

Irish Elements in William Butler Yeats's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), Ireland's preeminent modern poet and Nobel laureate (1923), intricately wove Irish elements into his verse to forge a modern national consciousness, blending Celtic mythology, folklore, heroic legends, political history, rural landscapes, and spiritual traditions with modernist innovation. Influenced by John O'Leary, Sligo's ghost stories, and Maud Gonne's activism, he drew from O'Grady's *History of Ireland* (1878) and folk ballads. Early works (*The Wanderings of Oisín*, 1889; *The Rose*, 1893) blend Celtic escapism and symbolism (Innisfree, the Rose). Poems like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "The Ballad of Father O'Hart," and "Down by the Salley Gardens" evoke agrarian, superstitious Ireland—haunted dales, Catholic-Protestant divides, emigration, and rebellions. Political verse critiques nationalism: "To Ireland in the Coming Times" redefines patriotism; "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" shows wartime indifference; "September 1913" mourns "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone"; "Easter 1916" celebrates yet questions the Rising's "terrible beauty"; "Meditations in Time of Civil War" laments violence. Through Cuchulain, druids, and ballad forms, Yeats bridges ancient heroism and modernism, forging a mythic, wounded Irish consciousness.

KEYWORDS: W.B. Yeats, Irish mythology, Celtic revival, nationalism, folklore, Sligo landscape, Maud Gonne, Easter Rising, symbolism, modernism

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I. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was Ireland's greatest modern poet and a Nobel laureate (1923). His works use elements such as mythology, legends, political events, and the landscape to both celebrate and examine Ireland, often blending tradition and modernism. "I have desired", Yeats wrote in one of his essays, "like every artist to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant and significant things of this marred and clumsy world". His early poetry, published in the volumes of 1889, 1893 and 1899, mixes post-Peterian aestheticism with a Celticism, which is both nationalistic and escapist. As in the contemporary French Culture of Maeterlinck and Debussy, Celtic legend offered an alternative way of seeing and representing the world, a non-classical, anti-urban, anti-mechanical, and anti-material intermixture of the physical and the metaphysical and of the sensual and the spiritual. Yeats's verse of the 1890s exploits a languorous repetition, learned from Tennyson and Swinburne, and calls for withdrawals into ideal landscapes, like that of Innisfree, or for driving with Fergus into 'the deep woods shade'. "The self-evident Irishness of these poems emerged from a context which, if thoroughly sympathetic to Celtic imaginings, was not itself exclusively Irish.

IRISH ELEMENTS

W.B. Yeats was a true citizen of Ireland. In his poetry we find Irish folklore, Irish heroic story, Irish history and even Irish landscape, working in his imagination to dilute the excesses of romanticism and of mere dreaminess and decorativeness. It was under the influence of John O' Leary that Yeats developed an interest in Irish Nationalism, read patriotic literature and joined a young Ireland society. He formed an ambition to write a new kind of Irish literature and came nearer to creating a style of his own when he began to write about what he knew, especially the scenery of Sligo, when he lived as child, and folklore to which his imagination had responded when as a young man he spent his summers in Sligo with his uncle George Pollexfen. From Sligo and its stories of ghosts and fairies came characteristic cadences in the poems.

His lady love Maud Gonne was a high ranked leader of Irish freedom movement. He loved her profoundly, which we can know from many of his poems, and for her, he joined the secret extremists party Irish Republican Brotherhood in 1896. Wanting to play a vital role in the movement for Irish independence, Yeats wrote a play called 'The Countess Cathleen'. He also wished to warn Maud Gonne through the story of the play that she was in danger of losing her own soul through her immersion in political activity. His role, he thought,

was to reshape Ireland's literature, an aim deliberately put in the poem 'To Ireland In the coming times'. His patriotic impulse was different from that of the nineteenth century Irish nationalist poets, as his poem makes clear.

The Irish people think differently from the English on matters relating to religion and economy, culture and tradition. The Irish are mostly tillers of the soil and naturally their country being poor, education has not made any majestic strides in the country or any deep impression upon the minds of the cultured and educated. They were born poor and naturally to seek employment and with their daily bread, many had come out of their land.

So superstitious are they that they think every will and dale, every river and tree is haunted by some ghost or spirit. They have further an unshaken belief in the existence of influence of witches and ghosts and black magic upon people. Every piece of land and every ruined tower or building has its own legendary and local association and the inhabitants are very familiar with them. The poem 'The Tower' gives the readers an idea of the life of the Irish. Ireland is the land of shadows, spirits and memories little affected by the march of civilization; accounts and stories are handed down by the elders to their succeeding generations with fervour. Yeats was indeed creamed with such accounts and his poetic genius assisted him to describe such an outlook of the Irish and his imagery and mythology, created a stir among the reading public. His heroes are of Irish origin.

Most of the inhabitants in Ireland are farmers, peasants living in cottages separated from one another. There are dim forests-interspersed with green vegetation and landscapes and thinly populated. It has not experienced the touch of industry. The middle class people are not many, for most of them are poor and belong to the lower-classes of the nation. Many of them are seafarers as in Synge's novel 'Riders to the Sea'. Big landlords were very few in number who dominated over others; but this class is also disintegrating and disappearing from the countryside. Most of them have emigrated to England and America for better living and livelihood. Naturally, Yeats's poetry takes the agricultural scent and rural scenery, free from the taints of industrial tension and tumult. His folk-tales are of absorbing interest in these elements and the poet describes reality in its nakedness. Despite their poverty they have often risen in rebellion against the British rule over their country.

