

## **Chapter 2**

### **W.B. Yeats**

#### **A. The Early Phase (up to 1890)**

Yeats's early poetry written between 1883 and 1890 has been seen as vague, gloomy and mournful. It presents sufficient signs, so runs the opinion of major critics, of coming from one who is shy, lonely and lacking the warmth of confidence (Brown 5). The problem has been detected to have taken roots from the prevalent family climate. Yeats was born in 1865 and in 1867, J.B. Yeats, the poet's father, to the chagrin of his wife and astonishment of other family members, declared that he intended to abandon the law for the art. The decision showed profound irresponsibility of a man who could turn his charm on and off at will and sacrificed his family's security to his own sense of how an Irish gentleman should conduct himself. For, J.B. Yeats frequently uttered the creed that "a gentleman . . . is such simply because he has not the doctrine of getting on and the habit of it. The contrast is not against material things, but between those who want and those who don't want to get on, having other important things to attend to" (Hone 24). In painting J.B. no doubt showed his talent and produced a number of good works but could never become financially successful. The pressure and stress it had upon the family is evident from a gloomy letter he writes to his wife in 1873:

I know that years back I have night and day thought of nothing else except how to get a competency. Time can only tell whether I am on the right track. . . . I have

hopes, expectations, but no certain knowledge. I am going on trying to get skill. . . . Possess skill and you possess money – and great skill means a great deal of money. . . . I must grind on as everyone else has done and be patient. Of course it is very unpleasant, and very galling and very humiliating, but to me quite as certainly as to you, unless it is that I *know* that the event will be a success. Show me a better course and I will take it. (Murphy 83)

That this gloomy family atmosphere had bestowed an existential anxiety, an apprehension of incompleteness on the imaginative child is clear from the following confession in *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*: “. . . all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens” (*Autobiographies*, 106).

Susan Yeats, the poet’s mother, was a profoundly unhappy woman who detested the thick materialism and prosaic inhumanity of metropolitan London to which her husband had dragged her against her will. “She would spend hours”, her son recalls, “listening to stories or telling stories of the pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point, or of her own Sligo girlhood, and it was always assumed between her and us that Sligo was more beautiful than other places” (*Autobiographies*, 31). From his mother Yeats heard in his childhood many myths, legends, folk and fairy tales which recurred in many of his mature works and as Deirdre Toomey argues, from her he derived a profound sense of place, a life long respect for folk imagination:

Inasmuch as Yeats is an Irish poet and a poet of Irish Place, landscape and legend, of the “cairn-heaped grassy hill/Where passionate Maeve is stony still”. . . we can thank Susan Pollexfen . . . she gave value to folklore, legend, country wisdom, the irrational, traditional, “unthinking” “lunar” side of life – all that J.B. Yeats rejected. (24-5)

As one who opened a window to the magic world of fairies and the love of the countryside, Susan Yeats in London tried her best to preserve for her children an archaic, immemorial world which modernity was fast demolishing. The conflict may be traced in one of the early poems of 1886, '*The Two Titans*', a political poem. Yeats describes England as a monster:

Over her spotted flesh and flying hair  
And her gigantic limbs, the weary thirst  
Unquenchable still glows in her dull stare,  
As round her, slow on feet that have no blood,  
The phantoms of her faded pleasures walk;  
And trailing crimson vans, a mumbling brood,  
Ghosts of her vanished glories, muse and stalk  
About the sea.

In contrast Ireland is presented as a 'grey haired youth', who is

Worn with long struggles; and the waves have sung  
Their passion and their restlessness and ruth  
Through his sad soul for ever old and young,  
Till their fierce miseries within his eyes  
Have lit lone tapers. (Cited in Mansergh 39-40)

Richard Ellmann has found the poem 'preposterous' on account of its muddled allegory that carries a blunt note of false sentimentalism. The inclination is characteristically to a style full of languor, dream-heavy weariness, indolence and melancholy, exemplified in one of the representative poems of this phase, '*The Sad Shepherd*' :

But o sick children of the world  
Of all the many changing things  
In dreary dancing past us whirled  
To the cracked tune that Chronos sings  
Words alone are certain good. (Qtd. in Jeffares 11)

It was his active participation in politics and study of Irish history and literature that enabled Yeats to come out of the trap of this luxury of mourning and to face reality that provided his poetry a kind of solidity and hardness and made it substantial and sinewy. First he met Charles Hubert Oldham, the leader of a political group at Trinity college, Dublin and participated under his influence, in many debates that had been regularly organized in the Contemporary Club. He encountered a range of Irish opinions on various issues which the Unionist dominated University could never offer. In the Contemporary Club, Yeats's chief antagonist was John.F.Taylor, in whom the young poet faced the force of histrionic authority in the service of a windy, essentially pious Catholic nationalism. In the figure of John O'Leary, another Club disputant, however, he met another effective and profound authority on Irish issues of his day. O'Leary gradually became his mentor.

O'Leary was a Fenian, a member of the revolutionary Brotherhood that had risen in 1867 to assert Ireland's right to independence by force of arms, though personally he did not believe in violence. He had been sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude in 1865, the year Yeats was born, – for treason felony. When he came back to Ireland in 1885, he was warmly received. For, here was a man who had suffered hard for the country and had never lost the faith. Yeats was readily impressed.

O'Leary had not much faith in Parnell's land reform movement and believed that ultimately "a people who are not prepared to fight in the last resort rather than remain slaves, will never be made free by any sort of Parliamentary legerdemain whatsoever" (Pierce 87).

He retained the conviction that a country must be worth fighting for; it must have, he insisted, a cultural life of its own and its citizens must maintain some moral virtues. O'Leary told Yeats that "There are things a man must not do to save a nation" (*Autobiographies*, 96). He advised Yeats to be always in the good book of either the Church or the Fenians, – the two most influential factors in revolutionary Ireland. His curious blend of the public spirit with individual moral concern, in the service of a 'revolutionary elitism' (Brown 39) affected Yeats all through his career.

O'Leary introduced Yeats to the poetry of Davis and his school. He came to know the poets of the 'Nation', Allingham, Mangan, Ferguson and was much impressed by their themes, their sincere effort of glorification of Ireland, though not by their (chiefly Davis's) propagandist stand. He began to devour the new ideas and discussed and disseminated them in the debates of Young Ireland society:

We had no Gaelic but paid great honour to the Irish poets who wrote in English, and quoted them in our speeches. I could have told you at that time the dates of the birth and death, and quoted the chief poems of men whose names you have not heard, and perhaps of some whose names I have forgotten. I knew in my heart that the most of them wrote badly, and yet such romance clung about them, such a desire for Irish poetry was in our minds, that I kept on saying, not only to others but to myself, that most of them wrote well, or all but well. (*Essays*, 3)

Yeats believed in the freedom of art and artists and under no circumstance agreed to make poetry serve a purpose or programme. But in spite of his dislike, he valued them for two reasons, their sincerity and their effort to unify their people. About the first he had O'Leary's approval. Jeffers quotes his reminiscence:

I was so accustomed to find Unionist hating Nationalist, and Nationalist hating Unionist, with the hatreds of Montague and Capulet, that his answer impressed itself on my memory with a distinctness which may seem inexplicable to those who live in more placid lands. ‘Sir Samuel Ferguson’ he replied, ‘is, I understand, a Unionist, but he is a better patriot than I am; he has done more for Ireland than I have done or can ever hope to do. (*W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*, 37)

About the second, Yeats wrote in *A General Introduction for My work* : “. . . but they had one quality I admired and admire, they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people, behind them stretched the generations” (*Essays and Introductions*, 510).

Through O’Leary Yeats became intimate with two other persons, both women, one Katherine Tynan, the other Maud Gonne. Seven years older than Yeats, Tynan regularly conducted evenings of literary conversation at her Clondalkin home. For Yeats this was an opportunity to get acquainted with the middle-class Catholic world that hitherto was barred to him in Sligo and Dublin. Through Maud Gonne, opened the door of another unknown world, that of fiery nationalism.

Impressed much by Yeats’s *Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) Gonne came to visit the poet, or as she believed, to renew an acquaintance (Brown 50), on 30th January, 1889. Even though Yeats discovered that she ‘seemed to understand every subtlety of my own art and especially my spiritual philosophy’ (*Memoir*, 61), Gonne was a firebrand and wanted immediate results. She threw herself to dangerous political and revolutionary activities that placed her under the threat of arrest. But as he saw her, Yeats fell in desperate love with this divine beauty who had ‘a complexion like the blossom of apples’ (*Memoir*, 40) and followed her blindly to participate in revolutionary activities of nationalist politics.

Richard Ellmann in his study *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, finds Yeats's meeting with Maud Gonne and his instant inflammation as a disclosure of the poet's own bifurcated nature, troubled as it had been in the clash between the dreaming and retiring poet on the one hand and the man who aspired to action and achievement in the external world on the other. The conflict has been well explained in Yeats' novel *John Sherman* (1888) where Sherman represents Yeats, the poet, and William Howard, a career conscious Sligo curate and man of purposeful action, stands for the alter personality, Yeats realized he would have to become if he was to win Maud. Summing up the difference between them, Howard at one point in the novel, remarks to Sherman, "Your mind and mine are two arrows. Yours has got no feathers, and mine has no metal on the point." Ellmann takes the clue from here and proceeds in his analysis:

Yeats's dilemma was that he was naturally dreamy, poetic and self conscious, and therefore unable to act with the spontaneity of the man of action. But he could not hope to attract Maud Gonne to a farm life in the west of Ireland; no turning back to Sligo was possible any more. To win her, he would have to be the man of action, organizing and building for Ireland.

But this would be to deny his dreamy, ineffectual self and to play the part of another. Can true love be secured through artifice? So long as love is unsuccessful, it is no longer wholly honest. Had Maud Gonne accepted his love, as she did not, he would have feared that she loved him for qualities superimposed upon his natural ones. He imagined himself as trapping her, and was half pleased when she jumped out of the net. (83)

But in reality Yeats could never come out of the infatuation and passionate love he felt for Gonne, at least in his nationalist phase, until his marriage. Twice he made proposals of marriage to her, twice she rejected. Yet it was under her influence that he joined the Irish

Revolutionary Brotherhood in 1898, organized as a member of Wolf Tone Centennial Committee, memorial celebration of the rebellion of 1798, and in 1902 wrote and produced *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a play that immensely contributed to the swelling tide of nationalism in the country. Maud Gonne herself played the role of the heroine in it and appearing as Ireland, the beautiful daughter of Houlihan, who had but the walk of a queen, completed the full circle for Yeats, who with image and imagination ‘idealized’ motherland within whom merged the beloved.

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* raised question regarding whether such plays should be produced unless the audience or countrymen were prepared to go out and shoot and be shot (Gwynn 158). But Yeats by nature was never an advocate of incendiary literature. O’Leary’s views on the question of violence was sufficient for him as his notion of insurrection and upheaval bore little or no practical realities but emerged or evolved from his familiarity with Irish legend and myth of Cuchulain, from his acquaintance with Madam Blavatsky who from theosophical perspective, predicted an imminent revelation and transformation of the world and from his study of Blake, whose *New Jerusalem* was to emerge out of chaos and ruin (Mansergh 41). Yeats’s real hope for Ireland was not a politician’s platform, it was a poet’s dream, a utopia of Ireland which was supposed to emerge as the ideal nation. Yeats painted Ireland not as it was in fact, but Ireland, as it might become. According to Irish tradition, the ancient ‘fili’ ( bards) were not only skillful in verse making, they had been endowed with an intuitive foresight, and many of the Irish poets, including Yeats, seemed to take pride that this unique faculty was their rightful inheritance from the past (Mansergh 45). The poets, each in his own way, invoked a vision of the country and called forth a model nation, arrayed in new garments. George Russel (A.E.) believed that Gods would return to Ireland and “awaken the magical instinct everywhere and the universal heart of people will turn to the old Druidic

beliefs” (Mansergh 46). Yeats predicted the birth of Celtic twilight and offered the image of an emerging, culturally enriched and united Irish nation.

Once out of the luxury of sorrow and dim, vague, cloudy style of writing, Yeats started to read and learn about Irish mythology and folklore. Previously he was enchanted by a kind of Keatsian concept of beauty. But now the attitude changed to view reality and depict the common life and substantial originality, bearing the refreshing fragrance of the soil. One ready example is ‘*Moll Magee*’, a ballad that narrates the sufferings of a poor deserted woman who lost her only child and unable to bear the shock and injustice of her husband, went mad. However, she retained her faith in God who, she hoped, one day would stand by her:

And sometimes I am sure she knows  
When, opening wide His door  
God lights the stars, His candles  
And looks upon the poor. (C.P. , 27)

The attitude of the poet is evident from the subjective involvement of the poet in the first line, ‘I am sure’. He has left behind the imaginary castle of indolence and come to the soil to meet the real men and women and their saga of daily suffering. It is not that he simply feels pity for them. He recognizes them as part of his own identity, he sees them as an integral part of the image and identity of Ireland.

