



YEATS

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FORWARD

Yeats stands like a colossus on the world's literary landscape. His influence extends to nearly every facet of Irish political and cultural identity. Since his death, Yeats's work has been viewed as nationalistic, occultist, radically right wing, modern, romantic and postcolonial. He is a very difficult poet to interpret and such varied critical opinions of his poetry stem in large part from the diverse and complex nature of his life. Yeats looked to the [people and events](#) of his time to provide him with the raw material for his poetry. He had a long and, for the most part, unrequited love affair with the beautiful and ardent patriot, Maud Gonne. He became a leading figure in the European esoteric movement, was a founding member of the Abbey Theatre and his wife was a clairvoyant who communicated with the spirit world. Yet despite the poet's obsession with the afterlife, he was also deeply engaged with the political reality that confronted him in his native country. In fact, Yeats, more than any other writer of his day, sought to influence the course of his country's destiny through his writing. And influence it he did. At various points in his life he attacked British rule, the narrow-mindedness of his fellow Irishmen and the democratic institutions of the postcolonial government. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Yeats's career is his refusal to give in to the inevitability of old age. Some of his most [insightful](#) and [profound](#) poetry was written when the poet was nearing the end of his life. The poems by Yeats in this anthology capture the full complexity of our national poet's achievements. If read with an open mind, these poems will [challenge](#) and [captivate](#) you.

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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;	5
For men were born to pray and save: Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, It's with O'Leary in the grave. Yet they were of a different kind, The names that stilled your childish play,	10
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.	15

Glossary

'September 1913' was originally entitled 'On Reading Much of the Correspondence against the Art Gallery'. Yeats also toyed with the title 'Romance in Ireland'. In 1905, Hugh Lane had made a generous offer of French paintings to the Irish people, with the proviso that Dublin Corporation find them a suitable home. The collection was very valuable and included works by Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Morisot, Vuillard and Degas. Yeats was disgusted at the fact that the Corporation could not agree on a building to house this valuable collection. Many people at the time felt that Lane's religion was a major factor in the Corporation's refusal to accept his generous offer. Yeats not only saw this as a sectarian attack on his background, but he also felt it was an affront to high art. The controversy surrounding Lane's art collection continues to this day. Following his death, he bequeathed his collection to the National Gallery in London, but in an unwitnessed codicil he apparently changed his mind and donated the collection to Dublin. Having possession, London's National Gallery stuck to the letter of the law, but in 1959, following decades of lengthy correspondence, an agreement was reached whereby half of the Lane Bequest would be lent and shown in Dublin every five years.

1 *you* – the money-obsessed Catholic merchant class.

7 *Romantic Ireland* – Ireland of the past, an Ireland of heroes.

8 *O'Leary* – John O'Leary was an Irish nationalist who, owing to his involvement in anti-British movements, was imprisoned

of the 1840s. From Yeats's view, O'Leary was something of a Renaissance man who embraced high culture and popular politics. Following

O'Leary's

death in 1907, Yeats became bitterly disillusioned with the cause of Irish nationalism.

17 *wild geese* – the Irish soldiers of fortune who went into Europe in organised units following the Flight of the Earls in 1607, when Hugh O'Neill and Rory O'Donnell, the respective Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell, set sail from Loch Swilly in County Donegal.

20 *Edward Fitzgerald* – Lord Edward Fitzgerald was an Irish rebel who was renowned for his gallantry and courage. He was ejected from the army for proposing a republican toast in 1792. Later he became a leading conspirator behind the uprising of 1798 against British rule in Ireland. He died from wounds sustained while resisting arrest.

21 *Robert Emmet* – Irish nationalist leader who inspired the abortive rising of 1803. He led an attack on Dublin Castle, which resulted in the murder of the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. He was arrested, convicted and hung, drawn, quartered and beheaded. He refused to have a priest present at his execution. Emmet is often remembered as a romantic hero of Irish lost causes.

21 *Wolf Tone* – Irish republican and rebel who sought to overthrow English rule in Ireland and who led a French military force to Ireland during the insurrection of 1798.

22 *delirium* – a state marked by extreme restlessness, confusion and sometimes hallucinations. Delirium can also be a state of extreme excitement or emotion.

30 *weighed* – calculated.

7

1. Content

It is remarkable that a poem written at the beginning of the last century should resonate so clearly nearly 100 years later. This poem was prompted by the refusal of the largely Catholic Dublin Corporation to accept a donation from the Protestant philanthropist Hugh Lane. In the opening line, the speaker questions the leaders of the new, largely middle-class, Catholic Ireland:

What need you, being come to sense

But fumble in a greasy till

In the next few lines it becomes clear that this poem is a bitter **invective** against the merchant classes. According to the speaker, these people are obsessed with adding '*the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer*'. This low-minded and selfish pursuit of wealth, combined with a narrow and stifling interpretation of Christianity, leads to a kind of parasitic existence where, figuratively, the "**marrow**" is dried from the country's bones. In addition to this, these people seem to be ignorant of the sacrifices that others have made in the past:

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,

It's with O'Leary in the grave.

In the second stanza, the poet returns to that heroic past in order to put the present into sharper relief. The heroes that '**stilled [...] childish play**' '**were of a different kind**'. Their endeavours have inspired men the world over to see their actions as more significant when

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one considers the materialistic selfishness of the present generation. These men gave their lives for their country and the poet feels that this should never be forgotten:

***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.***

The full force of Yeats's scornful **polemic** is felt in the third stanza, where we are presented with a catalogue of Ireland's dead heroes. Their names ring out with an almost mythical force as the reader is swept away by the poet's rhetoric:

*Was it for this 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 Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?*

The refrain at the end of the stanza reminds us once again that they are 'dead and gone [and] I [...] with O'Leary in the grave'.

In the final stanza, Yeats engages in some wishful thinking. He wonders if it is possible to turn back the clock and call the 'exiles' back. Before giving it any further thought, he dismisses this idea as being fanciful. The speaker feels that if these men were indeed to come back, they would be maligned and mocked by the middle class. The passion of their commitment to Ireland's cause would be interpreted as something base and unreasoned. Although 'September 1913' is a very public poem, Yeats may be allowing elements of his private life to intrude upon the narrative. The *image* of the 'woman's yellow hair' is obviously intended to capture the denigration that these men would suffer at the hands of a low-minded public, but it may also stem from Yeats's feelings for Maude Gonne.

As the poem winds to a close, Yeats lays the ghosts of a bygone age to rest. Their generous and open sacrifices were not calculated and as such have no place in the modern, materialistic world. While the final *couplet* of the poem echoes the refrain in the previous stanzas, its *tone* is slightly different:

*But let them be, they're dead and gone,
They're with O'Leary in the grave.*

The inclusion of 'let them be' softens the tone somewhat from one of bitterness to sober acceptance.

2. Stylistic Features

This powerful and memorable poem was originally entitled 'On Reading Much of the Correspondence against the Art Gallery'. In 1905, Hugh Lane had made a generous offer of French paintings to the Irish

people with the proviso that Dublin Corporation would find them a suitable home. The rejection of the paintings was undoubtedly an act of ignorance, but this was compounded by rumours of sectarianism. To Yeats, this was an act of utter philistinism and as an Anglo-Irish Protestant art lover, he was, as one can imagine, outraged. In his view, this was just another facet of small-mindedness on behalf of the Irish middle classes. The Dublin Lockout of 1913 gave him further confirmation of the fact that the merchant classes and captains of industry, such as William Martin Murphy, could not be trusted. In particular, Yeats was shocked by the sectarian nature of the Corporation's foot-dragging over the Hugh Lane bequest. Ten years later, in a speech to the Irish Senate, he reminded his fellow countrymen of his proud lineage:

We against whom you have done this thing, are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks in Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Parnell. We have created most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence ...

In 'September 1913', Yeats launches a powerful polemic against the narrow-minded, sectarian selfishness of the middle classes. The force of his language is increased through a number of complex techniques. Throughout the poem, the poet relies on *rhetorical questions* in order to add weight to his argument:

And what, God help us, could they save?

Was it for this the wild geese spread

The grey wing upon every tide;

Yet could we turn the years again,

These questions engage the reader, forcing him or her to become a participant in a dialogue with the poet.

