University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

INNERVATE
Leading undergraduate work in English studies
Volume 13: 2020-21 ISSN: 2041-6776

**Seamus Deane has suggested that 'Yeats began his career by inventing an Ireland amenable to his imagination. He ended by finding an Ireland recalcitrant to it'.7 Do you agree with this? Support your answer with reference to at least two of W.B. Yeats's poems.**

**Kate O'Gorman**

W.B. Yeats did more as a poet than write about Ireland. He aspired to a greater belief system where the past informed the present, and the power of his imagination helped steer a national consciousness that embraced tradition. However, the poet's relationship to modernity was tumultuous and challenged, especially amongst the conflict of the Easter Rising. I will explore Deane's argument through the analysis of the following poems; 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', 'Easter 1916', and 'The Fisherman.' This will reveal Yeats's personal involvement in mythology, nationalism, and the construction of the self, and alongside Yeats's essay writings I can evaluate if the Ireland of his time functioned cooperatively to his imagination. To enhance my study, I will call upon social and philosophical theories.

To begin, Yeats looked backwards towards folklore that contained "traditional wisdom that could feed his Romantic protest against nineteenth-century 'materialist philosophy,"[1] to somewhere that contrasted with the urban world.[2] For Yeats, these legends were rooted in Sligo and the West of Ireland where he spent childhood summers gleaning all he could from mythology. David Lloyd observes that this appeal to archaic Irish culture "allows paradoxically for the production of that most modern phenomenon, a separate sphere for art."[3] Yeats locates a literary tradition in the rural that in hand forges nationalistic sentiment, moving away from "nationalistic propaganda" in something that is "uncompromisingly aesthetic"[4] – poetry. Such an antidote to modernity can be found in the treasured 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. Its name alone calls to Irishness and the old Gaelic

[1] Sinéad Garrigan Mattar, 'Folklore', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.247.
[2] James Pethica, 'Yeats, Folklore and Irish Legend', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats,* ed. by Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.129.
[3] David Lloyd, ''Nationalism and Postcolonialism', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.181.
[4] Lloyd, 'Nationalism and Postcolonialism', p.181

"*dinnseanchas"*[5] tradition of place name literature, and Yeats animates the lines with musicality and lyricism. As explained in his *Essays and Introductions*, he wrote for the ear and not the eye,[6] relishing in the oral tradition of performing his work, much like Regan's analysis of the poem's "acoustic appeal."[7] 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' comforts in serenity, "for peace comes dropping slow."[8] The speaker is pulled towards this perfect place and desires to be solitary and "live alone in the bee-loud glade", imagining Ireland in its sounds with its "evening full of the linnet's wings". It is a sensuous and vivid experience, full of noise and colour in its "purple glow" and "water lapping with low sounds by the shore" [9], a natural perfection that stays with the speaker when he resides in the monochromatic grey city. Yeats's inner sense of Irishness is entrenched in this water; a sacred and pure symbol that the speaker testifies "I hear it in my deep heart's core." There is no doubt of the speaker's place of origin, yet Yeats's own ancestry has been contested by researchers; Fitzpatrick evaluates more eastern-Irish and even non-Irish origins. According to him, Yeats very much chooses his formative environment to be Sligo, "the one fixed point in an itinerant upbringing, and the locus of a folklore and folklife promising access to an elusive Celtic past."[10] This fabrication of identity, or more accurately a cherry-picking, can contribute to Yeats's imaginative Ireland in his selection of where Irishness is found.