Another notable poem of this group is ‘*The Stolen Child*’. It is built on the popular belief that fairies often reveal the secret of their magical life to chosen human beings and take them to their land, the land of the heart’s desire. That imaginary world is full of beauty and gaiety but human beings do not have legitimate claim and authority there. The human world may be full of troubles, but it offers the peace of ‘home’, something which has become the

part of our individual identity. Disillusionment is again the theme in ‘*The Meditation of the Old Fisherman*’, a poem in which the refrain “When I was a boy with never a crack in heart”, occurring at regular interval, makes contrast between the happy past and sad present. A steady love for the real world is seen to be developed in Yeats. He seems to find out his area of strength and the route to reach there as well. John Unterecker points out: “If the first eight poems of *Crossways*, Indian and Arcadian in subject matter, represent one road, Yeats briefly wandered on, the remaining eight grimly Irish, represent the one he finally traveled” (73). The road led him to the exploration and glorification of Irish nationalism.

That Yeats had already stepped in the nationalist movement was clear when he wrote the ambitious *Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) that made him famous overnight. Oisín, the Fenian hero of old Irish legends and folk tales, narrates how he met Niamh, fell in love with her and went through numerous adventures in three islands for three centuries and finally came to Ireland to meet his own people, the Fenians:

O Niamh! O white one! If only a twelve hour day,  
I must gaze on the beard of Finn, and move where the old men and young  
In the Fenians’ dwellings of wattle lean on chessboards and play  
Ah sweet to me now were even bald Conan’s slanderous tongue. (C.P., 446)

Fairy Niamh agrees but warns him of the danger of touching the soil. Back in Ireland, Oisín finds it altogether changed. The Fenians are no longer rulers there. The Irish race has been driven to dire poverty and exploitation. He sees two of his old friends carrying a sack of sand and losing balance under the heavy weight. Oisín forgets Niamh’s warning, jumps on the ground from horse back to support the friends, but immediately as he touches the soil, the spell breaks and his ever lasting youth turns into crooked old age. Oisín becomes a “creeping old man full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry”.

In *Wanderings of Oisín* Yeats seems to have identified his duty, that of singing heroic songs to arouse the creeping nation. Oisín, old and fragile, but unconquered in confidence (what Tagore later will call ‘*atmashakti*’), takes leave of St. Patrick and says:

Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians, O cleric to chaunt  
The war songs that roused them of old; they will rise making clouds with their  
breath,  
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath them shall pant,  
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled beneath them in death. (C.P., 445)

True, Oisín dreams, but it is a heroic dream. Yeats did not believe in militant nationalism. For him the true battle ground was the mind, the culture. As a fili, he acknowledged his holy duty to prepare the mental setting of the people, the spiritual domain of Irish nationalism”

We will tear out the flaming stones, and batter the `gateway of brass  
And enter and sayeth ‘No’ when there enters the strongly armed guest;  
Make clean as a broom cleans, and march on as oxen move over young grass;  
Then feast, making converse of wars, and of old wounds, and turn to our rest.

(C.P., 446)

*The wanderings of Oisín* made distinct use of Irish mythology, though it retained in style some influences of European masters, Spenser, Blake, Shelley, and Morris. Yeats came to face the inevitable question he had so long stored up for himself: how was the young artist to serve the cause of Ireland through poetry? He was early convinced of the paradoxical truth that Anglo-Irish literature could best serve the Irish cause, not by narrow political motif but by deriving its essence from the artistic impulse of Europe. Hence he rejected the Devisite propaganda and said

The Irish national writers who have bulked largest in the past have been those who, because they served some political cause which could not wait, or had not enough of patience in themselves, turned away from the unfolding and developing of an Irish tradition, and borrowed the Mature English methods of utterance and used them to sing of Irish wrongs and preach of Irish purposes. Their work was never quite satisfactory, for what was Irish in it looked ungainly in English garb, and what was English was never perfectly mastered, never wholly absorbed into their being.

*(Uncollected Prose, Vol. 1, 360)*

Yeats did not know Gaelic. He spoke in support of using English language, so that people living outside Ireland may also read and know the wealth and resource of Irish culture and the present debasement of that culture under the English rule. But the subject matter must be the rich heritage of Ireland, its glorious past. He believed that Ireland must escape from the phantoms of propaganda and rhetoric, because Ireland alone, by preserving the old Gaelic tradition, retains the hope and ability to revive and recreate 'a portion of old imaginative life' (*Plays and Controversies*, 100):

Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the educated classes, rediscovering for the work's sake called, what I have called, 'the applied arts of literature', the association of literature, that is, with music, speech and dance, and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that artists and poet, craftsmen and day labourer would accept a common design.

*(Autobiographies, 194)*

Yeats's stand is clear. He does not consider that political passion itself, can excite a community to nationhood, or can arouse a nation sufficiently to the struggle of independence.

Far more important to him is the preparation of the mental horizon of that community, its culture, its spiritual domain. Unless the rich heritage and past glories of the people are studied through mythology and legends, until the memories of that collective communal life are revived from folklore and folk art, Yeats knows, nationality cannot form. This is the first task. That being completed, automatically a passion will emerge, – so the social scientists opine, – for the nation’s individual identity, for its unique culture (dream and fairy tales and myth) and natural glories (glens, rock and hills, serenity of forest life etc.). This is the phase of the development of the spiritual domain. During the early part of his career, Yeats found his field of activity here, in the formation of unity of culture and unity of being. Thus he said: “I thought that all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs” (*Autobiographies*, 191). Hence he emphasized on the exploration of the glorious heritage of Irish history and on the recall of its heroic past:

The first thing needful if an Irish literature more elaborate and intense than our fine but primitive ballads and novels is to come into being, is that readers and writers alike should really know the imaginative periods of Irish history. It is not needful that they should understand them with scholars’ accuracy, but they should know them with the heart, so as not to be repelled by what is strange and outré in poems or plays or stories taken there from. The most imaginative of our periods was the heroic age and the few centuries that followed it and preceded the Norman invasion – a time of vast and mysterious shadows, like the clouds heaped round a sun rising from the sea.

*(Letters to the New Island, 107)*

The direction Yeats’s thoughts prefer to take becomes distinct here, when one notices words and phrases like ‘imaginative period of Irish history’, ‘know them with the heart’, ‘not to be repelled by what is strange’, ‘heroic age’, ‘vast and mysterious shadows’,

‘clouds heaped round a sun rising from the sea’. Yeats is no realist. What is more, he is an anti-materialist. Thus he can speak of a ‘transcendental revelation’:

Literature differs from explanatory and scientific writing in being wrought about an invisible soul; . . . these moods are the labourers and messengers of the Ruler of All. . . . Everything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means, for, he belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation. We hear much of his need for the restraints of reason, but the only restraint he can obey is the mysterious instinct that has made him an artist and that teaches him to discover immortal moods in mortal desires, an undecaying hope in our trivial ambitions, a divine love in sexual passion.  
*(Uncollected Prose, 367)*

The recognition of the mysterious nature of art stemmed in Yeats from his belief in the existence of Great Memory and Great Mind of which the individual memory and individual mind are only parts. In his essay “*Magic*”, the ideas have been summarily explained:

- a) The margins of our psyche are not fixed, so many minds can flow in or out of other minds and thus can create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- b) Like minds, there is a store house of one great memory, the memory of nature herself, where one can meet traces of individual memory. The collective memory stores everything, the pros and cons of the concerned culture.
- c) The great Mind and Great memory can be explored by symbols.

One finds here resemblance between Yeatsian view and Jung’s theories of collective unconscious, the archetypal or primordial images. It was Yeats’s constant effort to reshape

and remake the collective memory of the Irish communities, and in doing that he never ignored magic, mystery, occult or the call of imagination, the dance of the soul.

The impetus came primarily from Madame Blavatsky and her theosophical lessons. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century neared the end, new questions came to tease mankind. The biblical faith collapsed. Darwin and his science revealed new truths but the soul and mind had been still more or less unknown, undeciphered. As a reaction to this, many people in Europe refused to accept the universe as explained by the scientific, materialist and rationalist thinkers, but went for supernatural theories. The new movement called itself Theosophy and its chief advocate, Madame Blavatsky said that she had access to a unique oral tradition of supernatural knowledge, preserved as secret wisdom by a group of saints and Buddhist ascetics whom she called 'masters', in the high mountains of Tibet. Yeats already had an entry and interest in theosophical principles from the writings of his school fellow Charles Johnston. According to Johnston the soul passes through seven rounds. In the first round, man is relatively ethereal, not intellectual but super-spiritual. He inhabits an immense but loosely organized body. In the second round his body grows firmer but still less intelligent than intuitive. In the next phase he appears as a giant ape, with intelligence much increased. In the fourth round, which is the normal state of mankind, the size is diminished but intellect achieves enormous progress. In the fifth, consciousness unifies with the spiritual soul and reaches salvation. In the next round humanity hardly attains anymore perfection of body or mind and the last round is altogether too god-like for man in the fourth round to know and describe. Failure to unify with one's spiritual soul in fifth round necessitates a return or further reincarnation, but if the soul passes all seven rounds safely, it attains final salvation and becomes a planetary spirit (Ellmann 61-2).

Yeats got so much interest in Theosophy that he became a regular member of its societies and gradually participated in various occult programmes and experiments. In one

such experiment in January 1888 when he attended a séance, he was forced to utter some prayers and remembering nothing he had to utter the opening lines of ‘Paradise Lost’ from memory. Then his whole body ‘moved like a suddenly unrolled watch spring’. Next he was thrown backward on the wall. “Four years afterwards”, he records, “I would not go to a Séance or turn a table and would often ask myself what was the violent impulse that had run through my nerves. Was it a part of myself – something always to be a danger perhaps; or had it come from without, as it seemed?” (*Autobiographies*, 103-5)

The supernatural had a unique appeal and relevance in the Irish country life. The spectral matters were never far from a social recognition. Yeats’s sister Lily was gifted with a ‘second sight’ in the Irish way. The folklore of Irish countryside too, with its haunting, revenants and changelings, its Hallowe’en games to placate the walking spirits of the dead, was an integral part of everyday awareness (Brown 38). Thus, as Foster suggests in his study “*Protestant Magic: W.B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History*”, there was something traditional and instinctive about Yeats’s preoccupation of the spooky and domestic supernatural (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 243-6).

Yeats had a lifelong love for esoteric supernaturalism and the occult. But more than that, it offered him a route to enter the essential Irish world, where he had found a natural harbor for his art. By that time he had had his patriotic feelings sharpened. An article of 1892 records how he had found an unreceptive audience among the Rhymers’ for the brand of Irish nationalism which he was developing at that time:

I well remember the irritated silence that fell upon a noted gathering of the younger English imaginative writers once, when I tried to explain a philosophy of poetry in which I was profoundly interested, and to show the dependence, as I conceived it, of all great art and literature upon conviction and upon heroic life.

(*Uncollected prose*, Vol.1, 248)

He was fast settling down on the Irish theme and in one particular instance, advocated for the benefit of that to one new comer in the literary art, in a letter written on 30th January, 1989:

You will find it a good thing to make verses on Irish legends and places and so forth. It helps originality – and makes one’s verses sincere, and gives one less numerous competitors. Besides, one should love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one’s life.

The Rhymers’ aesthetic commitment to ‘art’s for art’s sake’, movement left an inhibition for poems written on natural and supernatural grounds. They preferred only the urban impressionist setting. Yeats with his stern dislike of materialism took the opposite way and this was first revealed in his hatred of city London, the metropolis. Where another imaginative and sensitive child might have developed a romance of the metropolis, Yeats even in early childhood ‘began to respond to the glamour of a country whose other name was danger’ (Brown 23). At school, he remembers, “Anti-Irish feeling was running high, for the land league had been founded and land lords had been shot, and I, who had no politics, was full of pride, for it is romantic to live in a dangerous country” (*Autobiographies*, 35).

Dislike soon grew to aversion and horror. To Katharine Tynan Yeats writes:

London is always horrible to me. The fact that I can study some things I like here better than elsewhere is the only redeeming fact. The mere presence of a more cultivated people is a gain, of course, but nothing in the world can make amends for the loss of green field and mountain slope, and for the tranquil hours of one’s own countryside –where one gets tired and move into bad spirits it seems an especial misfortune to live here – it is like having so many years blotted out of life.

