

A Primer for Yeats's Middle Phase

When critics refer to Yeats's middle phase, they usually are referring to the period from the publication of Responsibilities (1914) to the publication of The Tower (1928), which marks the start of his great, late phase.

Literary Modernism

- Yeats described himself as “the last Romantic,” but the work of his middle phase also exhibits some of the features of literary modernism:
 - A thoroughgoing disdain for middle class materialism and sense that the modern world is fragmented, disconnected from those great traditions of the past that once gave meaning to cultures.
 - A distrust of flowery, sentimental verse, which the modernists generally saw as an outgrowth of romanticism.
 - A rejection of poetic individualism, the Romantic notion that the poet should express his own deeper feelings; instead, the modernists tended to stress the notion that poetry must be rooted in universal ideas and emotions that are not confined to one person. The truly modernist poet taps into the great traditions of the past, offering a type of impersonal poetry that expresses not the unique but the collective (provided “collective” means, not the crass materialism of the middle classes, but those deeper ideas and emotions that are supposedly evident in pre-Romantic poetry).
 - An emphasis on hard, spare verse—the short, compact image over ornate description.
 - Form: the modernists tended to reject formalism in poetry, preferring instead a type of fragmented, free verse that pulls in aspects of modern culture (eg, popular songs, snippets from newspapers) and is, at the same time, suffused with complex allusions to the literature and traditions of the past (both Western and Eastern). Eliot's “The Waste Land” is, in this respect, the quintessential modernist poem: a poem that mirrors modern life and, by incorporating allusions to fertility myths, the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching of the Buddha, and a host of other traditions, attempts to give order to that modern existence. Yeats was NOT a modernist in the former sense: he never uses free verse, and he never adopts the fragmentary strategy of T.S. Eliot. He does, however, rely heavily on allusions to collective myths, though many of these myths are evoked (paradoxically) by his own personal storehouse of symbols.
- Ezra Pound: Yeats met Pound in 1909, and the two of them shared a cottage near Oxford from 1913 to 1915, with Pound acting as Yeats's secretary. Pound, the quintessential high modernist, influenced Yeats's work profoundly. He supported Yeats's increasing interest in more direct language, but he also stressed the notion that increasingly spare language could be used to explore ever more complex and ambiguous states of mind. Pound, who would go on to issue radio broadcasts in support of Mussolini during WWII, helped to deepen Yeats's conviction that the middle classes were, in essence, a lost cause. What was need, instead, was return to those traditions that could be found among the aristocracy.

More Problems with the Middle Classes

- John Synge: When Synge died in 1909, Yeats saw him as another victim of a Catholic middle class culture that, instead of embracing the genius of his work, rioted at his plays because of rather tame references to sexuality.

- Hugh Lane: Augusta Gregory's nephew, Lane was killed when the Lusitania was sunk in 1915 and a dispute ensued that would involve Yeats for the remainder of his life. The situation is amazingly complex, but the basics are this: Lane was one of the first collectors of French impressionist paintings, buying Monet and Degas works at a time when they were worth very little. By 1915, they were considerably more valuable, and Lane had willed this collection (depending upon which version of the will you consider) to either London or Dublin. Yeats believed that it was clear that Lane wanted the works to go to Dublin, provide (as expressed in one version of the will) that money be raised to build a new gallery to house this collection. At the time, Dublin was among the poorest cities in Europe, so it is hardly surprising that the public was not interested in funding the project. Many people, though, were less concerned about money, and more concerned with the fact that Lane was Protestant, that the works were French (which people associated with liberal sexuality), and that early reports on the gallery design referenced British architects. In any case, all of this made for an extremely messy situation (which was only resolved in the 1990s). Yeats, once again, viewed the situation as an example of the middle class rejecting great art.
- The Dublin Lockout: Labor agitation reached a high point in Dublin between 1912 and 1914. Influenced by socialism, Catholic workers in Dublin sought to organize a transit workers union, and there was talk of a strike (that would have paralyzed the city). Members of the Catholic middle classes, whose business would be harmed by a strike, organized a massive lockout. Left without any means of earning, the workers quickly capitulated to merchant demands. This was facilitated by two factors: William Murphy, a Catholic newspaper editor, whose papers spread anti-worker propaganda; and the Catholic Church, which claimed that any Catholics who looked to support from Protestant homeless / food shelters (Protestants ran most of them during this period) would go to hell.
- Responsibilities: the betrayal of Synge, the rejection of Hugh Lane, and the actions of the Catholic Middle classes during the Lockout are all in the backdrop of this collection. Indeed, some of the poems, such as "September 1913" were first published in newspapers alongside editorials attack middle class Irish commercialism.

