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Recommended Citation

Grimes, Patrick, "William Butler Yeats: Classic Ireland Poeticized". *The Trinity Papers (2011 - present)* (2022).

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William Butler Yeats: Classic Ireland Poeticized

Patrick Grimes

Not many can say that they have enjoyed as much time, innovation, and success in poetry as W.B. Yeats. He is one of the most formally talented and widely respected poets to ever pen a stanza; and this gift to worldly literature was given gently to Ireland. Yeats was born in Dublin but raised in London, beginning his inner strife surrounding national identity. It would be difficult to tell his British upbringing when reading his poetry, however. One of Yeats' largest themes is his contemporary Ireland. His later works comment more extensively on the political turmoil plaguing Ireland and the quarrels between North and South, British and Irish, Protestant and Catholic. His earliest poetry focuses on a different Ireland, a classical Ireland. The Ireland celebrated on St. Patrick's Day and showcased by Tourism Ireland. The Ireland of soft green pastures, leafy hills, and ale that flows like the babbling streams.

Yeats not only highlights the physical phenomenon that is Ireland, but the very roots of its culture and tradition. When Yeats began writing, he took all that he loved about his birthplace and set out to make something of Irish literature, which was previously overshadowed by the mammoth that is British or, more specifically, English literature. Yeats was heart set on creating a distinguishably Irish voice. The imagery, musicality, characters, and mythology of Yeats' early work tell the story of an Ireland rich with fantasy, wonder, and nature. Yeats' early verse escapes him to an idealistic Ireland full of plentiful fields and beautiful women, a dream of what Ireland could be and what Ireland once was. One could argue Irish literature was born when W.B. Yeats was born. Yeats' early work sought to create a brand of poetry that could be uniquely identified as Irish; and he accomplished this through his development of consistent style and form, images of the Irish landscape, and allusion to Irish folk tradition.

When setting out to forge a new tradition of poetry, form and style is the place to begin. Yeats himself was crazy for tightly formatted poetry. In much of his work, he employs a strict rhyme scheme and consistent meter. Young Yeats was a major player in the pre-modernist school of poetry that held

form close to the top of their list of poetic priorities. Yeats' discerning eye for form and rhythm was perhaps born out of Irish oral traditions. Much of Yeats' inspiration for his Irish literary revival came from Ireland's earliest kept oral traditions, ballads and folktales. These were kept by the elders of County Sligo, in western Ireland, where Yeats spent significant time as a young lad. Quin dives into Yeats' earliest relationship with Irish oral traditions, stating "There were still a few native speakers left in Co. Sligo when Yeats was growing up there. He never learnt more than a word or two of Irish. But he visited them and got them to translate their lore for him." (Quin 4). It is this innate love of language that solidified Yeats' future in Irish literature, interestingly, he would never forget these deep roots.

The rhythmic story-weaving ballad style is profound in Yeats' discography, especially "The Stolen Child" from his first collection, *Crossways*. The musicality of "The Stolen Child" is blatant, even complete with a full refrain. In fact, "The Stolen Child" is closer to songwriting than poetry in the eyes of some. "The Stolen Child" follows a bouncy rhyme scheme also typical of a musical ballad, A, B, A, B, C, C, D, D. Its meter is consistently iambic trimeter (with some interruptions), which adapts the poem's short lines and maintains the musical measure. Another essential element of a ballad is its content. A ballad's original purpose was to deliver a narrative in musical form for ease of recitation. Therefore, for "The Stolen Child" to be a true ballad it must tell a story or have a concrete narrative. The tale told by "The Stolen Child" describes an unnamed "human child" who is whisked away by fairies. Yeats sings exactly where in the opening lines "Where dips the rocky highland / Of Sleuth Wood in the lake, / There lies a leafy island / where flapping herons wake" (Yeats 18). The poem has been taken into musical tradition by many musicians and common Irishmen alike.

Another of Yeats' most recognizably musical poems is "The Song of Wandering Aengus". Every other line rhymes in "The Song of Wandering Aengus", which tells the tale of Aengus, the pagan Irish love god, chasing his dream woman through the woods. It is a quintessential love song, penned as a lyric poem rather than a ballad. A lyric is typically written in the first person, while a ballad such as "The Stolen Child" has no explicit speaker. Iambic tetrameter fulfills Yeats' obsession over tight form in "The

Song of Wandering Aengus”. The poem’s meter and rhyme scheme are steady throughout with no outright deviations, typically Yeatsian.