(Tynan: *The Middle Years*, 68)

Writing in the same period, Tagore, after his second visit to London, as it will be seen later, expresses identical feelings of repulsion against London and its metropolitan clumsiness. If Tagore's love of nature finds expression in *Manasi* ('Of the Mind'), and *Sonar Tori* ('The Golden Boat'), Yeats records his longings in the famous poem of the volume *The Rose* (1893), *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*. Yeats revealed the story of its composition:

I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake waters. From the sudden remembrance came my poem 'Innisfree', my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. (*Autobiographies*, 153)

The poem projects Yeats's confidence that finally he has got his subject matter:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core. (C.P. , 31)

The heart's content, when explored with love and delight to reach one's national and cultural heritage, yields inexplicable wealth and resources. Yeats recognizes his talent and informs readers in advance:

Know that I would accounted be  
True brother of a company  
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,  
Ballad and story, ran and song;  
Nor be I any less of them

Because the red-rose-bordered hem  
Of her, whose history began  
Before God made the angelic clan,  
Trails all about the written page. . .  
Nor may I less be counted one  
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,  
Because to him who ponders well,  
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell  
Of things discovered in the deep . . . (C.P. , 41)

He has got access to magic, legend, myth and history, he uses all the keys to unlock and restore the old, imaginative life of Ireland and its heroic past. Ready to discover the secret message of ‘Revelation’, Yeats arrives at the dawn, at Celtic twilight, and sings of the beauty of Mother Eire:

Out-worn heart in a time out-worn,  
Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;  
Laugh, heart, again in grey twilight,  
Sigh, heart, again in the dew of morn.  
Young mother Eire is always young  
Dew ever shining and twilight grey. (C.P. , 65)

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## **B. The Second Phase (1890 – 1907)**

Charles Stuart Parnell died on 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1891. Yeats was shocked at the betrayal of his countrymen as they stood indifferent to Parnell who was charged of maintaining extra marital relationship with the wife of Captain O’Shea and as such was forced to resign from his leadership of Irish Parliamentary Party on moral grounds. Parnell could not bear the infamy and died within six months. But three days before his death, in an article “*The Young Ireland League*” (which was published on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1891 in the ‘*United Ireland*’) Yeats stood by Parnell and explained his project:

We are Fenians coming to take care of Mr. Parnell . . . It really seems needful to say that our aim is to help or train up a nation of worthy men and women who shall be able to work for public good, whether we are about to win an Irish parliament or whether the old war against English dominion is still to go on. The general election or the coming of Home Rule itself, will not do away with the need for our work, for our enemies are ignorance and bigotry and fanaticism, the eternal foes of the human race which may not be abolished in any way by the Acts of Parliament.

Yeats had been a great admirer of Parnell, but that did not prevent him from identifying the limitation of Parliamentary Acts and politics in general. He recognized the true enemies of Irish nation and set hands to put in order its ruffled feathers. For him, the objective was to revive the old glory of Celtic civilization, to restore its rich culture and unique heritage so that a resistance is built in the spiritual domain of the nation, steady and alert against vicious materialism in general and also against its offshoots like colonial and imperial exploitation:

The actual work before the League is definite enough. Classes will be organized to teach the history and language of Ireland, lectures will be given upon Irish subjects and most important of all, reading rooms will be started in connection with the various branches. They need not cost much. It has been calculated that a reading room, where the papers of all sides and the best magazines are taken can be kept going on in a country village for 4s or 5s.

*(Uncollected Prose, vol. 1, 207.)*

Yeats found the Irish Literary Society in London and Dublin. John O' Leary and Maud Gonne actively supported him in launching and monitoring the new literary programme. His intent was to make Irish literature autonomous, so that independent of politics, it could consolidate the multi-layered Irish communities from internal rivalry and assemble all under one umbrella, called cultural nationalism. In other words, Yeats was looking for strategies to arrive at a unity of culture and used literature as a means to reach that target. It is literature that could provide him, so he thought, access to the essence of Celticism and Irishry and he was quick to draw attention of his countrymen to the inherited resource:

We have behind us in the past the most moving legends and a history of lofty passions. If we can but take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound with reverie; we may deliver that new great utterance for which the world is waiting. (*ibid.*, 250)

It was insightful for Yeats to recognize the rich wealth of folklore, legends and mythology buried under the uncultivated lands of Irish literature. It gave him unique opportunity to go back to the distant past and dig up remnants of a forgotten, shared culture that paved way for integration and rebirth of a nationality, under the assuring glimmer of a

‘Celtic Twilight’. For, as at the heart of the Empire colonialism and imperialism challenged the liberal Victorian commitment of social progress, in the periphery of that Empire, nationalism at the same time was developing a vision of cultural and social distinctiveness to be asserted in the defiance of the increasingly uniform patterns of scientific and materialist autocracy. In much of his work in the late 1880s and in early 1890s, Yeats revealed himself as a fervent Irish cultural nationalist who clung to Ireland and her natural, original fragrance. Thus he could declare:

Whenever an Irish writer has strayed away from Irish themes and Irish feeling, in almost all cases he has done no more than make alms for oblivion . . . . There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature. (Reynolds 103-4)

Yeats was confident that “we are a young nation with unexhausted material lying with us in our still unexpressed national character, about us in our scenery and . . . behind us in our multitude of legends” (*Uncollected Prose*, 273). He studied and explored the materials, the scenery, the multitude of legends and the essence of that nationality and in the essay “*The Celtic Element in Literature*” (1897) remarked:

Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among the shadows; and that deer, and ravens and foxes, and wolves and bears, and clouds and pools, almost all things under the sun and moon, and the sun and moon, were not less divine and changeable. They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water-jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels; and when a sudden flight of wild duck, or of crows, passed over their heads, they thought they were gazing at the dead hastening to their rest; while they dreamed of so great a mystery in little things that they

believed the waving of a hand, or of a sacred bough, enough to trouble far-off hearts, or hood the moon with darkness. All old literatures are full of these or of like imaginations, and all the poets of races, who have not lost this way of looking at things, could have said of themselves, as the poet of the *Kalevala* said of himself, 'I have learned my songs from the music of many birds, and from the music of many waters'. (2)

But this purity of imagination could not last long. Civilization progressed. Men were forced to move away from nature and learnt absurd meditation:

When a mother in the *Kalevala* weeps for a daughter, who was drowned flying from an old suitor, she weeps so greatly that her tears become three rivers, and cast up three rocks, on which grow three birch-trees, where three cuckoos sit and sing, the one 'love, love,' the one 'suitor, suitor,' the one 'consolation, consolation.' And the makers of the Sagas made the squirrel run up and down the sacred ash-tree carrying words of hatred from the eagle to the worm, and from the worm to the eagle; although they had less of the old way than the makers of the *Kalavala*, for they lived in a more crowded and complicated world, and were learning the abstract meditation which lures men from visible beauty . . . . (2 – 3)

Yeats considered abstract meditation an outcome of rationalism which stood in sharp contrast to natural feeling and intuitive knowledge that always leads to wisdom. He realized that behind the present misery of Ireland lay the reason of a gradual detachment from natural and supernatural roots. In the same essay, "*The Celtic Element in Literature*", he approved the analysis of the Celtic character by Earnest Renan who said that the Celtic race had 'a realistic naturalism', "a love of nature for herself, a vivid feeling for her magic, commingled with the melancholy a man knows when he is face to face with her, and thinks he hears her communing with him about his origin and his destiny" (xxiii). The Celts, according to

Renan, had worn itself out in mistaking dreams for realities and compared with the classical imagination, the Celtic imagination appeared to him as 'the infinite contrasted with the finite'. Yeats agreed to the views of Matthew Arnold also that 'the Celtic passion for nature comes almost more from a sense of her 'mystery' than of her 'beauty,' and it adds 'charm and magic' to nature, and the Celtic imaginativeness and melancholy are alike 'a passionate, turbulent, indomitable reaction against the despotism of fact' (40). To save Irish nationality from disintegration under the lure of materialism and despotism of fact, Yeats directed his countrymen to probe into and revive the old legends and sagas of ancient Celtic life, and he prepared also a checklist of such legends in that essay:

Cuchulain in the Irish folk tale had the passion of victory, and he overcame all men, and died warring upon the waves, because they alone had the strength to overcome him. The lover in the Irish folk song bids his beloved come with him into the woods, and see the salmon leap in the rivers, and hear the cuckoo sing, because death will never find them in the heart of the woods. Oisín, new come from his three hundred years of fairyland, and of the love that is in fairyland, bids St. Patrick cease his prayers a while and listen to the blackbird, because it is the blackbird of Darrycarn that Finn brought from Norway, three hundred years before, and set its nest upon the oak-tree with his own hands. Surely if one goes far enough into the woods, one will find there all that one is seeking. Who knows how many centuries the birds of the woods have been singing? (5)

In order to get back the essential identity of Celtic nationhood Ireland must make a return journey, so Yeats opined, to its glorious past, the seed bed of future harvest. He prepared the seed bed, the spiritual domain of Irish nationalism and underlined its guiding principles in the same essay:

Matthew Arnold asks how much of the Celt must one imagine in the ideal man of genius. I prefer to say, how much of the ancient hunters and fishers and of the ecstatic dancers among hills and woods must one imagine in the ideal man of genius. Certainly a thirst for unbounded emotion and a wild melancholy are troublesome things in the world, and do not make life more easy or orderly, but it may be the arts are founded on the life beyond the world, and that they must cry in the ears of our penury until the world has been consumed and become a vision.

(5 – 6)

“*The Celtic Element in Literature*”, shows Yeats’s growing confidence and maturity in the understanding and handling of the complex elements of Irish nationalism and he distinctly recognized the movement as the opening up a new fountain. It is true that intuitively he said: “none can measure of how great importance it may be to coming times, for every new fountain of legends is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world.” But the worth of this intuition has been historically proved in subsequent times, in Yeats’s own writings, in writings of other exponents of Celtic Twilight, in the plays of Irish National Theatre and in many other fields. It is true that going back to ancient days and to the essence of past civilizations, have not been able to solve all problems of man. It had been true in the case of Yeats too. But it is also true that, Yeats in his part did not sit idle. After defining the character of Irish literature, he jumped into the real field of activities and pushed the literary movement forward, to reach its goal.

A controversy had been running in the pages of a Dublin news paper regarding what was the true intellectual capital of Ireland, Dublin or London. Even though the *Daily Telegraph* editorialized that “it was eminently fitting that, if an Irish literary society is to be formed, its seat should be in London, not in Dublin”, Yeats protested and supported Dublin since, in his opinion, it was the capital of a country that at least appreciated literature whereas

the general people in London had no respect for books whatsoever (*The Collected letters of Yeats*, vol. 1, 297). He was convinced that where Ireland lagged behind was the infrastructure to support its natural, cultural life. A national literary society in Dublin and a circulating library would, he thought, solve the problem for the moment. The society was established in 1892 and it was decided that under the guidance of the London based Irish society, appropriate books would be selected for republication and circulation through the libraries in Ireland. Such a movement was supposed to reinforce nationalist feelings too. But troubles arose from the very beginning regarding aims and policy. Sir Charles Gavan Duffy had been appointed president of the Irish literary society in London. In the 1840s he had been involved in the Young Ireland movement and edited for some years '*The nation*', the most popular of all 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish nationalist publications. Like others of his generations, he held that literature should serve the national cause in the way the poets of the Young Ireland movement attempted. He was anxious to publish the tried works of his old friends who in spite of their patriotism, never wanted to foment extreme separatist opinion (Foster 122). Yeats in contrast, wanted to publish only those books which were written by young poets and which had sharp political teeth (Brown 86). But he soon found out that he had been betrayed by Duffy, Rolleston, J.F. Taylor and other members of the Young Ireland movement. He realized how foolish he had been in disclosing to all of them his own plans and took oath never to repeat that mistake.

The Young Irelanders supported propaganda; to them literature or style was secondary, primary thing was nationalism, though they did not go all out in their hatred against England. They promoted the campaign "Ireland for the Irish", and roused the native Catholics whom they taught the lessons of hatred against the Protestants. That Yeats was by religion a Protestant, went against him.

Yeats on the other hand was a literary artist who could never ignore the aesthetic question of style and taste. Moreover, inexperienced, youthful and imaginative, as he had been, he was possessed by visions and dreams of Ireland's emergence as a unique nation that preserved its spiritual heritage and attained a unity of culture. He could not realize that in spite of his vehement nationalism, he might be suspected for his Protestant origin. When Douglas Hyde delivered his famous speech on "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" and appealed to the Irish people to substitute the foreign, English culture by using everything of Gaelic origin, Yeats appreciated it outright and wrote a letter to the editor of the *United Ireland*:

I agree with every word you said last week about Dr. Hyde's lecture, and, like many others, am deeply grateful to you for your reprint of it in the current number . . . it seems to me the best possible augury for the success of the movement we are trying to create. (*Uncollected Prose*, vol.1, 255)

But although he had been a nationalist, Yeats was not to be guided by parochialism and so against Hyde's insistence on full adoption of Gaelic and complete expulsion of English, he boldly affirmed that what was more important was the content, not the language. To him it was more practical to use English in place of Gaelic which had limited access and was known only to a few people:

Let us make these books and the books of our older writers known among the people and we will do more to de-Anglicise Ireland than by longing to recall the Gaelic tongue and the snows of yesteryear. Let us by all means prevent the decay of that tongue where we can, and preserve it always among us as a learned language to be a fountain of nationality in our midst, but do not let us base upon it our hope of nationhood.

