

## W.B. Yeats' Views on Poetry

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**Abstract:** *The principal objective of this paper is to understand analyze W.B. Yeats' views on poetry. Yeats' poetry has got a very good place in the history of English poetry due to its art and genius. The gradual evolution is one of the chief features of Yeats' poetry. His early poetry is romantic while the later one is realistic both in theme and treatment. Yeats himself was painfully aware that most readers approach a poem as if it were bad prose or, worse, prettified prose. To point out the dangers of this approach, and to suggest a better one, he wrote a great many essays which were intended to make clear that the poem is best seen as an organic whole, an "architectural" structure. The paper focuses on bringing out Yeats' ideas on poetry which are meaningful and relevant in the present scenario.*

**Keywords:** *Poetry, Theory, Views & Yeats.*

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### Place of W.B. Yeats' Poetry

By Common consent Yeats has been recognized as a great modern poet. J.W. Beach calls him the finest of British poets of the modern age. Edith Sitwell, admiring his poetry, says: "It is forty years since the earliest of these great poems gave new life to the language; and today they spring into our consciousness as if we heard them for the first time and the wonders and splendor of the latest poems are even greatest, since they have grown from a deeper wisdom, a more universal experiment". G.S. Frazer in his widely known book entitled 'The Modern Writer and His World' claims for Yeats the position of a major English poet and equates him with Donne, Milton and Wordsworth and considers him very greatly superior to Browning, Tennyson or to Arnold.

G.S. Frazer, further asserts that "the poetry of Yeats would be more permanently and enduringly popular than that of either T.S. Eliot or of Ezra Pound, because it is more coherent and more traditional than that of his two great contemporaries. He is mostly free from the caprices and whims, the eccentricities and incoherent ramblings which are the features of bulk of contemporary poetry".

Yeats' poetry has got a very good place in the history of English poetry due to its art and genius. The gradual evolution is one of the chief features of Yeats' poetry. His early poetry is romantic while the later one is realistic both in theme and treatment.

Yeats' occultism embarrassed the Oxford ions in the 1925, as being primitive and premature in the wrong way, and yet the verse of Yeats was cultivated and subtle, not to be scouted nor easily matched. Even as an older man he persistent in exploring themes such as personal love and general ruin. His behavior was much less congenial to his younger contemporaries than T.S. Eliot's. Eliot was proceeding with stately anguish into middle age and spirituality while Yeats advanced precipitously, without this American decorum, upon old age and corporeality.

### **Yeats' Theory of Poetry**

A poem may be a bridge to the unknown but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known. Those mystics proper, who have written poetry, have had in so doing, when trying to express the ineffable, to descend from the mystical plane; they start from a sense of mystical union, a fusion of subject and object, and have to translate this into the language of a world where subject and object are separate and clearly defined. The normal poet, on the other hand, starts in this world of distinctions and approaches the mystical plane from below and, as it were, incidentally. The poet's medium is language and the purpose of language is the making of distinctions. Therefore, though the poet may transcend the world of distinctions, he can only do this by a kind of bluff, by pretending at least to recognize that world. In most poets this is not even a conscious pretence. They regard themselves and their poetry as of that world and, in so far as they approximate to a different world, they do it, as I have said, incidentally and unintentionally.

Yeats often spoke as if the function of poetry were mystical and sometimes tried to give the impression that he himself had mystical experiences, in the proper sense of the word. Some critics, taking him at his own valuation, have described him as a 'mystical poet'. This is an incorrect description, if the word is being used in the narrow sense. Yeats was no mystic in the sense that certain Christian and Hindu saints, or his own friend, A. E., were mystics. Yeats believed in mysticism but he does not seem to have had, in any unusual degree, direct mystical experience. Yeats in his critical writings stresses the religious aspect of poetry but he tends to

