



William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount, Dublin on 13 June 1865 into an Anglo-Irish family. When Yeats was a child, his father, John Butler Yeats, gave up a career in law and moved the family to London to pursue his passion for painting. Although talented, John Butler Yeats was never able to make painting pay and the family struggled financially.

In 1872, when William was seven, the family travelled to Sligo for a summer holiday, staying with his mother's family. The holiday lasted the best part of two and a half years and proved to be a vital experience for Yeats. He fell in love with the landscape and listened intently to the servants' stories of fairies. From an early age, he was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. These memories and stories of Sligo were to remain with the poet for the rest of his life.

Back in England, Yeats struggled at school. He was considered to be 'very poor in spelling', a weakness that persisted throughout his poetic career. It was in science that he excelled. While reading his son's school report, John remarked that William would be 'a man of science; it is great to be a man of science'.

In 1880 the family moved back to Dublin, settling first in Harold's Cross and later in Howth. Yeats didn't fare any better in school in Dublin, but spent a lot of time at his father's nearby studio, where he met many of the city's artists and writers. John Butler Yeats constantly encouraged his children in the world of ideas, philosophy and art. The entire family was highly artistic; William's brother Jack went on to become a famous painter, while his sisters Elizabeth Mary and Susan were active in the arts and crafts world.

After finishing school in 1883, Yeats attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, now the National College of Art and Design. By then, Yeats had been writing poetry for a few years, beginning in his late teens. His early work was strongly influenced by Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake and other Romantic poets. His first publication, 'The Island of Statues', appeared in the Dublin University Review in 1885.

Despite their Anglo-Irish background, Yeats' parents were broadly supportive of Irish nationalism. Yeats, in turn, was passionate about the Irish cause. In 1885 he met the Fenian activist John O'Leary, whose romanticised view of the nation struck a chord with Yeats. O'Leary's twenty years of imprisonment and exile, his sense of patriotism, and his devotion to cultural rather than militant nationalism all held an attraction for the young Yeats. O'Leary embodied a sense of an older, romantic Ireland, one that was ancient and mysterious. Yeats termed this 'indomitable Irishry'. He would later lament O'Leary in the poem 'September 1913': 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,/ It's with O'Leary in the grave'.

The Yeats family moved back to London in 1887, where Yeats continued to write in earnest. In 1888 he wrote one of his most famous poems, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. When it was published in the National Observer in 1890, it received critical acclaim and brought Yeats' work to national attention. His first collection, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, was published in 1889. It drew heavily on Irish mythology and dealt with one of Yeats' most common themes: the tension between a life of action and a life of contemplation.

Yeats met the heiress and Irish nationalist Maud Gonne in 1889 when she visited the family home. He was immediately struck by her, and she would provide him with the inspiration for a lifetime of great love poetry and unrequited longing. He proposed to Gonne four times and was refused on each occasion, partly because Gonne believed that Yeats' unrequited love

“He proposed to Maud Gonne four times and was refused on each occasion, partly because Gonne believed that Yeats' unrequited love for her inspired his greatest poetry”

for her inspired his greatest poetry. Gonne went on to marry the republican icon John MacBride in 1903. The marriage soon fell apart, and though Gonne did have a fleeting romance with Yeats in 1908, it never became the committed relationship he hoped for.

In 1890 Yeats joined the Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society with initiation rites, rituals and other occult practices. His membership of this society was reflective of his lifelong interest in mysticism and the supernatural. He attended séances and read widely the mystical literature of other belief systems, such as Buddhism and Judaism. He was fascinated by the ritual and mystery of the supernatural, something which also fuelled his interest in Irish legends. That sense of ceremony and symbolic importance in the revelation of truth never left Yeats and permeates his poetry.

In 1896 Yeats met Lady Augusta Gregory, and her estate at Coole Park in Galway was to become a summer retreat for Yeats for many years. Lady Gregory encouraged Yeats' nationalism and his playwriting. Together with other writers such as J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey, Yeats and Gregory were instrumental in founding the movement known as the Irish Literary Revival. In 1899, they established the Irish Literary Theatre for the purpose of performing Irish and Celtic plays. This led in turn to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. Yeats' play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*, starring Maud Gonne, was performed on the opening night.

Yeats proposed to Maud Gonne one last time in 1916, soon after John MacBride was executed for his part in the 1916 Rising. When Maud refused him, Yeats proposed to her daughter, twenty-one-year-old Iseult Gonne. When Iseult also turned him down, Yeats eventually married twenty-five-year-old Bertha Georgie Hyde-Lees at the age of fifty-one. Georgie was involved in much of Yeats' writing, and like her husband was interested in the occult. With Georgie, Yeats experimentally wrote numerous poems by a process called automatic writing. Georgie considered herself a medium and claimed to channel the messages of spirits in the form of symbols. Together they produced

hundreds of pages' worth of poetic material, eventually published in the 1925 book *A Vision*.

