

## W. B. Yeats and the Awakening of Irish Nationalism

Zeyad Mohammed<sup>1</sup>, Kanubhai D. Patel<sup>1</sup>

Email: [Mutazkhalidnaji@gmail.com](mailto:Mutazkhalidnaji@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India

Received: February 23, 2025

Received in Revised: April 7, 2025

Accepted: April 29, 2025

### Abstract

This paper explores the influential role of W. B. Yeats in the awakening of Irish nationalism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Yeats, a seminal figure in both literature and politics, utilized his poetry, plays, and public persona to rekindle a sense of Irish identity and pride among his compatriots. The study examines Yeats' involvement with the Irish Literary Revival, his association with key nationalist figures, and his contribution to the cultural and political movements that sought to resist British colonial rule. By analyzing Yeats' major works and their thematic focus on Irish myth, folklore, and history, this paper highlights how Yeats' artistic vision and nationalistic fervor helped to galvanize a burgeoning Irish nationalist sentiment, ultimately contributing to the push for Irish independence. The paper also considers the complexities and contradictions in Yeats' nationalism, offering a nuanced understanding of his legacy in the context of Ireland's struggle for self-determination.

**Keywords:** Yeats, Poetry, Nation, Irish nationalism, Irish Identity and Ireland

### Introduction

The native land, whether independent or under sovereignty, serves as a wellspring of inspiration and constitutes a pivotal theme for numerous poets. One can sense Tagore's profound love when he entreats, expressing his desire to traverse a region. Where the mind is free from fear and the head is held high. India, with its cornfields laden with the weight of golden grains, diverse seasons, an array of flowers, and a network of rivers, mountains, and enchantment, comes alive in Tagore's verses. Similarly, Ireland finds its poetic portrayal in Yeats' work. Its joy and sorrow, restlessness and tranquility, the typical and the universal, collide within his poems. Derozio's poem "*To India – My Native Land*" speaks of the once-beautiful aura surrounding India, juxtaposed with its predicament as it succumbs to "humble dust." Yeats similarly envisions Ireland, depicting its former grandeur and present circumstances.

Following Friedrich Engels, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Nigerian writer, defined the state as one "armed with coercive instruments and institutions" (Thiong'o, 1998) The state is a force that "regulates the whole society like a patriarch did his household in the feudal era" (p. 7). Thiong'o further explains that in "every absolutist state, the holder of the pen, which forces words on paper, is seen as the enemy of the holder of the gun, which enforces words of the law" (p. 9). In his book, Thiong'o seeks to understand why the state "fear[s] the open word" (p. 9) when the artist is armed only with "his feather...his bottle of ink, and a white piece of parchment" (p. 9) and when the artist can only "spill the ink" (p. 9), the absolute state has the ability to "draw blood" (p. 9). Yeats expresses this apparent helplessness of life against the forces of oppression in his poem "*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  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.” (Yeats W. , 2008.)

Therefore, the term *poets of the nation* is used with an awareness of the enormous responsibility and resulting distress that Yeats suffered due to his choice to speak on behalf of their people, who viewed his voices as a threat. Despite the apparent powerlessness of life, Yeats continue to speak through the language of poetry because, as Thiong'o states, “art arms silence with voices that even when the bodies that carry them are crushed and ground to powder, will rise again, and multiply, and sing out their presence.” (Thiong'o 28).

In the initial phase, Ireland directly served as the backdrop for many of Yeats' poems. A division can be made between poems that draw upon Celtic myths and those inspired by local memories of places. Yeats expressed, "...since the moment Oisín began to wander...I have become an Irish subject." (Yeats, W.B., 1993) He wrote to Catherine Tynan, "We must create poems about the familiar landscapes we cherish, not the strange, rare, and dazzling scenes that we wonder about..." (Yeats, W.B, 1986)

The poetry of W.B. Yeats and his poetic works constitute a favored subject of study for numerous literary critics and researchers worldwide, particularly those with an interest in poetry. These studies present a diverse analysis of Yeats' works, encompassing the gradual development of the poet, the various influences shaping his artistic expression, the significance of symbolism in his art, his theoretical approach to the mask, utilization of autobiography, exploration of the unseen, engagement with myths, involvement in public life, and meticulous criticism of his poems.