The poem's title, together with the use of historical names and events, lends 'September 1913' a sense of authenticity. As a child, Yeats tells us that he was deeply impressed by the energy and charisma of the men who died for Ireland. The implication here is an interesting and complicated one. The present generation has become corrupt and no longer possesses the kind of innocence that gives recognition to the achievements of men like Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone. Rather than name their heroic exploits, Yeats uses the *imagery* of the poem to hint at the energy and commitment of their lives and the tragic inevitability of their death. The repressive and ultimately deadly hangman's noose is contrasted with the open and free nature of their existence, as represented by the 'wind'. In particular, the image of the wind captures something of the elemental, adventurous and unpredictable nature of these men. In order to add dignity and weight to their sacrifice, Yeats relies heavily on *iambic tetrameter*. This type of four-foot, four-stress line creates the following pattern:

ta TUM ta TUM ta TUM ta TUM

By doing so, it breaks from the normal five beats of spoken English, lending the poem a traditional, even balladic, feeling. This is made all the more noticeable when Yeats includes a genuinely heartfelt and *colloquial* sigh.

And what, God Help us, could they save?

Finally, the poem is cleverly structured around a series of opposites that create a marvellous tension throughout. The past is contrasted with the present, bravery is weighed against delirium and materialism is set against selfless sacrifice. Although Yeats would later recant much of the scathing mockery in this poem, it is difficult to ignore the fact that he is bitterly disillusioned with his fellow Irishmen.

3. Essay Writing

'September 1913' is one of Yeats's best-known political poems. As such, you may wish to include it in any response to the poet's work that you could be asked to write. Try to bear some of the following points in mind.

- The tone of the poem is scathing and bitter. You may wish to contrast this with 'Easter, 1916'.
- This is obviously an overtly political and public poem. Given the dominance of politics in the poems by Yeats on the course, it may be possible to create a paragraph that centres on this aspect of his work.
- Once again, Yeats reveals his mastery of form and sound in this poem. It might be possible to construct a paragraph that concentrates on Yeats's unquestioned technical genius.

Sailing to Byzantium

I

**That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long 5
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.**

II

**An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless 10
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come 15
To the holy city of Byzantium.**

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,

Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
 And be the singing-masters of my soul. 20
 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 It knows not what it is; and gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take 25
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing 30
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Glossary

The title refers to the city of Byzantium, an ancient Greek city which, according to legend, was founded by Greek colonists from Megara in 667 bc and named after their king Byzas, or Byzantas. The name Byzantium is a Latinisation of the original name, Byzantion. The city later became the centre of the Byzantine Empire, or the Greek-speaking Roman Empire of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, and was then known as Constantinople. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire, the city became known as Istanbul to the Ottoman Turks. However, it was not officially named Istanbul until 1930. In 1907, Yeats visited the Italian city of Ravenna and was deeply impressed by the Byzantine mosaics in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe that had been commissioned by Bishop Reparatus between 673 and 679 ad.

1 That – contemporary Ireland. Yeats rejects modern Ireland, viewing it as a symbol of the temporal world. It is important to bear in mind that while Yeats was an ageing man, Ireland was in fact a very young country with a very young population.

3 dying generations – this oxymoron captures one of the paradoxes of life – that life necessarily implies death.

5 commend – to praise somebody or something in a formal way.

7 sensual – relating to the body and the senses as opposed to the mind or the intellect.

9 paltry – insignificant or unimportant.

10 tattered coat – one of Yeats's favourite symbols for old age is the scarecrow.

17 sages – wise men.

18 mosaic – a picture or design made with small pieces of coloured material such as glass or tile stuck onto a surface.

19 perne in a gyre – Yeats uses the word 'perne' to refer to a circular oscillating motion that corresponded to the eternal pattern or rhythm in which all cycles of history moved as they travel through time. In order to describe this process, he drew two spinning cones, or 'gyres', the bases of which are joined, thus producing an endless cycle of alternate expansion and contraction which the poet believed corresponded to specific states of history. For more information on this, see the critical commentary on p. 516.

21 Consume – to burn away or to purge. The central idea here is that in order to prepare for eternal life, the soul must be purged of all that is corrupt.

24 artifice – that which has been made.

Commentary

1. Content

- 'Sailing to Byzantium' first appeared in the collection 'The Tower' and is probably Yeats's most well-known poem.
- Before this composition, Yeats had been deeply attracted to eastern philosophy in general and to the ancient city of Byzantium in particular.
- Writing in his semi-mystical work 'A Vision', Yeats had the following to say about this city:

*I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity
and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium
a little before Justinian opened St Sophia and closed the Academy
of Plato. I think that in Byzantium, maybe never before or since in
the recorded history, religious, aesthetic, and practical life were
one ...*

- In the first stanza, the poet describes a natural world that is teeming with life. We are told that it is a place where the young of all species – 'birds', 'Fish', 'fowl' – are busy reproducing and, as Yeats terms it, commending the flesh.

- Surrounded by life, 'The young | In one another's arms' appear to be ignorant of an inescapable and profoundly thought-provoking truth about existence.
- In simple terms, the poet points out that: 'Whatever is begotten' will, in the natural course of life, be born.
- He then goes on to imply that once born, the only certainty in life is that it will end. In the final **couplet**, the speaker asserts that because the young are 'Caught' in the 'sensual music' of life, they 'neglect | Monuments of unageing intellect' such as: works of art, religion and philosophy or the products of man's non-physical imagination.
- Conversely, it would seem that an old man, whose senses have already begun to fail and his flesh to falter, has no place in a world such as this.
- In the second **stanza**, Yeats sets about describing the predicament that he must face as an old man. 'An aged man' is, we learn, no better than a scarecrow, a 'tattered coat upon a stick'.
- However, in the next line we are told that there is a way out of all this, a means of escape which, if taken, will provide rescue from the curse of ageing.
- In order to attain this freedom, the 'flesh' must be renounced in favour of the higher pursuits of art and philosophy.
- The sensual music of the first stanza finds a corresponding **resonance** in the spiritual / artistic music in this stanza. We are told that the 'soul' must:

*[...] clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,*

- The song that the poet speaks of is the song of art and of poetry which can, if embraced, become a monument to the soul's '**own magnificence**'.
- Having accepted this truth, the poet then feels that there is only one course of action open to him. In order to embrace high art, he decides to sail the seas '**and come / To the holy city of Byzantium.**'
- In the third and most difficult **stanza** in the poem, the poet addresses a mosaic in Byzantium.
- Communing directly with the '**sages**' represented in the mosaic, he commands them to '**Come from the holy fire**' and become the '**singing-masters of [his] soul**'.
- We are now at the passionate epicentre of the poem, where the speaker tells us that he wishes for his '**heart**' to be consumed away and that he is '**sick with desire**'.
- Continuing in the same vein, the speaker informs us that his soul longs to be free from his body, which he likens to a dying animal.
- Once the poet unchains himself from his heart, blinded as it is by mortal dreams, he feels free to embrace the '**artifice of eternity**'.
- The fourth stanza sees the poet musing on what this newfound immortality will really be like. It is, we notice, far removed from traditional concepts of an afterlife.
- Having cast off his earthly and therefore **mutable** form, he is now '**out of nature**'. He has turned his back on the sensual music of the first stanza in order to embrace a new and eternal music.

- His song, he argues, will be the song of true knowledge – the song of the soul, art and of all ages. The artist has now become the artefact.
- This transformation is **symbolised** by the golden bird sculpted from '**hammered gold and gold enamelling**'. Through art, the poet has achieved a kind of immortality that enables him to speak:

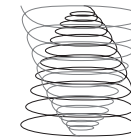
'Of what is past, or passing, or to come.'

2. Stylistic Features

- In its **carefully drawn oppositions of age and youth, high art and reality**, '*Sailing to Byzantium*' superbly expresses some of the keenest central dilemmas of Yeats's work – and indeed, some of the poet's own longest-standing preoccupations and frustrations.
- The poem's main concern is, of course, literature's oldest theme – the **passing of time, ageing** and man's **mortality**.
- This is not surprising when one considers the circumstances of the poem's composition. It was written at a time when Yeats's career had reached its zenith.
- At the same time, the poet was an ageing man who was living in Europe's youngest country. The poem consists of four stanzas, all written for the most part in **iambic pentameter**.
- Despite the fact that this **metre** is particularly suited to regular speech patterns, the poem is in fact quite **complex** and far removed from ordinary discourse.
- Firstly, Byzantium has, as many critics have pointed out, deep **symbolic** value.

