



## YEATS'S POETRY

### William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born in Dublin in 1865 to a chaotic, artistic family. His father, a portrait painter, moved the family to London when Yeats was two, and William spent much of his childhood moving between the cold urban landscape of the metropolis and the congenial countryside of County Sligo, Ireland, where his mother's parents lived. An aesthete even as a boy, Yeats began writing verse early, and published his first work in 1885. In 1889, Yeats met the Irish patriot, revolutionary, and beauty Maud Gonne. He fell immediately in love with her, and remained so for the rest of his life; virtually every reference to a beloved in Yeats's poetry can be understood as a reference to Maud Gonne. Tragically, Gonne did not return his love, and though they remained closely associated (she portrayed the lead role in several of his plays), they were never romantically involved. Many years later, Yeats proposed to her daughter—and was rejected again.

Yeats lived during a tumultuous time in Ireland, during the political rise and fall of Charles Stuart Parnell, the Irish Revival, and the civil war. Partly because of his love for the politically active Maud Gonne, Yeats devoted himself during the early part of his career to the Literary Revival and to Irish patriotism, seeking to develop a new religious iconography based on Irish mythology. (Though he was of Protestant parentage, Yeats played little part in the conflict between Catholics and Protestants that tore Ireland apart during his lifetime.) He quickly rose to literary prominence, and helped to found what became the Abbey Theatre, one of the most important cultural institutions in Ireland, at which he worked with such luminaries as Augusta Gregory and the playwright John Synge. In 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

One of the most remarkable facts about Yeats's career as a poet is that he only reached his full powers late in life, between the ages of 50 and 75. Indeed, after reaching his height, he sustained it up until the very end, writing magnificent poems up until two weeks before his death. The normal expectation is that a poet's powers will fade after forty or fifty; Yeats defied that expectation and trumped it entirely, writing most of his greatest poems—from the crushing power of *The Tower* to the eerie mysticism of the *Last Poems*—in the years *after* he won the Nobel Prize, a testament to the force and commitment with which he devoted himself to transforming his inner life into poetry. Because his work straddles the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Yeats is stylistically quite a unique poet; his early work seems



curiously modern for the nineteenth century, and his late work often seems curiously un-modern for the 1930s. But Yeats wrote great poems in every decade of his life, and his influence has towered over the past six decades; today, he is generally regarded as the greatest poet of the twentieth century.

Yeats is the greatest poet in the history of Ireland and probably the greatest poet to write in English during the twentieth century; his themes, images, symbols, metaphors, and poetic sensibilities encompass the breadth of his personal experience, as well as his nation's experience during one of its most troubled times. Yeats's great poetic project was to reify his own life—his thoughts, feelings, speculations, conclusions, dreams—into poetry: to render all of himself into art, but not in a merely confessional or autobiographical manner; he was not interested in the common-place. (The poet, Yeats famously remarked, is not the man who sits down to breakfast in the morning.) His elaborate iconography takes elements from Irish mythology, Greek mythology, nineteenth-century occultism (which Yeats dabbled in with Madame Blavatsky and the Society of the Golden Dawn), English literature, Byzantine art, European politics, and Christian imagery, all wound together and informed with his own experience and interpretive understanding.

His thematic focus could be sweepingly grand: in the 1920s and '30s he even concocted a mystical theory of the universe, which explained history, imagination, and mythology in light of an occult set of symbols, and which he laid out in his book *A Vision* (usually considered important today only for the light it sheds on some of his poems). However, in his greatest poems, he mitigates this grandiosity with a focus on his own deep feeling. Yeats's own experience is never far from his poems, even when they seem obscurely imagistic or theoretically abstract, and the veil of obscurity and abstraction is often lifted once one gains an understanding of how the poet's lived experiences relate to the poem in question.

No poet of the twentieth century more persuasively imposed his personal experience onto history by way of his art; and no poet more successfully plumbed the truths contained within his "deep heart's core," even when they threatened to render his poetry clichéd or ridiculous. His integrity and passionate commitment to work according to his own vision protect his poems from all such accusations. To contemporary readers, Yeats can seem baffling; he was opposed to the age of science, progress, democracy, and modernization, and his occultist and mythological answers to those problems can seem horribly anachronistic for a poet who died barely sixty years ago. But Yeats's goal is always to arrive at



personal truth; and in that sense, despite his profound individuality, he remains one of the most universal writers ever to have lived.

