

## A Primer for Yeats's Early Phase

### Yeats's Childhood and Family Background:

- Born in Dublin on June 13, 1865
- Mother: Susan Mary (nee Pollexfen) Yeats came from a prosperous Protestant family; her family came from Sligo, a small town on the west coast of Ireland, and their money came from the shipping industry. Yeats spent much of his childhood in Sligo, and that environment shaped much of his early poetry.
- Father: John Butler Yeats came from a prosperous Protestant family consisting of merchants, government officials, landowners, and clergymen. J.B. Yeats was trained as a lawyer, but he gave up that career for portrait painting. Although an excellent artist, he had difficulty actually completing his portraits (never being satisfied with them); as a result, he was often in financial difficulties. Indeed, Yeats's childhood was marked by his family's steady decline from upper middle-class to lower middle-class.
- Younger Siblings: Elizabeth (Lily), Mary (Loly), and Jack (who went on to become perhaps Ireland's most important painter of the twentieth century).
- Influences on Yeats:
  - His Mother: Yeats generally associated his mother with Sligo. From her, he learned about the peasant folklore common throughout much of western Ireland. This shaped his belief in faeries, spirits, and other mystical beings. It also sparked his consistent belief that peasant culture in Ireland was organically connected to the soil, to traditions going back into Ireland's distant past. For Yeats, Irish artists need to foster that connection, in the sense that their work would tap into Ireland's collective folk memory.
  - His Father: J.B. Yeats had rejected his own father's steadfast belief in God and the importance of religion. Having grown up during the late Victorian age, when thinkers— influenced by the works of Darwin, Nietzsche, J.S. Mill and others—had come to question the existence of God, J.B. Yeats embraced an agnostic worldview, compensating for his rejection of religion by playing up the importance of art. W.B. Yeats rejected both his ancestors' attachment to religion and his father's rational skepticism. Instead, Yeats (like many others who came of age in the late 1800s) turned to mysticism, magic, and spiritualism.

### Religious Views:

- Spiritualism was a crucial early influence and would remain so throughout his life. For Yeats, the goal of existence is to discover that secret symbolically expressed wisdom that he felt underpinned all of the world's religious traditions. While at school in his late teens (Yeats went to art school, hoping to follow in his father's footsteps as a painter), Yeats quickly made friends with people who shared his spiritualist interests (including the visionary poet, George Russell, who went by the penname A.E.). This led him into theosophical groups that conducted séances and other mystical societies that did experiments in group meditation, mental telepathy, and a host of other activities designed to prove that the physical world is merely a façade concealing some deeper metaphysical universe.
- Spiritualism profoundly shaped Yeats early poetry, which tends to use highly symbolic language (see especially the poems in The Rose) in order to evoke spiritual essences that cannot be grasped by the rational mind.
- Spiritualism fueled Yeats's belief that physical death is not the end of existence; rather, there is a spiritual world that contains all human consciousness. Again, this collective consciousness can only be evoked through symbols.

- Throughout his life, Yeats tended to associate spiritualism with Ireland's peasant culture, believing that these people, who lived in close proximity to faeries and other spiritual beings, represented the antithesis of modern rational humanity.
- Yeats's valorization goes hand in hand with a steadfast rejection of modern rationalism, which he soon came to associate with Ireland's Catholic middle classes.
- Organized religion was, for Yeats, the enemy of spiritualism. Whereas spiritualism allowed creativity to flourish, religion, particularly Catholicism, sought to destroy all natural creative impulses in favor of a sterile piety. Put another way: Catholicism was, for Yeats, the enemy of truly creative art.