Despite the diverse range of research, it is noteworthy that the topic of Irish nationalism and its connection to Yeats' poetry garners special attention, particularly in the context of critically analyzing the national elements within the poet's creative output. While D.O. Boyce, O.D. Edwards, and M. Hurst openly discuss Celtic nationalism in general, there is a distinct focus on Irish nationalism and its intersection with the poetry of W.B. Yeats by eminent critics who also delve into other crucial aspects of the poet's oeuvre. Notably, Suhail Bashroui's thesis, *"Images of a Changing Ireland in the Works of W.B."* and R. J. Loftus's thesis, *"Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry,"* stand out among the significant works that illuminate this national dimension in Yeats' poetry, shedding light on the evolution of the image of Ireland in his works and the role of nationalism in shaping his poetic expressions.

Nevertheless, there persists a dearth of literature addressing the intrinsic national sphere within Yeats' poetry, a facet that has not undergone adequate exploration. This implies that Yeats limited his original resources to certain phases of his career, thereby creating a significant void in the critical analysis of his body of work.

In the post-colonial context, the concept of nationalism has become an engaging and contentious subject of discourse, addressing both the importance and controversy surrounding this notion. In January 2005, a symposium of significant importance was convened in New Delhi, where the relevance of nationalism was deliberated upon in various global regions. Lord Meghnad Desov from the London School of Economics expressed the viewpoint that the concept of nationalism had diminished in significance in regions marked by religious, social, and linguistic diversity. However, such arguments are not applicable to Ireland, as it has never exhibited a multifactorial character. In this context, it is emphasized that the notion of the nation in Ireland was integral to asserting political sovereignty and establishing a robust individual

identity for the state. Seamus Deane, in his introduction to *"Nationalism, Colonies, and Literature"* by Eagleton, Jameson, and Edward Said (1990), underscores this perspective says:

“Irish nationalism is, in its foundational moments, a derivative of its British counterpart. Almost all nationalist movements have been derided as provincial, actually or potentially racist, given to exclusivist and doctrinaire positions and rhetoric.” (Eagleton T, 1990)

Hence, nationalities strive to construct a version of history that consistently reflects their essential essence. This is precisely the objective of this paper—to demonstrate that Yeats' poetry articulates this Irish essence.

The French theorist Ernest Renan emphatically asserted in *"What is a Nation"* article that a nation is “a *spirit*,” and *"spiritual principle."* (Gellner, 1996) This study undertakes an in-depth examination to comprehend the Irish nationalist spirit within the poetry of W.B. Yeats. This analysis aligns with the claims made by the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, asserting that Yeats had indeed illuminated the spirit of Ireland in his poetry. We emphasize Yeats' endeavors to arouse a native consciousness within Ireland, utilizing his poetic capabilities to connect with the original Irish reservoir. This is associated with Ernest Gellner's observation that nationalism involves not only the awakening of self-consciousness but also the invention of nations that do not exist, a notion affirmed by Yeats' proto-poetry.

### **Yeats and Awakening of Irish Nationalism**

As Maud Gonne said “without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival in Ireland. Without the inspiration of that revival and glorification of beauty and heroic virtue I doubt there would have been an Easter week.” (Power, 1974)

W.B. Yeats, a prominent Irish poet of Protestant background, played a significant role in shaping an Anglo-Irish nation. Seeking to establish an Irish identity, Yeats endeavored to construct a heroic Anglo-Irish literary culture grounded in ancient Irish mythology. He drew inspiration from the fantastical folklore of an emerging rural civilization, amalgamating the heroic virtues of Gaelic culture with the global perspective afforded by the English language. In addition to his role as a poet, Yeats wore multiple hats, assuming the roles of mystic, philosopher, playwright, folklore collector, and academic. He effectively laid the groundwork for a modern Irish literary school within the English language.