(*Uncollected Prose*, 256)

It was not easy for Yeats to identify his enemies. Love makes man blind. Yeats had two loves, one for magic, myth and dream, best explained in his life-long search for anti-materialist spiritualism, the other for Maud Gonne. Ireland could be the third, but Yeats had already distributed her in the earlier two.

In April 1895, while on a visit to the nationalist folklorist Douglas Hyde in County Roscommon, Yeats discovered the island of Castle Rock in Lough Key. It was just the place, he believed, where he could “centre a Celtic Order of Mysteries to infuse Irish reality with an ancient spirituality in which Paganism and heterodox Christianity combined could help Ireland achieve a transcendental liberation from the materialist world of England’s commercial empire” (Brown 92). Yeats thought of a pan-Celtic universalism in which Ireland, as a place where the mythic, Celtic energy had been trapped, could act as the epicenter. He wanted to restore there, the ancient religion of the world, a project which however, remained unfulfilled.

Under Maud Gonne’s fiery influence Yeats became a member of Irish Republican Brotherhood, a secret organization descending from the Fenian movement, and joined the Centenary Commemoration Committee, that decided to erect a statue of the Irish patriot and martyr, Wolf Tone. Yeats declared that “Ireland was appealing to the past to escape the confusions of the present” (Owens 106). Maud Gonne later recapitulated

. . . the preparation for it had been the really important part, for it had given an opportunity to bring the hope of complete independence and of the means of its attainment –Wolf Tone’s means – slumbering in the hearts of the whole Irish race, to the surface consciousness of the people. (MacBride 259)

It was a difficult time for nationalism in Ireland. The revolutionary factions had been riven by internal conflict and clash of opinions. The huge crowd which turned out to

welcome Queen Victoria in Dublin also left the message that Ireland was safely in the bosom of the Empire. Yeats became the chairman of the Centenary Committee and made the second mistake. He hoped that after laying down the stone, all Irish political parties could be invited to subordinate themselves to his council which would then be, after careful re-election on a more permanent basis, the equivalent of an Irish Parliament, for it would then control the function of the Irish members at the Westminster and could have great strength (Jeffares 115).

But this plan was ruined by the treachery of another Catholic nationalist, Frank Hugh O'Donnell, who reported everything beforehand in a Dublin based newspaper in the name of an imaginary secret society, Count Shanon. Yeats's plan was badly damaged and defeated; annoyed and irritated, he decided to dissociate himself from active politics and to serve his old friend, poetry and his newest passion, The Irish Literary Theatre.

In 1890s Yeats had published a number of Prose works like *The Fairy and Folk Tales of Irish Peasantry*, a two volumed anthology; *Selection from the Irish Novelists*, a collection of stories on Irish background, *The Secret Rose*, *Irish Fairy Tales*, *The Celtic Twilight* etc. In the poem '*The Dedication to a Book of Stories*' he records their central theme. It begins with a sad remembrance of Ireland's glorious past when her literature had been jubilant and vibrant:

There was a green branch hung with many bell  
When her own people ruled their tragic Eire;  
And from its murmuring greenness, calm of Faery,  
A Druid calmness, on all hearers fell. (C.P. 51)

The next stanza describes the capability of literature, how did it charm a people to unity and communal solidarity:

It charmed away the merchant from his guile,  
And turned the farmer's memory from his cattle,  
And humbled in sleep the roaring ranks of battle  
And all grew friendly a little while.

But then the poet grows sad looking at the ruined green branch that symbolizes the present disintegration of Ireland. He resolves to revive the old glory of the country and invokes the bells, symbols for the creative writers, to ring merrily and sing the rebirth of the nation:

. . . gay bells bring laughter  
That shakes a mouldering cobweb from the rafter  
And yet the saddest chimes are best enjoyed.

Among other poems of the volume '*To Ireland in the Coming Times*' has been identified as a remarkable achievement as it offers a defense of Yeats's position as a poet. He identified himself as the true brother of a company "that sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong". And he poured his passion, his dream and imagination to record the story and history of her whose "red – rose –bordered hem" trails all about the written pages. Yeats engaged himself in the making of the land of heart's desire:

I cast my heart into my rhyme  
That you, in the dim coming times  
May know how my heart went with the  
After the red rose bordered hem, (C.P., 41)

Though Yeats seems to put himself here amid the group of 'them', the poets of the Nation school, actually after the evaporation of initial enthusiasm, he did not like the propagandist style followed by them, especially by Davis. Later, in the essay "*Poetry and Tradition*" (1907) he would analyze his real point of difference from the 'brothers':

It was our criticism I think, that set Clarence Mangan at the head of the Young Ireland poets in the place of Davis, and put Sir Samuel Ferguson, who had died with but little fame as a poet, next in the succession. Our attacks, mine especially, on verse which owed its position to its moral or political worth, roused a resentment which even I find it hard to imagine to-day, and our verse was attacked in return, and not for anything peculiar to ourselves, but for all that it had in common with the accepted poetry of the world, and most of all for its lack of rhetoric, its refusal to preach a doctrine or to consider the seeming necessities of a cause. Now, after so many years, I can see how natural, how poetical even, an opposition was, that showed what large numbers could not call up certain high feelings without accustomed verses, or believe we had not wronged the feelings when we did but attack the verses. (*Essays and Introductions* , 257)

The wrong which England had done to Ireland was, in Yeats's opinion, cultural and literary as well as political and economic (*Uncollected Prose*, 35). The poets of the Nation school strove to arouse the native Irish people to make them claim what was their rightful demand, Ireland for the Irish. Himself much interested and active in the formation of the 'Unity of Culture' and 'Unity of Being', Yeats nonetheless, was a less political poet and accordingly had the primary mission to make the world believe that Ireland possessed an important literature. Therefore he was more willing to recall the glorious and resourceful past of Ireland to reclaim its rich mythology, legends and lores which unveiled the untrodden ways leading to the spiritual domain of the nation, the plinth upon which the political Ireland could comfortably rely. Yeats had for his country sociological and economic plans too. Ellmann refers to the speech he delivered in New York in 1904:

What is this nationality we are trying to preserve, this thing that we are fighting English influence to preserve? It is not merely our pride. It is certainly not any

national vanity that stirs us on to activity. If you examine to the root a contest between two peoples, two nations, you will always find that it is really a war between two civilizations, two ideals of life. First of all we Irish do not desire, like the English, to build up a nation where there shall be a very rich class and a very poor class. Ireland will always be in the main an agricultural country. Industries we may have, but we will not have as England has, a very rich class, nor whole districts blackened with smoke like what they call in England their 'Black Country'. I think the best ideal for our people, an ideal very generally accepted among us, is that Ireland is going to become a country where, if there are few rich, there shall be nobody very poor. (Yeats: *The Man and the Mask*, 116)

But it is also true that Yeats, after all, had been a visionary and one who could never be forgetful of his original aim. So he continues in the same speech:

And then Ireland too, as we think, will be a country where not only will the wealth be well distributed but where there will be an imaginative culture and power to understand imaginative and spiritual things distributed among the people. We wish to preserve an ancient ideal of life. Wherever its customs prevail, there you will find the folk song, the folk tale, the proverb and the charming manners that come from ancient culture.

If this is the familiar Yeatsian stance in public speech, the same has been reflected in poetry too, for instance, in the poem '*The valley of the Black Pig*':

The dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears  
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,  
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries

Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.  
We who still labour by the cromlech on the shore,  
The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew,  
Being weary of the world's empires, bow down to you,  
Master of the still stars and of the flaming door. (C.P. 63)

“All over Ireland”, Yeats writes in the notes to this poem, “there are prophesies of the coming rout of the enemies of Ireland in a certain Valley of the Black Pig, and these prophesies are, no doubt, now, as they were in the Fenian days, a political force. I have heard of one man who would not give any money to the land league, because the battle could not be until the close of the century but as a rule, periods of trouble bring prophesies of its near coming (*Collected Poems*: “Notes”, 526-7). The Celtic atmosphere of the poem is evident: the violent clash and armed rebellion of Ireland against England is conceived in a dream vision, which in an uncanny way seems to foretell what will be coming in Easter 1916. “The poem seems to move forward, but the spears and horsemen intend to glorify the ancient heroic past. The imminence of violence and decisive action arising out of weariness and disappointment with the ‘world’s empires’ refers to the heated political domain of the revolutionary nationalism in Ireland” (Watson 93).

The best poem in the volume *The Wind Among the Reeds*, however, is ‘*The Secret Rose*’, which Yeats used as the introduction to his volume of stories with the same name:

I too, await  
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.  
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,  
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?  
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,  
Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose? (C.P. 67)

The lines are supposed to ventilate three primal aspirations of Yeats with which he had been preoccupied at this stage of life: gain of Maud Gonne's love, revelation through magic and revival of the heroic past. "The Rose" symbolizes all three. In his occultist experiments Yeats found that symbols had a strange force of elemental powers behind them. Their area of reference is limitless, their impact, wide, profound and undefinable:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of long associations evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down upon us certain disembodied powers whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion.

*(Essays and Introductions, 156-57)*

*The Wind Among the Reeds* has been accused to be vague, not much cured of the old fascination of clouded gloom and dream-heavy phrases. But it is also to be acknowledged that, Yeats, under the influence of Symons and the French symbolist poets, learnt here the skillful use of symbols that not only enriched the texture of his poems but enabled him to go for that Unity of Being which was explored through heritage, history, culture, nation and individual passion in many of his subsequent poems.

Failure in his venture of active politics proved blissful for Yeats, as he became more and more convinced that an ideological battle had to be won first against his enemies before the elite and populace could be trusted to seek unity through the ways he devised for them to follow, and founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897 to achieve that end. The prospectus of the theatre made it clear that its objective was to create a new kind of audience and project a new image of Ireland:

We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience, trained to listen by its passion for oratory – we will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of sentiments, as it has been represented but the home of an ancient idealism. (cited in Fallis 87)

Yeats explained his ideas more elaborately in two letters which show his concern for both nationalism and its spiritual impact, to be sparked from the Irish Literary Theatre. First one is addressed to Fiona Macleod in January 1897:

My own theory of poetical or legendary drama is that it should have no realistic, or elaborate, but only a symbolic and decorative setting. A forest, for instance, should be represented by a forest pattern and not by a forest painting. One should design a scene which would be an accompaniment not a reflection of the text. This method would have the further advantage of being fairly cheap, and altogether novel. The acting should have an equivalent distance to that of the play from common realities. (The *Letters of W.B. Yeats*: Wade 280)

The second one is larger and addressed to the editor of *The Daily Chronicle* on January 27, 1899:

The lull in political life of Ireland has been followed, among the few, by an intellectual excitement so remarkable that a learned German is writing a book about it; and among the many, by that strange sense of something going to happen which has always in all countries given the few their opportunity. The best among the leisured class have begun to read Irish books and Irish history with a curious passionate interest and the unleisured class has always had its ballads and legends, which are the beginnings of literature and the arts. We will have difficulty at first, for some, who do not dislike the modern theatre, or who

dislike it for wrong reasons, will come to see our plays out of patriotism, and miss that appeal to the senses which they have mistaken for drama; but even they will not hate us as London playgoers hated the founders of the Independent Theatre. We will however, gradually draw to us no great audience indeed, but one drawn from different classes, which will add to a true understanding of drama an interest in the life and in the legends on which our plays are founded so deep that it will give us that freedom to experiment, that freedom to search for the laws of what is perhaps a lost art, which even the most cultured London audience, with its half-conscious disbelief in the theatre, would not be able to give us. I know these people upon whom I rely, for I have worked with them and lived with them, and though I have heard them discuss what would seem to most Englishmen hopes and beliefs too wild even for laughter, I have not heard them exalt material above immaterial things, or claim any foundations for the arts but in moral and spiritual truths. The contemplation of great sacrifices for great causes, the memory of rebellions and executions, the reveries of a religious faith, founded in visions and ecstasies, and uncountable old tales told over the fire, have given them imaginative passions and simple and sincere thoughts. (ibid, 310-11)

To build on the innate, imaginative passion, emotion and thoughts of the Irish people, to excite them intellectually when a strange lull had arrested the political life of Ireland, Yeats relied on *Countess Cathleen* (1891), his first play on Irish Literary Theatre. But controversy arose regarding the conclusion where Yeats makes Countess Cathleen sell her soul to the agents of Devil, so that in lieu of the money derived from that action, starving and dying Irish peasants could save their lives during the famine. Edward Martyn, Yeats's fellow partner in the theatre project, could not accept this and opined that for selling her soul

to Devil, the Countess should suffer in hell. But in Yeats's play she goes to heaven, as Yeats writes:

The Light of Lights

Looks always on the motive, not the deed.