Yeats's pull to the west thus ties to his childhood and according to Oona Frawley, "In the face of a changing or threatened social structure, place and nature can be conceived of as a steady and unaltered realm."[11] This idea of a continued return to mystical, rural literature is evident in Yeats's work as it offers escape and reliability. However, Marjorie Howes quite rightly acknowledges that the speaker's wish to "arise and go now" and leave

[5] Stephen Regan, ''The fin de siècle, 1885-1897', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.30.
[6] W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p.530
[7] Regan, 'fin de siècle', p.31
[8] W.B. Yeats, 'Yeats, W.B, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), p.28
[9] Yeats, 'Innisfree', p.29
[10] David Fitzpatrick, 'Sligo', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.69.
[11]Oona Frawley, 'Nature and Nostalgia in Irish Literature', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium,* 18/19 (1998/1999), 268-277 (p.270).

the "pavements grey"[12] will remain perpetually deferred.[13] His more frequent London dwelling "became mortifying for someone with a strong consciousness of inherent Irishness."[14] This longing to return is nonetheless evident in one of one of his final poems 'Under Ben Bulben'.[15] Yeats marks his desire to return to the western landscape after death and is therefore "authoritative in affirming his lineage and entitlement to a home in Sligo".[16] Yeats finalises where he belongs, and in 'Lake Isle of Innisfree' he takes the reader with him, asking them to believe it exists. But they are looking at Yeats's vision, not their own, and could result in a rejection of his too personal imagined Ireland.

Poetry and art operate on a superior level in Yeats's construction of Ireland and have the potential to invoke a national memory. Writing in 1901, Yeats asserts his devotion and purpose – "I must write or be no account to any cause, good or evil; I must commit what merchandise of wisdom I have to this ship of written speech."[17] Combined with Yeats's investment in tradition and the past, Frantz Fanon's discourse on national culture is a framework to consider Yeats the artist in national consciousness. In turning away from the present and towards the past, Fanon evaluates the artist or "native intellectual" to distance themselves from the current nation.[18] Not only that, they *oppose* the people. With this in mind, we can consider Yeats's scorn of modern Ireland, the grey opposite to Innisfree, to be a turn from actuality and a dismissal of those living within the definition of a modern nation – who in return reject Yeats's ideals. According to Fanon, "the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities." In this context, a shift is necessary for Yeats to join those in the changing movement of Ireland. Fanon describes this as the third phase, the "fighting phase" where the

[12] Yeats, 'Innisfree', p.29.
[13] Marjorie Howes, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats,* ed. by Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.3.
[14] Fitzpatrick, 'Sligo', p.74
[15] W.B. Yeats 'Under Ben Bulben', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 209-212.
[16] Fitzpatrick, 'Sligo', p.78
[17] Yeats, *Essays,* p.51.
[18] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 1961 (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

intellectual "shakes" the people in the creation of "revolutionary literature."[19] This shift materialises in Yeats's 'Easter 1916.'

A different position of the artist is evoked in this poem detailing the failed rebellion against British rule. What gives this poem its distinction is the perspective of the speaker. As Jonathon Allison defines, "the contrast between the 'I' of the speaker (suggesting solitude and individuality) and the 'us' of communal commitment."[20] Where in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' the 'I' speaker is inherently personal to Yeats and his ideal, imagined Ireland, in 'Easter 1916' he places himself amongst the crowds of modern Ireland. Here, we see the bitterness that Deane refers to. The speaker is the aimless poet wandering the streets in the aftermath of such a fracturing, defining moment in the Irish narrative. Yeats being an artist already involved in a form of literary nationalism, doubt creeps in. He acknowledges "meaningless words"[21], conversation and perhaps literature not occupying the same space it once did. While his imagination has been elsewhere, a transformation has happened under Yeats's nose until it is "All changed, changed utterly".[22] Ireland revolts in front of him and we see Yeats process the loss of his ideal Ireland. The third stanza brings in the natural world, the world in which Yeats has previously found solace and reassurance. Instead, the "Hearts with one purpose alone" are united in this now inescapable national fight. The line "To trouble the living stream"[23] disturbs nature, like the Innisfree water, taking two hands to Yeats's earlier illustrations of rural, sacred Ireland and agitating it with a reactive discourse. Yeats was deeply moved by the violence of the rising, and his bitter complacency and non-committal position as an artist was exposed.[24] A fracture for the individual and for Ireland, this enters Fanon's third phase of nationalism. Fear at the scale of this change falls on the much-quoted line, "A terrible beauty is born."[25] Oxymoronic in construction and more deeply