- In Yeats's view, the city stands for the unity of all aspects of life. Furthermore, because the glory days of Byzantium have long since passed, it contains in and of itself something of the **passing of time** and the mysteries of death.
- In the poet's imagination, the city becomes a mystical place outside of time; a haven of the mind, where all things are possible. In his quasi-mystical work 'A Vision', Yeats described the artistic process as he imagined it at work in Byzantium. In his opinion, Byzantium had the ability to produce mystical works of art.
- Here, in this poem, Yeats asserts that if the '**soul**' is allowed to '**sing**', then it will shake loose the tatters of its '**mortal dress**' so as to achieve a state of being that is akin to pure art.
- In brief, it will become a miracle of eternity. In the poem, Yeats **juxtaposes** the temporal and the earthly world of '**sensual music**' with the '**holy city of Byzantium**,' the world of the mind as represented by high art.
- The message in the poem is clear – '**Whatever is begotten, born, and dies**' ought not, if it wishes to transcend the depressing cycle of '**Those dying generations**', to '**neglect | Monuments of unageing intellect**'.
- To most readers, art, gold and ancient mosaics may well seem like lifeless artefacts. In fact, they may appear to be a poor substitute for the beautiful music of nature that Yeats describes in the first stanza.
- However, for Yeats, **artistic creation** is infinitely more infused with real life and true knowledge. Yeats seems to be suggesting that the '**birds in the trees**' are, despite their obvious connection to nature, less alive in the

- true sense of the word than the golden bird '**set upon a golden bough to sing**'.
- This is true because Yeats's bird, like the '**sages standing in God's holy fire**', is no longer '**fastened to a dying animal**'. It is now free to sing '**Of what is past, or passing, or to come.**' In other words, art is **immutable** and exists outside of time.
 - Earlier on in the third stanza, Yeats speaks of perning in a 'gyre'. The poet used the word 'perne' to refer to a circular spinning motion. **This spinning motion corresponds to the eternal pattern or rhythm of things in which all cycles of history and personality inevitably move as they travel through time.** Yeats illustrated this **complex** notion in the following manner:



- In Yeats's view of existence, all time **oscillates** through two cones, or 'gyres', the bases of which are joined. As a result, he believed there was an endless cycle of alternate expansion and contraction which corresponds to specific stages in human history.

- Furthermore, he believed that it was possible for a mystic or visionary to see into these 'gyres' and thereby comprehend all times, events and human natures.
- Yeats also believed that pure art existed at the **nexus** between these two spinning gyres. **Consequently, in the poet's vision of the world, art exists outside of time.** Some critics have argued that Yeats does not fully accept the **symbol** of the bird sculpted from gold.
- And while this golden bird may indeed exist outside of time, its ultimate function ('**To keep a drowsy Emperor awake**') is somewhat unsatisfactory.
- This is especially true when one **contrasts** it with the sensuous bird in the first stanza.
- Other critics view Byzantium not as a **symbol** for artistic perfection, but rather as a model for the poet's idealised version of Ireland – an Ireland which, having broken away from its masters, may only now develop its own true artistic and philosophical destiny.
- Whatever reading one chooses, it is difficult not to be impressed by the depth of thought and **rich nuances** that permeate this poem on every level.
- Since its publication, critics have agreed that 'Sailing to Byzantium' masterfully marries **structure and content**.
- For Yeats's biographer, Richard Ellmann, the poem represents a poetic 'climax' for Yeats, '**creating richer and more multitudinous overtones than before**'.

- Ellmann believes that Yeats attempted '**to evoke a symbol – in the poem as a whole and also in the symbolic symbol of the bird**'.
- This **lyrical** and deeply passionate poem demands the concentration and attention of its readers, but its beautiful **images**, masterful **sounds** and towering ideas more than compensate for any effort required.

3. Essay Writing

If you are thinking of referring to 'Sailing to Byzantium' in an essay, you may wish to consider some of the following points:

- In this poem, Yeats confronts his mortality. Given the dominance of the ageing process in the poems by Yeats on the course, you might want to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of his work. In any such paragraph, you may wish to compare and contrast the poem with 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', 'An Acre of Grass' or 'Politics'.
- Once again, the poem provides the reader with rich and varied examples of Yeats's technical mastery.
- Here the poet addresses the artistic process directly. Given that so many of Yeats's poems on the course centre on the poet's preoccupation with art, you may want to devote a paragraph to this aspect of his work.

Easter 1916

Yeats

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head 5
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe 10
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly: 15
A terrible beauty is born.

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Yeats

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill. 20
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd horse; 25
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought. 30
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song; 35
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,

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Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. 40

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road, 45

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; 50

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: 55

The stone's in the midst of all.
Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?

That is Heaven's part, our part 60

To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall? 65

No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough 70

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 75

And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. 80

Glossary

The title refers to the Easter Rising which took place in Dublin on 24 April 1916. The Rising was an attempt by militant republicans to win independence from Britain by force of arms. It was the most significant uprising in Ireland since the rebellion of 1798.

Largely organised by the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Rising lasted from Easter Monday, 24 April to 30 April 1916. Members of the Irish Volunteers, led by schoolteacher and barrister Pádraig Pearse, joined by the smaller Irish Citizen Army of James Connolly, seized key locations in Dublin and proclaimed an Irish Republic independent of Britain. There were some actions in other parts of Ireland, but they were minor and, except at Ashbourne, County Meath, unsuccessful. The Rising was suppressed after six days of fighting and its leaders were court martialled and executed, but it succeeded in bringing the cause of militant republicanism to the forefront of Irish politics once again. Less than three years later, in January 1919, survivors of the Rising convened the First Dáil and established the Irish Republic.

1 them – the rebels.

2 vivid – having striking clarity, distinctness or truth when considered either by the eye or the imagination.

10 gibe – a comment that is intended to hurt or provoke somebody or to show derision or contempt.

12 the club – the Arts Club in Dublin, which Yeats was a member of.

14 motley – the multicoloured clothing worn by medieval jesters or clowns.

17 That woman – Constance Gore-Booth (Countess Markiewicz). Born on 4 February 1868, she was a revolutionary

nationalist, a leading member of the suffragette cause, an Irish Sinn Féin activist and later a Fianna Fáil politician. She was the first woman elected to the British House of Commons, though she did not take her seat and along with the other Sinn Féin TDs formed the first Dáil Éireann.

She was also the first woman in Europe to hold a cabinet position. She was sentenced to death for her role in the Rising, but this sentence was later commuted to life in prison. In 1917 she was released along with other political prisoners as part of an amnesty.

23 harriers – small dogs used for hunting hares or rabbits.

24 This man – Pádraig Pearse. The son of an Irish mother and an English father, he was born at 27 Great Brunswick Street, now Pearse Street, in Dublin and was educated at the Christian Brothers' School. He graduated from the Royal University and became a barrister. An enthusiastic student of the Irish language, he became a writer in both English and Gaelic. He founded St Enda's College in Rathfarnham in Dublin, a school for boys which he hoped would further his aims of an Irish-speaking Ireland. After visiting the United States, he joined the Irish Volunteers and was commander-in-chief of the Irish rebel forces in the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

25 wingèd horse – here Yeats is referring to Pegasus, a traditional symbol for poetic inspiration.

26 This other – Thomas MacDonagh. MacDonagh was born in Cloughjordan, County Tipperary and followed his parents into the teaching profession. His interest in the Irish language led him to join the Gaelic League, and while staying on the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway he first encountered Pádraig Pearse.

He joined the teaching staff of Pearse's school, St Enda's in Rathfarnham, and later, having taken a masters degree in arts, he became a professor of English at the National University and a director of the Irish Theatre.

31 This other man – John MacBride, Irish revolutionary and officer in the Irish brigade of the Boer Army. He joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood and was associated with Michael Cusack in the early days of the Gaelic Athletic Association. He also joined the Celtic Literary Society, through which he came to know Arthur Griffith, who was to remain a friend and influence throughout his life. His short marriage to Maud Gonne was a cause of deep resentment to Yeats. He was executed for his part in the Easter Rising.

68 England may keep faith – the British government had decided to grant Home Rule to Ireland following the end of the First World War.

76 Connolly – James Connolly was a socialist leader. Born in the Cowgate area of Edinburgh, Scotland to Irish immigrant parents, he left school at only 11 years of age. Despite his limited education, he was regarded as being one of the leading Marxist theorists of his day. He was shot by firing squad following his involvement as a commandant in the General Post Office during the Rising.

Commentary

1. Content

- 'Easter, 1916' is one of Yeats's best-known poems. Although the poem was not published until 1920, it was written directly after the Easter Rising.
- Despite the fact that the poem is obviously about a very **public** event, it is narrated in a **personal** manner. Opening in the **first person**, the poet tells us that he has:

*[...] met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.*

- The speaker then admits that he has passed these men at the end of the working day, even exchanging '**polite meaningless words**' with them.
- The poet has the **honesty** to admit that he looked on these men with derision.
- On such occasions, he would look forward to pleasing his friends '**Around the fire at [his] club**' by mocking these would-be revolutionaries.
- In the next line, Yeats attempts to explain his attitude at this time. He tells us that he was certain that he '**lived where motley is worn**'. In other

words, Ireland at that time was a country of clowns or jokers, a place devoid of honour and patriotism.