The couple bought a Norman castle, Thoor Ballylee, from Lady Gregory sometime in 1916 or 1917. Their first-born, Anne, arrived in 1919, the same year that Yeats published his seventh collection of poetry, *The Wild Swans at Coole*. Their second child, Michael, was born in 1921 while the family was living in Oxford. Yeats was appointed to the first Senate of the Irish Free State in 1922, and was re-appointed for a second time in 1925.

In 1923 Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first Irish person to achieve that honour. The Nobel Committee remarked on his 'inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.' Yeats could not help but associate his win with Ireland's recently-won independence, saying: 'I consider that this honour has come to me less as an individual than as a representative of Irish literature; it is part of Europe's welcome to the Free State.'

In 1928, not long after moving to Italy due to ill health, Yeats published his acclaimed work *The Tower*, which included poems such as 'Sailing to Byzantium' and 'The Stare's Nest by My Window'. The 'tower' was the vantage point from which Yeats had observed the violence that had raged throughout Ireland during the revolutionary period and civil war.

Despite his ill health, Yeats remained a prolific writer. After reportedly going through an operation that restored his libido, Yeats even had several affairs with younger women in his later years, among them the actress Margot Ruddock and the novelist Ethel Mannin. He died in the town of Menton in the south of France in 1939, aged seventy-three. He was initially buried nearby in Roquebrune, before being exhumed in 1948 to be brought back to Drumcliff, Co. Sligo. His epitaph is taken from the last lines of 'Under Ben Bulbin', one of his final poems: 'Cast a cold Eye/ On Life, on Death./ Horseman, pass by!'



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,
 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.

[5]

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

[10]

Innisfree: a tiny uninhabited island on Lough Gill, Co. Sligo

[2] **Clay and wattles:** an ancient construction technique known as 'wattle and daub', whereby clay is smeared over a frame of interwoven branches

[7] **a purple glow:** Innisfree comes from the Irish Inis Fraoich, which means island of heather. Here Yeats imagines the purple heather glowing in the noon sunlight

[8] **linnet's wings:** a linnet is a type of finch, typically brown and red-breasted

Get In Gear

Where is Innisfree located? Do a Google image search for Innisfree and write a short paragraph describing your impressions. Do you think it's a wild or calm place, a harsh or pleasant environment? Give reasons for your answer.

Tease It Out

1. The poet declares his intention to go and live on Innisfree. Is this a spontaneous decision or something he's been thinking about for a long time? Give a reason for your answer.
2. What ancient building process will the poet use to construct his cabin on Innisfree? Describe it in your own words.
3. The poet imagines living a self-sufficient life on the island. What different foodstuffs does he imagine growing in order to feed himself?
4. What metaphor does the poet use to describe the mist that drifts across the island each morning? Is it an effective one in your opinion?
5. What word or phrase describes the effect of starlight as it's reflected in the waters around the island?
6. What sound fills the island as evening comes?
7. What are the Irish origins of the name Innisfree? What does this suggest about the purple glow that fills the island each noon?
8. What sound does the poet claim to hear 'night and day'?
9. Consider his description of this sound. Do you think he finds it a pleasant one? Do you think it bothers him that he 'always' hears this sound, seemingly everywhere he goes?
10. Is he really hearing this sound or does he experience it only in his own imagination?
11. What aspect of the mind or self is suggested by the phrase 'deep heart's core'?
12. In what sort of environment is the poet at this moment? How does he feel about this place?
13. Class Discussion: The poet states three times that he will 'go' and live on Innisfree. Do you think it's likely that he will actually move to the island and live there? Do you think the poet is serious about changing his life in this way? Or is he merely trying to convince himself that he's actually capable of such a radical move?
14. Do you think the poet is prepared for the challenges of living a solitary, self-sufficient lifestyle? Or is he being naïve about nature, and idealistic about what it means to live in such a remote place? Give reasons for your answer.

Think About Themes

1. 'In this poem, the poet fantasises about leaving behind the 'rat race', the stresses and strains of everyday living. Like hippies and new age travellers, he dreams of living 'off the grid', of being completely self-sufficient and detached from modern technology'. Write two paragraphs in response to this statement.
2. 'And I shall have some peace there'. Identify three words or phrases that emphasise the island's extreme tranquillity. Is the impression he creates of the island a realistic one, in your opinion?
3. 'Innisfree is a real place, but it's also an idea, a state of mind that the speaker can access any time'. Do you agree with this statement? Write a few paragraphs in response.

