

# Body and Mind in Yeat's Later Poetry

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**BODY AND MIND IN YEATS'S LATER  
POETRY**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language  
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## **Abstract**

The topic of this thesis is the later poetry of W.B. Yeats. It explores how the impossible separation of mind and body finds expression in this work, and how this theme is linked with other important concerns in these poems: the clash between the past and the present, Yeats's invocation of, and expressions of admiration for, his friends, and the regrets he has about some of his earlier works. Each theme will be analysed in terms of specific poems, but also in the context of Yeats's life and the world around him.

**Key words:** W.B. Yeats, mind, body, past, present, art, immortality

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## 1 Introduction

When *The Tower* was published in 1928, Yeats was having serious problems with his health. The years before this had been replete with professional and personal success: in 1922 he was appointed to the Irish Senate and in 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, and he had become a father a few years earlier. He was revising his own works and was in search of new inspirations when he contracted a life-threatening cold in 1927. Yeats was under strict doctors' orders not to push his body over the limit, and Mrs. Yeats decided they should move to a warmer climate until he got better. Yeats liked it so much in Italy that for the next few years the two lived in Rapallo, London and Dublin. He claimed that he was much happier and more at peace living outside the bitter Ireland, and the new surroundings had a positive influence on his writing.<sup>1</sup>

Due to his illness and older age, Yeats became more aware of his body's limitations, and what can be seen from the poems he wrote during the 1920s and 1930s is that he resented those boundaries. One of the issues Yeats faced was how aging had affected his sexual life and how the lack of energy made it difficult to maintain the personal relationships he had outside of his marriage. This proved to be another sign that his body was deteriorating, and Yeats was determined to resolve it. In 1934 Yeats had a vasectomy which was supposed to revive his energy and help him be more sexually active. And indeed, he told his doctor that his energy has improved, he was more focused and even his poetry had benefited from the procedure. He began writing with renewed vigour and determination, finishing the poems which he had already been in the process of making, and starting to write new ones.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of the success the vasectomy proved to be, Yeats was still very aware that his death was nearing. What is prominent in his later poetry is the conflict between the body,

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffares, 1988, pp. 288-330

<sup>2</sup> Jeffares, 1988, p. 320

which is becoming weaker, and the mind that is still full of life. The past is observed with longing, while the present has not fulfilled the expectations of his youth. He also started remembering his close friends, immortalizing them through poetry, finding in them what is missing in the present, especially in regard to what was lacking in the public figures of the day. Another characteristic of his later works is a re-evaluation of his earlier works and their influences. Yeats knew that he was nearing the end of his life and the regret he feels while reviewing his own life becomes evident in his later poems. These poems also stress a move from the superficial to a more spiritual level. Although his poems have always reflected his inner state and emotions and have articulated a search for the spiritual life, this quest takes on an added urgency in his later poetry, and now also finds expression in terms that seek to come to terms with the body of the poet.

## 2 Body and mind

As he grew older, Yeats became more aware of his weakening body. His mind was sharper and more alive than ever, but it was trapped inside a dying body, limited by bad health and old age. During this period, Yeats's focus shifted towards the limitations the body presented and finding a way to keep the mind from dying along with the body. In this part of the thesis, I will be discussing these themes in terms of specific poems in which Yeats explores the connection between the mind, the body, art and immortality.

“I sought a theme and sought for it in vain”<sup>3</sup> is the first line of ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’. The opening line expresses Yeats’s desperation because he was not able to find a theme that would be suitable, but eventually Yeats decides to use this lack of inspiration as the basis for his poem. And indeed, the first two titles Yeats considered for this poem were ‘Despair’ and ‘On the Lack of a Theme’ showing us that the search for an inspiration has become inspiration in itself.<sup>4</sup> Yeats describes himself as a “broken man”, he is unable to enjoy the things he used to love, his body is well past its prime. The themes he used to write about no longer hold the same appeal. He has changed, the world around him has changed and he has to adapt to the new circumstances. The fight for Irish freedom is mostly over, love poetry is not relevant anymore, so he needs to find something new, something worth writing about. He says that his “circus animals were all on show”, the circus animals being his earlier works. He feels like those works were created to attract attention, but he has moved on from such superficiality, and their themes no longer speak to him as a poet. He sees them as being created only for show, with no deeper meaning. They are just like the circus animals, there is nothing underneath the surface, their main purpose is to create a show. The idea to associate his works with circus animals might have originated from the drawings and paintings Yeats’s

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<sup>3</sup> Yeats, 2004, pp. 128-9

<sup>4</sup> Parkinson, 1964, pp. 173-5

brother had done for Cuala Press.<sup>5</sup> Jack B. Yeats often used the themes of circus and clowns in his works, and while W.B. Yeats was not particularly fond of that imagery, in this poem he decided to associate the circus animals with his works in order to mock them. The painting that is said to be the inspiration behind this imagery is ‘The Banquet Hall Deserted’, Jack B. Yeats’s self-portrait in which he is observing a deserted auditorium after the circus has left for another destination. Similar to the imagery in J.B. Yeats’s painting, the circus animals in W.B. Yeats’s poem are gone, he has to search for something new to replace the old themes.<sup>6</sup>

The next three stanzas are dedicated to some of his earlier works. The first one is the poem ‘The Wanderings of Oisín’, then *The Countess Cathleen*, and finally *On Baile’s Strand*. These three works stand as representations of Yeats’s themes. Although Yeats changes the stories to fit in his style and themes, all of these works derive from Irish mythology, which held a great interest for young Yeats. Thanks to Lady Gregory who translated Irish folk tales for Yeats, he had a vast knowledge of these myths and was able to use them for his works.