- Then suddenly, in the final **couplet**, the poet recants his **scornful** opinion of Ireland's nationalists:

*All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.*

- These powerful lines, which, with some slight variation, become a **refrain** throughout the poem, are perhaps among the most memorable in Anglo Irish literature.
- The second **stanza** centres on the history and the characters of several of the rebels.
- Although Yeats does not identify them by name, his contemporaries would have easily recognised Countess Constance Markiewicz, a childhood friend from County Sligo; the schoolmaster, poet and revolutionary leader Pádraig Pearse; and John MacBride, the husband of Yeats's own great love, Maud Gonne.
- The opening lines highlight the '**ignorant good-will**' of Countess Markiewicz, who spent her nights in argument '**Until her voice grew shrill**'.
- Although her political achievements were considerable, these are overshadowed by the part she played in the Easter Rising.
- She has, however, paid a price for her involvement in revolutionary politics. The privileged and carefree days of her youth seem distant when one considers the role she now plays.
- In the next line, Yeats turns his attention to Pádraig Pearse, who '**kept a school**'. Following the collapse of the Rising, Pearse was executed.

- Along with his brother and 14 other leaders, he came to be seen by many as the embodiment of the rebellion. The '**other**' man that Yeats refers to is the dramatist, poet and teacher Thomas MacDonagh, who was also executed for his role in the Rising.
- Then, in the next **quatrain**, the poet turns to a very personal and obviously painful episode from his own life:

***This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,***

- The reference here is to John MacBride, whom Yeats despised. MacBride, who was married to the love of Yeats's life, Maud Gonne, was rumoured to have treated her very badly.
- However, despite his personal misgivings, the speaker feels obligated to '**number him in the song**'. Owing to the role he played in the '**casual comedy**' of 1916, MacBride has, in the poet's eyes, been '**Transformed utterly**'.
- The final line reminds us once again that:

A terrible beauty is born.

- In the third stanza, Yeats contemplates the single-mindedness of the rebels, whose '**Hearts**' acted '**with one purpose alone**'.
- In the third line, the '**stone**' acts as a **metaphor** representing those members of the rebellion who refused to sacrifice their ideals to change.

- The idea of change is in turn represented by the '**living stream**' and other **symbols** of a transitory nature, such as the horses and riders, clouds and streams, moor-cocks and moor-hens, yet all along '**The stone's in the midst of all**', unchanged and immovable.
- Interestingly, Maud Gonne had once described herself as acting like a stone in her refusal to marry Yeats.
- For her part, she felt that she could not surrender her political ideals in order to pursue an ordinary life.
- In an unusual **simile**, Yeats attempts to capture something of the tender admiration he feels for what these men have done.
- He likens the act of pronouncing their names to that of a mother naming her child:

***To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;***

- This brief **reverie** is interrupted by the chilling reality that these men will die for their beliefs. In the next line, Yeats openly questions whether or not their deaths were '**needless**'.
- He ponders the possibility that the English might have '**[kept] faith**' and granted Irish freedom without the need for violence.
- This impulse is, however, countered by the emotional conclusion to the poem. Here the poet cannot find it in his heart to criticise men who died from an '**excess of love**' for their country.

- All that remains for those who survived is to chronicle the effect of their dreams, 'To murmur name upon name'.
- It is difficult not to be moved by the stirring and **deeply emotional** final lines of the poem:

***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.***

2. Stylistic Features

- Although when compared to most of Yeats's other poems 'Easter, 1916' is uncharacteristically sentimental, it is in fact a highly structured **apostrophe** to the dead martyrs of the Easter Rising.
- According to Yeats's biographer R.F. Foster: '*the intellectual complexity, subtly modulated argument, and tightly controlled changes of mood and form [mark a new level] of achievement*' in Yeats's poems.
- This **complexity** can first be seen in the title, which is a deliberate attempt by Yeats to remind his readers of his earlier poem, 'September 1913'.
- In this sense, 'Easter, 1916' **recants** the bitter disillusionment and antipathy that the poet felt towards his fellow countrymen only three years previously.
- The Rising of 1916 was a truly extraordinary event that is difficult to comprehend fully at this remove.

- Writing in *The Irish Times* on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the Rising, Fintan O'Toole had the following to say:

The Easter Rising is a complex set of events that happened to real people at a specific time and in specific places. Those people had fears and aspirations, expectations and uncertainties. They lived with upheavals that are very hard for us to imagine, in the midst of the bloodiest conflict the world had ever known. They found themselves in a time of deep instability. Huge technological changes – radio, X-rays, cinema, telephones, audio recording, aeroplanes – were altering the ways in which people understood the physical world around them. Slaughter was the new norm in Europe, and it was happening on an industrial scale. Within a year or two of the Easter Rising, a series of vast empires – the Russian, the Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian and the German – would crash and burn. In this feverish, violent context, people on the island of Ireland were no better and no worse than those in other European countries. They reacted to their times by joining mass movements – for workers' rights, for the rights of women, for a Gaelic revival, for Irish independence, against Irish independence – that gave them a sense of purpose and belonging. They felt that history was turning and that they could play their part in shaping it. They protested, they marched, they drilled and, when the call came in 1914, the men joined armies in vast numbers and went to the battlefields to kill each other.

- Apart from the title, the body of the poem also memorialises the Rising and in the processes **expiates** the poet for the wrongs he has done to these men in the past.
- The four separate stanzas, measuring 16, 24, 16 and 24 lines, respectively, correspond perfectly with the date of the rebellion – 24 April 1916.
- This sense of memorialising extends to the poem's **form** and **structure**. The **metre** of 'Easter, 1916' is very sophisticated and works to enhance the overall effect.
- Yeats employs two separate metres (**iambic tetrameter** and **iambic trimeter**) together with an alternating **rhyming scheme** (abab).
- In this manner, the structure, form and sound of the poem emphasise distinct elements of its content.
- In the first and second stanzas, respectively, the poet relies for the most part on **tetrameter**, only to switch to **trimeter** in the following lines:

*Or polite meaningless words,
Polite meaningless words,
To please a companion
All changed, changed utterly:*

- In this manner, the poet emphasises both the facile conformity of life in Dublin prior to the Rising and the overwhelming change that has occurred in the wake of this event.
- Some critics have questioned the poet's reliance on such short lines in a poem that memorialises the sacrifice of so many men.
- **However, the precise nature of these lines prevents the poem from becoming too sentimental.** In the remaining **stanzas** in the poem, Yeats chooses to rely on **trimeter**.

- This condensed form is well suited to the imagery and ideas that crowd these stanzas.
- Yet once again, when it is necessary to emphasise a particular idea or emotion, Yeats changes the **rhythmic structure** of the poem.
- For example, in the fourth stanza, the poet reverts to **tetrameter** in order to lay emphasis to the loss of life that the pursuit of change and ideals has necessitated.
- The movement of the poem is also interesting. Yeats presents human characters, natural imagery and philosophical ideas, yet manages to unite these in the final and memorable lines of the poem. In other words, the events of 1916 are, in the poet's estimation, all encompassing.
- Yeats's use of **imagery** in this poem is masterful. For instance, 'Easter, 1916' opens with the **image** of the vivid faces of the would-be revolutionaries contrasted with that of the **'grey | Eighteenth-century houses'**.
- In these two **images**, Yeats contrasts the lively and hopeful sense of change that the rebels embody with the static conservatism of their colonial masters.
- Yet at the same time, Yeats has the honesty to convey the derisive scorn that he once felt towards these men.
- In the second stanza, the poet transforms historical figures into **symbolic** representations of various facets of the revolutionary mindset.
- Countess Markiewicz, who commanded a garrison at the College of Surgeons near St Stephen's Green on the day of the rebellion, **symbolises** the inevitable corruption of youthful innocence and beauty that violent struggle brings about.
- She also embodies the notion of **paradox**. Her commitment to her ideals has in some respects corrupted her.

- Pearse's '**helper and friend**', Thomas MacDonagh, who taught English in UCD, comes to represent the wasted potential of a young man who '**might have won fame in the end**'.
- And for his part, John MacBride, whom Yeats describes as a '**drunken, vainglorious lout**', becomes **symbolic** of the transformative power of this event.
- There is another aspect of this poem that warrants consideration. The issue, as so often with Yeats, is whether the poet is fascinated by events in terms of the human drama they represent or whether he views this tragedy as providing him with a rich source of artistic material.
- For instance, at several points in the poem Yeats stresses the artistic process. He speaks of his '**song**', he draws on the theatrical **imagery** of '**motley**' and he likens the event to a '**casual comedy**'.
- This reading of the poem is interesting, especially when one considers the issues that Yeats debates in other poems, such as '*The Circus Animals' Desertion*'.
- Notwithstanding this, the real achievement of '*Easter, 1916*' lies in the manner in which Yeats conveys the dramatic change in his thinking that the "**terrible beauty**" of the Rising occasioned.
- However he does address that Rising in all its complexity. He touches on the political truth that the Rising may not have been necessary and at the same time considers the effects on the human soul of violent fanaticism.
- As if this were not enough, the poet has the **honesty** to address and **expiate** some of his own darker feelings concerning the events and people of 1916.

