

## William Butler Yeats

He is an Irish poet and he lived during the period of fight for Irish independence. He was born in 1865 in Dublin and devoted his literary work to Irish nationalism. He was a famous and important supporter and wrote so beautiful poems that he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

At the beginning of his literary career, he is influenced by Romantic themes. He celebrates Ireland through the land, rope and the legends of the island.

Then he understands that he can celebrate Irish nationalism through the new heroes of the rebellions. This is evident in "Easter 1916" (published in 1921 when Michael Collins signed the agreement with England).

In the second part of his literary production is characterized by a new style, less ornate and more vigorous.

He uses symbols and can be considered a forerunner of Imagism. In fact his poems are not always very clear to understand.

This is referred to some of the "patristic" poems and to the poems written in the 1920s and 1930s.

He died in 1939.

## The Irishness of Yeats

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William Butler Yeats is a very patriotic poet. At the beginning of his career his poetry is influenced by the Romantic tradition. His poems are immersed in an atmosphere dominated by the love for Irish landscape and legends. Then Yeats' interest in Irish political life grows and his poetry changes. It becomes more factual and closer to the last events of Irish history.

Why was Yeats so interested in Irish legends? What did he want to tell the readers in his poems? To answer these two questions, we have to consider a passage from "The Course of Irish History". It contains some considerations about the Irish poet and the qualities of a national Irish culture. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries we have the so-called Irish Renaissance. Irish poets and writers understood Ireland could not be independent if it didn't get her own culture through a new intellectual life. Yeats was one of the major figures who fought for Irish intellectual independence to get political independence. These poets believed that Irish national literature should deal with the legends and the history of Ireland. This is why Yeats' early poems are centred on Irish legends. He wants to arouse in the readers the sense of nationalism through the figure of the ancient Irish heroes like Cuchulainn.

During the First World War he develops his interest for contemporary Ireland. Perhaps he understands that, even if the legendary heroes lived in the past and can't come back to life, now there are new heroes. They are the people who "dreamed and are dead", just like he says in "Easter 1916". The poem



doesn't describe the important insurrection happened in Dublin: it remains implicit. Yeats transfers his feelings in the poem giving an intimate interpretation to what happened. In fact it's difficult to understand what he wants to say in some points of his poem. First of all he reproaches himself because he criticised the rebels. He made fun of them ("To please a companion/ Around the fire at the club) with a friend without taking part in the rebellion to change the situation. Then he celebrates the people who died in the rebellion, but he doesn't tell their names: we must know who the protagonists of the rebellion were to understand who he is speaking about. And he puts an element of his private life: he says that one of the man "had done most bitter wrong". We understand this man is the one who had married the woman Yeats loved if we know this fact.

Though the poem is centred on Irish political life, the importance of Irish landscape is still present in it: in the third stanza the poet compares the rebels' hearts to stones thrown into the water. Even if nature changes and the clouds that "minute by minute change" move fast in the sky, the strong stone is "in the midst of all" and tries "To trouble the living stream". The natural elements are used to represent the political actions of the rebels. They strengthen their relevance. In the last part of the poem Yeats wonders "when may it suffice". He doesn't know. But he knows that the duty of the Irish poet is to immortalize the figures of the heroes. This idea is similar to the one in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by Keats. At the very end of the poem Yeats eternizes the names of the rebels ("now and in time to be") and repeats once more "A terrible beauty is born": this oxymoron summarises the whole content of the poem and complete the description of the setting in which the rebels died. They are martyrs of their country.