‘The Wanderings of Oisín’ represent his love poetry and symbolism. In a letter to Katherine Tynan, Yeats admitted that he had used many symbols and allegories in the poem, most of which the readers wouldn’t be able to find because it would “spoil the art”.<sup>7</sup> The poem can also be understood in terms of Yeats’s fear of death and old age, “the horror of old age [is] that [it] brings wisdom only at the price of bodily decrepitude and death”.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the poem, the hero is able to leave the mythical islands and return to his home, but since 300 years have passed, even with all the knowledge he acquired, the only thing waiting for him is a certain death. Another symbol which is very important for Yeats’s later work is the bird. The symbol is present throughout the poem and it represents immortality. Just as in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ where the image of the bird is used as the medium through which the

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 508

<sup>6</sup> Pyle, 1977, pp. 208-10

<sup>7</sup> Unterecker, 1966, p. 49

<sup>8</sup> Unterecker, 1966, p. 47



poet will be able to live on and sing “Of what is past, or passing, or to come”, the birds in ‘The Wanderings of Oisín’ are able to rejuvenate themselves and thus live forever.<sup>9</sup>

*The Countess Cathleen* expresses his nationalistic tendencies, but also his infatuation with Maud Gonne. The play was dedicated to her, and while Yeats wanted Maud Gonne to portray the main character, she refused. She was very often mentioned in Yeats’s poetry and was an inspiration throughout his youth. The play is centred around the Countess Cathleen whose people were starving and when Satan sends his demons to buy their souls in exchange for gold, Cathleen does everything in her power to save them and their souls. First, she sells her lands and everything but her house, but when the demons continue to harass her people, Cathleen decides to sell her soul. Seeing her sacrifice, heaven decides to interfere and save her soul. In the poem ‘The Countess Cathleen in Paradise’, which is a part of the play, she is described as becoming a part of heaven itself.<sup>10</sup> When *The Countess Cathleen* finally reached the stage, the audience was divided. While a part of them praised Yeats and his work, the others disapproved the use of religious symbols. Yeats even admitted that he did not consider that some of the religious aspects are a reality for many people. Another reason the nationalists condemned the play was because they didn’t approve of the message that a landlady would be willing to sacrifice herself for her Irish tenants during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Famine.<sup>11</sup>

The last one, *On Baile’s Strand*, represents the struggle between his dream world and reality, as well as Irish mythology.<sup>12</sup> It is a part of a five-play Cuchulain cycle in which Cuchulain ultimately dies fighting the sea. Throughout the works, Cuchulain ages, even if in the original story he dies at the age of 27. He goes through Yeats’s career path and ages along with him. In a letter to Frank Fay, Yeats tells him that he decided to change the original story

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<sup>9</sup> Unterecker, 1966, pp. 55-6

<sup>10</sup> Jeffares, 1968, pp. 37-9

<sup>11</sup> Jeffares, 1988, pp. 109-11

<sup>12</sup> Jeffares, 1968, pp. 509-10

because it made sense in his version. He also explains that some of the events and Cuchulain's reactions have no reasons behind them, Yeats wrote based on instinct, based on what he thought would be the appropriate response to certain situations. He even saw Cuchulain himself as instinct. "It is as though the character embodied itself."<sup>13</sup>

Returning to 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', Yeats now sees himself in this position:

[...] Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of heart.

The themes of his earlier works are not what interests him anymore. The stories he told are no longer relevant and his focus now should be on finding new themes, on finding something that suits better the man he has become, something he feels close to, ultimately, something he understands better than he ever could while he was younger. But to do that, first he has to find the core of his inspiration. "Those masterful images because complete/ Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?" He is looking for the source of these works, trying to see where these words came from. These lines suggest that the inspiration for those works can be found in the mind. They were carefully constructed and did not come naturally as they would if he had written them from the heart. Unlike young Yeats who was more concerned with the superficial qualities of the poems, the older Yeats wants to create poetry that is not polished and perfect, but that is honest and comes from his heart.<sup>14</sup>

When the poem 'Among School Children' was written in 1926, Yeats was divided between his roles as a politician and a poet. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, but he was also going through his first term as a Senator. He was a poet, a politician, a father, a husband, and many more things, but the struggle he faced trying to

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffares, 1988, p. 150

<sup>14</sup> Unterecker, 1966, pp. 288-9

reconcile all these parts of him led to problems with his health.<sup>15</sup> The poem was inspired by a semi-official visit he made as a Senator to St. Otteran's School in Waterford. He describes himself as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" walking through the school and observing the children.<sup>16</sup> Yeats often praised the work of that school in the Senate and most of the first stanza describes the way in which the school works according to the Montessori principles.<sup>17</sup>