3. Essay Writing

The title refers to Coole Park, Gort, County Galway. The Coole estate was purchased in 1768 by Robert Gregory upon his return to Ireland following service with the East India Company. It remained with the Gregory family until 1927, when it was sold to the state. Yeats's lifelong friend and benefactor was Lady Augusta Gregory. She was a dramatist, folklorist and co-founder of the Abbey Theatre with W.B. Yeats and Edward Martyn. Lady Gregory's love of Coole and its 'Seven Woods', immortalised by Yeats, is manifested in her writings and those of her literary guests. Writing about Coole in 1931, Lady Gregory said, 'These woods have been well loved, well tended by some who came before me, and my affection has been no less than theirs. The generations of trees

have been my care, my comforters. Their companionship has often brought me peace.'

12 clamorous – loud and excited or even angry.

15 All's changed – while the poet has changed physically and emotionally, the world has also changed beyond recognition.

21 Companionable – friendly or sociable.

27 rushes – marsh plant whose stems resemble blades of grass.

If you are thinking of referring to '*Easter, 1916*' in an essay, you may wish to consider some of the following points.

- ① This is yet another overtly political poem in which Yeats examines a very public event in a very honest manner.
- ② In particular, Yeats examines the transformative power (both negative and positive) of commitment to a cause.
- ④ Symbols and metaphors play an important role in conveying key aspects / profound truths about the revolution.
- ④ Yeats makes particularly effective use of rhythm and metre to highlight profound truths about this event.

The Wild Swans at Coole

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
 The woodland paths are dry,
 Under the October twilight the water
 Mirrors a still sky;
 Upon the brimming water among the stones 5
 Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
 Since I first made my count;
 I saw, before I had well finished,
 All suddenly mount 10
 And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
 Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
 And now my heart is sore.
 All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, 15
 The first time on this shore,
 The bell-beat of their wings above my head,

Trod with a lighter tread.	
Unwearied still, lover by lover,	
They paddle in the cold	20
Companionable streams or climb the air;	
Their hearts have not grown old;	
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,	
Attend upon them still.	
But now they drift on the still water,	25
Mysterious, beautiful;	
Among what rushes will they build,	
By what lake's edge or pool	
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day	
To find they have flown away?	30

Commentary

1. Content

- This poem embodies all that is best about Yeats's poetry. The beautiful simplicity of its **language**, the masterful control of **sound** and the emotional **honesty** that lies at the centre of the poem have been matched by very few poets in the twentieth century.
- In the first **stanza**, the poet sets the scene carefully. He describes the 'autumn beauty' of the landscape around Coole:

***The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;***

- Then, in the final couplet, the poet notices '**nine and- fifty swans**'. The uneven numbering of this group of swans will become significant later in the poem.
- In the next stanza, we learn that: '*The nineteenth autumn has come upon*' the poet since he first visited this place and counted the swans as a young man.
- His meditation is then interrupted by the sound of the swans as they '**scatter wheeling in great broken rings | Upon their clamorous wings**'.

- In the third stanza, the poet tells us that the sight of these birds provides him with a painful reminder that all has '**changed**' since he first heard the '**bell-beat of their wings**'.
- The final line of this stanza seems disconnected. However, it takes its logic from the **personal pronoun** '**I**' in the third line.
- In other words, the poet is telling us that when he was here 19 years ago, he was more at ease and '**Trod with a lighter tread**'.
- In the fourth stanza, the speaker returns to his consideration of the swans, which he feels are '**Unwearied**'. As they paddle together in the '**Companionable streams or climb the air**', these creatures are transformed.
- In the poet's eyes, they have managed to **transcend** the here and now. They represent a kind of eternal youthful vigour and: '**Their hearts have not grown old**'.
- In the final stanza, the poet continues his consideration of these beautiful creatures as they '**drift on the still water**'.
- As the poem draws to a close, the speaker contrasts the **transcendent** changelessness of the swans with the **mutability** of his own existence. He wonders whose eyes they will delight when he awakes: '**To find they have flown away**'.

2. Stylistic Features

- It is difficult not to be impressed by this poem. ①+② *It contains some of Yeats's most pressing and enduring preoccupations concerning the **human condition**: the passing of time, the inevitability of change and the vagaries of human love.*

- At the centre of '*The Wild Swans at Coole*' is the readily recognisable / **accessible** yet deeply suggestive **image** of the swans. These graceful creatures come to **symbolise** a vision of eternal and unchanging beauty in the face of the continual flux of human existence.
- For Yeats, the image of the swan has deep and emotional associations with his feelings for Maud Gonne.
- Elsewhere, he has likened Gonne to Leda, the mother of the beautiful Helen of Troy. Helen was born as the result of a union with Zeus, who had assumed the form of a swan.
- In the poet's imagination, the swans symbolise at once the almost otherworldly beauty of Gonne and his unrequited love for her.
- The fact that there are '**nine-and-fifty swans**' suggests that, like the poet, one swan remains alone.
- The autumnal setting of the poem is equally important. From Homer to Keats, poets have looked on autumn as a **metaphor** for the ageing process.
- Now in the autumn of his life, the poet views the scene in front of him from an entirely different perspective. He now realises that although individual swans may die, they are replaced by younger swans.
- In this respect, the swans are both changing and changeless. Set to the backdrop of '**October twilight**', the opening stanza also establishes and objectifies the poet's depressed state of mind which dominates the rest of the poem.
- The reader is immediately overwhelmed by a sense of things – a day, a year – coming to an end.
- This is, of course, reflected in the poem's **mood**. So, just as '**the water / Mirrors a still sky**', so too does the landscape mirror the poet's mood.

- For this reason, it is significant that the speaker is drawn to the fact that the **'woodland paths are dry'**. *In his writings, Yeats associates the idea of dryness with creative, physical and artistic sterility.*
- The references to water and earth are drawn from Yeatsian mysticism and cosmology. In Yeats's view of things, air and water represent facets of the spiritual world.
- As a result, they are **symbols** of unchanging timelessness. Conversely, Yeats looked on the earth as representing the physical dimension to human existence.
- For this reason, the poet views the swans that mount the air and paddle in the cold streams as being timeless.

In his own words, Yeats described the genesis of this poem:

I had [in London] various women friends on whom I would call towards five o'clock mainly to discuss my thoughts that I could not bring to a man without meeting some competing thought, but partly because their tea and toast saved my pennies for the bus ride home; but with women, apart from their intimate exchanges of thought, I was timid and abashed. I was sitting on a seat in front of the British Museum feeding pigeons when a couple of girls sat near and began enticing my pigeons away, laughing and whispering to one another, and I looked

straight in front of me very indignantly and presently went into the Museum without turning my head towards them. Since then I have often wondered if thou were prettu or

lapses. 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 shopwindow which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem 'Innisfree', my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric and from that emotion of the crowd that rhetoric brings, but I only understood vaguely and occasionally that I must for my special use nothing but the common syntax. A couple of years later I could not have written that first line with its conventional archaism - 'Arise and go' - nor the inversion of the last stanza.

- However, they are also independent, physically powerful and passionate creatures. In the second stanza, the poet relies on a powerful image of the whole flock of swans taking to the sky together:

I saw [...]

All suddenly mount

And scatter wheeling in great broken rings

Upon their clamorous wings.

- The use of the muscular verb **'to mount'** is an unusual one to describe the flight of birds. It is difficult to ignore the fact that the verb can also mean to copulate.
- In this respect, the word encompasses for Yeats the power, *'Passion'*, youthful *'conquest'* and freedom of these creatures.
- The **form** of the poem enhances the impact of its central themes. While the poet relies on a modified **balladic structure**, he departs sufficiently from the ballad so as to replicate the irregular **cadences** of speech patterns.
- The effect of this is to make the lines more **authentic and honest**. The reflective and melancholy **tone** that dominates the poem is aided by the use of **assonance, consonance** and **onomatopoeia**.

3. Essay Writing

If you are including *'The Wild Swans at Coole'* in an essay on Yeats's poetry, you may wish to bear some of the following points in mind.

- The poem provides us with a memorable example of Yeats's ability to control sound and form in his poetry.

- The poem addresses some of Yeats's most pressing and enduring preoccupations: the passing of time, the inevitability of change and the unpredictability of human love.
- The poet gains inspiration from the natural world. Given that there is an abundance of nature imagery in the poems by Yeats on the course, you may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of his poetry.