“The Fisherman” also follows Yeats’ lyric poem formula with illiberal end rhyme encapsulating its brief musical lines. “The Fisherman”, however, takes the first-person narrator and simple rhymes of a lyric inside the mind of Yeats himself. “The Fisherman”’s speaker is Yeats, describing an old Irish fly fisherman who is his ideal reader for Yeatsian poetry. This poem does not hold the same folkloric content as “The Stolen Child” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, but it uses similarly rigid form and musicality to discuss a more personal matter compared to ancient Irish myth and campfire-side tales.

Ireland is a nation with a great veneration for their writers and literary legacy. Fortunately, Yeats’ lyric and musical ballads are not just hidden in poetry collections; they have become facets of Irish life and tradition. Olivia O’Leary comments on the influence of Yeats’ poetry as musical tradition, saying “So we chanted *The Stolen Child* and *The Song of Wandering Aengus* in the same way we sang *Tantum Ergo* and sniffed the incense at Benediction. We didn’t understand a word of it but we knew it was lovely.” (O’Leary 65). Sentiments such as this exemplify Yeats’ gravity within a broader, all-encompassing Irish cultural liturgy. Yeats’ form and style has helped solidify him within Irish society as a not just a poet, but a cultural enigma. As Yeats is to Ireland, Twain is to Hartford. Yeats is not only extremely familiar within Irish canon, in a way, he formed the modern Irish canon. Yeats’ tightly formatted and musical style continually permeates the work of his peers and successors, like Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice, and others.

The other avenue in which Yeats stamped Irish culture and canon was through his fantastical depictions of the Irish west. After W.B. Yeats’ rise to global prominence, his descriptions of the western Irish countryside were internationally synonymous with Irish culture and literature for decades. When an Irishman is asked what he knows about Yeats’ poetry, he will likely first mention the beautiful scenes he paints of the Irish countryside. The ecological poems from Yeats’ early career helped to characterize Irish literature alongside the external image of the nation of Ireland. Ireland before Yeats struggled with its

national identity. The island was an Anglo-Ireland which could not shake the comparisons of its British big brother. Yeats, despite his Englishness, tried to make his poems less Anglicized. In creating a fantasy land out of County Sligo and the surrounding countryside, he helped shape an image of Ireland based in its natural self.

Perhaps his most famous ecologically focused poem is “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”. This poem celebrates Ireland’s nature in an escapist manner that rejects the bustling Protestant cities of Ireland and England in favor of the purity of the flowing western hills. Yeats describes his happy place and escape from reality in the first stanza: “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made / Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, / and live alone in the bee-loud glade.” (Yeats 39). Another first-person poem means that the reader is allowed inside the great mind of Yeats. He uses such nicely toned imagery that pleases the ear as well as the imagination. For example, Yeats lives in the “bee-loud glade” which rhymes with the material of his cabin, which is “of clay and wattles made”. Yeats associates this small cabin with his own inner peace, and the peacefulness of the surrounding landscape, writing “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, / dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;” (Yeats 39). For Yeats, the beauty and solace of Innisfree is what attracts him and helps him to escape. This is the dreamy, idealistic Ireland that Yeats created, a land of supreme natural beauty that is disconcerted with human struggle and conflict.

“The Song of Wandering Aengus” takes Yeats’ ideal western Ireland and crosses it with Irish folklore rather than agrarian escapism. This gives the poem an ancient feel, a feeling that Ireland has always been this perfect and beautiful. There are talks of “hazel woods”, “silver trout”, and “moth-like stars” as pagan love god Aengus searches for his lost love (Yeats 59). The environment that Aengus finds himself in is woodsy and marked by a rushing and plentiful stream. However, the Irish west is an environmentally diverse land. The final stanza concerns itself with “hollow lands and hilly lands”, “dappled grass”, and “silver apples of the moon”. A much more lush, hilly, and green land is depicted

here. Yeats' ability to create sense of place within his poems is extraordinary. He is like a painter armed with pen and word rather than brush and canvas. His images do not list singular facets of the landscape but blend images together into a comprehensive space that has three-dimensionality. These literary spaces that Yeats has woven have become bastions of Irish national identity. They helped to transform a small island into a nation-state known around the globe for the natural and cultural beauty it contains.

