In *Dialogue of Self and Soul*, Yeats employs the traditional Christian-based form of a dramatic poetic debate, between the Soul (or heart) and the Self (or body), reversing the usual Christian message of works in which the *soul laments what the body has done*. Sinning has condemned both body and soul to hell. Traditionally, sin originates with the body, since that body desires pleasure, the pleasures of the egoistic present and so not of the future in heaven in contemplation of god. Paradoxically, Yeats' poem chooses the body and life with all its failures, sins, and humiliations over the morality of the soul.

When the voice of the Soul protests that a man '**past his prime**' should not '**remember things that are / Emblematical of love and war**' but instead seek deliverance from '**the crime of death and birth**', the voice of the Self returns to the sword and to its history, and makes its symbolism explicit.

Yeats wrote to **Olivia Shakespeare** of the poem that he makes the **sword** and its **silk** covering the '**symbol of [his] life**'. '**Montashigi**', as often has been noted, is a **corruption of Montashigi**, the family name of the sword maker. The connection to Japanese subjects in the poem perhaps does not end with **Sato's sword**. In other words, he focuses on the meaning of his life. The soul is driven by the past or ancient events. The self is the reaction to the soul. In this poem, soul can be described as;

*Think of ancestral knight that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wondering.*

The Self of Yeats is described as;
*The wooden scabbard found and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.*

Part two of the poem is spoken entirely by the **Self**. It is a celebration of life. Yeats asserts that no matter how miserable our life has been, if we follow to its source, forgive each other of our mistakes, we will transcend these mistakes and become **'blest'**.

*That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?
And what's the good of an escape
If honor find him in the wintry blast?*

In the **second part** of this poem, his **self is expressed**. The **Self** and **Soul** have become a **whole**. You can conclude from this poem that a person has **matured, self-actualization** is obtained. For instance, *Yeats* says;

*I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"*

The main theme of the poem is an **affirmation of earthly life**. The elderly speaker embraces living, not dying. This differs from most poems contemplating end-of-life issues, which usually advise resignation and preparation for death. The poem is a dense structure of mirror-like internal relations, primarily between the **Self** and **Soul** but also between the Self and the objects it chooses as opposition to the Soul's vision.

Stanza wise Summary

Stanza#1

In the first stanza the *Soul* calls the reader to the tower of learning where "the star," the most distant part of our universe, "marks the hidden pole." The *soul* seems to be talking about the contemplation of eternity. On the other hand, the poem itself seems to imply that the soul's goal is so vague as to be virtually unknowable. "Thought," as represented by the tower, cannot distinguish "darkness from the soul." In a later poem Yeats says the tower is "half dead at the top." If we see the tower as an individual, as a source of knowledge, this would seem to imply that there is no more original thought there. If, on the other hand, we see the tower as a phallic symbol, it has become impotent.

Stanza#2

In the second stanza, **Self** says it holds an ancient Japanese blade wrapped in a piece of embroidered silk. As pointed out in the next stanza, these seem to be symbols of war and love. The sword can stand for the blood that has been spilled, while the dress seems to have been given to the samurai out of love. The sword also seems to represent self-discovery, "a looking glass," where man discovers his penchant for violence. The silken embroidery represents art, one thing many romanticists felt transcended time.

Stanza#3

Soul argues that these are foolish symbols, and that if imagination would just "scorn the earth" (perhaps, instead, contemplate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or meditate on its navel) and intellect would quit wandering from topic to topic, then together they could deliver us from the "crime of death and birth," suggesting a Buddhist-like escape from the cycle of eternal rebirth.

Stanza#4

In the fourth stanza, Self sets purple flowers the colour of the heart and the sword, with its implied blood, against the darkness that the tower represents. Passion, in and of itself, Yeats seems to suggest can make life meaningful. We shouldn't try to avoid life and death; we should live it passionately.

Stanza#5

Soul finally argues that when intellect and imagination are focused on philosophy that intellect no longer knows, is from Ought or Knower from Known and that is like ascending to Heaven. It's obvious that Yeats is a Romantic and believes in the power of intuition, not rational arguments.

Stanza#6

Part II of the poem is spoken entirely by the Self. Luckily, it needs little explanation. It is a celebration of life itself, though a rather strange celebration, no doubt, by some people's standards. No matter how miserable our life has been, the narrator argues, if we follow it to its source, measure the lot, and forgive ourselves for our mistakes, we will transcend those mistakes and become "blest."

Stanza#7

Part of the power of the poem comes from our realization that, we, too, have suffered most of these indignities. Who hasn't felt the awkwardness of childhood, or the fears of becoming a man or woman, and fear of enemies who would have our job? How can we escape the hurtful image that malicious acquaintances project onto us at different times of life?

Stanza#8 & 9

Everything we look upon is blest. The power of the poem, of course, also comes from the power of the description, not the mere intellectual argument. Lines like ... ***if it be life to pitch/ Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch, / A blind man battering blind men*** are the kinds of lines that can stay with you for years. Equally amazing is how these lines can be transformed into the **optimistic lines** that the poem ends with: ***"We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest."*** Yeats must have been blessed by the blarney stone to compose lines this magnificent.

