

A Primer for Yeats's Late Phase

When critics refer to Yeats's late phase, they usually are referring to the period from the publication of The Tower (1928) to Yeats's death in January, 1939

A Vision (Important for the late middle phase and everything that follows)

- Automatic Writing: Yeats's marriage to Georgie was a hasty affair, and, during their honeymoon in England, it quickly became clear to both of them that they had little real attraction. Hoping to change things, George began to experiment with automatic writing, a common practice among mystics in which the medium goes into a type of trance and writes without thinking. Supposedly, what appears on the page are messages from the spirit world. When George began this, Yeats was immediately captivated, and out of these sessions he developed an elaborate mystical philosophy that would play a crucial role in his poetry.
- A Vision: Yeats published two versions of this mystical philosophy, both titled A Vision, in 1925 and then in 1937. Although the ideas were not really formalized until his late phase, they begin to show their form from 1917 onward.
- A Very Brief Overview:
 - Take a pen and draw a tornado on its side, with the tiny point of the tornado facing right. Now, draw another tornado facing the opposite direction, so that the points are touching. Next, draw the two tornados as if someone had smushed them together, so that the tip of each tornado is "inside" the widest part of its opposite. Got it so far? Now, draw a circle around the whole thing. On the left, put the number 1 / 28 and on the right, put the number 15. Working counter-clockwise, fill in the remaining numbers in between (8 ends up at the bottom and 22 at the top). Ok, now you have the core symbol.
 - The tornados are what Yeats calls "gyres." Each gyre represents the mode of consciousness governing an individual or a historical age. The gyre facing right is called "primary" and the gyre facing left is called "antithetical."
 - The wider the gyre, the more the person / age is influenced by that gyre. Using the circle, which corresponds to the 28 phases of the moon, we can see that a person / age at, say, phase 3 is influenced mostly by the primary gyre and just a little bit by the antithetical one. Conversely, person / age at phase 17 (which, by the way, is Yeats's phase) is influenced mostly by the antithetical gyre and just a little bit by the primary one.
 - What all this means:
 - Primary: Yeats associates this mode of consciousness with the "objective" mind; when the primary gyre dominates, people tend to be easily molded; they don't think about themselves but about some collective form of identity. Thus, Yeats associates the primary gyre with saints (who give themselves over to God), fools (who give themselves over to whims of the world), and middle class democracy (since, under democracy, the people "are" the state). In other words, the primary gyre tends to represent modes of thought that Yeats rejects.

- Antithetical: Yeats associates this mode of consciousness with the “subjective” mind; the antithetical gyre dominates, people tend to individualistic; they don’t think about the masses but have instead that pride of thought / creativity which enables them to rise above the masses. Thus, Yeats associates this gyre with heroes (who defy dominant culture), beautiful woman (since Yeats views beauty as form of creative labor), poetry / great art (since great art, for Yeats, always begins with an act of individual will), and the aristocracy (because, under this system, the few lead the many).
- The 2000 Year cycle:
 - For Yeats, the circle represents 2000 year cycles of human history. Certain ages are dominated by the primary mind, while others are dominated by the antithetical. If phase 1 / 28 corresponds to the year zero, our own age is somewhere around phase 1 / 2 (which is why we all cling to democracy!).
 - When a person is of a certain type that doesn’t correspond to the age, he is “out of phase.” Yeats saw himself in exactly this way: he is of phase 17, but his age was heading toward phase 28.
 - How this relates to the poetry: This system underpins quite a bit of his poetry, including some of his best poetry. For example, Yeats saw ancient Byzantium as a high point of culture, roughly associated with phase 15, and in some of his poetry he represents Byzantium as a place of creativity (and a lot more). Yeats also believed that each change in the gyres is coupled by an annunciation, some type of revelation that will express what’s to come. Think of this when you read, “The Second Coming,” which is set in the year 2000 AD, at the fullest expansion of the primary gyre.
- A Last Word on A Vision:
 - These ideas are in the backdrop of most of the poems Yeats wrote after 1917. In general, though, it’s not especially useful to simply reduce the poems to examples of the system, just as we wouldn’t read Dante’s Divine Comedy as simply an example of Catholic theology. Remember, too, Yeats was often pretty coy about A Vision. Sometimes he said that the system is “true,” but sometimes he merely claims it’s something he needed to create in order to write more poetry. Dante, Milton, Blake—all the poets Yeats admired has some spiritual system to animate their poetry, and Yeats basically creates one for himself.

Political Events

- Sinn Fein victories. In the 1918 British Parliament elections, Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) supported a number of candidates who eventually won. Although the candidates did not end up serving because they refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Crown, the elections demonstrated that the British response to the Easter Rising had backfired.
- The Anglo-Irish War. With popular support behind them, the IRA mounted a guerrilla campaign against the British controlled police force in Ireland. The first attacks, which involved bombings, assassinations, and other forms of what many called “terrorism,” came in 1919.