The second stanza deals with his relationship with Maud Gonne. He describes an illustration done by Maud Gonne in which she presented a sphere containing two swans that have ultimately become a whole. Yeats sees it as a version of Plato's parable of humans created as a sphere, but destined to roam around the world looking for their other half because Zeus's jealousy made him cut the sphere in two equal pieces. Yeats's altered version of this parable uses egg white and yolk to convey the meaning of unity. This image is connected to the "Ledaean body" as the representation of Maud Gonne in this poem. She had been previously associated with Helen of Troy in Yeats's poetry and this time he makes the connection with Leda, Helen's mother. According to Greek legends, Leda was impregnated by Zeus when he took the form of a swan and the eggs of Leda are believed to be the cause of the fall of Troy.<sup>18</sup> The poem 'Leda and the Swan', which describes her rape, ends with the question "Did she put on his knowledge with his power/Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" Yeats introduces the dialectic between power and knowledge. Since Zeus was a god, it is possible that he possessed the knowledge of the future, so he could have foreseen what his actions will cause. Because of it, he held the power over these events and over humans who were affected by the Trojan war. Yeats suggests that Leda might have taken some power from Zeus during the act, and with it the knowledge, so she could have been aware that the fate of so many people has already been decided. Just like in the poem 'Leda

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<sup>15</sup> Unterecker, 1966, pp. 170-1

<sup>16</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. xvii

<sup>17</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 300

<sup>18</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 297

and the Swan', in 'Among School Children' Yeats is wondering if a single event was able to change the course of history, for both Leda and Maud Gonne—a "[...] trivial event/ that changed some childish day to tragedy". He observes the children around him and questions if these women were similar as children. "For even daughters of the swan can share/ Something of every paddler's heritage", meaning they could have resembled the unremarkable children he sees. There is a draft Yeats wrote after the visit that mentions an idea for a poem about school children and the almost non-existent possibility that life will fulfil their hopes and dreams.<sup>19</sup> Now that he is older, Yeats might be more aware of the differences between each generation and the different paths people take throughout their life. Things he might not have noticed when he was younger could be attracting his attention in his older age because he is seeing the world from a different perspective.

At the end of the fourth stanza Yeats describes himself as an "old scarecrow". This image, which is also used in the poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', here refers to what is left of the philosophers he admires "Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird". It is an image that expresses the way in which Yeats observes his body in his old age. The body is weak, slowly becoming less useful, but it is also the destiny that awaits every living thing; even the greatest philosophers have succumbed to the harsh rules of nature. But taking all this into consideration, there is still a part of them that is living. Their mind, although now gone, is present through the works they have left behind. Yeats plays with the philosophers most famous characteristics, and creates physical images that express them:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays

Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;

Solider Aristotle played the taws

Upon the bottom of a king of kings;

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<sup>19</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 299

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras

Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings

Plato's most notable theory is the world of ideas, meaning that he does not see the "real world" as real. Everything exists beyond our world in a perfect version of itself and the things around us are mere imperfect copies, thus the image of "a ghostly paradigm of things". Aristotle believed that the only truth we can really trust is the one that can be proven, if there is no evidence, it cannot be considered as true beyond a doubt. The line "Upon a bottom of a king of kings" is a reference to Alexander the Great who was Aristotle's student. The image created around Pythagoras refers to some measurements he made between notes on a stretched string and the epithet "golden-thighed" is taken from Thomas Taylor's translation of *Life of Pythagoras*.<sup>20</sup> Yeats seems to downplay their achievements, using humorous descriptions, but he does it in a way that does not seem patronising or disrespectful. Quite the opposite, he creates images that are carefully constructed as to emphasize their greatness, showing that the elderly Yeats could share in their experiences.<sup>21</sup>

The last stanza expresses the struggle Yeats faces throughout the poem. He is trying to reconcile the different parts of him, "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,/ Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" Is he a politician, a poet and a philosopher all in one person, or should he define himself only as one of those? Should he choose only one aspect to emphasize or can he be all at the same time? The same struggle can be paralleled with the wish to separate the mind and the body. He is both the body and the mind, one cannot exist without the other and his being cannot be narrowed down to one of them, just like the chestnut tree can only be seen as a unity of the leaf, the blossom and the bole. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>22</sup> The same can be said for the poet and the poem. The two

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffares, 1968, pp. 303-4

<sup>21</sup> Parkinson, 1964, pp. 103-4

<sup>22</sup> Unterecker, 1966, p. 191-2

cannot be separated since the poet uses his personal experiences and thoughts to form his poetry. Yeats himself said that a poet always starts from his personal life, and that each poem is a representation of some part of him. But the link between the poet and the poem is never clearly shown, which makes it harder to distinguish where one ends and the other one begins.<sup>23</sup>

‘Sailing to Byzantium’ begins with the line “That is no country for old men”. Even though Yeats never specified to which country he refers, it is often assumed that he is either talking about Ireland or about the world in general. The line sets the tone of the poem, foretelling that the main focus will be on the contrast between the younger generations and the older people. It could be as simple as a misunderstanding because of the generation gap, not being able to identify with the other generation. Or it could be that Yeats was feeling unwelcome in, and disconnected to, his fatherland since it is usually the youth who enjoy life to the fullest, not thinking of the future and the consequences of their actions. Seen from Yeats’s perspective, the youth seems to be self-absorbed. They do not see far from themselves, nor do they want to. Having fun and enjoying life is of most importance to them. The art they appreciate is not the one Yeats would deem worthy of his attention now. The young do not care about the spiritual, about deeper meanings, they care about the material and the superficial and this is something Yeats cannot connect to anymore, even as it was manifested in his own earlier works, as can be seen from ‘The Circus Animal’s Desertion’.