#### Political Views:

- John O'Leary: Yeats met this militant Irish nationalist early in life, and O'Leary's views sparked Yeats's thoroughgoing belief that Ireland would only flourish as a culture when it achieved independence from British rule.
- The British Empire: According to Yeats, Britain had exerted a negative influence on Ireland in several ways. First, it promoted the belief that Ireland's history and culture was unimportant when measured against the supposedly great achievements of the British people. Second, because Britain was the dominant capitalist nation of the world, it necessarily sought to develop a capitalist system in Ireland; and, in this sense, British rule spread empty materialism to Ireland, a process that, Yeats feared, would lead to the eventual demise of the peasant folk culture that he so prized. Finally, British culture was, for Yeats, marked by a thoroughgoing rationalism, and this mechanical consciousness, gradually spreading to Ireland, threatened to destroy that deeper spiritualism which characterized peasant society (beneath the façade of Catholicism).
- Young Ireland: This cultural nationalist movement, which emerged in the decades after the Great Famine (1845-1848), had an important influence on Yeats. According to the leaders of the Young Ireland movement, Ireland would only become independent from Britain when the people looked to their own nation as a source of pride instead of shame.
- Cultural Nationalism: Influenced by Young Ireland, Yeats committed himself to cultural nationalism. His belief was that artists had a crucial role to play in the independence movement, since they would create new works of poetry, drama, folklore, painting, and music that inspire the people.
- Charles Stewart Parnell: A liberal Protestant, Parnell had skillfully used his seat in the British Parliament during the 1870s to bring about a Home Rule bill that would have granted Ireland limited autonomy. When it became known, during a divorce trial, that Parnell was having an affair with a woman named Katherine O'Shea, the Catholic Church denounced Parnell as morally corrupt. This quickly eroded his support, killing the Home Rule bill. Parnell died in disgrace a few years later. Yeats saw Parnell as a hero, and he never forgave the Catholic Church for its betrayal. In later years, Yeats saw this same pattern repeat itself again and again: a man of genius emerges to lead the Irish in art or politics, and he is defeated by a puritanical Church that cannot abide individual thought or creative leadership.
- Militant Nationalism: For a brief period, Yeats supported the notion that Ireland should engage in an armed uprising against the British. Increasingly, though, he became distrustful of such hard-line nationalism, since these types of nationalists tended to take a very limited view of art, believing that all works of art should be placed in the service of Irish politics. For Yeats, turning art directly into politics creates a climate in which truly great art cannot emerge.
- Protestant Ireland: Yeats was proud of the fact that his father's ancestors, though wealthy, never embraced the extreme tactics of the British Empire. Instead, they supported the Irish people who worked their land, never evicting them when they could not pay rent, always paying them fair

wages, etc. From his earliest days, Yeats valorized this enlightened, liberal Protestant tradition. Eventually, this would harden into a form of elitism.

Maud Gonne:

- Yeats met Maud in 1889 and immediately fell in love.
- They quickly became close friends, but not lovers; this was in part because Maud, unbeknownst to Yeats, had embarked on a long-term love affair with a French journalist, Lucien Millevoye, with whom she conceived a child shortly after meeting Yeats.
- Over the next twenty-five years, a pattern emerged: Yeats would propose marriage, Maud would refuse, their relationship would become strained, and they would eventually reconcile.
- Maud's spiritualism: Like Yeats, Maud was deeply interested in spiritualism (one of the children she had with Millevoye died at a young age, and she was anxious to contact the child's spirit). This mutual interest in spiritualism led to a number of erotically charged letters in which Yeats and Maud would discuss dreams about a "mystical union."
- Maud's nationalism: Maud was a hard-line, militant nationalist. She believed, uncompromisingly, that Ireland could only achieve independence through armed struggle. As Yeats grew older, he became increasingly uncomfortable with Maud's attitudes, particularly as Maud tended believe that all art should be put in the serve of politics. (Her own works of art, mainly plays, are generally propaganda pieces).
- Because of Maud's beauty, spiritualism, and commitment to Irish nationalism, Yeats often used in his poetry and drama as a symbol of an imagined, idealized Ireland.

Characteristics of the Early Poetry:

- Yeats's early poetry and drama can be seen as an attempt to combine his three interests: art, spiritualism, and cultural nationalism.
- Peasant culture: his work during this period is marked by an emphasis on Irish peasant culture; his poems and plays are often set in the area surrounding Sligo, with frequent references to faeries, spirits, Irish mythology, and Irish folklore.
- Maud Gonne: In his poetry, Yeats transformed Maud into an unobtainable object of beauty; in his poems focused on her he explores a range of emotions, from adoration to hostility. When reading these poems, though, it is important to recognize that the works are not simply autobiographical. Rather, Maud functions in the poems as a type of aesthetic object, a generalized image of beauty (she is not, in fact, mentioned by name in any of these early works) that enables Yeats to meditate on all the different shades of human love.
- Symbolism: Yeats was heavily influenced by the aesthetics movements of the late 1800s, which emphasized the idea of "art for art's sake." According to this doctrine, art, unlike other objects in commodity culture, has no practical use value. Instead, the creation of beauty is an end in itself. For Yeats, this notion went hand-in-hand with symbolism, the idea that poetry works, not through direct statement, but by evoking "essences," deeper spiritual truths that are hinted at but never plainly revealed (because they exist in a spiritual realm that cannot be fully grasped by the rational mind). In this sense, reading an early Yeats poem is meant to be a spiritual experience, a glimpse into that deeper unconscious realm that binds together all of humanity.
- Opposites: A central theme of the early poetry and drama is the interplay between opposites: the physical / the spiritual; body / soul; the man of action / the dreamy poet; modern civilization / ancient civilization; timeless beauty / time-bound human existence, etc. Often, these oppositions will be set in tension. Thus, in a poem such as "The Stolen Child," the act of going away with the faeries to an immortal spiritual world, one that transcends human suffering, comes at a cost, for

the child who departs with the faeries into this deathless realm will no longer experience the ordinary things (such as the lowing of the calves on a hillside) that animate daily human life.