## **Themes**

### The Relationship Between Art and Politics

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to educate his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively impacted Irish politics and social life. His early compilation of folklore sought to teach a literary history that had been suppressed by British rule, and his early poems were **ode** to the beauty and mystery of the Irish countryside. This work frequently integrated references to myths and mythic figures, including Oisín and Cúchulainn. As Yeats became more involved in Irish politics—through his relationships with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Maud Gonne—his poems increasingly resembled political manifestos. Yeats wrote numerous poems about Ireland's involvement in World War I (“An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” [1919], “A Meditation in Time of War” [1921]), Irish nationalists and political activists (“On a Political Prisoner” [1921], “In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz” [1933]), and the Easter Rebellion (“Easter 1916” [1916]). Yeats believed that art could serve a political function: poems could both critique and comment on political events, as well as educate and inform a population.

### The Impact of Fate and the Divine on History

Yeats's devotion to mysticism led to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that emphasized the role of fate and historical determinism, or the belief that events have been preordained. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his lifelong study of mythology, Theosophy, spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult demonstrate his profound interest in the divine and how it interacts with humanity. Over the course of his life, he created a complex system of spirituality, using the image of interlocking gyres (similar to spiral cones) to map out the development and reincarnation of the soul. Yeats believed that history was determined by fate and that fate revealed its plan in moments when the human and divine interact. A **tone** of historically determined inevitability permeates his poems, particularly in descriptions of situations of human and divine interaction. The divine takes on many forms in Yeats's poetry, sometimes literally (“Leda and the Swan” [1923]), sometimes abstractly



("The Second Coming" [1919]). In other poems, the divine is only gestured to (as in the sense of the divine in the Byzantine mosaics in "Sailing to Byzantium" [1926]). No matter what shape it takes, the divine signals the role of fate in determining the course of history.

## The Transition from Romanticism to Modernism

Yeats started his long literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. When he began publishing poetry in the 1880s, his poems had a lyrical, romantic style, and they focused on love, longing and loss, and Irish myths. His early writing follows the conventions of romantic verse, utilizing familiar rhyme schemes, metric patterns, and poetic structures. Although it is lighter than his later writings, his early poetry is still sophisticated and accomplished. Several factors contributed to his poetic evolution: his interest in mysticism and the occult led him to explore spiritually and philosophically complex subjects. Yeats's frustrated romantic relationship with Maud Gonne caused the starry-eyed romantic idealism of his early work to become more knowing and cynical. Additionally, his concern with Irish subjects evolved as he became more closely connected to nationalist political causes. As a result, Yeats shifted his focus from myth and folklore to contemporary politics, often linking the two to make potent statements that reflected political agitation and turbulence in Ireland and abroad. Finally, and most significantly, Yeats's connection with the changing face of literary culture in the early twentieth century led him to pick up some of the styles and conventions of the modernist poets. The modernists experimented with verse forms, aggressively engaged with contemporary politics, challenged poetic conventions and the literary tradition at large, and rejected the notion that poetry should simply be lyrical and beautiful. These influences caused his poetry to become darker, edgier, and more concise. Although he never abandoned the verse forms that provided the sounds and rhythms of his earlier poetry, there is still a noticeable shift in style and tone over the course of his career.

## **Motifs**

### Irish Nationalism and Politics

Throughout his literary career, Yeats incorporated distinctly Irish themes and issues into his work. He used his writing as a tool to comment on Irish politics and the home rule movement and to educate and inform people about Irish history and culture. Yeats also used the backdrop of the Irish countryside to retell stories and legends from Irish folklore. As he became increasingly involved in nationalist politics, his poems took on a patriotic tone. Yeats addressed Irish politics in a variety of ways: sometimes his



statements are explicit political commentary, as in “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” in which he addresses the hypocrisy of the British use of Irish soldiers in World War I. Such poems as “Easter 1916” and “In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz” address individuals and events connected to Irish nationalist politics, while “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” subtly include the idea of Irish nationalism. In these poems, a sense of cultural crisis and conflict seeps through, even though the poems are not explicitly about Ireland. By using images of chaos, disorder, and war, Yeats engaged in an understated commentary on the political situations in Ireland and abroad. Yeats’s active participation in Irish politics informed his poetry, and he used his work to further comment on the nationalist issues of his day.