His old age and illnesses have burdened him and made him even weaker, a fact with which he could not make peace. The image “An aged man is but a paltry thing/ A tattered coat upon a stick” resembles the “old scarecrow” from ‘Among School Children’. His body is old and weak and he compares it with something that is meant to scare creatures: it is not an enjoyable sight. Scarecrows are also destined to spend their existence alone in fields, and

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<sup>23</sup> O’Neill, 2008

when the time comes, they are easily replaced. Maybe that is the reason why Yeats wants to go to Byzantium, he feels lonely and unappreciated where he is now. “And therefore I have sailed the seas and come/To the holy city of Byzantium.” Byzantium, for Yeats, represents the centre of European culture and the source of spiritual philosophy, and it is there he wants to continue his search for spiritual. Yeats admitted that he would have gladly spent some time in Byzantium, but since that is not possible, he created a similar place in his mind and embodied it through his poetry.<sup>24</sup> In the place he creates, the spiritual is more important than the material, it is a place where his weak body is not a source of frustration since he knows that in this Byzantium his body can perish and his mind will live on. This is another theme very present in Yeats’s poetry. His concern with aging is connected to his concern with death.<sup>25</sup> His greatest worry is that his heart is entwined with his dying body: when the body perishes, so will his heart. He asks the sages, those who have attained the wisdom that a philosopher seeks, to separate his heart from the body and to create something extraordinary from it. That is why eternity becomes an artifice in the last line of the stanza. It is not literal immortality, but eternal life achieved through art.

Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
 And fastened to a dying animal  
 It knows not what it is; and gather me  
 Into the artifice of eternity.

The sages Yeats invokes to free his soul from the “dying animal” that is his body are the image of martyrs in the frieze in the church of S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna. He visited the church in 1907, but it is possible that he remembered that particular image in 1924 when he went to Sicily with Mrs. Yeats. There he saw the Byzantine mosaics of Monreale and the

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<sup>24</sup> Jeffares, 1968, pp. 252-4

<sup>25</sup> Jeffares, 1990

Capella Palatina in Palermo which might be the reason why he chose to create the image of Byzantium and equate it with his search for spiritual life.<sup>26</sup> In his search for the spiritual, he has turned away from the superficial poetry that was discussed in the ‘The Circus Animal’s Desertion’. The key difference between the artifice of eternity and the superficial is that the artifice, even if it is man-made, is used to step into the other world, where immortality is an option. In contrast, superficiality does not have any substance, any higher meaning or ulterior motive. Its existence is not necessary or crucial for the poet. His focus now is on the quest for immortality, he wants to become part of the art itself. He does not want to be another bird in the tree singing “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” but he wants to be a part of the art itself, to become a part of something he himself has admired.<sup>27</sup>

The poem ‘The Man and the Echo’ shows a shift in focus from the separation of the mind and the body to the regret that Yeats feels. The speaker is standing on the Alt, a rocky fissure on Ben Bulbin, and he is burdened with regret. Having grown old, and nearing death, the speaker starts questioning events throughout his life. Fearing that his words and actions have had a negative impact, he comes to the Alt to seek answers from the Rocky Voice because he is unable to find one himself: “I lie awake night after night/ And never get the answers right.” He lists the events that are troubling him, from *Cathleen ni Houlihan* inspiring people to rebel against England, to criticising Margot Ruddock’s poetry and her eventually going mad, and finally he places the blame for Coole Park’s destruction on himself.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the poem, Yeats questions if his words were the instigator of any violent acts: “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?” Here he refers to the Easter Rising which happened in 1916. Yeats is not sure whether his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* inspired Irishmen to turn to violence as a way to fight oppression. Some of the

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<sup>26</sup> Jeffares, 1968, pp. 253-5

<sup>27</sup> Unterecker, 1966, p. 173

<sup>28</sup> Unterecker, 1966, pp. 290-1



leaders of the Rising, executed by the English, were Yeats's friends and fellow nationalists, some of the other men who died during the Rising he knew personally and some he heard of through mutual friends. Yeats also always had his doubts about whether the Rising was truly a good thing. He cannot know for sure what actually made them rise against England at that particular moment, but if there was someone who found the inspiration to do so from Yeats's play, he believes that he should take at least a part of the blame.

After stating aloud the particular events that are troubling him, the speaker concludes that there is no way he can redeem himself. "Nor can there be work so great/ As that which cleans man's dirty slate." Nothing he does now will be able to right all the wrongs of his past, so the speaker moves on to find a way to mask the regret so it is not right on the surface, close to his mind. He thinks distractions will help him sleep at night, thus forgetting his regrets at least while he is asleep.

If the speaker expects an answer from the Rocky Voice, all he receives is an echo of his own words, cementing his belief that he is indeed guilty. The Echo only has two lines: "Lie down and die." and "Into the night." Both of these are nothing more than repetitions of the speaker's own words. The poem is essentially a dialogue between the man and the self. He did not learn anything new, he was not enlightened by the Rocky Voice. Because the echo repeats after the speaker, it appears as if he has already had the answers, or that there are no answers. No one can prove that he did not cause those unfortunate events, and more importantly, no one can convince the speaker that he shouldn't feel guilty. The only person capable of doing that is the speaker himself.

