

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) *Poems (B, 2386-2422)*

William Butler Yeats, like Jonathan Swift, was born in Ireland, and like Joyce and Swift remained throughout his life devoted to the cause of Irish independence from British occupation. Nonetheless Yeats spent his life both in Ireland and England, where he was at the center of an active literary scene. In both cultures he worked with native folklore, ancient mythical themes, and the social power of poetry. Romantic, passionate, he married and had two children, but remained throughout life devoted to the image of one woman, Maude Gonne, with whom a single night of love testified to their bond.

Question: Can you see any consistency among the many styles Yeats displays throughout his writing career?

“The Stolen Child,” and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” show us Yeats under the thrall of Irish folklore, and of a dreamy Romanticism. These poems date from the 1890’s. Poems like “Easter, 1916” or “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” put us in the creative stance of political rebellion and the dignity of patriotic honor. Late poems like “Sailing to Byzantium” or “Byzantium”—written in 1927 and 1932—take us both into Yeats’ complex personal mythology—perns and gyres, his philosophy of history—and into the subtle worship of art, as a dictating factor in culture. Once again, the question: *can you see a binding stylistic theme among the poems of this volatile career in language?*

Comparative Literature:

1. Both Yeats and William Blake created personal mythological systems. We passed over that issue above, in mentioning Blake. His *The Four Zoas* (begun 1797) incorporates much of the cosmic drama of Blake’s mythical scheme. The full fledged cosmology, embodied there, is Blake’s effort to recreate the cosmos in language. Yeats’ *A Vision* (1925) was his full fledged account of a philosophy of history encapsulated in the form of a widening and contracting gyre, Yeats’ geographical image for the development of human history. The challenge of this Comparative Literature entry is to “compare” the two systems of world-explanation on display here, and to evaluate their successes as material for poetry.

2. Comparative literature is typically concerned with the theoretical question: What is literature? To consider what poetry is, specifically, you need to examine what metaphor is. What is Yeats doing with the metaphor of “Leda and the Swan,” (2405). What is he managing to say through the metaphor of the Father God, the raped Leda, the “white rush” of the swan, and finally “Agamemnon dead,” that he could not otherwise have said? (Let’s say, could not have said in the languages of history, of the concatenation of events, and even of the religious perspectives that tie God in one way or another to creation?) What Yeats is able to say, of that metaphorical kind, is hard to discuss, and constitutes the material of the “metaphysics of literature.” Suggestion, drop in on a classic of philosophical analysis *Metaphor and Reality* (1962) by Philip Wheelwright. You will be startled by the layers of meaning unfolding around the act of poetry.