think of the poet as priest rather than saint. Poetry is a mystery cult, a ritual. Yeats has for this reason often been accused of mumbo-jumboism. Poetry is a compromise, or even a series of compromises. The poet's approach is personal; he does not aim at an objective, scientific truth. But at the same time he is not a solipsist. Poetry is not a mere reflection or a mere imitation of life but it has an essential relationship to life. If poetry is good because of its self-coherence as poetry, at the same time it cannot be good if it does not correspond in a certain way to life. And an analysis of this concept 'life' reveals another compromise. A poem, though an individual thing, derives from and has to be referred back to life, which means, in the first instance, the life of the poet. In the same way the life of the poet, though also an individual thing derives from and has to be referred back to the life outside him. Now a poem is ill-balanced either if it is too far removed from life or if it is too slavishly subordinate to it. In the same way an individual is ill-balanced either if he attempts autarky or if he merely surrenders himself passively to the life outside him. This intimate connection between a poem, its author's life and the wider life beyond the author (a life which expands in concentric circles through both time and space) establishes certain conditions for the truth, and therefore for the value, of poetry.

Yeats also at times misrepresented the world in which he was living. Yeats, who repudiated realism and does not use the tone of a crusader, may present certain facts colored or distorted by his own partisan feelings but he allows the reader to see that this presentation is founded on an 'as if'. Thus Yeats in his homage to Ireland treats her as if she were a mistress or as a symbol of spiritual realities. He implies tacitly- and sometimes states overtly -that there may be discrepancy between the fact and the ideal, Whereas Brooke allows for no discrepancies. Ireland was far less misrepresented by Yeats than the Great War was by Brooke. Both Yeats and Brooke grew up in a romantic, individualist tradition. Yeats tried to hitch his romantic individualism to Irish nationalism, Brooke tried to hitch his to cause of the Allies in the Great War. Brooke's attempt was doomed to complete failure; Yeats's was only doomed to partial failure. Irish nationalism was a clumsy vehicle for Yeats's ideals but it was a vehicle of sorts. The Great War was a mere negation of ideals.

Many exaggerate Yeats's 'escapism'. He was neither so simple-minded nor so esoteric nor so dilettante a poet as he is often represented. A poet cannot live by style alone; nor even by intuitions alone. Yeats, contrary to some people's opinion, had a mind. He had also

extraordinary force of personality. It is impossible to explain him by merely murmuring about Beauty. Yeats belonged to the company of mystics, and throughout his life his sole object was to break through the so-called real world, the world of Here and Now, to some eternal world of Platonic essences behind it; the bridge to this eternal world was poetry. Throughout his life he continued to think that words- though perhaps not words alone-are certain good. For Yeats the spiritual meaning is impotent until it is clothed in words. He is with Shelley who wrote:

**Language is perpetual Orphic song,  
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng  
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.**

Yeats, granted his limitations, was a rich and complex poet, who often succeeded by breaking his own rules and who turned his own liabilities into assets. A man is conditioned by his time and his place. The two main backgrounds of Yeats are the Irish background and the background of the English Aesthetic Movement; they were, complementary to each other. Ireland moulded Yeats's thoughts as a child, but it was the London of the Eighteen Eighties and Nineties that influenced his earliest work. Yeats was at the same time of them and not of them; some of their doctrine persisted in his mind to the end but always he applied it his own way.

Yeats had dreamed in his youth of being a great popular poet, of writing epic and dramatic cycles to give back to Ireland, perhaps through Ireland to the world, an integrated vision of perfection; but he never dreamed of accommodating his sense of truth to the world's. He discovered that art could not be popular unless it expressed a vision share between artist and audience.

Yeats was not sort of Christian; he not only believed in supernatural power but acknowledged the divinity of Christ more unequivocally than some of them. Yet he could not be called a follower of Christ, for it was not in Christian teaching, whether scripturally or traditionally interpreted, that he sought the all-inclusive liberating truth.

His poetry was founded in the soul; it is empty without the assumption that a man brings something into the world which he has not first drawn from it. The world must give him his forms of expression, but they are clothing or an embodiment. The great religions have their several ways of expressing this, but Yeats had no orthodoxy, only faith in the assumption itself;

and the mental climate around him, both religious and skeptical, was alien to his sense of values. He had to find images which would define the shape of his soul, to disentangle its essence from the experience of the senses and the rationalizing of the intellect, and the way to do this was to dream. While he was writing his world of dreams he was coming to grips with the outer world in thought and action, testing his convictions and gaining the courage of them.