In contrast to his predecessors, Yeats endeavored to appeal to the broader public in the creation of a genuinely Anglo-Irish nation. He manifested his nationalism both politically and culturally, actively participating in Irish politics earlier in his life and later securing a position in the Senate. The pivotal moment in Yeats' nationalist sentiment transpired when he encountered John O'Leary, an elderly Fenian leader who returned to Dublin after enduring imprisonment and exile due to youthful conspiracies. O'Leary served as a catalyst, inspiring Yeats and instilling in him a fervent sense of nationalism. Yeats himself acknowledged O'Leary's profound impact on him in his essays and introductions.

Yeats emerged as a prominent figure in the Irish Literary Renaissance, spearheading the movement recognized as the Irish Renaissance, aimed at revitalizing traditional Irish cultural and literary heritage. His profound influence on Ireland transcended the realm of literature, extending to the national consciousness and spirit. T.S. Eliot, the British-American poet and Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, characterized Yeats as one of the foremost poets in the English language during the twentieth century. Yeats is widely regarded as an icon of Irish artistic and cultural expression, and his literary oeuvre has exerted a profound impact on global

literature, playing a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary history of Ireland. As T.S. Eliot stating:

“those few whose history is the history of their own time and who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them.” (Holdeman, 2006)

Yeats played a role in the initiation of the decline of the British Empire, marking with the culmination of the fall of feudalism and the birth of modernity. This transformative period commenced during the Victorian era and extended into the modern era. George Bornstein characterized Yeats' intellect as "the most complex mind of our century, and one cannot fully comprehend it through any singular approach."

William Butler Yeats articulates the colonial conflict between Britain and Ireland within his literary works. His perspective on the Anglo-Irish relationship encompasses political dimensions, yet he also contemplates the issue from an apolitical Irish standpoint. In an interview with the Daily Chronicle, Yeats characterizes Ireland as a *mother country*, revealing a profound love and sense of belonging to his homeland. Despite Ireland's historical experience as a colony, Yeats does not identify himself as a colonizer, nor does he perceive Ireland as a subordinate state. In elucidating his viewpoint on the Irish situation, he highlights the intricacies of national belonging, citing instances of rejection faced by nationalists and Catholics in Sligo. Simultaneously, he acknowledges their shared animosity towards England. As expressed in his *Responsibilities*:

“Everyone I know well in Sligo despised the nationalists and the Catholics but all disliked England with prejudice that had come down perhaps from the day of Irish Parliament.” (Yeats, W.B, 1937)

W.B. Yeats was profoundly influenced by Irish writers and traditions, particularly under the impact of Middleton. He expressed his interest in cultivating rural and fairy tales that captured various facets of Ireland's heritage. However, in the early twentieth century, his aspirations for the Abbey Theater and the Irish National Movement faced setbacks, prompting him to depart from Ireland and relocate to the United States of America in 1907. One of his noteworthy works, *Responsibilities*, published in 1917, serves as an exploration of his commitment to citizenship and social responsibilities.

Yeats, a member of the clerical class, wrote passionately about Sligo, considering it his motherland. His significance in the history of Irish nationalism is underscored by recognitions such as the documentation issued by the Bank of Ireland. He not only played a prominent role in reshaping the landscape but also proved to be not just an accomplished writer but a profound thinker shaping perceptions of the nation around him.

Yeats' efforts to comprehend and write in the Irish language, highlighting how he conveyed the myths and distinctive features of Irish culture through his writing, which positioning him as a significant contributor to presenting Ireland's legacy to the world.