### Mysticism and the Occult

Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and expanded and developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Mysticism figures prominently in Yeats’s discussion of the reincarnation of the soul, as well as in his philosophical model of the conical gyres used to explain the journey of the soul, the passage of time, and the guiding hand of fate. Mysticism and the occult occur again and again in Yeats’s poetry, most explicitly in “The Second Coming” but also in poems such as “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Magi” (1916). The rejection of Christian principles in favor of a more supernatural approach to spirituality creates a unique flavor in Yeats’s poetry that impacts his discussion of history, politics, and love.

### Irish Myth and Folklore

Yeats’s participation in the Irish political system had origins in his interest in Irish myth and folklore. Irish myth and folklore had been suppressed by church doctrine and British control of the school system. Yeats used his poetry as a tool for re-educating the Irish population about their heritage and as a strategy for developing Irish nationalism. He retold entire folktales in **epic** poems and plays, such as *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) and *The Death of Cúchulain* (1939), and used fragments of stories in shorter poems, such as “The Stolen Child” (1886), which retells a parable of fairies luring a child away from his home, and “Cúchulain’s Fight with the Sea” (1925), which recounts part of an epic where the Irish folk hero Cúchulain battles his long-lost son by at the edge of the sea. Other poems deal with



subjects, images, and themes culled from folklore. In “Who Goes with Fergus?” (1893) Yeats imagines a meeting with the exiled wandering king of Irish legend, while “The Song of Wandering Aengus” (1899) captures the experiences of the lovelorn god Aengus as he searches for the beautiful maiden seen in his dreams. Most important, Yeats infused his poetry with a rich sense of Irish culture. Even poems that do not deal explicitly with subjects from myth retain powerful tinges of indigenous Irish culture. Yeats often borrowed word selection, verse form, and patterns of **imagery** directly from traditional Irish myth and folklore.

## ***Symbols***

### The Gyre

The gyre, a circular or conical shape, appears frequently in Yeats’s poems and was developed as part of the philosophical system outlined in his book *A Vision*. At first, Yeats used the phases of the moon to articulate his belief that history was structured in terms of ages, but he later settled upon the gyre as a more useful model. He chose the image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical spirals—to symbolize his philosophical belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul (or the civilization, the age, and so on) would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. Although this is a difficult concept to grasp abstractly, the image makes sense when applied to the waxing and waning of a particular historical age or the evolution of a human life from youth to adulthood to old age. The symbol of the interlocking gyres reveals Yeats’s belief in fate and historical determinism as well as his spiritual attitudes toward the development of the soul, since creatures and events must evolve according to the conical shape. With the image of the gyre, Yeats created a shorthand reference in his poetry that stood for his entire philosophy of history and spirituality.

### The Swan

Swans are a common **symbol** in poetry, often used to depict idealized nature. Yeats employs this convention in “The Wild Swans at Coole” (1919), in which the regal birds represent an unchanging, flawless ideal. In “Leda and the Swan,” Yeats rewrites the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda to comment on fate and historical inevitability: Zeus disguises himself as a swan to rape the unsuspecting Leda. In this poem, the bird is fearsome and destructive, and it possesses a divine power that violates Leda and initiates the dire consequences of war and devastation depicted in the final lines. Even though Yeats



clearly states that the swan is the god Zeus, he also emphasizes the physicality of the swan: the beating wings, the dark webbed feet, the long neck and beak. Through this description of its physical characteristics, the swan becomes a violent divine force. By rendering a well-known poetic symbol as violent and terrifying rather than idealized and beautiful, Yeats manipulates poetic conventions, an act of literary modernism, and adds to the power of the poem.