And till his intellect grows sure  
 That all's arranged in one clear view,  
 pursues the thoughts that I pursue,  
 Then stands in judgment on his soul

The end of the second stanza suggests that the part of him that is burdened by regret is the soul. His feelings, not his intellect (the mind), are making him question everything. But the part of him that should be dealing with this is his intellect. It is the logical part of him, and in the end, it will pass judgement on his soul. Once this is done, all parts of him (his body, his mind and his heart) will finally be at peace.

At the end of the poem, the speaker is distracted from his dark thoughts by a hawk or an owl catching a rabbit. It is a confirmation of his claim that distractions such as alcohol or love, or in this case events happening around him, can be used as a means to focus on something other than regrets. It is also a proof that nothing can escape violence in life, not even innocent creatures.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Heaney, 1993, pp. 98-9

### 3 Past and present

While the first part of the thesis focused on the dialectic between the body and mind in Yeats's later poetry, this part deals with the poems from the same period that articulate different relationships he made throughout his life. Yeats acknowledges important people in his life by depicting them in his poetry, carefully choosing the memories he wants to share with the world. The memories he reflects upon in turn represent the very essence of each person, the very reason he sees them as noble and remarkable.

The poem 'Beautiful Lofty Things', written in 1937, lists people who were significant to Yeats throughout his life. In this period, Yeats did not approve of the state in which Ireland found itself. He was disappointed and disgusted by the anti-intellectual atmosphere in the country and what worried him most was the lack of a heroic figure that could lead Ireland to a better future. In a country full of "Plaster Saints", the remarkable people he catalogues are the ones who fought for the freedom of Irish nation, they were of noble hearts and were inspiring; the kind of people who were obviously missing from the political scene in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> Yeats focuses on the people who were important to him as a person, but he also deems them important for Ireland as they were all involved in the nationalist movement, either through their political or artistic work. Since he could not find a worthy leader in the present, he goes back to the past where he locates the people who had all of the traits he believes are currently missing in political life.

The first to be mentioned is John O'Leary. He was an Irish activist and nationalist who inspired the young Yeats to become involved in Irish politics. He also introduced him to Maud Gonne. O'Leary functioned as a representation of Irish nationalism in several of Yeats's works.<sup>31</sup> The most notable example being the poem 'September 1913' in which Yeats

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<sup>30</sup> Boyce, 1995, pp. 339

<sup>31</sup> Watanabe, 1990, p. 44

declares that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,/ It’s with O’Leary in the grave.” The lines are repeated throughout the poem, emphasizing the importance Yeats sees in O’Leary.

Yeats then moves on to describe the scene where his father makes the statement that Ireland has become a land of plaster saints. It has become a land in which the masses are worshipping fake figures, they have become superficial and are mostly interested in the show that is being broadcast. The political situation in Ireland was unstable at the time and, in some ways, all the elections, speeches, and other happenings were seen as a source of entertainment for the people. The reality of the new state was not close to what Irish nationalists had envisioned, but the government was able to steer attention away from all the problems. Another point Yeats resented was the religious aspect that emerged after the Rising. After years of being oppressed by the Protestants, the Catholics were finally free to express their beliefs.<sup>32</sup> This, however, also resulted in the interference of Catholic Church in politics, and this meant that the aspect of religion that was prominent was not the spiritual side, but public expressions of piety. The fake figures could be all the new politicians who had not fulfilled the expectations of the Irish nationalists, but it could also refer to the Catholic Church in Ireland and the figures inside it that had to be respected by everyone.

Another important detail in this part of the poem is the Abbey stage. The Abbey Theatre is the Irish national theatre founded in 1904 by Lady Gregory and Yeats himself. Many people who were connected to the Abbey Theatre were also linked to the 1916 Rising.<sup>33</sup> The quote “The Land of Saints [...] Of Plaster Saints” is connected to one of the plays performed in the Abbey, *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge. John B. Yeats said those words in a discussion that followed the riots. He started by calming the crowd that had gathered, but in the end, he enraged them even more by calling their idols fake and by

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<sup>32</sup> Boyce, 1995, pp. 339-42

<sup>33</sup> [www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/history/](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/history/)

proclaiming that Ireland is a country full of sinners disguised as saints. For many nationalists the play was not a good representation of Irish people, and it was especially criticized by Catholics who were offended because of the connection that was made between the main character Christy, who had allegedly killed his father, and religious figures, specifically Christ. As was already mentioned, W.B. Yeats did not approve of the fracture that emerged between the Catholics and the Protestants, especially when it came to emphasizing religious beliefs and equating them with Irish national identity.<sup>34</sup>

Next in line is Standish O'Grady who is considered "the father of Irish literary revival". He was a historical novelist and literary historian whose versions of Irish historic sagas had a great influence on Yeats and other writers during Irish literary renaissance.<sup>35</sup> Yeats uses a word play in this part of the poem when he describes the writer, whose name is Standish, as "supporting himself between the tables" meaning that he is so drunk he cannot stand on his own.<sup>36</sup> The memory Yeats chose to include in the poem is from a dinner hosted in honour of Edward Martyn and Yeats in 1899. As Yeats himself described it, O'Grady was visibly drunk when he decided to give a speech. Although he could not stand on his own and had to use tables to remain upright, his words were still clear and gentle. He talked about the future of Ireland, about the possible outcomes of the fight and the means necessary to achieve this. In his speech, he also predicted the future need of military action above everything else. His very political speech thrilled the crowd and he received a round of applause.<sup>37</sup>