- The Black and Tans. In early 1920 the British government responded by deploying the Black and Tans, a collection of various army groups left over from WWI. They quickly became known for injustice (e.g., they would arrest and hold people without trial) and extreme cruelty (they tortured many of their prisoners; on “Bloody Sunday” they shot into a crowd at a football match, killing a number of unarmed people).
- Partition. The Anglo-Irish War ended in 1921, when Michael Collins, a leader of Sinn Féin, signed a treaty with the British. The compromise agreement essentially gave the 26 predominately Catholic counties of Ireland independence, while the six predominately Protestant counties of Northern Ireland remained under British control. The south was called the “Free State” (later, “The Republic of Ireland”), while the north became “Northern Ireland.”
- Civil War. The agreement immediately caused a power struggle. Some people, called Republicans, believed that all counties of Ireland had to be free. Others, called Free Staters or “Irregulars,” embraced the partition. The result was a bloody civil war that lasted until the end of 1922, with the Free State remaining in control. Yeats supported the Free State, though many of his close friends, including Lady Gregory, were Republicans.
- Free State Government. For the first time in Irish history, Catholics were in control of Ireland’s government, and many supported a vision of Ireland in which the Church would play a heavy role. This meant that a number of morality laws were quickly passed, including laws banning divorce, contraception, and abortion; committees were formed on everything from “evil literature” to “immodest fashion in female dress”; and political leaders generally relied on the Church for guidance.

Personal Events, Health, Political Beliefs

- The Irish Senate. Yeats was appointed to the Irish Senate in 1922, and he served there until 1928. Although the post was in some respects ceremonial (the other branch of the Irish legislature, the “Dáil,” drafted laws, Yeats was quite active. He spoke out against the law banning divorce, headed the committee that designed Ireland’s new coinage, and worked tirelessly to promote the arts and artistic freedom.
- The Noble Prize. Yeats won the Nobel Prize in 1923, and this established him as perhaps the most important poet of the early twentieth century.
- Ill Health. During the 1920s and 1930s, Yeats was seriously ill on a number of occasions. As a result, he spent much of time outside of Ireland in the milder air of Southern Europe.
- Creative Potency. Although Yeats was frequently ill, the 1920s-1930s are his most prolific period as a writer. During this time, he writes his most important and well-known poems.
- The Blue Shirts. In 1932, Eamon de Valera, the leader of the Republicans in the Civil War was elected President of Ireland. Many believed that de Valera would embrace an extreme, anti-British position that would result in the complete marginalization of Irish Protestants. The Blue Shirts emerged as a leading opposition party. Consisting mostly of farmers who feared that de Valera’s anti-British attitudes would dramatically harm agricultural trade, the Blue Shirts modeled themselves on Italian fascism. They promised the return of a heroic Irish age, championed conservative nationalism, etc. Yeats was briefly infatuated by this movement,

believing that it would usher in a new age in which a cultured elite would rule the masses. He became disillusioned though by their general anti-intellectualism and simplistic views on art.

- The Steinach Operation. In 1934, Yeats underwent an operation (basically a vasectomy) designed to restore sexual potency. The “Steinach Operation” was all the rage during the 1920s and 1930s, after scientific research seemed to show that monkeys that were given vasectomies were more sexually active. All of this was pretty much nonsense, but Yeats got the operation and, afterwards, claimed to have rediscovered sexual vigor (if not the ability to actually perform). This sparked a number of affairs with younger women; it also (at least according to Yeats) helped him to write poetry.
- Eugenics. Eugenic theories underpin much of Yeats’s poetry. In his work, On the Boiler, a collection of political rants published after his death, Yeats argues that the aristocracy tends to possess the most important traits (of sophistication, intelligence, beauty, etc) and that these traits are hereditary. Further, he argues that democratic cultures, because they allow lots of different social classes to breed together, causes these traits to fade away. A lot of this is quite disturbing, though it is useful to remember that Yeats always took extreme positions, usually in opposition to popular will, as a way of fueling his imagination. It’s also useful to remember that he was quite ill at this time, and his illness led him into fits of rage.
- Yeats died in France in January of 1939.

Major Themes in the Late Poetry:

- A Vision: Yeats’s visionary system runs throughout all of his late poetry. For instance, several of his poems focus on Byzantium, while others concentrate on moments of “annunciation,” when one age gives way to another.
- Political Violence. Yeats’s poems from his late period, especially those from the 1920s, focus on the costs of political violence, though they also tend to see violence as a necessary feature of heroic people / nations.
- The Soul vs the Body. Many of his late poems establish an antithesis between a desire, on one hand, to embrace spiritualism and, on the other, to embrace the realm of the body. As a poet, Yeats usually chooses the body, though a part of him longs for spiritual escapism.
- Sexual longing. Maud continues to feature in the late poetry. Many of the poems express frustrated sexual longing. The poet’s mind remains fertile, yet his body continues to fail. Yeats also uses poetry as a vehicle for attacking the sexual repression of Irish culture.
- Old Age. Yeats’s rage at sexual frustration is matched by his rage against old age. Indeed, perhaps the greatest and most universal theme of the late poetry is his fears of and anger with the aging process.
- Legacy. So many of the late poems deal with Yeats’s concerns about how he will be remembered. “Under Ben Bulbin” is the quintessential example (Yeats even writes his own epitaph in that poem).
- Rebirth. Although the poet fears death, he often turns for comfort to spiritualism, clinging to the belief that when we die we “dream back” our lives until we come to new wisdom.