"In his poetry, Yeats engages in both public and private commentary using rich language that relies on symbols and metaphors." Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the poetry of Yeats on your course.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
 And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
 Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
 And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, 5
 Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
 There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
 And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
 I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; 10
 While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
 I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Commentary

1. Content

This short poem is one of Yeats's best known and best loved. First published in the poet's second collection, *The Rose*, in 1893, '*The Lake Isle of Innisfree*' is an example of Yeats's early lyric poetry. In three short quatrains, the poem explores the poet's longing for the calm and tranquillity of his boyhood haunt, Innisfree. The poem opens with a firm declaration of intent:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,

Once there, the speaker tells us that he intends to build a cabin made from '*clay and wattles*'. His existence will be an idyllic one sustained by the '*bean-rows*' he has planted and the hives that he maintains. In the next quatrain, the speaker tells us that he '*shall have some peace*' in Innisfree. The type of peace he speaks of is one that comes '*Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings*'. This is a beautiful place where midnight glimmers, the noon has a '*purple glow*' and the evening is '*full of the linnets wings*'. In the final quatrain, the poet tells us that he is haunted by the sound of Innisfree's water, which he describes as '*lapping with low sounds by the shore*'. The final couplet contrasts the poet's heartfelt desire to be back in the West of Ireland with the drab urban uniformity of '*pavements grey*'.

2. Stylistic Features

When the poet was living in London, he was drawn to the sound of water trickling from a display in a shop window. Instantly, Yeats was taken back to the West of Ireland of his childhood. Given that the poem was inspired by the sound of water, it is not surprising that it should be dominated by the almost hypnotic sound of Innisfree's shoreline. In order to create this effect, Yeats relies heavily on the hexameter. This six-stress line slows down the poem and creates a stately, if not antiquated, feeling to the poem. At the same time, the poet shortens the final line of each quatrain so as to lay emphasis on its rich sound patterns. Unusually for Yeats, every line in the poem is rhymed (abab) and this, combined with assonance, alliteration and consonance, creates a haunting, musical effect that is richly suggestive of the ebb and flow of the tide:

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore.

Although the poem is mainly situated in the future tense, there is a timeless quality to the scene that Yeats depicts. This is aided in large part by the fact that *'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'* contains only one detail to situate it somewhere in the modern era. Aside from the mention of grey pavements, the poem's images and sounds stem wholly from the natural world. Of course, it is important to realise that Yeats is, as with so many of his great poems, retreating to the realm of the imagination. In the 1880s, when Yeats wrote the poem, Ireland was in a state of turmoil. At the same time, the Yeats family was experiencing financial hardship. It is not surprising, then, that the sound of a water fountain in a London shopfront should remind him of the lapping water of Lough Gill, reawakening in him his boyhood dream of living on Innisfree, unencumbered by the demands of modern urban life. The critic Edmund Wilson has described the imaginative impulse that dominates Yeats's early poetry in the following terms:

Glossary

The world of imagination is shown in Yeats's early poetry as something infinitely delightful, infinitely seductive, as something to which one becomes delirious and drunken – and as something which is somehow incompatible with, and fatal to, the good life of that actual world which is so full of weeping and from which it is so sweet to withdraw.

Finally, in the poem, the poet manages to address all the senses. The sound of the water, the taste of the honey and the sight of the midday sky combine to create a rich vision of a rural idyll.

2. Essay Writing

If you are thinking of referring to *'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'*, you may wish to include some of the following points.

- Once again, Yeats turns to nature for inspiration. Given the prevalence of nature imagery in the poems by Yeats on the course, you may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of his work.
- It is difficult not to be impressed by Yeats's mastery of sound in this poem.
- In many respects, the wish to retreat to Innisfree can be seen as a form of imaginative escape. Such escapism is seen in many of the poems by Yeats on your course.

Eva Selina Laura Gore-Booth was born at Lissadell House, County Sligo on 22 May 1870 and died on 30 June 1926. She was a poet and dramatist, a committed member of the suffragette movement, a social worker and a political activist. Both she and her sister, Constance, who later married and became Countess Markiewicz, reacted against their privileged background and devoted themselves to helping the poor and the disadvantaged. Eva was also an accomplished poet. Her first published volume was highly praised by Yeats. After World War I, Eva and Constance became members of the Committee for the Abolition of Capital Punishment and worked for prison reform. As she grew older, Eva was forced to give up active work but continued writing poetry. She died in 1926 at her home in Hampstead, London. Constance Gore-Booth was born on 4 February 1868 at Buckingham Gate, London. Her father, Sir Henry Gore-Booth, was an explorer and philanthropist with a large estate in County Sligo. Although the Gore-Booths were members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, they were known as model landlords in Sligo. The fact that they were raised in an atmosphere of concern for the common man influenced the manner in which Constance and her younger sister, Eva, would conduct their later lives. Constance became a revolutionary nationalist, a leading member of the suffragette cause, an Irish Sinn Féin activist and later a Fianna Fáil politician. She was the first woman elected to the British House of Commons, though she did not take her seat and along with the other Sinn Féin TDs formed the first Dáil Éireann. She was also the first woman in Europe to hold a cabinet position. She was sentenced to death for her role in the Easter Rising, but this sentence was later commuted to life in prison.

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In 1917, she was released along with other political prisoners as part of an amnesty.

1 Lissadell – Lissadell House in County Sligo. Following several years abroad, Robert Gore-Booth (see 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death') decided to build a home for his family. He commissioned English architect Francis Goodwin to build him a new house at Lissadell. By 1833, the new house was finished, built of local cut grey limestone in the Neoclassical Greek Revival style. This impressive house overlooks Sligo Bay and lies at the foot of Ben Bulbin. Surprisingly, given the immense historical significance of the house, the Irish government decided not to purchase it on behalf of the Irish people when it came on the market in 2004.

4 gazelle – a small, graceful, swift antelope, native to the plains of Africa and Asia.

5 raving – wild.

5 shears – cuts.

7 The older – Constance was two years older than Eva.

9 Conspiring – planning or formulating a secret plan, usually with the intention of committing a subversive act.

11 Utopia – an ideal and perfect place or state, where everyone lives in harmony and everything is for the best.

28 conflagration – a large and very destructive fire.

30 gazebo – a small, usually open-sided and slightly elevated building, situated in a place that affords a panoramic view. In the poem, the gazebo comes to symbolise the artistic and cultural achievements of the Anglo-Irish.

An Irish Airman Foresees his Death

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,

5

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,

10

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

15

In balance with this life, this death.

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The airman in the title is Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's only son. In Yeats's opinion, Gregory was the ultimate Renaissance man. He studied at Harrow, New College and the Slade and he excelled at bowling, boxing and horseback riding.

He worked in Jacques Blanche's design studio and had his own exhibition of paintings in Chelsea in 1914. In 1915, he joined the war effort and became a member of the 4th Connaught Rangers. He then transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1916 and became Chevalier du Légion d'Honneur in 1917. Gregory earned a Military Cross 'for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty'. He died tragically at the age of 37 when an Italian pilot

mistakenly shot him down. Robert Gregory's death had a profound and lasting effect on Yeats, who wrote four poems about him: 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death', 'Shepherd and Goatherd' and 'Reprisals'.

3 Those that I fight – the Germans.

4 Those that I guard – England and her allies.

5 Kiltartan Cross – a townland near Coole Park, the Gregory home in County Galway.

12 tumult – a violent or noisy commotion.

Commentary

1. Content

This simple poem provides us with a profound commentary on the concepts of life and death during a time of war. The poem is one of four that Yeats composed to commemorate the death of Major Robert Gregory, the son of Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats's friend and benefactor. Robert Gregory was the embodiment of the Renaissance man: a fighter pilot, a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, an athlete, a scholar and an artist. At the age of 37, Gregory was not required to fight in the First World War, but he enlisted because of his thirst for adventure. Adopting the persona of Gregory as he prepares to engage the enemy in the skies over Italy in 1918, Yeats opens the poem by sounding a note of grim certainty:

I know that I shall meet my

fate

Somewhere among the clouds above;

In the next line, the poet captures something of Gregory's ambiguity towards the war. He does not hate the men he is fighting and does not love those that he is guarding. Given that his '*country is Kiltartan Cross*' and his '*countrymen Kiltartan's poor*', he realises that the outcome of this conflict will have little impact on him or his people:

No likely end could bring them loss

Or leave them happier than before.

In the next lines, we learn that his decision to fight was not forced on him by '*law*' or '*duty*', '*public men*' or '*cheering crowds*': '*A lonely impulse of delight | Drove [him] to this tumult in the clouds*'.

In the final quatrain, Yeats takes us directly to Robert Gregory's final moments. These are characterised by a curious sense of balance between life and death. Here, Gregory carries out a kind of tragic arithmetic that balances an empty future with impending death.