Another very important figure in Yeats's life was Lady Gregory. She was an Irish writer who played an important role in 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish literary renaissance, but also in the lives of many young Irish authors, especially through her role as a director of the Abbey.<sup>38</sup> Lady

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<sup>34</sup> O'Neill, 2004, p. 175

<sup>35</sup> [www.britannica.com/biography/Standish-James-OGrady](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Standish-James-OGrady)

<sup>36</sup> O'Neill, 2004, p. 175

<sup>37</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 461

<sup>38</sup> [www.britannica.com/biography/Augusta-Lady-Gregory](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Augusta-Lady-Gregory).

Gregory's home, Coole Park, was an inspiration for some of Yeats's poems, such as 'Coole Park, 1929'. The story Yeats decided to share in 'Beautiful Lofty Things' is an anecdote about a threat Lady Gregory received in her later years.

[...] 'Yesterday he threatened my life.

I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,

The blinds drawn up' [...]

Although Lady Gregory sold a big part of Coole estate to a group of Irish tenants in 1920, they threatened her several times in the hope of taking over Coole by force. The threat mentioned in the poem was recorded in her journal on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1922 where she states that she explained to the tenant how easy it would be to kill her if he really wanted to.<sup>39</sup> She was a very brave woman, someone who was not afraid to speak her mind, and even at the age of almost 80, she was still fearless.

The last one to appear in the poem is Maud Gonne. She was a patriot, feminist and actress, and she was deeply involved in the revolution in Ireland. After Yeats met her, he fell in love, proposed to her several times, but she refused repeatedly. Nonetheless, Maud Gonne was still someone Yeats admired, and although 'Beautiful Lofty Things' is the first poem in which he specifies her by name, she features in many other of Yeats's works as well. The event described in this poem is Maud Gonne waiting for the train after having spent the day with Yeats at Howth when they were young.<sup>40</sup> Even if this scene does not seem like a very important event, it could be that Yeats uses it to once again show how much aging is troubling him: they spent the day at Howth when they were young, full of energy, hope and dreams. It was an event that took place during the years when they fought English oppression. That

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<sup>39</sup> Yeats, 2008, p. 334

<sup>40</sup> Watanabe, 1990, p. 45

period was, unlike the 1930s, full of great people who dominated the scene and were capable of leadership.

Not for the first time, Yeats compares Maud Gonne with a figure from Greek mythology. In ‘No Second Troy’ she was Helen of Troy, in ‘Among School Children’ she is compared to Leda. Pallas Athene, the mythical figure he compares her with in ‘Beautiful Lofty Things’, is the goddess of war and wisdom. Like Helen and Leda, she was involved in the Trojan war as one of the gods who initiated it. Athena is also believed to have led young soldiers into battle, much like Maud Gonne had influenced Irish people into rising against Englishmen. This could be connected to the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* where Maud Gonne portrayed the main character who was the representation of Ireland. In ‘The Man and the Echo’, as we saw in the previous chapter, Yeats worries that this particular play has led some men into their death: “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?”

After naming the people who inspired him and who were important to him as a person and as a poet, Yeats finishes the poem with the line “All the Olympians; a thing never to be known again.” The people described in the poem have achieved a certain greatness, they were above all that is mundane. The nobility and inspiration he found in them could not be found in the politicians and public figures prominent in 1937. The people present in that decade did not fulfil the potential of their youth, they did not come close to the heroes of this poem, and were not fit to lead the country. What Yeats wanted in a leader was someone who would uphold the ideals the nationalists believed were right, not someone who would sell out those beliefs for practical solutions.<sup>41</sup> Yeats was deeply disappointed in what Ireland has become. The leaders were not as they envisioned them during the fight for independence, the reality was not as poetic as they hoped it would be. The friends Yeats describes in the poem

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<sup>41</sup> Boyce, 1995, p. 338

should stand as an example of what a leader should be because they possess all the qualities Yeats envisioned as being necessary for leadership.

A reason behind calling these people Olympians in the last line could be O'Grady's words that Yeats recalls as follows: "a day will come, he said, when Slieve-na-mon will be more famous than Olympus".<sup>42</sup> They are the "Beautiful lofty things" in Yeats's life, each and every person mentioned meant something to Yeats and has influenced his life in one way or another. In his search for someone worthy of the highest functions in the country, he goes back to the past because there are no similar people in his present and the values they had are probably lost forever. The only thing left to do to honour these figures is immortalize them through poetry. As long as the poems are read, these people will live on.<sup>43</sup>

The admiration Yeats has for his friends is also notable in another poem he wrote in 1937, 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited'. As the title itself explains, Yeats is in the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art surrounded by paintings that portray the struggle of Irish people during the Rising, but there are also portraits of some of his friends in the gallery.

