

## CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF IMAGISM IN WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS' POETRY

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this work is to identify the patterns of imagism, its system, language, and material - in modern times, in modern literary creativity, outside the conditions that existed in the era of pre-logical thinking. Yeats's work as a subject of such consideration is especially indicative. Firstly, even against the background of special attention to the symbolism that existed at the turn of the century, Yeats stands out as one of the brightest imagists, and secondly, his poetry can be considered as transitional phenomenon between romantic symbolism and imagism, which makes it possible to study some of the features of both directions.

**Keywords:** modern poetry, imagism, poetry analyses, interpretation of images in poetry.

**Introduction.** Yeats is the greatest poet in the history of Ireland and the most prominent poet to write in English during the twentieth century. His themes, images, symbols, metaphors and poetic sensibilities depict his personal and his nation's experience during one of its most troubled times. Yeats' great poetic project was to reify his own life, his thoughts, feelings, speculations, conclusions, dreams into poetry to render all of himself into art. His elaborate style takes elements from Irish mythology, Greek mythology, nineteenth-century occultism, English literature, European politics and Christian imagery. All these features would together inform his own experience and interpretive understanding.

His thematic focus could be sweepingly grand in the 1920s and 1930s, he even concocted a mystical theory of the universe, which explained history, imagination, and mythology in light of an occult set of symbols, and which he laid out in his book "A Vision" which usually considered important today only for the light it sheds on some of his poems. However, in his greatest poems, he mitigates this grandiosity with a focus on his own deep feeling. Yeats' own experience is never far from his poems, even when they seem obscurely imagistic or theoretically abstract, and the veil of obscurity and abstraction is often lifted once one gain an understanding of how the poet's lived experiences relate to the poem in question.

**Main part.** No poet of the twentieth century more persuasively imposed his personal experience onto history by way of his art; and no poet more successfully plumbed the truths contained within his “deep heart’s core,” even when they threatened to render his poetry clichéd or ridiculous. His integrity and passionate commitment to work according to his own vision protect his poems from all such accusations. To contemporary readers, Yeats can seem baffling; he was opposed to the age of science, progress, democracy, and modernization, and his occultist and mythological answers to those problems can seem horribly anachronistic for a poet who died barely sixty years ago. But Yeats’s goal is always to arrive at personal truth; and in that sense, despite his profound individuality, he remains one of the most universal writers ever to have lived.

Fortunately, in more recent years, simultaneously with decline of the New Critical movement, there has been increasing access to Yeats’ unpublished materials, letters, diaries, and especially the manuscript drafts of poems and plays and more scholarly attention has been paid to the relationships between such materials and the probable themes or meanings in the completed works. Even so, critical difficulties of no small magnitude remain because of continuing widespread disagreement among even the most highly regarded authorities about the basic metaphysical vision from which Yeats’s poetic utterances spring, variously interpreted as atheism, Platonic dualism, modern humanist monism, and existentialism.

Added to the problems created by such a critical reception are those deriving from Yeats’ qualities as an imaginative writer. Probably the most obvious source of difficulty is the highly allusive and subtly symbolic mode in which Yeats so often expressed himself. Clearly another is his lifelong practice of infusing many of his poems and plays with elements of doctrine, belief, or supposed belief from the various occult sources with which he was so thoroughly imbued. Furthermore, as to doctrine or belief, Yeats was constantly either apparently or actually shifting his ground more apparently than actually. Two of his better-known poems, for example, are appropriately titled “Vacillation” and “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.” In these and numerous others, he develops and sustains a running debate between two sides of an issue or between two sides of his own truth-seeking psyche, often with no clear-cut solution or final stance made unequivocally apparent.

**Discussions.** The fact that Yeats tended to change philosophical or metaphysical views throughout a long career, again either actually or apparently, and, also again, sometimes more apparently than actually. One

disquieting and obfuscating consequence of such mental habits is that one poem will sometimes seem flatly to contradict another, or, in some cases even aside from the dialogue poems, one part of a given poem may appear to contradict a different part of the same poem. Adjacent passages in the major piece “The Tower,” involving apparent rejection of Plato and Plotinus alongside apparent acceptance of Platonic reincarnation in spirit, doctrine, or belief, then, Yeats remained preponderantly a romantic and a nineteenth century spiritualist as he lived on into the increasingly positivistic and empirically oriented twentieth century. It was in form, not content, that he gradually allowed himself to develop in keeping with his times, although he abjured *verse libre* and never wholly relinquished his attachment to various traditional poetic modes. In the direction of modernism, he adopted or employed at various times irregular rhythms, writing by ear, declaring his ignorance of the technicalities of conventional metrics, approximate rhymes, colloquial diction, some Donnean or “metaphysical” qualities, and, most important of all, symbolic techniques much like those of the French movement, though not from its influence alone. The inimitable Yeatsian hallmark, however, remained a certain romantic rhetorical quality, despite his own fulminations against rhetoric, what he called passionate syntax, that remarkable gift for just the right turn of phrase to express ecstatic emotional intensity or to describe impassioned heroic action.

To suggest that Yeats consistently achieved great poetry through various combinations of these thematic elements and stylistic devices, however, would be less than forthright. Sometimes doctrinal materials are indeed impediments. Sometimes other aspects of content are unduly personal or sentimental. At times the technical components seem to be ill-chosen or fail to function as might have been expected, individually or conjointly. Thoroughly capable of writing bad poetry, Yeats has by no means been without his detractors. The poems for which he is famous, however even those which present difficulties of understanding are masterpieces, alchemical transformations of the raw material of his art.