Analysis

Stanza One

In this poem both the self and the soul speak to express their characteristics. In the first stanza, the soul speaks; here it says that it is the one who guides the body to make all the actions. Initially it says that " **I summon** " by this it makes the body to makes the body to go towards the zigzag ancient stair , the stair here represents our life and it is ancient as it might get broken here or there. We take the risk of going forward by listening to the voices of our soul. It makes us to go beyond the limit "**human limit**" which is the external world. A soul has the power of getting together all our wandering thoughts (search for reasons) in a single area. In this section the soul questions itself, Can anyone divide darkness from soil?

Stanza Two

In the second stanza the self that is the body speaks. Here the poet has used one of his life experiences in order to express the actual idea of self in our life. He was gifted by one of his friends named **Junzo Sato**. The gift was a pious Japanese blade which is actually the heirloom of his friend. The blade looks like a glass, it appears sharp and ageless. The poet says that upon his knees lies "**the Blade**" which was wrapped by a torn cloth of an old Japanese court -lady's gown. Though the Blade is with him; it was Junzo's, will be Junzo's and will always remind as his

own. He means that the soul is one; it has no death; it remains the same; the medium that it uses to be in action might differ for one life to the other; which is the body; the body might be different but the soul will remain the same and nobody has the hold of the soul. The soul itself is eternal and the body is its property which it can change when the body becomes old and decayed (Here the blade is the soul and the cloth wrapped around it to protect the body).

Stanza Three

The third stanza is the continuation of the first. The soul here speaks on the intellect of the human mind which wanders in search of reasons for birth, life and death. The soul questions, why is the human mind not confined with its remarkable emotions such as love and war? Why is it wandering hither and thither and the other to get answers? The soul tries to get together all these wandering thoughts in the first stanza.

Stanza Four

The fourth stanza is the connection of the second stanza. The self speaks on the continuity and repetition of soul's action through different mediums (i.e body). He says the embroidery of the cloth shows its age but all he sees is the past actions which have the ability to be repeated. (Here he means the deeds that are left undone will be done sooner or later by the soul in a different self).

Stanza Five

The fifth stanza is connected to the third stanza. Here the soul says that when it makes a human to bring all his wandering thoughts together and his mind gets filled with the overwhelming power, he goes to a stage of trance and becomes deaf, blind, and dumb; and loses his intellect because he will be dead by the stage. His soul will reach the heaven because this is beyond his reach (**moksha**).

Second section:

In the second section of the poem, his self speaks. To be precise, soul is eternal and so it lives in different forms. The cycle of birth-life-death becomes an infinite loop in which the soul is same and the self gets to be in diff shapes to repeat its life over and over. The toil of growth , the facing of pain in immature state and the stage of fighting all the enemies at once in the matured state; these inescapable situations which are faced by the self in different forms with different forms (other souls and men) in all its lives is an unbreakable chain. Life is like a ditch he says it is same over and over again ; all the people we have faced , all the situations we have crossed , the life partners we chose , the experiences we have undergone happens again in a different shape. This sounds depressing. Yet the poet's self gets a reason to be content.

He says he will feel content to be in the loop because a man's intellect wanders in search of reasons which require ultimate thoughts and toil, amid of this he gets the bliss of attaining remorse. The bliss that spreads all over the breasts, the happiness that the self attains makes him feel content to be in this loop. Because when he gets the ecstasy of remorse he gets to laughs, he gets to sing , he gets blessed by everything and everything he look upon gets blessed . This is enough for the self to be content with this endless life of toil in this undying loop.

Main Theme of the Poem:

The main theme of the poem is the conflict the narrator experiences between Self and Soul, with the Self, representing life, winning the debate. The main theme of the poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" by William Butler Yeats is an affirmation of earthly life. The elderly speaker embraces living, not dying. This differs from most poems contemplating end-of-life issues, which usually advise resignation and preparation for death.

The speaker is an old man, and the *Soul* is in dialogue with him. The Soul asks him to transcend his earthly *Self* and think of what is to come after he dies. The *Soul* argues that the speaker should ponder eternity (the "quarter where all thought is done"):

*Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done*

The *Self*, however, stays stubbornly fixated on the earthly. He thinks about the "**consecrated blade upon my knees,**" a phallic, erotic symbol of life on earth. The *Self* is not ready to give up what is potent and life giving.

The Soul continues to push back, asking the *Self* why a person should:

*Long past his prime remember things that are Emblematical
of love and war?*

But while the Soul tries to turn the Self's thoughts towards death, the Self clings relentlessly to the world.

In the second stanza, the voice of the Soul, earlier in dialogue and debate with the *Self*, is silenced. In this stanza, the Self affirms life, saying he would be "content" to live it all over again. He states:

*We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.*

Yeats' perspective on death is different from that of other poets who write about the end of life. Most poets writing about the end-of-life counsel paying attention to the soul and preparing oneself for what is to come. In contrast, Yeats's speaker seems determined to double down on experiencing all the fullness of life, despite his old age.