The first stanza describes paintings of people who had played different roles in Irish life over the previous thirty years. The paintings are a representation of what people felt throughout the years, the pride and joy because they were able to form an independent country, but also the sadness and sorrow some cannot keep hidden because, even though they have achieved their goals, they have also dealt with a lot of loss. One of the people mentioned is Arthur Griffith. He was the founder of the Sinn Féin movement and he holds a great deal of responsibility for the freedom of Ireland. Although Yeats was not fond of the ways in which Sinn Féin worked, he respected Griffith for he was among those who did everything they

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<sup>42</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 461

<sup>43</sup> Watanabe, 1990, pp. 45-6



could to create the country of Ireland.<sup>44</sup> Another political figure Yeats mentions in this stanza is Kevin O’Higgins. He was also a member of Sinn Féin, he was a minister of justice and helped draft the first constitution of Ireland. O’Higgins was also a close friend of Yeats.<sup>45</sup> Both of these men died during the 1920s so mentioning them could further reinforce Yeats’s statement that the people who were capable of leading the country are now long gone.

[...] 'This is not,' I say,  
 'The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland  
 The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.'

They have imagined an ideal country, a place where they would not be oppressed or looked down on, with leaders that were noble and worthy of the position. Yeats describes the country they wanted using the adjectives “terrible and gay”. Out of the painful past, full of death and suffering, a bright future should have emerged. But the harsh reality did not live up to the poetic dream. Although they have managed to form an independent country, it has not lived up to their dreams. It is emphasized once again that even if they managed to free themselves from oppression, there are many mixed feelings involved. The contemporary political scene was far from what those who fought for independence imagined it could have been. The kind of heroic figures described in ‘Beautiful Lofty Things’ and ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’ are not the reality anymore, so the Ireland they wanted to create was only left as a dream.

“Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,/ My heart recovering with covered eyes”. When in 1937 the Irish Academy of Letters gave Yeats a banquet, Yeats said that he has not visited the Gallery in a very long time, and when he was finally able to do it, he was overwhelmed with emotions. He was having problems with his heart at the time so seeing the paintings of his friends who were no longer alive was especially difficult. Yeats also

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<sup>44</sup> [www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Griffith](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Arthur-Griffith).

<sup>45</sup> [www.britannica.com/biography/Kevin-Christopher-OHiggins](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Kevin-Christopher-OHiggins).

explained that he had a poem in mind and promised the people who were present that he would write about his visit and express the emotions he felt while he was in the gallery.<sup>46</sup>

Lady Gregory's son Robert and her nephew Hugh Lane are both mentioned. Robert Gregory died during World War I, shot down by friendly fire above Italy. This particular death was loosely described in Yeats's poem 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death'. Although it is not specified that the speaker in that poem is Robert Gregory, it is most commonly concluded that in fact it is him. Yeats also dedicated the poem 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' to Lady Gregory's son. Her nephew Hugh Lane was the founder of the Municipal Gallery that is today known as the Hugh Lane Gallery. He donated the original collection to the Gallery in 1908 and he promised a larger collection of French paintings on the condition that a worthy gallery was built. Lane was also under a lot of pressure to donate this collection to the National Gallery of London because it was considered that the paintings would be much more appreciated there. As his request for the new gallery was denied on the account of insufficient funds and problems associated with the building site he proposed, Hugh Lane started to believe that the art he wanted to provide wouldn't be valued in Dublin as it should be, so he wrote a will in which he left the collection to the National Gallery of London. Later in his life he became the honorary director of the Municipal Gallery and he was able to see the respect Irish people had for the art. He wrote another will in which he left everything to the Municipal Gallery, but as it was not witnessed properly, the National Gallery was able to contest it.<sup>47</sup> It was not until the late 1950s that an agreement was made between the cities and it was decided that the two galleries will share the collection. Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats were some of the people who put all their effort into bringing the collection to the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jeffares, 1988, pp. 339-40

<sup>47</sup> Gregory, 1921, pp. 56-75

<sup>48</sup> Jeffares, 1988, p. 213

The poem 'To a Wealthy Man' was written as a result of Lane's decision to donate his collection, but the earlier title of the poem 'The Gift/ To a friend who promises a bigger subscription...' indicated that Yeats considered Lane to be a friend.<sup>49</sup> But even though they were close and frequently kept in touch through letters, Lane refused to acknowledge their friendship in public claiming that association with any member of the Movement would impact his reputation among the rich, which would in turn make it harder for him to enlarge his collection of paintings.<sup>50</sup>

The fourth stanza concentrates on the portrait of Lady Gregory. Although Synge considers it a great painting, Yeats doesn't believe it catches the very essence of Lady Gregory. "But where is the brush that could show anything/ Of all that pride and that humility?" She was both proud of her family and heritage, but also humble and ready to help and assist anyone in need. The anecdote Yeats chose for 'Beautiful Lofty Things' shows that she was brave and fearless, willing to confront the possible assassin even though she could not have been sure if his threat was real or not. There is much more to her than the features shown in Mancini's portrait. The portrait might be "Greatest since Rembrandt", but again it is unable to express all the contradictions that were essentially Lady Gregory. Yeats also states his fear that the future might bring people who cannot even come close to the magnificent person that was Lady Gregory.

