

‘Yeats’s poetry is driven by a tension between the real world in which he lives and an ideal world that he imagines’ (2014)

William Butler Yeats is often considered as one of the greatest figures of 20th-century literature. Born 1865 in Dublin, he quickly became a pillar of the Irish literary establishment. This patriotism is often reflected in his poetry, which is evidently driven by a tension between the real world in which he resides and an ideal world that he imagines. His exploration of conflicting dualities, objectivity and subjectivity, mortality and immortality are depicted ubiquitously throughout his work. However, the five poems that I believe most effectively reflect this discourse are 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'The Wild Swans At Coole', 'September 1913', and finally 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death'.

There is often a tension in Yeats' poetry where he is between despairing about his sordid realities and fantasising about an ideal world. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' expresses the poet's desire to escape from the "pavements grey" of London to the peace, beauty and tranquillity of an island on Lough Gill. The poem itself is deeply romantic and is renowned for his use of idyllic sentiments. He depicts the island from "the veils of morning" through "midnight", employing synaesthesia to blur the reader's senses. One can visualise the "purple glow" of the heather's reflection on an island where there is no sound but that of the crickets' song and an "evening full of the linnets' wings". His use of ethereal diction is achieved through the strong broad vowels and the frequent double consonants of "small", "build" and "glade" which, collectively create a slow languorous movement.

Similarly to the aforementioned poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium' can be understood as a search for the spiritual in a world of temporal decay. The poem begins with a flat rejection of the world of natural experience from which the poet's age has excluded him. The images of "the mackerel-crowded seas", "the salmon fall" and "the birds in the trees" vividly express the timing plurality of nature. Yeats also employs enjambment to accelerate the pace to reflect the frenetic physical activity of the natural world. It becomes evident that he is yearning to escape this inevitable

process of ageing and transform into something immortal. In stanza two, the poet uses the image of the scarecrow to express his self-disgust, declaring that an "aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick". The image also links with the birds of Stanza one to depict how cut off Yeats feels from the vitality of youth. Despite this nostalgia for youth, however, in stanza four, Yeats admits to not wanting his "bodily form" to be incarnated in "any natural thing" once he is "out of nature". Thus, in a matter of four stanzas, we witness the poet move with inexorable logic from youth to old age, through the transition from the natural life of the flesh to "the artifice of eternity".

Yeats wrote "The Wild Swans at Coole" in 1916 at the age of 51. With a similar pining for youth as seen in his other poems, Yeats now reflects on how his life has evolved since his youth, or when he walked "with a lighter tread". In the first stanza, the poet sets the scene carefully, describing the "autumn beauty" of the landscape around Coole. It quickly becomes evident that perhaps Yeats feels that, at fifty-one, he is reaching the autumn years of his life? The swans are counted at "nine and fifty" suggesting, as swans typically mate in pairs, that there is a single solitary swan remaining. In the second stanza, however, before Yeats can finish counting the swans, they "suddenly mount and scatter". The run on line reflects the swans' flight and the onomatopoeic word "clamorous" effectively captures the clapping and beating of the swans' wings as they soar into the air. The swans form a ring, which is a symbol of eternity, reminding Yeats that while he may age and evolve the swans remain the same, creating identical patterns in the sky every year. Time does not seem to disturb them; they will continue to "drift on the still water". However, as the season of Autumn transitions into Winter, serving as pathetic fallacy, it is evident that Yeats will not.

'September 1913' is a stinging criticism of the Catholic bourgeoisie's preoccupation with materialism and blinded faith, as they "fumble in a greasy till... and prayer to shivering prayer". Yeats admits that the only thing that could end these allied obsessions was death, or "until you have dried the marrow from the bone". He concludes each stanza with a lament that "romantic Ireland's dead and gone", perhaps against the presentation of men who merely "were born to pray and save" Employing language that is reverential, Yeats incessantly extols the virtues and valour of the dead patriots and martyrdom of "romantic Ireland" such as Emmet, Wolfe Tone and John O' Leary, all Irish Nationalists whom Yeats admired.

Similarly, In 'An Irish Airman foresees his Death', Yeats recollects the life of Major Robert Gregory, the son of Lady Gregory who tragically died at the end of WW1. Unlike the conventional elegy, Yeats assumes the persona of Gregory, allowing the dead man to speak retrospectively, admitting that "I think that I shall meet my fate somewhere among the clouds above". In the final line, however, Yeats concludes by abandoning the first person perspective, stating that "In balance with this life, this death." Particular attention should be paid to Yeats's conscious shift to "this" life and "this" death as opposed to "my." He universalises the airman's experiences, transcending the politics of World War I and moving to the realisation of the futility of all wars.

In conclusion, it's certainly evident that Yeats' poetry is fundamentally driven by a tension between the real world in which he resides and an ideal world that he imagines. Whether it be politically motivated or sheer dissatisfaction, the discourse between romanticism and realism appears ubiquitously and incessantly throughout the five poems and is one with which Yeats became preoccupied in his quest for truth and understanding of the mechanisms of life, history and imagination.