### **Irish Cultural Nationalism in Yeats' Poetry**

The poet and writer, William Butler Yeats, played a prominent and crucial role in the development of cultural nationalism in Ireland. His contribution focuses on establishing connections between literature and art with Irish national identity while championing cultural heritage. The significance of Yeats' achievement became apparent when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. His success held importance not only for world literature but also in promoting Irish identity. Yeats' accomplishment illuminated his country's name in the global imagination, surpassing the impact of many renowned political figures whose names are frequently spoken locally. Unlike those figures, Yeats crafted sentences that resonated beyond

national borders, capable of being repeated and incorporated into the thoughts of people in other countries.

William Butler Yeats emerged as a key figure in the literary movement, leading to Ireland gaining a distinguished international reputation for the first time in a considerable period. Following his demise in 1939, Maud Gonne accentuated his greatness, asserting that Yeats was the individual responsible for elevating Ireland's cultural prominence on the international stage by saying:

“without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival in Ireland. Without the inspiration of that Revival and the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue, I doubt it there would have been an Easter week.” (Gwynn, 1940)

Nationalism in Ireland emerged as an interweaving of politics and culture, a theme reflected in Yeats' understanding as expressed when he said, "we tear each other's character in pieces for things that don't matter to anybody" He acknowledged the constraints of cultural nationalism and chose not to leave Ireland, yet grappled with an inability to fully embrace his role in its history. Yeats recognized the inherent conflict between culture and politics within the Irish context.

In the 1890s, Yeats secured a prominent position in Irish literature alongside figures like Davies, Maghan, and Ferguson. However, he was reluctant to assume the role of the national poet. Despite Maud Gonne's attempts to persuade him, as Edward Said stating: “Yeats is the indisputably great national poet who articulates the experiences, aspirations and the vision of people suffering under the dominion of an off shore powers.” (Said, 1988)

In terms of existentialist philosophy, it becomes evident that William Butler Yeats experienced internal and external divisions. This is apparent in various manifestations, including his disengagement from politics, antipathy towards England, affection for Sligo, and fervor for 19th-century Irish theatre. These facets underscored his recognition of the distinctive role he played in shaping Irish cultural identity.

Moreover, he endeavored to accentuate Irish culture, paying homage to and commemorating the past, while on the other hand, he sought to secure his position in Irish history in the contemporary context. As asserted in *"To Ireland in Coming Time"*:

“Know, that I would accounted be  
True brother of a company  
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,  
Ballad and story, rann and song;  
Nor be I any less of them,  
Because the red-rose-bordered hem  
Of her, whose history began  
Before God made the angelic clan,” (Yeats W. , 2008.)

For Yeats, the past held significant importance, aligning with the sentiments of James O'Grady, as both mourned "the world we have lost." They believed in the potential to resurrect the myths of the past in the current reality. However, Yeats experienced profound disappointment due to his inability to inhabit the era that had come to a halt. He endeavored to explore uncharted territories, delving into stories, myths, fables, fairy tales, and folk tales, while also engaging

with ordinary people. Unfortunately, these pursuits were undervalued by contemporary literary writers in Ireland during his time.

Literary writers, such as Tom Moore (1779-1852), belonged to the Romantic trend; however, they were not politically active. In the poem "The Light of Other Day," published as part of *"Irish Melodies"* (1808-1834), Moore endeavored to convey a message to Irish men about the significance of exploring the unknown lands of Ireland.

Catherine Tynan, in her Anglo-Irish poetry collection *"Irish Love Songs"* (1892), highlighted the influence of the Gaelic language on the English language. In her introduction, she emphasizes the importance of this influence and how Gaelic shaped expressions and culture in English, stating, "poetry in Ireland has a way of rising and falling with the revolution." (Tynan, 1892)

The tradition of the United Irishmen was followed by the Young Irelander in 1840, and the Fenians joined in the 1860s. Nationalists began composing songs after the Rising of 1798. In a poem by William Drennan (1754-1820) titled *"The Awakening"* of William Orr, he described the lynching of a Presbyterian farmer for his association with the United Irishmen.