### The Great Beast

Yeats employs the figure of a great beast—a horrific, violent animal—to embody difficult abstract concepts. The great beast as a symbol comes from Christian iconography, in which it represents evil and darkness. In “The Second Coming,” the great beast emerges from the *Spiritus Mundi*, or soul of the universe, to function as the primary image of destruction in the poem. Yeats describes the onset of apocalyptic events in which the “blood-dimmed tide is loosed” and the “ceremony of innocence is drowned” as the world enters a new age and falls apart as a result of the widening of the historical gyres. The speaker predicts the arrival of the Second Coming, and this prediction summons a “vast image” of a frightening monster pulled from the collective consciousness of the world. Yeats modifies the well-known image of the sphinx to embody the poem’s vision of the climactic coming. By rendering the terrifying prospect of disruption and change into an easily imagined horrifying monster, Yeats makes an abstract fear become tangible and real. The great beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born, where it will evolve into a second Christ (or anti-Christ) figure for the dark new age. In this way, Yeats uses distinct, concrete imagery to symbolize complex ideas about the state of the modern world.

### “The Second Coming”

#### **Summary**

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening “gyre” (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold”; anarchy is loosed upon the world; “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst “are full of passionate intensity.”

Surely, the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; “Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” No sooner does he think of “the Second Coming,” then he is troubled by “a vast image of the *Spiritus Mundi*, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx (“A shape with lion



body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun”) is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker’s sight, but he knows that the sphinx’s twenty centuries of “stony sleep” have been made a nightmare by the motions of “a rocking cradle.” And what “rough beast,” he wonders, “its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

### **Form**

“The Second Coming” is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as “man” and “sun.”

### **Commentary**

Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, “The Second Coming” is one of Yeats’s most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a “rough beast,” the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

Yeats spent years crafting an elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that he described in his book *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats’s lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision* centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. Yeats believed that this image (he called the spirals “gyres”) captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical





process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development).

"The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats's poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

*The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre...*

In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The "rough beast" slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

This seems quite silly as philosophy or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of *A Vision*, "The Second Coming" is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats's best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats's work as a whole.

## “Leda and the Swan”

### Summary

The speaker retells a story from Greek mythology, the rape of the girl Leda by the god Zeus, who had assumed the form of a swan. Leda felt a sudden blow, with the “great wings” of the swan still beating above her. Her thighs were caressed by “the dark webs,” and the nape of her neck was caught in his bill; he held “her helpless breast upon his breast.” How, the speaker asks, could Leda’s “terrified vague fingers” push the feathered glory of the swan from between her thighs? And how could her body help but feel “the strange heart beating where it lies”? A shudder in the loins engenders “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower, and Agamemnon dead.” The speaker wonders whether Leda, caught up by the swan and “mastered by the brute blood of the air,” assumed his knowledge as well as his power “Before the indifferent beak could let her drop.”

### Form

“Leda and the Swan” is a sonnet, a traditional fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The structure of this sonnet is Petrarchan with a clear separation between the first eight lines (the “octave”) and the final six (the “sestet”), the dividing line being the moment of ejaculation—the “shudder in the loins.” The rhyme scheme of the sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFGEFG.

### Commentary

Like “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan” describes a moment that represented a change of era in Yeats’s historical model of gyres, which he offers in *A Vision*, his mystical theory of the universe. But where “The Second Coming” represents (in Yeats’s conception) the end of modern history, “Leda and the Swan” represents something like its beginning; as Yeats understands it, the “history” of Leda is that, raped by the god Zeus in the form of a swan, she laid eggs, which hatched into Clytemnestra and Helen and the war-gods Castor and Polydeuces—and thereby brought about the Trojan War (“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower, / And Agamemnon dead”). The details of the story of the Trojan War are quite elaborate: briefly, the Greek Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, was kidnapped by the Trojans, so the Greeks besieged the city of Troy; after the war, Clytemnestra, the wife of the Greek leader Agamemnon, had her husband murdered. Here, however, it is important to know only the war’s lasting impact: it brought about the end of the ancient mythological era and the birth of modern history.

Also like “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan” is valuable more for its powerful and evocative language—which manages to imagine vividly such a bizarre phenomenon as a girl’s rape by a massive swan—than for its place in Yeats’s occult history of the world. As an aesthetic experience, the sonnet is remarkable; Yeats combines words indicating powerful action (sudden blow, beating, staggering, beating, shudder, mastered, burning, mastered) with adjectives and descriptive words that indicate Leda’s weakness and helplessness (caressed, helpless, terrified, vague, loosening), thus increasing the sensory impact of the poem.