The shadow of shadows on the deed alone.

For Martyn and his conscience, this was too much. He gathered some opinion of unnamed sources which denounced the play. Yeats and Lady Gregory consulted two religious authorities, Father Barry and an Irish Jesuit. They received clean-chit. New forces joined the controversy as George Moore, a radical, denounced Yeats's submission of a work of art to theology for approval. On the other hand, Hugh O'Donnell, Yeats's old enemy, published a pamphlet, "*Souls for Gold*" and circulated the words of the Devil in the play, as Yeats's own words, which, in his view insulted Irish womanhood. But despite all commotion and hurly burly, Yeats faced the situation boldly and the play was performed on the scheduled date.

In spite of the overt autobiographical tone of the play (Yeats as Kevin, Maud Gonne as Cathleen, Jeffares: *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography*, 72) *Countess Cathleen* is basically a political play that intends to arouse nationalist feelings. Yeats himself drew attention to this in his Preface to *Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1891):

The chief poem is an attempt to mingle personal thought and feeling with the beliefs and customs of Christian Ireland; whereas the longest poems in my earlier book endeavoured to set forth the impress left on my imagination by the Pre-Christian cycle of legends. . . . Ireland having a huge body of tradition behind her in the depths of time will probably draw her deepest literary inspiration from this double fountain head if she ever, as is the hope of all her children, makes for herself a great distinctive poetic literature. She has already many roving songs

and ballads which are quite her own. The 'Countess Cathleen' like the 'Wanderings of Oisín' is an attempt to write a more ample method to feeling not less national, Celtic and distinctive. (xii)

*Countess Cathleen* explores a new religious route to advance Yeats's primary concern of nation building through the project of unity of culture. The Countess wins the peasants' sympathy by selling her soul for their well being and thus reinforces the bond between aristocracy and peasantry, a model Yeats has followed throughout. The Irish background of the sufferings of great potato famine also exposes the British reluctance to support Ireland during her crisis and Yeats sharpens the nationalist sentiment by introducing two merchants who purchase souls in lieu of gold and represent England, the nation of shopkeepers. The glorification of the motive behind the deed and not the deed itself, in a novel way patronized and had a lasting effect on nationalist movement in Ireland.

But Yeats's next play *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan* (1902) created history and made commentators remark that "the Irish Dramatic Movement was conceived on the afternoon Yeats talked with Martyn and Lady Gregory in the great house in County Galway, but it was born at the production of *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan*" (Fallis 94). In 1902 the Irish Literary Theatre had been turned into the Irish National Theatre of which Yeats was the President, and in the first opportunity he hit the bull's eye and wrote something of 'real action' which satisfied all the nationalists and Maud Gonne as well. The origin of the play had been a dream that projected a cottage where amid fire-light and talk of marriage appeared an old woman in a long cloak and assisted Yeats in the presentation of a political allegory.

The year is 1798, the place, County Mayo. Sustained by the hopes of getting her 'four beautiful green fields' back and driving the strangers out of her house, the old woman – who is Ireland herself and who is familiar with the Irish people as Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan – contemptuously rejects the family's offer of money and says, "If anyone would

give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all'. She goes off to seek her true friends and mutters:

It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked, many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken, many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid. [She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing.]

They shall be remembered for ever,

They shall be alive for ever,

They shall be speaking for ever,

The people shall hear them forever. (*Collected Plays*, 86)

Responding to her call, Michael, the eldest son of the peasant family rushes out and forgets all about his marriage on the following day. Asked by his father whether he has seen any old woman going down the path, the young son replies: "I did not, but I saw a young girl and she had the walk of a queen."

The young queen, whom Yeats and Lady Gregory conjured into existence in the autumn of the year in which queen Victoria died, was no beneficent aged mother, reigning over a settled Empire, but a threatening figure (Brown, 136), unifying Ireland in her nationalist struggle against England. The play combining Lady Gregory's fascination for tales of martyrdom and Yeats's longing for magical transformation of reality, stroke a miracle and mesmerized its spectators. Stephen Gwynn recapitulates in *Irish Literature and Drama* its effect:

The effect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot. Yeats was not alone responsible; no doubt but Lady Gregory had helped him to get the peasant speech so perfect; but above all Miss Gonne's impersonation had stirred the audience as I have never seen another audience stirred. (158)

The success of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* did not last long for Yeats. In 1903 Maud Gonne was married to John MacBride, and became a Catholic. Yeats was deeply hurt and his impulse to write truly romantic poems came to a halt with the terrible jolt. Madame MacBride later realized its impact upon him:

As we sat together through the long boredom of conventions and committee meetings, where his dominating personality and practical grasp of detail made him a powerful ally, it sometimes seemed like using a fine Toledo blade instead of a loy in the spade work of political organization, but I remember Willie's astonished pleasure when, after a meeting, some shy boy would come up and shake his hand because he had read his poems and loved them; I know that contact was good for him. After my marriage and during my long sojourn in France, he lost this contact and became more unaware of the forces working for Ireland's freedom. (A *Servant of the Queen*, 118)

Even though Yeats did not like to be engaged anymore in the 'spade work' of political matters, situation demanded his interference in the controversy over Synge's drama, *The Playboy of the Western world* (1907) which was charged to insult Irish peasant women by showing them in love with one who has killed his own father. A public meeting was held in the Abbey to discuss the *Play Boy* and Yeats fought the case on artistic grounds against the political interests:

The failure of the audience to understand this powerful and strange work [*The Play Boy of the Western World*] has been the one serious failure of our movement, and it could not have happened but that the greater number of those who came to shout down the play were no regular part of our audience at all, but members of parties and societies whose main interests are political. (*Explorations*, 229)

The Irish Dramatic movement had an immense influence on Ireland's cultural rebirth and made critics say:

The Abbey had done as much and more than any nationalist to prove that Ireland was indeed 'the home of an ancient civilization'. Yeats's plays spoke to one vision of Ireland in their intricate symbolism and passionate reverie, Lady Gregory's spoke to another, Synge's to yet a third. . . . No one vision was complete or perhaps even ultimately true, but each was a kind of truth about the Ireland that was and the Ireland that could be. Those visions, the products of the dramatic genius of Ireland's playwrights, had made drama one of the great and lasting achievements of the Irish Renaissance. (Fallis 115)

Still, the *Play Boy* crisis was 'a blow to Yeats's plan for moulding a new cultural outlook in Ireland and changed his attitude from doubt to certainty that there could be no appreciation of art or literature in this 'blind bitter land' (Jeffares: *In Excited Reverie*, 155). Angrily he wrote in the poem '*Fascination of What is difficult*':

My curse on plays  
That have to be set up in fifty ways,  
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,  
There business, management of men.  
I swear before the dawn comes round again  
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt. (C.P., 104)

The ugly side of politics disillusioned Yeats completely and almost in the same years when Tagore, dis-satisfied with boycott and other anti-partition agitations, would be leaving the political arena, he changed his route solely to literature, and in deed, found out the stable and pulled out the bolt. In '*The Coming of Wisdom with Time*', he wrote:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;

Through all the lying days of my youth

I swayed my leaves and flowers in the Sun

Now may I wither into the truth. (C.P., 105)

Yeats launched himself in search of the truth.

.....

### C. The Final Phase (1907- 1922)

Yeats stood by Synge in the ‘*Playboy*’ controversy, on purely artistic grounds. But in one important sense his art stands miles away from that of Synge, that is, in the issue of presenting the Irish peasant class. Synge knew Irish. He lived with the people of the West and the islanders in their own cottage. He presented their raw energy and desperate struggle with nature almost with a symbolic force and made it realistic too, by supplying Gaelic and the peasant’s turn of speech on the lips of his rustic characters. Yeats never attempted that. He had a clear vision of what he intended to do. He never wanted to present Ireland and Irish people in historical and sociological grounds. Watson George analyses his strategy and approach:

There was a genuine idealism in the romantic republican tradition which meshed with a genuine romantic idealism in Yeats himself. The revulsion from the comic stereotypical Irishman of Punch with his ‘amusing’ tipsiness, unreliability, inability to speak proper English and farcical indifference to tomorrow, underlay much of the idealization in the writings of the literary revival. Both Yeats and Lady Gregory saw the prime aim of their work at the outset as the necessity to bring back dignity to the image of Ireland, both at home and abroad. The intransigence of the republican tradition, the persistence of the ideal of selfless service to a romantic vision of Ireland through fair times and foul, the self-perpetuating legendary quality of this romantic nationalism which could invest the present and the future with the glamour of a glorious past ( “They shall be remembered for ever”, says the Old Woman, and proves it by citing her own litany of the glorious dead) – all of this certainly suggests and supplies images and symbols of more ‘dignity’ . . . . ( 90)

Behind this idealization of peasantry Yeats had two impulses, both strong from personal perspectives. The first one was his preoccupation with magic, supernaturalism and the occult. The second one was his interest in a different kind of Ireland, the Ireland of folk and fairy. F.S. Lyons has assessed the nature of these joint motives and their impact, in a rhetorical way:

After all, had he not invested largely in a supernatural world over which eventually he seemed to assume almost proprietary rights? And did he not as early as 1893 gather his knowledge of fairy tales and folklore into a book which he actually called *The Celtic Twilight*? And had he not accustomed his readers to recognize that grey, ghostly twilight as the hour before dawn, when ‘this world and the other draw near’? Since Yeats never lost his passionate belief in the supernatural, though it became more various and sophisticated as he grew older, it is understandable that the connection with the Celtic twilight should continue for many people to be the hall mark by which he is most easily recognizable. (212)

The idealism in Yeats quite naturally then, met and identified itself with the idealism in romantic nationalism of republican Ireland. It was romantic because it carried and conveyed the age old saga of heroic defeat. All through his life Yeats had an emotional and spiritual commitment to lost causes and he related failure, the economic and political failure of Irish nationalist movement, with spirituality and a design of higher kind of powers than merely material. He had the genius to convert his personal interest in the occult into an interest for mystic life itself, that found expression in numerous of his fairy and folk tales, in stories and visions of Irish Peasantry. What was esoteric in Madame Blavatsky’s theosophical society, after all became common and popular ‘when one met it among sturdy Connemara men’ (Watson 96). Peasantry thus gave Yeats a unique opportunity to explore

supernaturalism in popular culture and in turn was charged by his spiritual convictions.

Watson continues:

The image of the peasant was the focal point of a racial and cultural clash of images in the nineteenth century. For many Englishmen, Paddy and his Pig stood for the comic slovenliness of the Irish, a kind of Caliban whose poverty and lack of education was proof positive of Ireland's inability to govern herself. The cartoons of Tenniel in *Punch* make the point with striking visual immediacy. Therefore, in the battle to bring back dignity to Ireland, to prove it to be 'the home of an ancient idealism', the rehabilitation of the peasant was a top priority for many Irish writers. For Yeats the folklore of the peasants indicated their access to a spirituality markedly superior to the gross philistinism which, taking his cue not only from Arnold but also from his own experience, he saw as dominating the urban culture of materialist Victorian Britain. This opposition – archaic, peasant but spiritual Ireland versus modern, urban and materialist Britain – became an article of faith among literary revivalists. The Irish countryman could never fall victim, to the utilitarian materialism which afflicted the unfortunate Englishman, because his racial memory, imagination, even his very landscape, were saturated with the ethos of an alternative and ancient world.

(96-7)

The idealization of peasantry thus enabled Yeats to treat the rural and country life in a purely romantic way, to explore it far away from the 'sick hurry' and 'divided aims' of modern materialism, into deep forests where mystery reigned rather than beauty. He himself explains its nature in the essay "*The Celtic Element in Literature*" :

Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among the shadows. . . . They worshipped

nature and the abundance of nature, and had always, as it seems, for a supreme ritual that tumultuous dance among the hills or in the depths of the woods, where unearthly ecstasy fell upon the dancers, until they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon; and, as some think, imagined for the first time in the world the blessed country of the gods and of the happy dead. They had imaginative passions . . . and had immortal models about them. The hare that ran by among the dew might have sat upon his haunches when the first man was made, and the poor bunch of rushes under their feet might have been a goddess laughing among the stars; and with but a little magic, a little waving of the hands, a little murmuring of the lips, they too could become a hare or a bunch of rushes, and know immortal love and immortal hatred. (2)

True, this saved Yeats from what was awkward for him, the socio-historical reality of the Irish peasant's devout Catholicism. Nevertheless, the character he establishes in his works of a race dignified by the heritage of a mythology and folklore which are vibrant, alive and respectful of an antiquity, running deep within the culture, – had a powerful nationalist appeal. It gratified the Irish wish to believe that in spite of her history of defeat, Ireland retained an unconquered soul, replete with a moral and spiritual freshness and glory. Yeats ensured that Ireland's attainment of political ends was not worth the degeneration of its peasantry and the loss of her soul. He fought courageously to nourish and protect this spiritual domain of Irish nationalism.