In the following stanza Yeats expresses his sadness that the Gregory line won't live on, that Coole Park will no longer be their home. He has imagined that his children would spend time there and learn from it as much as he has. He never could have imagined that the future could be any different from what he wanted it to be. Now he notes that "No fox can foul the lair the badger swept" meaning that unworthy people will now be inhabiting Lady Gregory's

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 123

<sup>50</sup> Gregory, 1921, p. 61

home. Still, he will not lament the loss of Coole Park, because his memories will always be there, and no person could ever ruin the influence Lady Gregory had on people.<sup>51</sup> The fox could be Lady Gregory's daughter-in-law, Margaret Gough, of whom Yeats was not very fond. For him, Coole Park was much more than what could be sold or taken away to decorate another house, it was a home. It was a place where he spent many years, where his friendships flourished and where he grew as a writer. And while Lady Gregory was dying, and the fate of Coole Park was unknown, Margaret Gough was more concerned with removing what could be salvaged from the house, and that increased the animosity Yeats felt towards her.<sup>52</sup>

The last dear friend Yeats mentions in the poem is John Synge. Synge was an author who worked closely with Yeats and Lady Gregory in the Abbey Theatre. J.B. Yeats's words from the poem 'Beautiful Lofty Things' were uttered during the debate that followed riots caused by Synge's play *The Playboy of the Western World*, and the portrait Yeats is now looking at was also painted by his father, J.B. Yeats.<sup>53</sup> Yeats describes Synge's image on the portrait as that of a grave, serious man. Through their works, John Synge, Lady Gregory and Yeats were trying to go back to the root of things. He compares this action with Antaeus, a giant from Greek mythology whose strength originated in the ground because of his mother Gaea. Whenever he touched the ground, Antaeus was invincible.<sup>54</sup> The importance of their works lay in the fact that they went back to the soil, to the base of everything, so they could be understood by all, since they reflect the same core "Dream of the noble and the beggar-man". It was not only significant that one part of the nation is represented in their works. Both ends of the scale, the poorest and the richest, should be included. In the poem, this rendered Synge forgetful of human words, a serious man, disconnected from social aspects of life. The "Forgetting human words" line could also be understood in terms of how Synge had blended

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<sup>51</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 485

<sup>52</sup> Foster, 2004, p. 110

<sup>53</sup> Jeffares, 1968, p. 486

<sup>54</sup> [www.britannica.com/topic/Antaeus](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Antaeus).

Irish and English to create a ‘new’ literary language in his works; a language that, as Yeats had previously noted, may not have been used by anyone else: “Perhaps no Irish countryman had ever that exact rhythm in his voice, but certainly if Mr. Synge had been born a countryman he would have spoken like that.”<sup>55</sup>

You that would judge me, do not judge alone  
 This book or that, come to this hallowed place  
 Where my friends' portraits hang and look thereon;  
 Ireland's history in their lineaments trace;  
 Think where man's glory most begins and ends,  
 And say my glory was I had such friends.

Yeats does not want to be judged solely on his works. There are so many things to be considered when someone reads a poem or any kind of literary work, and that is exactly what Yeats is trying to emphasize. He asks the reader to think about the circumstances these works were written in, but most importantly, he wants us to consider the people who influenced him. He wants his readers to realize their greatness and why he sees them as something unique and never to be repeated. These people changed him, they made him a better version of himself. They are his beautiful lofty things, the memories he has of them are so precious he tries to immortalize those moments by placing them in poems. The very last line indicates that, not only does Yeats admire them, but he also sees these friendships as his glory, something he should be proud of. His greatest achievement is that these great, heroic, remarkable people saw him as worthy enough to include him into their lives and he also laments the fact that these qualities are very rare in the society in which he finds himself in his old age.

Although the theme of body and mind is not as clearly expressed in these two poems, it is present in a subtler manner. Most of the people he names in the two poems are dead, their

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<sup>55</sup> Yeats, 2007, p. 217

physical selves are gone, but there is part of them still alive. Their beautiful minds have outlived their fragile bodies. A part of them is in the people they influenced, another in the work they have done for the Irish people, they live through the paintings, and now through Yeats's poems. Like the paintings he observes in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', Yeats manages to give a representation of the memories of his friends. He gives them what he hopes to achieve for himself, another life in the form of art.

## 4 Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, in his last years Yeats considered the realities of life and death a lot more than he had in his youth. He was in search of a balance, reviewing his life and revising all the doubts and regrets he had, worrying about his afterlife. He was not only worried about his body, which would for sure perish, but also his soul. What will be left of him after the body is gone? Will it be his poems, memories, the stories of him people might share? Just as he immortalized his close friends through his poetry, telling stories about people who impacted his life in such a magnificent way and making sure they were never forgotten, he sought to immortalise himself. Since the poems are all representations of his emotions and experiences, they are a part of him, and he made sure that parts of him lived on each time someone reads his works. Taking this into consideration, it is no wonder that in ‘Under Ben Bulben’ he chose the place of his burial and the engraving he wanted to have on his tombstone. After having spent so many years wondering what might happen after his body dies and dreading the unknown, he retained whatever control he could while he was still alive.

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death.

Horseman, pass by!

We could say that these words are a perfect description of Yeats’s life, especially his later years. The constant re-examining he did of his works, friendships, ideas, of the different roles that were constituted him, of his entire life, but also of death and what comes after it, is evident throughout his later poems. Similarly, he could be advising his readers to reflect upon their life, to observe it objectively, but not to dwell on it for a long time. Take a cold look at one’s life, and then move on.

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