Yeats himself spoke as if the function of poetry was mystical and he lived to give the impression that he himself has mystical experiences. Yeats did believe in mysticism but he did not seem to have had, in any unusual degree, direct mystical experience. Yeats in his critical writing stresses the religious aspect of poetry but he tends to think of the poet as priest rather than saint. Poetry is a mystery cult, a ritual. Yeats was however addicted to rituals. Yeats was inclined towards Ireland, towards a simplified past, towards certain specialized doctrines. He repudiated general knowledge, world ideals, science and internationalism. Yeats, it is said avoided the world through fans. Yeats belonged to the company of mystics that throughout his life his sole object was break through the so called real world. The world of 'here and now' to some eternal world of platonic essences is behind it. The bridge to this eternal world was poetry. Pata, a contemporary poet, supplied Yeats with a belief in the importance of passion, a belief in the importance of style, a distrust of the vulgar world and a curious sort of aesthetic pantheism, a male believe homage of maternal objects which professes to discount their materiality. Thus in his early poems, he seems to be lurking for an ideal of a perfect 'imaginative love'. Throughout his life his advice to women is to abjure the intellect and in particular political opinions are the critical reason. Their discipline is to be that of the looking glass. This doctrine of Yeats can be related to his dislike of democracy science and progress.

Yeats believed that poets must not meddle with opinions. Poetry is the voice of the solitary sport, and prose the language of the sociable minded. Like the poets of the 1890s Yeats hated rationalism and every day realism, but hankered for system to a complaint by a contemporary poet that the poet of the day looks (referring to symbolists) to much away from himself and from his age, was not feel the facts of life enough, but seeks in art and escape from them, Yeats answered, 'I believe that the renewal of belief, which is great movement of our time, will more and more liberate the arts from then age and from life and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty and to busy themselves like all the great poetry of the past and like

religions of all times, with old faiths, myths, dreams, the accumulated beauty of the age. I believe that all men will more and more subject the opinion that poetry is a criticism of life and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of hidden life and that they may even come to think painting, poetry and music. The only means of conversing with eternity left to man and earth. Yeats took symbolism to Ireland and in taking it, he fed it with new reasons and gave it a special accent which leads one to think of Yeats' poetry from the point of view of its relation to the rest of European literature. Art is Art because it is not nature, he kept repeating to himself.

Later in his life he took to writing drama. 'To me drama had been the search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events and for clear outline instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret. Ireland meant to Yeats something very specialized.

Yeats first few important books of poems *The Wandering Ocean* (1889) and *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) show the languor of late Victorian old age. The Romantic revival and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement were for Yeats by Theosophy. Yeats' early poems do not present his thoughts as thoughts in an intimate letter to a friend. They are in the Victorian tradition. His third birth of lyrics *The Wind Among The Reeds* (1899) is the culmination of his early manner; after this there was an obvious change in his poetry. He ceased to be ninetyish.

His next book of poems, *Responsibilities* was published in 1914 when the bulk of early poetry belonged to the dream world, the world that was essentially irresponsible, that a reversal or abnegation of the values of the physical world we live in that collection, *The Shadowy Waters* his great acclamation of that dream world. In this collection, he expressed his change of mind—'Eternity, he observed, in his love with the productions of time or in the words of an Irish peasant which he was fond of repeating. God proposes heavens, but he covers the earth'. (Yeats). This collection deals with the themes of Freedom, preparedness for the Judgment Day, philosophy, theosophy, eternal powers etc. The collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* published in 1919 is autobiographical in tone, revealing Yeats' personal experiences. The people he really knew, the swans he really saw. His poems are about or for the friends whom he admired with something unusual in what he himself called the age of satirists.