In his prose writings, Yeats observed the evolution of folk songs in Ireland throughout different epochs. In the 1820s, songs were intertwined with Catholicism and national liberation. By the 1940s, songs began to focus on nations, shifting to tenant farmers in the 1950s. The 1960s saw themes related to Fenian issues, while the 1980s centered around Parnell and the Land League. Yeats was cognizant of this progression, and in his essay *"Popular Ballad, Poetry of Ireland"* from 1889, he opted for the term 'patriot' instead of 'national' to delineate the poetic, sentimental, mnemonic, imaginative, and patriotic currents in Ireland.

In his essay *"What is Popular Poetry,"* Yeats endeavored to define poetry, asserting that there is no great literature without nationality and no great nationality without literature. He posited that Irish literature should impart compelling lessons about national politics. When literary works are of Irish origin, they must embody a philosophy rooted in an esoteric understanding of essential poetry. These ideas encountered resistance from a nationalist audience, which condemned the aesthetic fervor that literary works brought to Ireland.

During a speech at the centenary of Thomas Davis in Dublin in November 1914, Yeats critically examined his marginalized position within the Irish nationalist movement, revealing a less compassionate disregard for Davis:

"Today I have no thought but for his virtue and his service. He was not indeed, a great poet; but his power of expression was a finer thing than I thought...During the thirty years that have passed since my boyhood I have seen five or six of the movements founded by young men who might have changed their generation had they copied his magnanimity." (Yeats, W.B, 1914)

Yeats emphasizes the necessity of redirecting the focus of Irish men in America away from contemporary political conflicts subsequent to the demise of Parnell. This epoch is deemed to signify a phase of distress and discord that ought to be averted. Yeats advocates for discussions on Irish history and culture, shedding light on matters related to Irish nationalism. He posits that history and culture serve as instrumental tools in guiding the imagination of the youth towards a comprehension of Irish identity and in fostering an interest in national issues.

In his literary endeavors, Yeats drew inspiration from the poet Ferguson, articulating his aspiration to unify the populace of Ireland in the 19th century. He staunchly opposed the notion of divorcing literature from culture and underscored the significance of amalgamating literature with the Irish cultural milieu. He asserted that this integration should be rooted in a context

replete with poignant memories and inspiring hopes, as evidenced by the 1880s, which nurtured the expectation that Ireland would eventually cultivate its own distinct literary tradition.

During his youth, Yeats ardently identified with Irish nationalism but eventually transitioned into politics. Engaging in aesthetic politics, he played a role in the movement aimed at redefining Irish traditions and national identity. In an interview with the Daily Chronicle on March 18, 1904, Yeats observed the evolving focal point of the Irish movement. In Parnell's era, the national movement had predominantly manifested as agricultural, whereas it had presently transformed into a literary orientation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper delves into the impact and role of nationalism on W.B. Yeats, examining its growth in Europe and its repercussions on colonized nations, particularly Ireland. Yeats, recognizing the significance of culture in instilling confidence and reaffirming identity in colonized states, expressed cultural nationalism through poetry, aspiring to liberate Ireland from colonialism. The paper highlights that Yeats' methodology of cultural nationalism endures, influencing contemporary Irish poets who build upon his legacy. The historical context underscores the emergence of nationalism during the French Revolution, where the third estate sought parliamentary representation. Despite literary inspiration from the revolution's ideals, disillusionment ensued with the reign of terror. The broader impact of nationalism in 19th and 20th-century Europe, leading to the unification of Italy and Germany, is acknowledged, with a cautionary note on the dangers of racial homogeneity, exemplified by Germany's role in the devastating Second World War.