The Irish peasants, as Yeats conceived them, were uncorrupted by urban civilization. They lived in close union with the wild nature, the wind and the sea. They were not aware of Locke, logic or rationalism but lived in a simple way, following habit of forefathers and their own instinct. Their words and deeds revealed their unpremeditated joyous energy:

‘Though logic-choppers rule the town,  
And every man and maid and boy  
Has marked a distant object down,  
An aimless joy is a pure joy’,

Or so did Tom O’Roughley say  
That saw the surges running by,  
‘And wisdom is a butterfly  
And not a gloomy bird of prey’.     (*Tom O’Roughley*, C.P. 116)

Yeats uses ‘butterfly’ in his verses to symbolize the intuitive delight that stands in contrast to logic and reason, symbolized by the hawk. “The peasants, Yeats presents, move unburdened as the dawn, and in their joyous ignorance get harmonized with nature” (Mansergh 49).

The dichotomy between spirit and flesh is a central issue in Yeats’s philosophy and he never hesitates to identify the peasants with the physical urge of human life, with its animal energy, vitality and instinct. He hates the abstract intellect. Yeats often describes their untutored, green passion:

I would be ignorant as the dawn  
That merely stood, rocking the glittering coach  
Above the cloudy shoulders of the horses;  
I would be – for no knowledge is worth a straw –  
Ignorant and wanton as the dawn. (*The Dawn*, C.P. 121)

Such a people, Yeats believed, could live in a spiritual bond with the natural world and in that unity could perceive Ireland as a holy land. Their lives there would be guided by a natural religion, that had long preserved the spiritual domain of the nation and its common, collective desire, to live together amid rough winds and rain and sun-shine.

But after the ‘*Playboy*’ controversy, Yeats somewhat withdrew himself from his passionate project of formulating a unity of culture. He had been in his ‘Celtic Twilight’ phase. Now he came back to recover and restore his Anglo-Irish identity. A number of reasons have been pointed out by critics behind this shift. F.S.Lyons holds that Yeats at this time fully realized his futile and fragile position in Irish nationalist politics. He had been caught in a cross-fire from unionists and nationalists. The unionists distrusted him partly because they did not understand, nor did they bother about his arts and ideals, but still more because of his ‘advanced’ nationalist position which had been regularly tutored by Maud Gonne and the Fenian, John O’Leary.

Nationalists on the other hand distrusted him partly because they could never be sure that he really had deserted his caste, and partly because their theory of culture was quite different from his. Under Devisite influence they required propaganda, and such was their influence that after her marriage with MacBride, – a marriage which has been recognized by many critics as Yeats’s reason of disillusionment and departure from the Celtic movement, – even Maud Gonne went against Yeats and in the controversy over Synge’s play ‘*The Shadow of the Glen*’, blatantly discarded aesthetic theories of Yeats regarding freedom of art: “We are in a life and death struggle with England . . . and have not time and energy for purely literary and artistic movements unless they can be made to serve directly and immediately the National cause” (MacBride White 178). Yeats would have none of this. Patiently but confidently he wrote in the *United Irishman* on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1903:

One can serve one’s country alone out of the abundance of one’s own heart, and it is labour enough to be certain that one is in the right, without having to be certain that one’s thought is expedient also. (Kelly: *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 3, 449)

From the beginning of his career he had a firm conviction that

No nation, since the beginning of history, has ever drawn all its life out of itself. . . . If Ireland is about to produce a literature that is important to her, it must be the result of the influences that flow in upon the mind of an educated Irishman today. . . . Gaelic can hardly fail to do a portion of the work, but one cannot say whether it may not be some French or German writer who will do most to make him an articulate man. (cited in Lyons 215)

Yeats believed in the freedom of imagination and freedom of artist. He found that freedom in folklore and said:

Folklore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare and even Dante, Goethe and Keats were little more than folklorists with musical tongues. The root-stories of the Greek poets are told today at the cabin fires of Donegal . . . . (*Uncollected prose*, vol.1, 284)

When that freedom was challenged, Yeats withdrew himself from his Celtic project of the 'unity of culture'.

Watson in his analyses, however, looks at the issue from a different angle, though comes to a more or less similar conclusion:

But the very success of Yeats's literary movement, alongside the efforts of the Gaelic league, The Gaelic Athletic Association and like organizations, in raising the national consciousness, brought difficulties down on the poet's head, and rammed home to him again his Anglo-Irish predicament. Yeats's 'broadness' was too broad for many of a nationalist persuasion, who wished that he would keep writing more *Cathleen ni Houlihans* . . . (100)

As long as Yeats kept himself pre-occupied with occult experiments, fairy and folk tales and myths and legends of distant Celtic past and wrote poems, nobody bothered either with his subject or with his style. But when the revival of past glories came to influence the people and the dream of united Ireland gave birth to successful cultural movement that led Irish nationalism to new horizons and brought back the interest of common people after the Parnellite and anti-Parnellite clash and chaos, Yeats was no longer to be taken lightly and ignored. The anxiety reached the climactic point of threat with the success of Yeats's next venture, the Irish national theatre movement. The objective of bringing back dignity to Ireland, the desire to establish it as the true home of an ancient idealism, was seriously wounded by the 'Irish Irelanders' who by challenging Yeats's *Countess Cathleen* on religious ground, in reality attacked his Protestant birth and superior class dignity. That Yeats was aware of the prejudice, has been well reflected in the *Autobiographies*:

If I must attack so much that seemed sacred to Irish Nationalist tradition, I must, I knew, see to it that no man suspect me of doing it to flatter Unionist opinion. Whenever I got the support of some man who belonged by birth and education to University or Castle, I would say, 'Now you must be baptized of the gutter'. (233)

In *Wanderings of Oisín* Yeats presented the pagan world. When this, along with his love of magic and fairy and occult was cited to challenge his Christianity, he wrote *Countess Cathleen* to disprove the charge. Now the charge aimed his Protestant origin which it was impossible to avert or rectify. Yeats realized that what was really under attack was not so much his birth, as his attitude, his idealism, that could not endure the political propaganda and its complex materialist calculation. Yeats characteristically defied the instinct of keen measurement of profit and loss, the greed of lowliness to grasp everything and ensure a material gain at the cost of spirit and value.

He was laughed at and labeled as a Protestant enemy willing to corrupt the religious faith of the naïve Catholic majority of Ireland. But the furore over Synge's '*Shadow of the Glen*' (1903) and then over '*The Playboy*' disillusioned him completely. He got weary of 'the daily spite of this unmannerly town' and attacked back his enemies, the Catholic bourgeoisie, in the famous poem '*September 1913*':

What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence  
And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
You have dried the marrow from the bone?  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave. (C.P., 86)

The middle class and its concern for material gain Yeats could never approve. And he contrasted it with the high values and passionate sacrifice of the great heroes of Irish history, who by the cost of their lives once gave birth to 'romantic Ireland':

Yet they were of a different kind,  
The names that stilled your childish play,  
They have gone about the world like wind,  
But little time had they to pray  
For whom the hangman's rope was spun  
And what, God help us, could they save?  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave. (C.P., 86-7)

The bitter irony is at the end of line six, in the skillful use of pun in the word 'save'. The bourgeoisie is always preoccupied with their interest to 'save' how much they can. Money and matter they want to have in their grip. But freedom can neither be achieved nor be preserved in their closing fists. Those who wanted to save Ireland, devoted their everything and did never repent. They did never want to 'save' any coin, nor could they think of Ireland's ever becoming a nation of mere 'savers':

Was it for this that the wild geese spread  
The grey wing upon every tide;  
For this that all that blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
And Robert Emmet and Wolf Tone,  
All that delirium of the brave?  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave. (C.P.,87)

The rising middle class in Ireland never cared for 'the delirium of the brave'. More than that, they infuriated Yeats also by their rejection of the arts. "This reached a climax when Lady Gregory's nephew Hugh Lane withdrew his offer to give his collection of modern French painting to Dublin, because not enough money was raised to provide a suitable gallery and because he and his pictures were subject to scurrilous abuse" (Lyons 216). Yeats first overlooked the abuse and implored a wealthy man, Lord Ardilaum to stand by the Lane project. Ardilaum's argument was that money should not be given unless there was a clear public demand for the project. He was forbidden by the Catholic middle class leaders to open his hands in this art project, which was after all a 'Protestant venture'. Yeats recognized the persons behind the curtain. In his counter argument in the poem '*To a Wealthy Man*' he

stressed that there was no need of public opinion when a great and useful work was to be done:

Let Paudeens play at pitch and toss,  
Look up in the sun's eye and give  
What the exultant heart calls good  
That some new day may breed the best  
Because you gave, not what they would,  
But the right twigs for an eagle's nest! (C.P., 86)

And he criticized the representative figure of the Paudeen, Martin Murphy, vehemently in the poem, '*To A Shade*', where a passionate appeal is made to Parnell's ghost:

A man  
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought  
In his full hands what, had they only known,  
Had given their children's children loftier thought,  
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins  
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,  
And insult heaped upon him for his pains,  
And for his open handedness, disgrace;  
Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set  
The pack upon him. (C.P., 88)

It is clear then, that after 1907, Yeats had changed track from the simple minded nationalism of his impetuous youth. His disillusionment about the project of achieving a Celtic unity of culture, his friendship with Synge and especially Lady Gregory, the influence of the latter's artistic responsibility and refined culture, his reading of Nietzsche and the Italian

renaissance artist Castiglione's *The Courtier*, his friendship with Ezra Pound who had a general contempt for the public and popular art – everything pushed him back to his Anglo-Irish identity and Yeats began to search his roots there.

Conor Cruise O'Brien in his discussion of Yeats's politics has accused the poet to be an opportunist, who according to him, after 1907 found a congenial environment to reassert his Protestant sense of class-superiority. In the years of his nationalist Celtic phase, this Irish Protestant, says O'Brien, ". . . had necessarily emphasized his Brashness, minimizing or denying the separate and distinct tradition which the word Protestant implies. The Protestant now re-emerged with an audible sigh of relief. It had been stuffy there, and getting stuffier" (*Notes on the Politics of Yeats*, 222).

O'Brien's principal charge against Yeats is this, that Yeats from the very beginning tried to maintain a duality. True, he once spoke of cultural unity in Ireland, but there too, he wanted that Protestant Ireland would offer leadership and the Catholic middle class Ireland would merely obey the call. When this project failed and his prejudice was exposed, Yeats, says O'Brien, cleverly went back to his original group identity and glorified Protestant Ascendancy culture, in the name of glorifying romantic Ireland. He did speak in favour of liberty, especially artistic freedom, and battled against authoritarianism, but not against all types of authoritarianism. His class prejudice prevented him. O'Brien continues, in another of his articles:

He defended the liberty of the artist, consistently. In politics, true to his duality, he defended the liberty of Ireland against English domination, and the liberty of his own caste – and sometimes, by extension, of others – against clerical domination. Often these liberties overlapped, and the cause of artist and aristocrat became the same; often his resistance to 'clerical' authoritarianism (his position on the lock-out, on divorce, on censorship) makes him appear a liberal. But his

objection to clerical authoritarianism is not the liberal's objection to all authoritarianism. On the contrary he favours 'a despotism of the educated classes'. . . . ( *Passion and Cunning*, 256)

Patrick Kavanagh goes one step further and builds on O'Brien's conviction that Yeats, all through his career had been overtly a Protestant writer. O'Brien at least recognized Yeats's part, however little, in his revivalist, nationalist phase. Kavanagh is unwilling to admit even the Irish identity of Yeats:

. . . there is one fact of the poet's life that few people have discussed, his desperate desire to be thought Irish and one of the people. Nobody will deny that he was Irish of a certain kind, a noble kind, his father was a wonderful man, yet he himself was always conscious of being something of an outsider.

And I would be accounted one

With Mangan, Davis, Ferguson. [ *To Ireland in the Coming Times* ]

As Plato tells us in the person of Socrates, a man cannot desire that which he has got. Joyce had it. Joyce as he himself says, was 'Irish, all too Irish'.

Yeats took up Ireland and made it his myth and his theme. And you can see him today standing in the centre of that myth, uneasy that he doesn't belong fully. Now we can see that he does belong fully to that exciting affair with the Nation, with Pearse and Connolly and the others. But the fact remains that he never was at ease.