**Analysis.** The most famous of all Yeats’s poems, especially from his early period and with popular audiences, is “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” A modern, middle-income Dublin homemaker, chosen at random, has said on mention of Yeats’s name: “Oh, yes; I like his ‘Lake Isle of Innisfree’; yes, I always did like ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree.’” Such popularity, as well as its representative quality among Yeats’s early poems, makes the piece a natural choice for initial consideration here.

On the surface, there seems to be little that is symbolic or difficult about this brief lyric, first published in 1890. The wavering rhythms, syntactical

inversions, and colorful but sometimes hazy images are characteristic of much of Yeats's youthful verse. So too are the Romantic tone and setting, and the underlying "escape motif," a thematic element or pattern that pervades much of Yeats's early work, as he himself realized and acknowledged in a letter to a friend.

The island of the title real not imaginary is located in Lough Gill near the Sligo of Yeats's youth. More than once he mentioned in prose a boyish dream of living on the wooded isle much as Henry David Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, seeking wisdom in solitude. In other passages, he indicates that while homesick in London he heard the sound of a small fountain in the window of a shop. The experience recalled Lough Gill's lapping waters, he says, and inspired him to write the poem. The most important factor for Yeats's emerging poetic vision, however, was his long-standing fascination with a legend about a supernatural tree that once grew on the island with berries that were food for the Irish fairy folk. Thus in the poet's imaginative thought, if not explicitly in the poem itself, esoteric or occult forces were at play, and in a figurative sense, at least, the escape involved was, in the words of the letter to his friend, "to fairyland," or a place much like it.

One of the most notable sources of praise for "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" was a letter from Robert Louis Stevenson in distant Samoa. Stevenson wrote that only two other passages of literature had ever captivated him as Yeats's poem did. Yeats himself said later that it was the earliest of his nonnarrative poems whose rhythms significantly manifested his own music. He ultimately developed negative feelings, however, about his autobiographical sentimentality and about instances of what he came to consider unduly artificial syntax. Yet in late life when he was invited to recite some of his own poems for radio programs, he more than once chose to include "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Evidently he wished to offer to that audience what he felt it probably wanted to hear. Evidently he realized that the average Irish homemaker or ordinary working man, then as later, would say in response to the name Yeats: "Oh, yes, I like his 'Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Almost as synonymous with Yeats's name as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is the unusual and foreboding poem "The Second Coming," which was composed in January, 1919, and first published in 1920. It is one of Yeats's few unrhymed poems, written in very irregular blank verse whose rhythms perhaps contribute to the ominous effect created by the diction and imagery. The piece has had a strange critical reception, deriving in part from the paradox that it is one of Yeats's works most directly related to the system of history in *A Vision*, but at the

same time appears to offer reasonably accessible meanings of a significant kind to the average reader of poetry in English.

The more obvious “meanings,” generally agreed on, are implications of disorder, especially in the first section, in which the falcon has lost touch with the falconer, and impressions of horror, especially in the second section, with its vision of the pitiless rough beast slouching through the desert. In the light of the date of composition, the validity of such thematic elements for both Yeats and his audience is immediately evident. World War I had just ended, leaving the Western world in that continuing mood of despondency voiced also in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) which shares with Yeats’s poem the desert image and in Gertrude Stein’s and Ernest Hemingway’s epithet of “a lost generation.”

Composed in 1926 and published in 1927, “Among School Children” is another of Yeats’s most widely acclaimed and extensively studied poems. The two most famous interpretative readings are by Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947) and John Wain in *Interpretations “Essays on Twelve English Poems”* (1955). Although both essays are almost belligerently New Critical, each sees as the overall theme the relationships between natural and supernatural, or between matter and spirit, and the ravages wrought on humankind by the passage of time. Most other analyses tend to accept this same general meaning for the poem as a whole, although almost inevitably there have been some who see the subject as the triumph of art, or something of that sort. With this poem, the problems and difficulties of interpretation have been not so much with larger suggestions of significance as with individual lines or passages in their relationships or supposed relationships to the poem’s broadest meanings. Such tendencies toward agreement about the piece’s general thematic implications are fortunate since they are in keeping with Yeats’s own comments in notes and letters: that physical or temporal existence will waste the youthful students and that the poem is one of his not infrequent condemnations of old age.

**Conclusion.** The poems share other attributes, a number of them related to Yeats’s revived interest at the time in the ballad form. Diction, syntax, and idiom are again as in the ballad or folk song colloquial and uncomplicated. Imagery, too, is earthy, sometimes stark or blunt. At times sound patterns other than rhyme contribute to the songlike effects, and some pieces, although not all, make effective use of the refrain as a device. In these verses, Yeats has come a long way from the amorphous Pre-Raphaelitism of his early lyrics. In them, in fact, he achieves some of the most identifiably “modern” effects in his entire canon.

Related to that modernity is the fact that these late-life songs are anything but simple in content and meaning. Their deceptiveness in this regard has led some early critics to label them especially the scatological ones as tasteless and crude. More recent and perceptive analysts, however, have found them to be, in the words of one commentator, more nearly eschatological. What Yeats is doing thematically in such pieces, in fact, is by no means new to him. As in "Solomon and the Witch," "Leda and the Swan," and some other earlier pieces, he is using the sexual metaphor to explore some of the metaphysical mysteries of human existence.

Yeats wasn't just an old curmudgeon, though. He truly believed in the ability of old forms to modify themselves for the new challenges and possibilities of his modern world. After you read "Sailing to Byzantium," you'll see that this was a pretty huge theme in his poetry, as well. Where Eliot and Pound broke down poetic form completely, Yeats tried to breathe new life into an aging shell.

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