Ireland is predominantly a Catholic Land. But prominent families belong to the Protestant sect; only the masses are Catholics. The typical landlord of Yeats's days handed down to his son a contempt for the Catholics which coloured their religious and social outlook on life and relation with others. Yeats himself was proud of his family and he did not mix with Catholics and he could have no sympathy with them.

Education imparted to the Irish was unscientific and naturally this did not pave the way for their social progress. While the Catholics were superstitious, the Protestants kept themselves free from such beliefs. So Ireland was truly divided into mutually exclusive sectors and their clashes left a mighty impression upon Yeats, as a poet and man.

Yeats's interest in the popular ballad form, sustained intermittently to the end of his life, appeared in 'The Ballad of Father O' Hart' and 'The Ballad of the Foxhunter'. The first gives literary life to some of the places in Ireland and the Second is built upon an incident from an Irish literary source. 'The Ballad of Moll Magee' is a piece of characterisation based on a sermon delivered at Howth, then a fishing village in Dublin. 'Down by the Salley Gardens' is a recollection of a snatch of a song sung by an old woman in Sligo.

Yeats had read the book 'History of Ireland' (1878) by O'Grady in his teens. This book made available material for him from the heroic age of Irish history. Then there were other writers who collected and published popular legends and folk literature of Ireland. Among Irish sources he continued his search for new myths and a living speech that could be used in poetry and he did so less as a patriot than as a poet. 'The Rose' (1893) is a collection of poems whose general theme is the symbolization of platonic ideas by means of figures from Irish mythology and early Irish history. The Platonism of Shelley and Spenser is fully seen in his conception of the Rose as a Symbol of the idea of beauty. 'The Man who Dreamed of Fairyland', one of the most successful of the poems using folk themes, treats popular belief and superstition in a highly symbolic way. In the poem 'The Wind Among The Reeds' (1889) he draws the symbols from Irish figures and Irish themes.

"As an Irishmen anxious to forge new loyalties, Yeats was famously detached from the British cause and British sympathies during the First World War. Unlike many of his class and religion in Ireland, he felt no moral obligation to be a combatant, nor was that obligation ever enforced by law (though conscription into the armed forces was introduced in Britain in January 1916, Ireland was exempted). When asked to write a war poem he later responded in a verse declaration that it was better 'in times like these / A poet's mouth be silent.' In "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", he produced a particularly impressive war poem, if one that expresses an indifference to other man's causes while still indulging in an exhilaration for 'this tumult in the clouds'".

*Nor law, nor duty bade me fight
Nor public men nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.*

The poems on Maud Gonne are also influenced by Irish elements. Maud Gonne herself is a Irish revolutionary leader whom the poet loved profoundly but whose way of politics was not supported by the poet. However, in most of the poems Maud Gonne is compared with Helen, the cause of Greek-Trojan war and the destruction of Troy.

In 1913, he had wrote a poem deploring the lack of daring and imagination in contemporary Ireland, its petty acquisitiveness and its petty piety. The poem 'September 1913' begins:

*'What need you being come to sense;
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It is with O'Leary in the grave'.*

Yeats saw especially in the figure of O'Leary heroic political symbol. He found in him a tragic personage, dignified, isolated, free, passionate, committed to an ideal of conduct above the low dream that was taken for reality by bankers, school masters and clergymen.

In some of the poems of the volume called 'The Green Helmet', Yeats expresses his disillusionment with contemporary Ireland's soullessness. He complains in the poem 'At The Abbey theatre', thinking no doubt of the Abbey Theatre audience, that the populace is willful, fickle and ignorant.

'Meditations in time of Civil War' begins with his customary homage to the 'Great House' with the regret that the society which founded such houses is vanishing. It ends with a vision representing futile violence. Yeats's description in this poem of the Black and Tan terror is almost Shakespearean in tone: 'Now days are dragon-ridden but weasals fighting in a hole'

The leaders of the Easter Rising wrung a reluctant tribute from Yeats. The poem 'Easter 1916' tells how the man were transformed under the spell of violence, 'now they resigned their parts in the casual comedy' of everyday living, how 'a terrible beauty' was born, a beauty that the poem celebrates.

*I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered a while and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club
Being certain that they and I*

*But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*

But in the middle of this hymn, Yeats inserts a passage that tells of the price the revolutionaries paid for their greatness.

*What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done had said
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead.*

He is of the opinion that their sacrifice is needless.

II. CONCLUSION:

Irish elements in Yeats's poetry manifest through myth and legend, national history, cultural revival, landscape, spirituality, and a unique blend of language and form. These aspects helped forge an enduring sense of Irish cultural identity in literature. Yeats did not merely use Irish elements; he forged a modern Irish consciousness through them. His poetry is where Druid meets modernist, where Sligo's hills converse with

global history, and where nationalism is both celebrated and interrogated. To read Yeats is to enter the soul of Ireland—mythic, wounded, and eternal.

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