It was a weakness in his character in a way, the sort of weakness that you get in Hemingway with his delusions of violent grandeur, bullfights and boxing. Still, as with Yeats, it gave Hemingway the basis of a theme. My own view is that men of supreme genius have no delusions of any kind about themselves. The truth is that

Yeats did not belong to Sligo and Sligo is not the ‘Yeats country’ as our tourist people claim. A truer Yeats country would be London, the Rhymers’ club, the Pre-Raphaelites, Arthur Symons, that world about which he tells us so fascinatingly in the Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.

A great deal of his poetry of this period has Sligionian themes – *Innisfree*, *The Fiddler of Dooney*, but the central emotion in them is that of *fin de siècle* decadence.

I am not one of those who think that a brilliant poet should be accessible to the ordinary people. . . . The traditional idea of the poet in Ireland is that he sings for the people. True poetry could not be created if it had to depend on the common man. The ability to recognize and enjoy the poetic content of a poem as distinct from its emotional wrapping is quite rare. Much of Yeats comes over on its Irishness. Incidentally, I think his poem on Nineteen Sixteen shows him at his worst. ‘The grey eighteenth century houses’ are phony and Pre-Raphaelite. In my opinion, Yeats’s finest work was written when he was over fifty, up to but not including, the *Last Poems*. (*Collected Prose*, 13)

Seamus Deane takes the cue from Kavanagh and explains why Yeats had felt uncomfortable in the post revival phase:

The period between 1880 and 1940 made a fetish of continuity in part because the generation before had witnessed the final rupturing of the Gaelic civilization. The glamorization of the Celt and of the Ascendency was an attempt to reconcile on the level of myth what could not be reconciled at the level of politics. It was, in effect, an Arnoldian ‘healing measure’, which failed. It offered the Irish the opportunity to be unique but refused them the right to be independent on the

grounds that independence would lead to a loss of their uniqueness. Yeats's unhappiness with the new Irish state stemmed from this. In refusing to accept an Ascendancy led cultural nationalism of Yeats's sort, with its aristocratic claims, post Treaty Ireland effectively put an end to the Revival, a fact for which many of its writers and artists have not forgiven it. The great myths had gone. The best of the poets after Yeats quickly learned that the local and the ordinary defined the horizon for literature as it did for politics. With the emergence of Patrick Kavanagh, the new state found its characteristic, if adversary, voice. The day of the literary peasant and of the aristocratic hero was over. (*Celtic Revivals*, 37)

Deane recognizes Yeats's contribution to mobilizing a cultural energy in Ireland, but studying Yeats from socio-historic perspectives, he finds the poet's mythologization and celebration of romantic Ireland to be a lie, which history witnesses to be outdated and invalid:

O'Connell and Parnell had mobilized Irish political energies into national movements. Yeats mobilized Irish cultural energies in a similar way, enhancing the distinction between Irish and English culture and providing the leadership to make this institutionally effective. The elite company which he envisaged would govern a community rather than represent a public. Therefore his aristocratic views needed reinforcement from the belief in the possibility of such a community in Ireland and, of course, the peasantry were there to supply it. The astonishingly swift decline of the Irish language in the years after the Famine and the increasing prominence of shopkeepers, publicans and innkeepers in the land league and Home Rule movements were clear indications that Yeats's view of the peasantry was outmoded by the 1870s. (Ibid., 33)

Like O'Brien, Deane also believes that Yeats had no other alternative but to ignore and defy the currents of Irish history, since it showed how power had been passing from

Protestant Ascendancy, the class Yeats belonged to, to the Irish Catholic middle class. Yeats could not accept this and made the last desperate attempt to revive the old glory. Two things, Deane says, emerged out of this. Having tried somewhat unsuccessfully to join the tribe of Davis, Mangan and Ferguson, Yeats invented a whole new tribe of Anglo-Irish writers, philosophers and politicians, whose glorious days like the Big houses of Sligo were in the eighteenth century:

Yeats however was unique in attributing the shared anti-modernism of his eighteenth century heroes to their Irishness. The Irishness is for him, partly genetic, partly environmental. . . . Born in such a community, Berkeley with his belief in perception, that abstract ideas are mere words, Swift with his love of perfect nature, of the Houyhnhnms, his disbelief in Newton's system, and every sort of machine, Goldsmith and his delight in the particulars of common life that shocked his contemporaries, Burke with his conviction that all states not grown slowly like a forest tree are tyrannies, found in England the opposite that stung their own thought into expression and made it lucid. . . . This particular version of eighteenth century literary intellectual history is manifestly absurd. . . . and yet he manages to escape derision. (Ibid., 28)

But the journey against history, Deane says, affected Yeats in a massive way from another side. It took away from him his authenticity and reduced him merely to his gloomy predictions and fears of the end of civilization:

The flimsy basis upon which Yeats built his conception of the Ascendancy and of the peasantry ultimately affects his poetry and drama. All his ideas and images of tradition and communion are predicated on the idea of spiritual loneliness. Even when he sees himself as being in some sense the inheritor of Young Ireland, he envisages the crisis of his own times as one in which the individual is liberated

from conformity, in which the lonely aristocratic spirit can survive only because it lives within an organic community. (Ibid., 54)

What O'Brien, Kavanagh and Deane, all of them Catholic in their religious belief, strive to 'reveal', leads one to an interesting battle in the cultural politics of Yeats criticism, where the other side is ready and confident to defend the poet. First defense comes from T.R. Henn who in his elaborate explanation shows that Yeats may have identified himself with one group of writers and one version of Ireland in his early revivalist years, but following such events as the Easter Rising of 1916, Black and Tans attack and civil war of 1918-20 and the ratification of the Irish Free State by the Dial in 1922, he began to identify with another version of Ireland, one which had only recently, all but ceased to exist:

The society and life of the early part of the century was in many ways peculiar. . . . Everywhere the Big House, with its estates surrounding it, was a center of hospitality, of country life and society, apt to breed a passionate attachment, so that the attempt to save it from burning or bankruptcy became an obsession (in the nineteen twenties and onwards) when that civilization was passing. The gradual sale of the outlying properties, as death duties and taxation rose higher, is recorded in Lady Gregory's struggle to save Coole Park, and was the fate of many estates. The great families were familiar with each other and with each other's history; often perhaps commonly, connected by blood or marriage. They had definite and narrow traditions of life and service. The sons went to English public schools, and thence to Cambridge, or Oxford, or Trinity College, Dublin: the eldest would return to the estate and its management, the younger went to the Services, the Bar, the Church. . . . The great age of that society had I suppose, been the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the eighteen fifties



To this society, in the main Protestant, Unionist, and of the Ascendancy, in character, the peasantry was linked. The great Houses had their tenantry, proud, idle, careless, kindly, with a richness of speech and folk lore that Lady Gregory had been the first to record. The days of *Castle Rackrent* and the absentee landlord were, in the main, over; the relationship between landlord and tenant varied, but was on the whole a kindly one, and carried a good deal of respect on either side. The bitterness of the Famine, the evictions and burnings described by Maud Gonne in *A Servant of the Queen*, belonged to an earlier period. The members of the family would be known either by titles of their professions: the Counsellor, the Bishop, the Commander, and so on: or by the Christian names of their boyhood. They mixed with the peasantry more freely and with a greater intimacy than would have been possible in England. Yeats's memories of conversation with servants, and particularly with Mary Battle, gave him much material. Sport of every kind was a constant bond: the ability to shoot, or fish, or ride a horse was of central importance. (6 – 7)

The glorification of peasantry in Yeats, thus appears to Henn, not an artificial passion, necessary to maintain his duality, but a most natural fact, grown out of the environment of Sligo and the West of Ireland into which Yeats was born and had been most familiar with. The Catholics and the Protestant communities in Sligo, as Henn shows, lived with mutual collaboration, both sharing pagan beliefs and there was also the lack of a so called middle class, which Yeats first confronted in urban Ireland. This resolves, at least for Henn, the roots of the basic and major impulses in Yeats's poetry, his call for unity of culture, his love of magic and occult and supernatural, his dislike of the middle class obsession with 'getting on', issues – which appeared to the critics of the opposition camp as mysterious, idiosyncratic, ambivalent, opportunistic or deceitful:

. . . in the years before the First World War I remember little trouble in the West. Indeed, my grandfather had given land for the local chapel, so that the front pew was reserved for members of the family in case they should one day be converted. And for many years, in accordance with some old tradition, a light was kept burning on our behalf in the ruined abbey on one of the islands in the Shannon – a ritual that hardly belonged to Protestantism, but was accepted as natural and proper. In every district there were many superstitions, with a curiously ambivalent attitude to them on the part of country folk and gentry alike. The early Christian missionaries had taken over many of the features of the Elder Faiths of the locality. . . . Families nursed the thought of past greatness, fed their vanity with old achievement or lineage or imagined descent from the ancient kings; and in the warm damp air, with its perpetual sense of melancholy, of unhappy things either far off or present, many of them decayed. Standish O’ Grady could write bitterly of the Great Enchantment, that web of apathy in a country with an alien government and an alien religion, subject at every turn to patronage and the servility it brings, into which Ireland had fallen. That too is a narrow view of the whole. The aristocracy had, at its best, possessed many of the qualities that Yeats ascribed to it: the worlds of Somerville and Ross, the Dublin of Joyce or of Sean O’Casey differ merely in accordance of the position of the onlooker. (ibid., 7-9)

The image, because of the position or the point of view of the onlooker has differed in the analysis of Watson too. O’Brien may have found Yeats an opportunist, or Yeats’s emergence as a leading representative of the national renaissance might have appeared to D. P. Moran as “one of the most glaring frauds that the credulous Irish people have ever suffered” (Watson 102), but Watson shows clearly that Yeats’s hostility to the rising Catholic middle class was directed not so much to the social standing of that class as to its middle

class mentality, its attitude: “I use the word to describe”, Yeats himself wrote, “an attitude of mind more than an accident of birth” (*Uncollected Prose*, vol.2, 241), and from this Watson takes his cue to explain the antipathy expressed in poems like ‘*September 1913*’:

What is under attack here is a mean-spirited prudential morality, incapable of selfless action or altruism, a morality at once utilitarian, mechanical and servile. Yeats was nurtured from his earliest youth to hate the utilitarian ethos, and tends to define his social position not in hereditary or ‘blood’ terms, still less in terms of Protestant hegemony, but – simply – in terms of an opposition to that utilitarianism of the spirit:

My father had brought me up never when at school to think of the future or of any practical result. I have even known him to say, ‘When I was young, the definition of a gentleman was not wholly occupied in getting on’. (*Autobiographies*, 89-90)

So in ‘*September, 1913*’ the fumlbers in the greasy till are measured against ‘*Romantic Ireland*’ – not against the well-bred hauteur of the great Protestant houses, but against powerful types of a reckless, uncalculating idealism. . . . The poem occurs in the *Responsibilities* volume of 1914, the introduction to which contains a line which strikes a tonal chord for the whole volume: ‘only the wasteful virtues earn the sun’ (C.P., 113). So the highest and culminating praise of the legendary patriots, what marks them off most from modern . . . Irishmen, is the ‘wastefulness’ of their attitude: ‘They weighed so lightly what they gave’. The vital contrast in the poem, then, is one of ‘attitude of mind’. From the perspective of this important poem, it is easier to grasp the Yeatsian flavor of lines like

Before the merchant and clerk

Breathed on the world with timid breath (C.P., 108)

where the emphasis is more on the timidity than on the social status, ‘the accident of birth’. (102-4)

Yeats, as Watson analyses, explored history not from sociological point of view but from an aesthetic angle. To him recovery of Irish dignity was the first priority and he tried his best to glorify the lofty ideas and innate values of Irish ancestry which he apprehended to have been corrupted and polluted beyond recovery by the materialist concern of the middle class and its instinctive timid lowliness. Hence at the crucial juncture, where Irish nationalism under the leadership of Catholic middle class seemed at last to come close to success, Yeats feared the outcome and joined his poetic lot with an idealized aristocratic class, finding in it, as Watson illustrates, “an even more powerful metaphor of heroic pride in defeat” (104).