Yeats helped to paint the physical picture of Ireland with the wonders of his ecological imagery. However, he also liked to include ancient Irish folklore in his poetry to give it a more authentic Irishness. Yeats might have begun an Irish literary revolution, but he was not the first Irish author. A strong tradition of Celtic legends and centuries of oral traditions precede W.B. Yeats. In order to further deviate his poetry from his Anglo-Irish identity and cease the Anglicization of Ireland, he decided to reach back to Ireland's Celtic roots to paint a picture of his nation devoid of British overshadowing. He sought to take this Celtic influence already infused into his nation and reclaim it for his new Irish tradition. In Yeats' essay "Ireland 1921-1931" he wrote:

"I had seen nothing in Protestant Ireland but its faults, had carried through my projects in the face of its opposition or indifference, had fed my imagination upon the legends of Catholic villages or upon Irish medieval poetry; but now my affection turned to my own people, to my ancestors, to the books they have read." (Ikeda 60)

Yeats was proud of Ireland's ancestry and thought that the nation's modernization and coupling with the United Kingdom diluted the allure of its origins. Yeats took the initiative to lace his nationalist Irish poetry with allusions to the nation's earliest flecks of culture to keep his verse organic.

"The Stolen Child" is entirely based in the Irish myth of fairies. The child named is being swept away by mystical creatures alluded to in the poem's refrain, "Come away, O human child! / To the waters and the wild / with a faery, hand in hand, / For the world's more full of weeping

than you understand.” (Yeats 18). “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is also rooted in Celtic mythology. Aengus is the god of love in ancient Irish mythology. In this poem, Aengus goes out to the forest and falls in love with his caught trout who has shapeshifted into a captivating yet unattainable young woman. The poem’s second stanza describes this shapeshifting, “But something rustled on the floor, / And some one called me by my name: / It had become a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair” (Yeats 60). Irish myth and legend contained tales of shape shifting women long before Yeats penned this poem, however. Yeats references Irish tradition of legend in a note under the poem’s 1905 publishing in *McClure’s Magazine*, “The Tribes of goddess Danu can take all shapes, and those that are in the waters take often the shape of fish.” (Yeats class handout). “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is not finished after those two Irish folklore allusions, however. Some also interpret this “glimmering girl” to be not a Tribe of Danu but an Aisling figure. An Aisling figure is an often-feminized figure that appears in Gaelic poetry, it represents Ireland as a female personification of the land. Perhaps the glimmering girl from Yeats’ poem represents Ireland itself rather than a nondescript object of love.

Overall, W.B. Yeats has brought light to Ireland as a literary culture and nation worth exploring. His earlier poetry highlights Ireland’s rich Celtic and Gaelic traditions through emulation of their sound and musicality. Poems like “The Stolen Child” are written in classic ballad form, and others such as “The Fisherman” or “The Song of Wandering Aengus” are first person lyrics that stem from Ireland’s rich oral tradition. Yeats’ impressively rigid use of meter, rhyme scheme, and overall form characterizes these works as inherently musical and therefore a nod to the oral tradition that preceded Yeats’ Irish literary revolution. Yeats also propped up Ireland’s national identity through his delicate descriptions of the western Irish countryside. These very popular, ecologically praising poems built an image of Ireland separate from its broader British identity. His poetry kickstarted a movement among successive Irish poets that

would concern themselves with the beauty of the western country, further bolstering an identity for Ireland's physical beauty. Poems such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" depict the wilderness of Ireland as an escape from the Protestantized cities of Ireland and Britain in favor of the beauty and solace of the lush, green hills. Lastly, Yeats turned back the clocks on Ireland's oral tradition and includes Gaelic and Celtic folklore in poems like "The Song of Wandering Aengus" and "The Stolen Child". This further helped to define what Irish literature was becoming by nodding to its roots. Yeats not only wrote Ireland's first truly internationally prominent literature, he helped to sculpt a culture and national identity that is now recognized worldwide. Yeats formed Ireland's publicized image and therefore dictated portions of the Irish experience. Yeats' early poetics do not simply depict or celebrate Ireland, they helped to form the enigma of Ireland; its land, culture, literature, and people.

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