The Easter Rising

- On Easter Monday, 1916 a group of roughly 2000 militant nationalist seized buildings in the center of Dublin, including the General Post Office. Here, they read a proclamation declaring Irish independence. The British, currently embroiled in WWI, took a hard-line response. The rebels managed to fight for several days, but they were soon overwhelmed. Fifteen rebel leaders were summarily executed (another, Roger Casement, would be later be added to the list). The people of Dublin were initially not supportive of the Rising, since many had family serving in the British army, fighting and dying in France. Indeed, historical accounts say that when the rebels were led away, the public pelted them with rotten fruit. Following the executions, however, public sentiment quickly changed, and the rebel leaders became known as martyrs. This would lay the groundwork for the growth of the IRA.
 - Yeats initially viewed the rising with dismay, believing that it had thwarted his cultural nationalist project. Following the executions, though, he came to view the rebels as heroic, though his view of the martyrs would always be, to some extent, ambivalent (In a late poem he wonders, in dismay, "Did that play of mine (Cathleen ni Houlihan) send out certain men the British shot?")

Maud, Iseult, and Marriage

- Anxiety about children: Yeats turned fifty in 1915, and he was anxious that he had not produced an heir. He proposed to Maud one last time in 1916—John MacBride was executed for his part in the Easter Rising (see below)—and she refused; he then turned to Maud’s twenty-two-year old daughter and proposed to her as well (I know, it’s icky); she refused, and finally he turned his attention to Georgie Hyde Lees (also known as George), an aristocratic woman who shared his interest in the occult. When they were married in 1917, he was 52 and she was 24.

A Vision

- Early in their marriage, Yeats and his wife began practicing automatic writing (writing without thinking). They believed this put them in touch with the spirit world. Yeats developed an extensive mystical system out of these sessions, which he published (in two editions) under the title, A Vision. For more on this, see “A Primer for Yeats’s Late Phase.”

Features of Yeats’s Middle Phase in the Poetry

- Direct address: Responsibilities signals direct political and social engagement. Instead of writing aloof, dreamy verse published for cultural nationalists and other artists, Yeats now writes poems meant for a wider audience. Indeed, many of his poems from this period were published in newspapers, and they comment directly on contemporary issues.
- Aristocratic idealism vs middle class consumerism: This is the central theme of the middle phase. Yeats’s poems idealism an aristocratic world that promotes art, while attacking a middle class culture that values money. His poems about Robert Gregory, for example, present him as a type of ideal, heroic figure who didn’t care about the public.
- Artifice: The mask was always a key idea in the backdrop of Yeats’s poetry, but in the middle phase, it becomes central. For Yeats, the proper response to middle class vulgarity involved cultivating and deliberately adopting a mask or pose, a type of (aristocratic) stance that kept one aloof from empty commercialism.
- A New Energy: The end of Yeats’s middle phase is marked by a new energy. Specifically, Yeats rededicates himself to the cause of cultural nationalism, and we begin to see a fresh set of spiritual themes begin to emerge. The causes include the following:
 - The Easter Rising proved to Yeats that heroism was still possible in Ireland. That romantic Ireland wasn’t entirely “dead and gone.”
 - Marriage. After years of pursuing Maud, Yeats finally settles down to marriage. And this marriage prompts him to engage with themes that extend well beyond love poetry and Irish nationalism.
 - A Vision. Through the automatic writing sessions with his wife, Yeats developed a new spiritual system (see “A Primer for Yeats’s Late Phase”) that would provide the symbolism for much of his late work.