In Context

1. In 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' and 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', Yeats describes two very different kinds of escape from the everyday world. Compare and contrast how the two poems deal with the themes of escape and solitude.
2. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' was written in 1888, when Yeats was in his early twenties, while 'Sailing to Byzantium' was published in 1928, towards the end of Yeats' career. Compare and contrast how the two poems depict the ideal escape from daily life and suggest how each poem may have been influenced by Yeats' age at the time of composition.

Language Lab

1. 'In stanza 2, peace is depicted almost as a physical substance, 'dropping' like dew from veils of mist onto the grasses'. Do you agree with this interpretation? Write a few sentences in response.
2. 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' uses repetition to great effect. In particular, the phrase 'I will arise and go now' has great power when repeated in the final stanza. Suggest how the meaning and tone of this line changes between stanza 1 and stanza 3.
3. This poem makes extensive use of assonance and alliteration to create a beguiling verbal music, such as in line 3: 'Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee'. Can you identify another example of assonance and another example of alliteration in the poem?
4. This poem is alive with the sounds of nature. List all the sound effects the poet describes. In your opinion, which is the most effective description? Give a reason for your answer.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree



LINE BY LINE

STANZA 1

Yeats declares his intention to go off and live on the island of Innisfree, a small uninhabited island on Lough Gill in County Sligo. He imagines that once he got there he would live a very simple life:

- He would live 'alone' in a clearing or glade upon the island.
- He would build his own cabin: 'And a small cabin build there'.
- This would be a very basic type of accommodation. It would be 'small'. It would be manufactured using the ancient 'wattle and daub' technique, which involves smearing mud over interwoven sticks and twigs.
- He would even produce his own food, keeping bees for their honey and growing rows of beans: 'Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee'.

STANZA 2

The poet imagines the great beauty of Innisfree, taking us through a day on the island from dawn to dusk to midnight.

- The poet would wake each day to the pleasant chirping sounds of crickets: 'where the cricket sings'.
- He uses a wonderful metaphor to describe the banks of mist that drift across the island each morning, comparing them to 'veils' that drift and disperse, momentarily obscuring the island's beauty as they pass: 'the veils of morning'.
- Noon, too, is beautiful. Sunlight glitters on the heather that covers much of the island and gives it its name. ('Inis

Fraoich', in Irish, means island of the heather). This glittering heather lends the whole place a 'purple glow'.

- Evenings on Innisfree are 'full' of the sound made by linnets (small brown finches common in the west of Ireland) as they flit around the island: 'And evening full of the linnet's wings'.
- Midnight, meanwhile, sees the starlight reflected on Lough Gill, so that its waters glitter and gleam: 'There midnight's all a glimmer'.

STANZA 3

The poet claims that the sound of Innisfree's beaches, of 'lake water lapping' on the island's shores, is always in his mind's ear. Like a catchy song he can't get out of his head, these 'low sounds' of water are 'always' present at the back of his mind. They repeat over and over again, 'night and day'; we sense that the poet couldn't make them stop even if he wanted to.

These lines, then, emphasise the intensity of the poet's attachment to the little island. The lapping sound of its water echoes in the very 'core' of his heart, in the depths of his being or psyche. No matter where he goes the sound of its waters is ever-present at the very centre of his mind, forming a kind of background music as he lives his life.

Yeats, it's worth noting, was inspired to write the poem when he was living in London. For the thought of Innisfree, it seems, is especially important to the poet when he finds himself in an urban environment: 'While I stand on the road way or on the pavements grey'. We can imagine how the cold grey concrete makes him long for the island's beauty. We can imagine how the city's endless racket makes him long for that soothing, almost silent retreat.

THEMES

Innisfree is depicted as a place of sublime tranquillity. It's a place of great silence, devoid of any man-made sound. Here one can appreciate the background noise of nature: the flapping sound made by linnets as they flit from branch to branch, the buzzing of the bees in the poet's glade, the creaking song the cricket sings, the low-pitched frequency produced by waves when they lap against the shore.

Innisfree, then, is where the poet will discover the peace he so craves: 'And I will have some peace there. Yeats, in a wonderful turn of phrase, presents peace as a physical substance, 'dropping' in the form of dew to cover the entire island. Peace, we're told, 'comes dropping' slowly from the banks of mist that cover the island each morning, drenching the grasses where the crickets are busy about their song.