The ideology of nationalism served as a catalyst for the Yeats, inspiring his struggle for independence from colonial powers. W.B. Yeats' poetry is intricately connected to the historical context of his time, evolving from early escapist tones to a blend of romanticism and realism influenced by Irish nationalism. Initially, Yeats' nationalism was latent but became active through encounters with figures like John O'Leary and exposure to the works of Davis Mangan, William Allingham, and Standish O'Grady. Founding the Irish Literary Revival Society, he aimed to elevate Irish literature globally, acknowledging the subjugation it faced under colonialism. Yeats, with the support of Maud Gonne, established Literary Societies in London and Dublin, reflecting his commitment to Irish nationalism.

Yeats believed it was every Irishman's duty to draw inspiration from their past, seeking to liberate Ireland from colonial rule. The impact of Easter Rising in 1916 is explored in Yeats' poem of the same name, praising the executed nationalists like MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse for their inspirational role despite the event's failure. Yeats delves into political leaders such as Tone, Robert Emmet, Edward Fitzgerald, Charles Parnell, John O'Leary, Patrick Pearse, James Connelly, and their influence on Irish nationalism in his poetry.

Yeats' cultural nationalism aimed to unite Protestants and Catholics against British rule, presenting a unique challenge to the British Empire. Contemporary Irish poets like Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Paul Mudoon, Nuala ni Dhomhnaill, and Medbh McGuckian continue to reflect Irish society, incorporating themes of nationalism, history, and identity into their works, with women poets addressing feminism alongside nationalism.

It can be asserted that Yeats' poetry mirrors the endeavors of Irish nationalists. His poetic evolution is evident, starting with romantic compositions that drew upon Irish myth, legends, and folktales in his early works. Subsequently, he shifted towards verses that focused on nationalist leaders and events associated with nationalism. In the latter part of his literary career, his poetry reveals a heightened sense of anger and frustration directed at the

contemporary Irish situation. This sentiment is notably expressed in his later poems, such as "A Bronze Head" and "Death."

## References

- Eagleton, T. F. J. (1990). Introduction. In S. Deane (Ed.), *Nationalism, colonialism and literature* (p. 7). Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Frayne, J. P. (1970). *The uncollected prose of W. B. Yeats* (Vol. 1). London: Macmillan.
- Gellner, E. (1996). *Nations and nationalism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gwynn, S. S. (1940). Tribute. In *Tributes to the memory of W. B. Yeats* (p. 27). London: Macmillan.
- Holdeman, D. (2006). *The Cambridge introduction to W. B. Yeats* (p. 21). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- MacDonagh, T. (1920). *Literature in Ireland: Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish*. New York: Kennikat Press.
- Pound, E. (1912). Editorial comment: Status rerum. *Poetry: Magazine of Verse*, p. 123.
- Power, A. (1974). *Conversations with James Joyce* (p. 24). New York: Harper & Row.
- Said, E. (1988). Yeats and decolonization. In *Nationalism, colonialism and literature* (p. 50). Derry, Ireland: Field Day.
- Thiong'o, N. W. (1998). *Penpoints, gunpoints, and dreams: Towards a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa* (p. 7). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tynan, K. (1892). *Irish love-songs* (p. 8). London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Unterecker, J. A. (1959). *Reader's guide to W. B. Yeats*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Wade, A. (Ed.). (1954). *The letters of W. B. Yeats*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.
- Yeats, W. B. (2008). *The collected poems of W. B. Yeats* (p. 129, 49). New York: Macmillan. (Original work published 1951)
- Yeats, W. B. (1961). *Essays and introduction*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited.
- Yeats, W. B. (1996). *The collected poems 1889–1939*. London: Simon & Schuster. (Original work published earlier)
- Yeats, W. B. (1914). Tribute to Thomas Davis. In *Tribute to Thomas Davis* (p. 55). Dublin: The Gaelic Society of Trinity College.
- Yeats, W. B. (1937). *Autobiographies. A vision* (pp. 301, 191, 55). London: Macmillan.
- Yeats, W. B. (1986). In J. Kelly (Ed.), *The collected letters of W. B. Yeats* (pp. 119, 338, 165). Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Yeats, W. B. (1993). *Collected poems*. Kolkata: Rupa and Co.