The Tower published in 1928 and The Winding Stair published in 1933 are even today known as the highest achievement of Yeats' genius. Yeats' view of poetry underwent modifications during his life. As most poets do, he threw an theoretical half-truths. He began by requiring beauty in the popular harrower sense and passion in the Romantic sense, abjuring the intellect and rhetoric and everyday moods and ideas and contemporary subjects. He was not even merely a poet of passion; his intellect was always involved in a Platonic search for universals. Rarely his naturalist period did he maintain that the naturalist poet is concerned only with the ephemeral and the irrelevant? Later he admitted that naturalism can sideline the poet into narrowness and hypocrisy. He believed in revelation; in practice he was exceptionally deliberate in selecting and analyzing his material. He invaded himself a poet and as poet he was essentially a maker.

Yeats did not turn his back on either sanity or statements. He did not renounce generalization and confine himself to shots of the particular; he was not ashamed of personal enthusiasm. He did not believe in dislocation, he repudiated the flux of the unconscious; he did not attempt rare factors. He thought of poetry as a specialized activity; he refused to tenth of it as advertising. Yeats believed in the importance of gesture of a mannered approach to life.

His Byzantium poems are packed with philosophical and historical thought, precise in reference yet boundless in suggestiveness in their contemplations of youth, age death and the hereafter all welded into a mosaic of technical brilliance, no word wasted, no linkage omitted, no repetitive yet accumulative enrichment of word, phrase, sentence or idea neglected. Yeats' vision published in 1926 reflects his diverse interests in the Occult, Theosophy, Astrology, neo-Platonism, Spiritualism, the magical and the Cabbalistic traditions. Writing A Vision enabled Yeats to express his own interest in personality and in history.

Yeats as a poet is characterized by integrity. As a poet he began by requiring beauty in the popular narrower sense and passion in the Romantic sense abjuring intellect and rhetoric and everyday moods and ideas and contemporary subjects. He was never a poet of passion; his intellect was always involved in a Platonic search for universals. During his nationalist period he maintained that the naturalist poet is conceived only with the ephemeral and the irrelevant. Later he admitted that nationalism can sidetrack the poet into narrowness, aridity, and even hypocrisy while he conceded that the contemporary world must be faced, for every man everywhere is

more of his time than of his nation. Theoretically he believed in revelation; in practice he was exceptionally deliberate in selecting and analyzing his material. He made himself a poet and as poet he was essentially a maker.

In reviving Irish Literature, he revived himself. Always a self-conscious artist he owed much of his originality to the deliberate attempt to be Irish, just as other poets have owed it to the deliberate attempt to be modern.

He wrote his early poems on the tradition of Rossetti, and in the Victorian tradition which itself was a development from the Romantic Revival. ‘Tennyson would not have come into being without Keats. Rossetti would not have come into being without Tennyson. Yeats would not have come into being without Rossetti’ says a well-known critic. One of the chief characteristics of this line is in their better poems, is an autumnal, almost a morbid languor. Yeats was a maker but not to any unusual extent an observer. Visual objects were accepted material for poetry but he used them, just enough to suggest the mood required. He selects his phrases primarily for their music or traditional associations.

Yeats felt the want of a religion, having no sympathy with any established religion. He looked for religion in art. In this, he followed the footsteps of Mathew Arnold. Arnold’s art religion was too low Church, for Yeats, who wanted to have ritual incense, candles and no morality: “I am very religious and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall whom I detested of the simple minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion almost an infallible church, of poetic tradition, of a fadel stories, and of personages and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians” (Yeats, Autobiography, P-70).

He found his sacred works in Pater. His unshakable belief was the thought that whatever of philosophy had been made of poetry, is alone, permanent. This attitude of Yeats could find sanction from William Blake who assumed that art had changed places with religion and practical morality. The revolt against Victorianism was a revolt against irrelevant descriptions of nature. The scientific and moral discursiveness of *In Memoriam*, the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Browning and the poetical diction of everybody. Yeats throughout his life hasped upon, passion though this became less and earthier. Like Pater