2. Stylistic Features

This poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue, during which the poet adopts the persona of Robert Gregory. However, in the final line, Yeats departs from this persona in order to demonstrate the futility of war and the universality of Gregory's experience. Particular attention should be paid to the poet's decision to shift to '*this life*', '*this death*', as opposed to using '*my*' and the personal pronoun '*I*'. In this manner, Yeats manages to pass commentary on the waste of human life that results from all war. The poem is equally divided into two eight-line sentences that form four quatrains, consisting mostly of iambic tetrameter. The long sentences, alternating rhymes and clipped, stoical tetrameters push the poem towards the inevitability of its last word, '*death*'. Yeats relies on contrast in the poem in order to infer something of Gregory's personality. His position high up in the '*clouds*' is juxtaposed with the terrible war being fought below him. Similarly, the poet contrasts the '*tumult*' that surrounds the Irish airman with the cold reasoning that leads him to accept and embrace the inevitability of his death.

3. Essay Writing

If you are thinking of including 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' in an essay, you might want to bear the following points in mind.

- Once again, Yeats looks to people and places from his own life for inspiration.
- The poem acknowledges the inevitability of death.
- The poem is perfectly constructed around a series of balanced opposites.

In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz

The light of evening, Lissadell,

Great windows open to the south,

Two girls in silk kimonos, both

Beautiful, one a gazelle.

But a raving autumn shears

5

Blossom from the summer's wreath;

The older is condemned to death,

Pardoned, drags out lonely years

Conspiring among the ignorant.

I know not what the younger dreams –

10

Some vague Utopia – and she seems,

When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,

An image of such politics.

Many a time I think to seek

One or the other out and speak

15

Of that old Georgian mansion, mix

Pictures of the mind, recall

That table and the talk of youth,

Two girls in silk kimonos, both

Beautiful, one a gazelle.

20

Dear shadows, now you know it all,

All the folly of a fight

With a common wrong or right.

The innocent and the beautiful

Have no enemy but time;

25

Arise and bid me strike a match

And strike another till time catch;

Should the conflagration climb,

Run till all the sages know.

We the great gazebo built,

30

They convicted us of guilt;

Bid me strike a match and blow.

Commentary

1. Content

- This hauntingly beautiful poem first appeared in the collection *'The Winding Stair'*, which was published in 1933.
- ④ It is difficult not to be impressed by the subtle tones and **elegiac** mood that Yeats creates in this poem.
- ③ The opening lines take us back to a moment drawn from the poet's memory.
- In the fading *'light'* of a distant evening, Yeats recalls: ***'Two girls in silk kimonos'***.
- While both these women are beautiful, one of them is likened to ***'a gazelle'***.
- The speaker's reverie is interrupted by a ***'raving autumn'*** wind that ***'shears | Blossom from the summer's wreath'***. This chill wind introduces an abrupt change in the poem's **narrative**.
- In the seventh line, the poet tells us that one of these women was ***'condemned to death'*** and then ***'Pardoned'***. Despite the fact that her sentence was commuted, she ended up alone and directionless, ***'Conspiring among the ignorant'***.
- The voice of the narrator interjects to tell us that he does not know what the ***'younger [girl] dreams'***. The poet sees her drawn and gaunt appearance as embodying the utopian politics that she pursued in life.
- Returning to the present, the speaker tells us that he often thinks of seeking one or the other of these women out in order to reminisce about

their ***'youth'*** spent in ***'that old Georgian mansion'***. The **final couplet** of the first stanza returns to the image of the ***'Two girls in silk kimonos'***.

- ③ There is a profound change in **tone** in the second and final stanza. Here, the poet addresses the ghosts or shadows of the girls.
- He believes they have now achieved an understanding that eluded them in their mortal years:

Dear shadows, now you know it all,

All the folly of a fight

With a common wrong or right.

- ① This is followed by a profound commentary on the passing of time. The speaker holds it as an undeniable truth that: ***'The innocent and the beautiful | Have no enemy but time'***.
- In the final section of the poem, Yeats moves beyond a straightforward examination of the ravages of time to encompass the historical changes that have taken place in Ireland since his youth.
- Lighting a match, the speaker attempts to cast some light on ② some of the darker aspects of Irish history in general and the Gore-Booths' involvement in that history in particular.
- He reminds the reader that his people, the Irish-Anglo Ascendancy, achieved much that was culturally significant.
- The Georgian **image** of the ***'great gazebo'*** must be viewed as a **symbol** for the artistic achievements of the Anglo-Irish. From Yeats's point of view, this is a particularly apt **metaphor** for the cultural achievements of his people.
- It is important to bear in mind that a gazebo provides a clear view of things. The final **couplet** of the poem is somewhat ambiguous. Some critics believe Yeats is accusing Eva Gore-Booth and Countess Markiewicz of convicting

his people of guilt, while others believe that he is levelling this accusation at the Catholic majority.

2. Stylistic Features

Yeats once said:

If I can be sincere and make my language natural, and without becoming discursive, like a novelist, and so indiscreet and prosaic, I shall, if good or bad luck make my life interesting, be a great poet; for it will no longer be a question of literature at all.

- If we acknowledge sincerity, free-flowing naturalness and energy in Yeats's late style, we still have not approached its secret.
- What is most impressive about Yeats's late work is that his whole personality is involved in his poetry.
- Few poems exemplify this fact as clearly as this one. 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz' is as haunting as it is complex.
- The marvellous achievement of Yeats in this poem is that *he makes us feel* the mortality of these two girls.
- ④ Rich and suggestive imagery combines with complex sound play and rhythms to produce a plangent elegy for times past and vanishing youth.
- Notice how the sound pattern of the third line is replicated in the first line of the second stanza. In this manner, the poet manages to juxtapose the painful fact of death with his recollection of their beauty:

Two girls in silk kimonos, both

Dear shadows, now you know it all

- The scene depicted in the opening stanza seems frozen in time, recalling as it does a portrait painting by Lavery or Osborne.
- Similarly, the image of the 'Two girls in silk kimonos' is a very effective one in that it perfectly captures *the delicate and innocent beauty that these women once possessed*.
- However, neither the house with great windows that '**open to the south**' nor the girls themselves are free from the ravages of time.
- As the poem progresses, it becomes clear they are as much victims of their own ideals as the passing of time.
- However, towards the end of the narrative, Yeats complicates matters further by adding a historical dimension to the poem. Yeats's biographer, R.F. Forester, believes that:

If the poem simply expressed his wish to burn away the years and restore Constance and Eva to the innocence and beauty they possessed in their (and his) youth, it would be an achievement of poignant clarity. The couplet towards the end, however, returns to his preoccupation with the hatreds and the confrontations of Irish history.
- It is easy to become mesmerised by the captivating imagery and musicality that Yeats employs in the final half of the poem, so much so that it is possible to lose sight of the political message in the final lines.
- The changes that have taken place in Ireland since the poet's youth have literally been overwhelming. Eva Gore-Booth and Countess Markiewicz played pivotal roles in the creation of the new Irish state.

- Yeats also played his part in fostering a sense of national identity. However, the influential role of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy was largely ignored following the creation of the Irish state. This was something to which Yeats objected. In a speech to Seanad Éireann, he had the following to say:

I wish to close more seriously; this is a matter of very great seriousness. 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 most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence. Yet I do not altogether regret what has happened. I shall be able to find out, if not I, my children will be able to find out whether we have lost our stamina or not. You have defined our position and have 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.

- In the final lines of this poem, the image of the gazebo acts as a metaphor for the considerable achievements of Yeats and indeed the entire Anglo-Irish people.
- So, by the poem's close, the poet has managed to create an **elegy** for the passing of time and a profound commentary on the mutability of mankind while at the same time rebuking those who would seek to denigrate his people.

3. Essay Writing

If you are thinking of referring to 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz' in an essay, you might want to bear some of the following points in mind.

- Once again, Yeats addresses the inevitability of change and the mutability of mankind. Given the predominance of this theme in the poems by Yeats on your course, you may wish to devote an entire paragraph to this aspect of his work.
- Here, as in so many of the poems by Yeats on your course, we are made to witness the poet's complete mastery of sound and form.
- Once again, Yeats draws on the raw material of his own life for inspiration.