Objecting to a mean-spirited servile utilitarianism, objecting also in a more complicatedly ‘aesthetic way to the possibility of political victory, Yeats also objected to the negative bigotry and emotional sterility which he felt characterized middle-class nationalism, rendering it not only culturally barren in itself but also, in its hate-fuelled narrowness, incapable of tolerating the free creativity of others. This is the basis of Yeats’s 1909 poem, ‘*On Those That Hated “The Playboy of the Western World”, 1907*’:

Once, when midnight smote the air,  
Eunuchs ran through Hell and met  
On every crowded street to stare  
Upon great Juan riding by:  
Even like these to rail and sweat  
Staring upon his sinewy thigh. (C.P., 124)

The diary entry of 1909 out of which Yeats made that poem is even more explicit:

The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland – the lower-middle class from whom the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for

the last ten years – has suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent to a certain surgical operation. Hence the shrillness of their voices. They contemplate all creative power as the eunuchs contemplate Don Juan as he passes through Hell on the White horse. (*Autobiographies*, 486)

This should not be discussed as mere Protestant hostility against Catholic emancipation, or as characteristic snobbery. Snobbery is present, but Watson detects underneath, a wounded sense of dignity, unwilling to yield and desperate to retain the lonely impulse of delight amid general decay. In one of the major essays of 1907, *Poetry and Tradition* Yeats reveals his new stand:

I could not foresee that a new class, which had begun to rise into power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals, could do without exceptional men, and those activities of the mind that are founded on the exceptional moment. . . . Power passed to small shopkeepers, to clerks, to that very class who had seemed to O’Leary so ready to bend to the power of others, to men who had risen above the traditions of countryman, without learning those of cultivated life or even educating themselves, and who because of their poverty, their ignorance, their superstitious piety, are much subject to all kinds of fear. Immediate victory, immediate utility, became everything, and the conviction . . . that life is greater than the cause, withered . . .

(*Essays and Introductions*, 259-60)

Any other man in Yeats’s position would have resigned, but Yeats decided to fight anew, the last battle. What saved him was the unique incorruptibility of his idealism. Rather than submitting himself to the disillusionment, he made from his disappointment two closely

related myths, each dominant and powerfully exciting his creative impulse for the rest of his life: a) the hero, solemn and dignified even in defeat, b) the cultured aristocracy (Watson 107).

The first has been expressed in the lines addressed '*To a Friend whose Work has Come to Nothing*':

Bred to a harder thing  
Than triumph, turn away  
And like a laughing string  
Whereon mad fingers play  
Amid a place of stone,  
Be secret and exult,  
Because of all things known  
That is most difficult. (C.P., 87)

And again, in the lines of the remarkable poem, '*Beautiful Lofty Things*':

Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary's noble head;  
My father upon the Abbey stage, before him a raging crowd:  
'This land of saints', and then as the applause died out,  
'Of plaster Saints'; his beautiful mischievous head thrown back,  
Standish O'Grady supporting himself between the tables  
Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical words;  
Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,  
Her eightieth winter approaching: 'Yesterday he threatened my life.  
I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,  
The blinds drawn up', Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,

Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head:

All the Olympians; a thing never known again. (C.P., 259)

The same theme occurs in poem after poem, for example, in '*Parnell's Funeral*' where the poet distinguishes defeated Parnell from the group of Catholic politicians, De Valera, Cosgrave, O'Duffy:

Had even O'Duffy – but I name no more –

Their school a crowd, his master solitude;

Through Jonathan Swift's dark grove he passed, and there

Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched his blood. (C.P., 320)

Or in the short poem, '*An Iris Airman Foresees His Death*', made on the premature death of Major Robert Gregory, the son of Lady Gregory, in 1918:

I know that I shall meet my fate

Somewhere among the clouds above;

Those that I fight I do not hate,

Those that I guard I do not love;

My country is Kiltartan Cross,

My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,

No likely end could bring them loss

Or leave them happier than before.

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,

Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,

A lonely impulse of delight

Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death. (C.P., 111)

The Yeatsian hero then is a disengaged free spirit 'committed only to the lovely extravagant gesture which is 'self-realization in a moment of burning intensity' (Watson 110). This is the theme celebrated in the poem '*Easter 1916*' too. Yeats's tone is carefully designed to convey a note of surprise at the sudden birth of heroism amid the dull and mundane flow of life. First he recognizes 'change' as the natural law of life:

The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;  
The long legged moor hens dive  
And hens to moor-cocks call  
Minute by minute they live. (C.P., 153)

But the middle-class men have been transformed into great heroes of Irish history by their momentary act of self sacrifice. The spontaneous action, while marking the culmination of a few centuries of insurrectionary thought and tradition, simultaneously transcended the cult of buffoonery and exchange of polite meaningless words. A terrible beauty was born:

We know their dream, enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (C.P., 153-4)

In fact, it is here, in this sudden birth of terrible beauty that those dull middle-class people were reborn as aristocrats, in the Yeatsian sense. And it is here that Yeats's heroic aestheticism finds a necessary anchorage and accommodation in the second motif, the aristocracy. Yeats himself defines its obligations in *Poetry and tradition*:

Three types of men have made all beautiful things. Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose

and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. All these look backward to a long tradition, for, being without fear, they have held to whatever pleased them. (*Essays and Introductions*, 251)

Aristocracy meant for Yeats higher taste, lofty ideals, fearfulness, qualities which offer men repose and confidence to overcome the slavery to matter and to explore the unseen and the unknown depth of the mind, soul and spirit. On the other hand, from his personal experience in Coole Park, in Lady Gregory's estate, he knew the care she had for the peasantry and the patronage she extended to movements of art and culture. Yeats offers his tribute to her in '*Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation*':

How should the world be luckier if this house  
Where passion and precision have been one  
Time out of mind, became too ruinous  
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?  
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow  
Where wings have memory of wings, and all  
That comes of the best knit to the best? (C.P., 77)

In another poem, '*Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931*', Yeats locates the 'rooted stability, the sense of tradition and permanence which sustains the aristocratic house. He sees it as no mere pile of stones but a focus for social cohesion, which is contrasted with the 'contemptible nomadism and fragmentation of modernity' (Watson 116):

A spot whereon the founders lived and died  
Seemed once more dear than life; ancestral trees,  
Or gardens rich in memory glorified

Marriages, alliances and families,  
And every bride's ambition satisfied.  
Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees  
We shift about – all that great glory spent –  
Like some poor Arab tribesman and his tent. ( C.P. 207)

Yeats draws attention to the sudden and sad demise of the aristocratic culture, to the Big houses, which fell apart and in certain cases were burnt out. He explicates the underlying threat and horror in '*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*':

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery  
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
To crawl in her own blood, and go scout-free,  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into Philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (C.P., 176)

But it could not out do the aristocratic majesty which the poet compares with the glory of the setting sun in the poem '*These are the Clouds*':

And therefore friend, if your great race were run  
And these things came, so much the more thereby  
Have you made greatness your companion,

Although it be for children that you sigh:

These are the clouds about the fallen sun,

The majesty that shuts his burning eye. (C.P., 78)

But despite the celebration of Aristocratic virtues in Lady Gregory or in Renaissance Italian figures like Guidobaldo, Duke of Urbino and Cosimo de Medici (in the poem: *To a Wealthy man who Promised a second subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were Proved the People Wanted Pictures*), it would be wrong, as Watson warns, “. . . to see Yeats’s aristocratic poetry as simply expressive of his endorsement of the Anglo-Irish cultural tradition” (117). Yeats hated the timidity of Catholic middle-class, as he himself explained in his notes to the poem ‘*To a Wealthy Man*’:

In the thirty years or so during which I have been reading Irish newspaper, three public controversies have stirred my imagination. The first was the Parnell controversy. . . . another was the dispute over the *Playboy*. . . . The third prepared for the corporation’s refusal of a building for Sir Hugh lane’s famous collection of pictures. . . . These controversies, political, literary and artistic have shown that neither religion nor politics can of itself create minds with enough to make a nation. . . . Religious Ireland . . . thinks of divine things as around of duties separated from life and not as an element that may be discovered in all circumstances and emotion, while political Ireland sees the good citizen but as a man who holds to certain opinions and not as a man of good will. Against all this we have but a few educated men and the remnant of an old traditional culture among the poor. Both were stronger forty years ago, before the rise of our new middle class which made its first display during the nine years of the Parnellite

split, showing how base at moments of excitement are minds without culture.

(C.P., *Notes*, 529-30)

But he was equally dissatisfied with his own stock, the Protestants. The Anglo-Irish aristocracy, the landlords of the Protestant Ascendancy were on the whole much less cultured, busy with individual projects of 'getting on' in life, they were much more indifferent to Ireland. Yeats, like Standish O'Grady, feared that they had become effete, a class withering away into irrelevance through failure to commit itself to any service, or duty imposed on it by its inherited wealth (Watson, 117). In '*Ancestral Houses*', the first poem of '*Meditations in Time of Civil War*', he exposes the aristocratic degeneration and its weak inheritors:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man

Called architect and artist in, that they,

Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone

The sweetness that all longed for night and day,

The gentleness none there had ever known,

But when the master's buried mice can play,

And may be the great-grandson of that house,

For all its bronze and marble's but a mouse. (C.P., 225)

It is clear then that Yeats's love of idealization did not care to safeguard his racial pride and sense of class superiority. As an artist of first water, Yeats could not and did not take Ascendancy as naturalized symbols for his poems, he had to fit them into a nobler concept, a pattern of idealization of the soul, a system of self-less struggle for heroic achievements. It is also here that O'Brien is sufficiently answered back by Donald T.

Torchiana, who in his 1966 study '*W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland*', comments: ". . . what attracted Yeats most in eighteenth century Protestant Ireland was more an attitude or quality of intellect than any necessary class distinction" (85).

Denis Donoghue, however, has found objection in this, in Yeats's incorrigible tendency to idealize, which makes him ignore the ordinary man, and to overlook the ordinary universe:

He admired notable people, but his respect for ordinary people as constituting a particular society and living a certain life at a certain time was extremely weak; when he looked beyond the chosen few he saw a fictive race, rather than a finite society. (29)

But the charge is twice away from reality. Yeats, of course, painted the ordinary men, their careless delight and found in it aristocratic virtue:

I choose upstanding men  
That climb the streams until  
The fountain leap, and at dawn  
Drop their cast at the side  
Of dripping stone; I declare  
They shall inherit my pride,  
The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,  
Neither to slaves that were spat on  
Nor to the tyrants that spat,

The people of Burke and of Grattan

That gave, though free to refuse –

Pride, like that of the morn . . . (*The Tower*, C.P., 167-8)

But what is most important, this aristocratic virtue is also fictitious, not historically authentic. “The awkward and divisive hostilities latent in the Protestant Anglo-Irishman’s relation to Catholic Ireland, and in the nationalist poet’s relation to his Protestant class, Yeats attempted to surmount with a sustained and – on the whole – generous effort of his creative idealizing imagination” (Watson 122). Many may raise objection to this unauthentic reading of history, many may consider him incorrigibly romantic, but it is most unfair to call him an opportunist. Once he, moulded by O’Leary, stepped into the slippery arena of politics. In the poem ‘*All Things Can Tempt Me*’, he confessed:

All things can tempt me from this craft of verse

One time it was a woman’s face, or worse –

The seeming needs of my fool-driven land. (C.P., 109)

But he had left that ugly trap for good and concentrated on the recovery of dignity for Ireland. That was the spiritual domain of Irish nationalism and Yeats, a ceaseless worker there, carried on his struggles to produce beautiful, lofty things. “The very gap between the average Ascendancy house in Ireland and the courts of Urbino . . . stresses the point that Yeats’s aristocracy is really a metaphor, or image. In other words, it is only a dream. But a beautiful dream” (Watson 122).

Yeats, and it will be seen in the case of Tagore also, was intent to cure Ireland from within. He wanted to decorate its inner mental and cultural world with lofty ideals and higher values, so that it could be prepared to receive freedom, when it was to come, with self esteem and confidence and not in borrowed robes from England. That did not happen. Ireland

accepted dominion status and emerged as Irish Free State in 1922, to be ruled by the Catholic majority. Even though he was a Protestant, Yeats was given the valuable post of a Senator, but the trick did not work. Yeats knew, the ceasefire would not last long and his assumption proved true. The Irish Parliament under the pressure of its Catholic majority denied the acceptability of Divorce Act, and Yeats, always a fighter, raised his voice:

I think it is tragic that within three years of this country gaining its independence we should be discussing a measure which a minority of this nation considers to be grossly oppressive. I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that minority. We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this century. We have created the best of its political intelligence. Yet I do not altogether regret what has happened . . . You have defined our position and given us a popular following. If we have not lost our stamina then your victory will be brief, and your defeat final, and when it comes this nation may be transformed.  
(Pearce: *Senate Speeches*, 99)

It is a far cry from his earlier struggle for unity of culture to his present identification with one of the section of Irish nation, the Protestants, whom he saw as descendants of eighteenth century heroic Ireland. But it is interesting to note that even then his idealization is unaffected, uncorrupted. He still hoped for a transformation. This confirmed his status as a true nationalist who having played the role of the *fili* in the construction of nationalism, now took upon himself the responsibility to straighten its ruffled feathers, to keep its ideals intact and unshaken, to protect it from any further degeneration and degradation due to internal chaos or external rough winds.

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