he believed that the poetic provides quickened sense of life. Yeats always thought of the world as a system and of life as a pattern. From Pater Yeats acquired the belief in the importance of passion, a belief in the importance of style, a distrust of the vulgar world and a curious sort of aesthetic pantheism, a make believe homage to material objects which profess to discount their materiality. Yeats in his love poems looks for the ideal of a perfect imaginative love. In his love poem, Yeats repeatedly deplores his beloved's refusal to observe the rules of the game to content her with existing merely as a beautiful object. Throughout his life his advice is to abjure the intellect and in particular political opinions and the critical reason. Their discipline is to be that of the looking glass. Yeats' dislike of democracy, science and progress is similar. To most people of his generation their mentality seems more than foreign. These poets believed in the priesthood of the poet but were one in their one conviction and that was shared by all- their opposition to all ideas, all generalization that can be explained and debated. Yeats was guilty of knowing himself a born explainer and debater.

Edmund Wilson regarded Yeats as the nearest English parallel to the French symbolists. Symons considered Yeats as the chief representative of the Symbolist Movement in English.

To Yeats, poetry was not just a criticism of life but more and more a revelation of hidden life. Taking symbolism to Ireland, he infused it with new resources and gave it a special accent which led others to think of his poetry from the point of view of its national qualities. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life.

Yeats' anti-Christ was Ibsen. That made him believe 'Art is art because it is not nature. Yeats still could harness the aesthetic doctrine to a force outside itself which he found in his own country, Ireland, which meant something very specialized. Yeats may be regarded as the pivot around which Irish literature turned from instructive to conscious art. In reviving Irish literature, really attacking the kind of anarchist individualism which characterized the Romantic Revival. An impersonal poet though, he need not be unconventional or inhuman does not impose his emotions upon the world but rather accepts them from it. Poetry as such has a mystical sanctum in so far as poetry can be discussed as an end in itself. A poem may be a

bridge to the unknown but it is a bridge essentially constructed in terms of the known. A poet is a distinct species from the mystic. Mysticism in the narrow sense unifies specific experience which is foreign to most poets and most men; but on the other hand it represents an interest which is a human *Sine qua non*. But the poet and the ordinary man are mystics in accidentally and there is a musical sanction or motivation for all, their activities which are not purely utilitarian. A poet is a specialist in something which everyone practices. The poet's reality is not less real, it is merely different poetry. Impersonality is a virtue of poets, according to T S Eliot. A poet's world is colored by him, complicated by his own emotions and rearranged in a principle which is another theme to the scientist. When Eliot attacks personality in poetry, he is really attacking as Yeats was never appreciated by his critics who found him to be utterly individualistic and egoistic. But towards the end, he was found to be close to a few poets of his age in perceiving the ideal of poetry as 'functional' which should convoke things, people and political events. Yeats could speak from different poles of his being. His political diction was a fastidious nationalism based upon individual freedom and spontaneity. A poem is a thing in itself, a self contained organism, a creation and an absolute, poetry is about something, and that is communication. So it is as if it is also separated itself in the same way a living animal in an individual although it is in one hand conditioned by heredity and environment and the laws of nature in general and on the other hand it has a function outside itself is a link in a chain.

Yeats, undoubtedly, is poet of all time. He had been universally recognized as the greatest poet by the peers, just a decade before he died. This recognition came for his writing in English language in this century. Certainly he has proved to be a poet of the century and one among the all time greats.

Playing tribute to Yeats, T.S. Eliot said **“But it must be apparent that Mr. Yeats has been and is the greatest poet of his time. I can think of no poet, not even among the greatest, who has shown a longer period of development as Yeats”**.

Yeats is not only a great poet, but also one who consciously acted the part of a great poet. He has been described as 'a peacocking Irishman'.

## Conclusion

In the present study, an attempt has been made to bring out W.B. Yeats' views on poetry. This view helps us to understand the concept of poetry in a simple way. To conclude, Yeats' views are realistic and relevant in the present scenario.

It may be appropriate if the scholars, the researchers, the writers and the editors concentrated on Yeats not only as an ideologist but also as a metaphysical, Irish nationalistic, a new Platonic, mystic, symbolist, a nostalgic aristocrat, an exponent of the magic world-view and as the student of the occult and other arcane.

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