W.B. Yeats (1865–1939)

A Short Biography

William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount in Dublin in 1865. He was one of a family of five children (two girls and three boys). His brother Jack went on to become a very well-known painter and is now regarded as Ireland's national artist. John Butler Yeats, his father, led a somewhat precarious existence, also as a painter. He was well known in Dublin for his wit and intellectual prowess and for the fact that he had chosen to give up a relatively lucrative law practice in order to pursue his dream of becoming a painter. On his mother's side, Yeats was descended from the Pollexfens, an Anglo-Irish family whose ancestral home was in Sligo. Whereas his father was an agnostic, his mother was a devotedly religious woman who had a deep interest in all matters spiritual, including the ghost and fairy stories of the Sligo peasants. She was a frail, beautiful and deeply intuitive woman who nurtured a deep love for the West of Ireland in her son that was to influence so much of his poetry. Much of Yeats's early childhood was spent among the lakes and hills of Sligo. In later years, **Yeats saw the West as a symbol of freedom and beauty that offered him an escape from the unpleasant reality of life.** *'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'*, which is on the Leaving Certificate course, is directly inspired by the landscape of the West.

In 1874, the Yeats family moved to London and although William still spent as much time as possible with his grandparents in Sligo, he was unhappy in London for long periods. However, despite the fact that he longed for the West of Ireland, his time spent in London was deeply formative. As a result of his father's artistic connections, the young poet was introduced to some of the leading literary and

artistic figures of the day. In fact, the family had moved to Bedford Park, which at the time was at the centre of what was later to become known as the pre-Raphaelite movement. In 1883, the family moved back to Dublin and Yeats graduated from secondary school. However, despite his father's wishes that he go to Trinity College, he chose not to, preferring instead to study art at the Metropolitan Art School. It was here that he met George Russell, who wrote under the pseudonym *Æ*, and realised that he had a talent for poetry. In fact, Yeats had begun to publish poetry as early as 1885, when his work appeared in *The Dublin University Review*. This was a period of intense political ferment in Ireland and Yeats began to come under the influence of the Irish nationalist leader John O'Leary. O'Leary had just returned from exile in Paris and together with his sister, the poet Ellen O'Leary, he was an important figure in the Dublin literary world and in the revival in interest in all things Irish that was taking place at that time. While Yeats was a committed believer in the nationalist cause, his interests extended to more *esoteric* areas that had little in common with ordinary nationalism. Along with George Russell and a small *cabal* of similarly enlightened friends, he formed the Dublin Hermetic Society. This unusual club devoted itself to the study of unconventional systems of thought, spiritualism and even magic. In particular, he became interested in esoteric Buddhism and the Cabbala, a secretive branch of Judaism. In 1888 he joined Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and then, two years later, he became a leading member of the Golden Dawn, where he regularly partook in séances. During one such séance he was said to have twitched so violently that he broke the table.

The next year, 1889, was a watershed in the life of W.B. Yeats. The meeting with the beautiful and radical Maude Gonne changed the direction of his life and art. Gonne was drawn to revolutionary politics and as early as 1899 had partaken in a plot to blow up a British troop carrier bound for South Africa. For Yeats, Maud Gonne represented at once his vision of the ideal woman and a complement to himself:

*My outer nature was passive – but for her I
should never perhaps have left my desk – but I*

knew my spiritual nature was passionate, even violent. In her all this was reversed, for it was her spirit only that was gentle and passive ...

Despite the fact that Yeats's love for her troubled him deeply for the greater part of his adult life, it led to some of the most beautiful and memorable love poetry in the English language. Although it is difficult to draw Maud Gonne out from Yeats's shadow, she was a fascinating woman in her own right. Her life story makes for captivating reading: her love affair with the French politician Lucien Millevoe, by whom she bore two children; her passionate Irish republicanism, which led to her involvement in the Irish Republican Brotherhood; her hatred of the British Empire; her imprisonments and hunger strike; her love of theatre and her acting; the role she played in the fostering of an Irish identity; and her involvement in the National Theatre Society and the Abbey Theatre. Yeats never formed a long-lasting physical relationship with Gonne, but the couple had entered into a 'mystic marriage' in 1898. Thus, when she married John MacBride, the poet felt bitter and betrayed, despite the fact that he himself had formed a close attachment with Olivia Shakespeare. The poems '*Wild Swans at Coole*' and '*Easter, 1916*', which have been selected for inclusion on the Leaving Certificate course, reflect aspects of the poet's tortured relationship with Gonne. In 1905, Gonne left MacBride and three years later, in Paris, the poet finally consummated his relationship with her. However, the relationship did not blossom and soon after their time in Paris, Gonne wrote to the poet indicating that despite the physical consummation of their love, there could be no prospect of a conventional union between the two:

I have prayed so hard to have all earthly desire taken from my love for you and dearest, loving you as I do, I have prayed and I am praying still that the bodily desire for me may be taken from you too.

By January 1909, she was sending Yeats letters praising the advantage given to artists who abstain from sex.

Another vital presence in Yeats's poetry was the Anglo-Irish noblewoman Isabella Augusta Persse Gregory. Yeats was introduced to Lady Gregory by their mutual friend, Edward Martyn, in 1896. She was deeply involved with the revival in Irish literature that would later become known as the Celtic Twilight or the **Irish Literary Revival**. Importantly, she gave him access to her country home, Coole Park, which provided the poet with a tranquil retreat from everyday life. She encouraged his nationalism and convinced him to continue writing drama. She also collaborated with him on many of his plays, such as *The Unicorn from the Stars*. Such was the influence that this woman had on his life that when she died, Yeats feared that the 'subconscious drama that was [his] imaginative life' may have come to an end.

In 1899, Yeats co-founded the Irish Literary Theatre, which would later become known as the Abbey Theatre. In 1902, the theatre staged Yeats's play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, a personification of Ireland in which Maud Gonne played the title role. That same year, Yeats met James Joyce, who told him that he was too old to be of use to younger writers. However, 10 years later, under the influence of the American poet Ezra Pound, Yeats was to enter into a phase of creativity that would forever place him in the vanguard of world literature. In 1913, Yeats and Pound lived together in London in the Stone Cottage at Ashdown Forest. Pound accelerated the movement away from Victorian prosody that had been evident in Yeats's poetry since 1910. In his earlier work, Yeats looked to the Irish peasantry for inspiration, yet chose to ignore the suffering and subjugation of this people. However, the emergence of a revolutionary movement in Dublin, which, unlike similar movements in Irish history, was drawn from the Catholic lower middle class, forced Yeats to reconsider his attitudes to his fellow Irishmen. Yeats now addressed political matters directly in his poems. In '*September 1913*', which can be found in this anthology, Yeats castigates the selfish complacency of his countrymen. Yet three years later, the poet attempted to **expiate** this attitude in the unforgettable refrain of his poem '*Easter, 1916*':

All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

In 1916, Yeats proposed to Maud Gonne and was once again rejected. A year later the poet asked Gonne's 21-year-old daughter, Iseult, to marry him. However, she also rejected him. The poet was now 51 and was desperate to produce an heir, so in September 1917 he asked 24-year-old George Hyde-Lees to marry him. She ignored the advice of family and friends and accepted his offer. Despite the difference in age and the poet's sense of foreboding during the honeymoon, the marriage was successful. They had two children, Anne and Michael, and George was to prove to be a great influence on Yeats's later poetry. In particular, she acted as a conduit for spirits with whom Yeats believed he was in contact. These spirits communicated a complex esoteric system of thought which he synthesised into a coherent system in his semi-mystical work *A Vision*.

Now in the mature phase of his writing career, Yeats was producing some of his most memorable poems. In 1923, he was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature and, along with T.S. Eliot, was widely regarded as being the elder statesman of world literature. In his final years, the poet played an active role in Ireland's political and cultural life. He was a senator in the upper house of the Oireachtas and continued to write profusely. In 1934, he underwent a Steinach operation, a procedure designed to restore sexual potency. The operation was a success and at the age of 69 he became involved with a number of younger women. For Yeats, sexual prowess was inextricably linked to creativity. In 1936, he felt strong enough to accept the difficult task of editing *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. At the same time, he wrote some of his most complex and accomplished poems. His health, however, was precarious and he died at the Hotel Idéal Séjour in Menton in the south of France. He was buried in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in a simple ceremony in accordance with his wishes. According to his wife, George, he had given her clear instructions surrounding his death:

If I die bury me up there (at Roquebrune) and then in a year's time when the newspapers have forgotten me, dig me up and plant me in Sligo.

The advent of war delayed the poet's removal to Ireland until 1948. His epitaph is taken from '*Under Ben Bulbin*', one of his final poems:

Cast a cold eye on life, on death. Horseman, pass by!

In his lifetime, Yeats transformed the literary landscape not only of Ireland, but the world. His name is now spoken in the same breath as Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Joyce. Generations of Irish writers have not only been inspired by his genius, but have struggled to emerge from his shadow. He has become transformed into an almost mythical figure and his poetry has now become so inextricably part of how we view ourselves as a people that it is difficult to gain a proper perspective on it. However, despite the almost iconic status of Yeats, it is difficult to ignore the sheer beauty of his achievements.