[19] Fanon, *Wretched,* pp.222-225.
[20] Jonathon Allison, 'Galway: Coole and Ballylee', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.101.
[21] Yeats, W.B, 'Easter 1916', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), p.119
[22] Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.119.
[23] Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.120.
[24] Allison, 'Galway', p.101.
[25] Yeats, 'Easter 1916, p.121.

ambiguous in meaning, Yeats is uncertain of what the future holds. Having been increasingly involved in nationalism under the influence of Fenian John O'Leary, and the radical Maud Gonne, Yeats's confidence in a violent revolution is unclear.[26] He questions the sacrifice of those involved and voices the anxiety "Was it needless death after all?", and following the blanket of "nightfall",[27] the finality of death leaves Yeats's conscious forever marked by the event. Wilson Foster concludes, "The poem registers the annoyed surprise and somewhat contrived responsibility Yeats felt as a private individual and public figure."[28] This establishes a two-way importance between the Rising and Yeats himself as they emerge from the rubble together, Yeats shocked and also mourning the loss of his imagined nation. Ireland can't remember the impact of one without the other, and the ambiguity of this poem has rendered it a timelessly universal piece.

On the other hand, Yeats's ability to transform in this changing Ireland is exemplary of a powerful imagination. He re-imagines himself repeatedly, committing to "lust, rage and imagination and begins the process of wanting to shed them all over again."[29] A contrast to the uncertainty in 'Easter 1916', Yeats writes in 1937, "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing."[30] His passion, emotion and ability to morph lasts until his final year, never admitting an easy defeat to modern Ireland. These margins of identity shift in his awareness of the individual, the collective, and a greater power that works behind them. Yeats proposes a memory that is stronger shared – "the memory of Nature herself."[31] In these essays, dreams and consciousness are linked to history in inherited and engaging themes. 'Anima Hominis' explores the inner psyche and is then balanced by the 'Anima Mundi' where repeated acts of passion collate a group activity.[32] In the former, Yeats discusses the retreat into a singular mind where the poet and

[26] Regan, 'fin de siècle', p.26.
[27] Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.121.
[28] John Wilson Foster, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (The Liliput Press, 1991), p.209
[29] Howes, 'Introduction', p.15.
[30] Yeats, *Essays,* p.522.
[31] Yeats, *Essays,* p.28.
[32] Ben Levitas, 'War, 1914-1923', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.49.

poetry can be understood. He is self-aware and describes the internal struggle between forms of the self – a doubt that is described by Levitas as a prerequisite of 'Easter 1916', wherein Yeats must "admit a failure of judgement"[33] concerning his complicity in a violent and bloody revolution. As Yeats says himself, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."[34] Poetry makes a catharsis of the intense and troubled soul, where one can "sing amid our uncertainty" to work through a period of unrest. This self is what goes through a process of reinvention in its inverse form – the anti-self. In 'Easter 1916', it is this anti-self that is faulted in its involvement in radical nationalism – "to which he is at once drawn and from which simultaneously repulsed."[35] This points out Yeats's complicated relationship to Ireland – a cause he wants to help but not in through violence. This is essential to the self and the anti-self; that internal and external conflict pass in parallel and reflect the other, the battle to perform what the self is, or what it longs to be.

'Anima Mundi' widens the lens in connecting to a higher, more spiritual level than individual volition. It ascends 'Anima Hominis' into a grander system of knowledge, a "mingling with minds."[36] Yeats talks at an elemental level of finding meaning in "the fire that makes all simple", somewhere that could offer a sense of purpose in such an unknown future that Ireland was facing. In a similar vein of mythologizing the past to validate the present, the "vehicle" of 'Anima Mundi' is a "great pool" to which Yeats imagines a whole nation linked to tradition.[37] Imagination is a power that illuminates truth where reason cannot, "the most binding we can ever know."[38] Yeats's beliefs are concrete, stating that "no authority seemed greater than that of this knowledge running backward to the beginning of the world."[39] This also indicates Yeats's serious investment in the occult. In the chapter 'Magic' in 'Ideas of Good and Evil', he presents at length his personal supernatural