Many people experience moments when they feel like dropping out, when they feel like getting out of the 'rat race' that all-too-often constitutes modern living.

VERBAL MUSIC

Repetition is a strong element of this poem's rhythm and verbal music. The opening line of the poem repeats the word 'go', and suggests the poet's earnest determination to act on his dream. The phrase 'I will arise and go now' is repeated in the opening line of the final stanza, but at this stage we suspect that the poet's journey will remain a fantasy. It's unlikely he will ever 'go' to the place he so lovingly describes.

Repetition also features in the second stanza, where the words 'peace' and 'dropping' are repeated, slowing the pace of the line to create a soothing, lulling music. The word 'hear', repeated in the third stanza, emphasises how strongly the poet recalls the sound of the island's 'lapping' waters, even when he's far away amid the grey pavements of the city.

The poem also contains many examples of assonance and alliteration. Line 3 features repeated 'h' sounds, giving a pleasant alliterative effect: 'will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee'. Assonance features in the second line: 'a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made'. It is also evident in the line 7, where the repeated 'i' and 'o' sounds create a soft musical effect: 'midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow'. The repeated 'a' and 'o' sounds in line 10 have a similar musical quality: 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'. Combined with the alliteration of the 'l' sounds, these techniques make this line very pleasant to the ear.

IMAGERY

'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' is a poem of contrasting imagery. There is a stark difference between the imagery of the city and the imagery of Innisfree. The city is a drab and dull place, composed of roadways and 'pavements grey'. The island, in contrast, is alive with colour and sound. We can contrast the 'purple glow' of the heather with the 'pavements grey'. However, the city seems a very real place, while the island comes across as more of an imagined paradise.

TONE AND ATMOSPHERE

There is a strong sense of yearning in the poem, as Yeats longs for Innisfree, a place that he knows, deep down, he will never actually visit. We can sense his desire to escape his current stressful city life to go to the island: 'And I shall have some peace there'. So great is his longing for Innisfree that it goes to the very centre of him: 'the deep heart's core.'

In his descriptions of Innisfree, Yeats creates a very peaceful, almost drowsy atmosphere. His days will be marked by the humming of bees and crickets. It is a place where 'peace comes dropping slow', where he can relax and be alone in nature. However, we also suspect that this is a highly idealised version of Innisfree. Were Yeats to actually go and try to live on the island by himself, the reality might be very different.

- They may feel, as Yeats does in this poem, that it's time to turn their backs on the stresses and strains of modern living, of exams and deadlines, of career pressure and social obligations. There are moments, maybe for all of us, when leaving all this hassle behind for an idyllic private island might seem an attractive prospect.
- They may feel like getting back to nature, by immersing themselves in a soothing environment like that of Innisfree with its 'veils' of mist and its glowing heather.
- They may feel, as Yeats suggests in Stanza 3, like trading in the cacophony of city living, with its endless traffic noise and car alarms for a place of tranquillity where 'peace comes dropping slow'.
- They may even fantasise, as Yeats does here, about going off the grid completely, about living without modern technology, even without electricity. They may entertain the notion of abandoning all the media and devices that sometimes seem to control us as much as we control them.
- The idea of self-sufficiency, too, can seem attractive at times. There are moments for many people when they long to stop consuming, buying and selling. They may fantasise, as Yeats does here, about being completely self-sufficient, about growing their own food and building their own simple dwelling places.

The poem opens with a dramatic declaration of intent. It's as if the poet has suddenly made a decision. It's as if he's

suddenly realised that he's had enough of modern living and that a change of direction is needed. And this new life, he declares, will begin immediately. For he's going to stand up any minute now and depart for his island paradise: 'I will arise and go now'. He even emphasises this intention by repeating it in Stanza 3.

Innisfree, as the poet describes it, is a kind of fantasy, an idealised almost heavenly version of the actual island in County Sligo. And no doubt Yeats, like most people, wouldn't last more than a week living alone and self-sufficiently upon Lough Gill. Think of the harsh winters, the difficulty of growing crops, the isolation, the lack of warmth and of electricity.

We sense, then, that the poet won't really follow through on this decision. We sense that this departure for Innisfree won't happen now and probably never will, that the poet isn't quite prepared to leave the modern world behind and embrace what today we'd describe as a hippy or new-age lifestyle. It's as if he's trying to convince himself that he's ready for and capable of such dramatic change.

But such fantasies can be important. For the poet, this dream of the simple life serves as a comfort or escape when times get tough. When the rat race proves too draining, when he tires of the grey city pavements, he can always daydream about his bean rows on the island of Innisfree.