[33] Levitas, 'War 1914-1923', p.49.
[34] W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies,* (London: Macmillan, 1959) p.330.
[35] Levitas, 'War 1914-1923', p.49.
[36] Yeats, *Mythologies,* p.346.
[37] Yeats, *Mythologies,* pp.350-352.
[38] Yeats, *Essays,* p.65.
[39] Yeats, *Mythologies,* p.348.

experiences and the power of the mind to share a divine imagination. However, it is this imagination and magic that risks separating Yeats from the very nation he wants to unify.

For this, we can call into question Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities. This concept defines nationality as a "cultural artefact" and the nation itself "an imagined political community."[40] In Yeats's context, we can further specify Irishness towards the rural west of Ireland in Yeats's perpetual pull towards there. Anderson suggests that this method of grouping is redundant on multiple levels – one being that members of a nation can never know everyone else involved. There lacks the possibility of complete association with every member, so any group dynamic is imaginary. Secondly, in wanting something distinctly Irish, Yeats must first define what 'Irish' means. This community becomes a "deep, horizontal comradeship" that in national terms results in people willing to "die for such limited imaginings." [41] While succeeding in some way to unify the people, this idea of sacrifice is what Yeats is acutely aware of in 'Easter 1916' – his potential incitement of fighting to defend Ireland. Anderson proposes that it is important to identify this as a social and cultural construct, and although is critical at the outset the importance lies in knowing where the imaginations derive from.[42] With this in mind, Yeats could be considered a thorough initiator of an imagined community in his respect and pride of Ireland's lore, that we must acknowledge was not created by him but remembered. But this becomes a nostalgia, a pain for a home that is too far away. As Seamus Deane explores, "The nostalgia was consistently directed towards a past so deeply buried that it was not recoverable except as sentiment."[43] It then becomes an impossible search for the 'Anima Mundi', the memory that Yeats believed tied the community together. He is caught between two plains of tradition and modernity, lusting after an Ireland that doesn't exist anymore and writing to a nation that doesn't see it either.

[40] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2016), pp.13-14.
[41] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p.15.
[42] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p.18.
[43] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.14.

This splintering of modernity from Yeats's imagined ideal can be evaluated in 'The Fisherman.' Yeats creates an idealised figure that is only survived by his memory and imagination. Its significance is deep-rooted in his psyche, much like Yeats's sense of Irishness. He denounces "The living men that I hate"[44] for their ruin of art, surrounded by a breed of civilization he does not respect or aspire to. Instead he imagines an alternate place that still holds ideals of tradition, and "rejects uncooperative real Dublin audiences in favour of the imaginary fisherman."[45] Where nature has densely populated other Yeats poems and beholds an idyllic scene, here the hills are "grey" and "Where stone is dark under froth."[46] The Fisherman climbs alone amongst a bleak and ominous background, carrying the weight of an ideal that Yeats is immortalising in art before it has faded completely from his mind. The speaker confesses that this is "A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream", and declares the effort to write him a "Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn."[47] Poetry is a form of preservation, and in honour of an imagined spirit of man that Yeats can only remember in a "sun-freckled face, / and grey Connemara cloth." Because it is in Yeats's mind, this figure is not a shared vision with other people and is already at risk of being drowned in the swathes of modernity. In comparison to the men of the city, the Fisherman is detached and alone and this is seen as the preferred position. As noted by Deane, "All his ideas and images of tradition and communion are predicated on the idea of spiritual loneliness."[48] Yeats heroizes the aloof man, the antithetical self to his own. In real life, this opposing character is embodied by Yeats's colleague J.M. Synge.

Nicholas Grene looks closer at this dynamic. To Yeats, Synge was the "model of an autonomous creativity to which he himself could only aspire."[49] In Synge was evidence that the detached artist could exist, and "takes on the role of Yeats's own mask, his anti-self."

[44] W.B. Yeats, 'The Fisherman', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.97.
[45] Howes, 'Introduction', p.13.
[46] Yeats, 'Fisherman', p.97.
[47] Yeats, 'Fisherman', p.97.
[48] Deane, *Celtic Revivals,* p.35.
[49] Nicholas Grene, 'J.M. Synge', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.145.

Where Yeats failed in the mission of dodging modernity, he absorbed Synge to uphold the counter-display. Much of this iconization was solidified after Synge's early death. This loss left Yeats in mourning of the imagined figure that was opposite to his own; he became an absent presence, mythologized by Yeats into a symbol of the aloof artist and forever in the periphery. This spiritual loneliness has defined Synge as the Übersmensch, the ultimate male figure coined in the philosophy of Nietzsche. Yeats was incredibly influenced by Nietzsche's concepts and engaged with his thoughts on heroism. He writes in a letter, "He [Nietzsche] is exaggerated and violent but has helped me very greatly to build up in my mind an imagination of the heroic life."[50] Yeats is still determined here to use his imagination as the foundation for the hero, his passion reignited by Nietzsche to devise his own version of the Übersmensch, the "solitary hero"[51] of Anderson's imagined community appearing in a deifying moment to enlighten and save the people. This finds further significance in Yeats's discourse in the grapple between nationalism and violence. Returning to 'Easter 1916', the naming of the fallen revolutionary fighters enters their names into Irish folklore. "I write it out in a verse – MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse."[52] Yeats eternalises their sacrifice in poetry and renders them heroes into a shared history, not a personal one.

Yeats was characteristically bitter towards modernity, and Deane's statement has value in suggesting Ireland was often unresponsive to Yeats's intricate imaginations. Certainly, he invents a sense of Irishness and laments at length of the spiritual Ireland gone by in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', and scorns at the modernity that surrounds him in 'Easter 1916' and 'The Fisherman'. With such a powerful imagination, it did exclude the community in being too personal to Yeats himself. I do argue amenability that by using folklore that dates back to legend, it is not from the mind of Yeats but an esteemed, historic Irish culture. With Yeats, Irish legacy weaves through the rural, the revolution and even into his

[50] W.B.Yeats, *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats: Volume III*, *1901-1904* (Clarendon Press, 1994), quoted in Michael Valdez Moses, 'Nietzsche', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.267.
[51] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p.28.
[52] Yeats, 'Easter 1916', p.121.

reactionary modernism. Bitter indeed, Yeats's desire to find meaning for the individual and collective survives to reflect the nation going through arduous and tremendous change.

Bibliography

Allison, Jonathon, 'Galway: Coole and Ballylee', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 98-106.

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2016).

Deane, Seamus, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth,* 1961 (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

Fitzpatrick, David, 'Sligo', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 69-79.

Frawley, Oona, 'Nature and Nostalgia in Irish Literature', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium,* 18/19 (1998/1999), 268-277.

Garrigan Mattar, Sinéad, 'Folklore', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 247-55.

Grene, Nicholas, 'J.M. Synge', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 139-147.

Howes, Marjorie, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats,* ed. by Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-18.

Levitas, Ben, 'War, 1914-1923', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 46-56.

Lloyd, David, 'Nationalism and Postcolonialism', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 179-92.

Pethica, James, 'Yeats, Folklore and Irish Legend', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats,* ed. by Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 129-143.

Regan, Stephen, 'The fin de siècle, 1885-1897', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 25-34.

Valdez Moses, Michael, 'Nietzsche', in *W.B. Yeats In Context,* ed. by David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 266-275.
Wilson Foster, John, *Colonial Consequences: Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (The Liliput Press, 1991).

Yeats, W.B, 'Easter 1916', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 119-121.

Yeats, W.B, 'The Fisherman', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 96-97.

Yeats, W.B, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 28-29.

Yeats, W.B, 'Under Ben Bulben', in Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 209-212.

Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

Yeats, W.B., *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959).