**A personal Response to the poetry of W.B Yeats**

Of all the poets on my Leaving Cert course, WB Yeats is easily my favourite. Several aspects of his poetry appeal to me: the political / polemical dimension to his work, his use of nature as a theme and his reflection on old age, the body and the soul. Although I am at ease in engaging with Yeats themes it is also his unique craft that has an impact on me. Yeats is a poet who uses powerful metaphors and images that have a very memorable quality that in my view, makes Yeats the most quotable of poets. Finally, the one thing I love about Yeats’ poetry is its dynamic quality. Yeats sets up dynamic contrasts in every one of his poems which for me makes his poetry interesting and thought – provoking. I found these traits particularly evident in *“Sailing to Byzantium”, “Easter 1916” , “September 1913”, “The Wild swans at Coole”, “Lake Isle Of Inisfree” and “The Stare’s Nest by my window”.*

I have a great interest in Irish history and I must say that I really love how Yeats writes political and polemical poems set in early twentieth century Ireland. This, in my view can be best seen in “*September 1913*”, a highly structured apostrophe where Yeats launches a powerful polemic against the merchant classes. It is a bitter invective against the working classes. Yeats condemns those who “*add the half pence to the pence*” and “*fumble in a greasy till*”. Yeats writes of how the “*marrow*” has been figuratively “fr*om the bone of the country*”. However in my reading, the full thrust of Yeats polemic is felt in the third stanza where Yeats presents a catalogue of Ireland’s dead heroes. The names ring out with an almost mythical force: “ *For this Edward Fitzgerald died, and Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone*”. This poem is in my view a memorable and thought provoking apostrophe which I feel is quite relevant in our age of rampant materialism. Yeats work is in my opinion also notable for its honesty and it seems to me that Yeats recants the derision with which he looked on the working classes in “*Easter 1916*”. Yeats was convinced he lived “*where motley (*was*) worn*”. Yeats recants his scornful opinion of Ireland’s nationalists as he declares “*all changed, changed utterly, a terrible beauty is born*”. Yeats feels that even John McBride *who had done (*him*) most bitter wrong*” should be “*numbered in the song*”. According to R.F Forester, Yeats “*marks a new level of achievement in this poem*”. In my opinion, these two poems present me with a fresh and Yeatsian concern in relation to the early twentieth century. This sets Yeats apart from any other poet on my course.

I am also attracted to Yeats’ treatment of nature. In “Lake Isle of Inisfree” Yeats shares his longing for the calmness and tranquillity of his boyhood haunt Inisfree. This ambition is vividly drawn in the opening line a firm declaration of intent “*I will arise and go now and go to Inisfree*”. Yeats seems here to want an idyllic existence. However, it is Yeats fabulous use of sound that really appeals to me in this poem. Yeats crafts the hypnotic sound of Inisfree’s shoreline “*I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore*”. This hypnotic feel is created by Yeats blending cacophonous alliterative and assonantal sounds. I just love how he relies heavily on the hexameter to give this line a stately and antiquated feel. Yeats appeals to all my senses in this poem. Whenever I read this poem I feel like I can hear the “*cricket sing*”, smell the “*honey-bees*” and see “*the purple glow*”. A similar reflection on nature can be found in “The Stare’s Nest by my window” where Yeats glances to the abundance in the natural word for a glimpse of continuity. The lack of unity in the world is vividly suggested in an almost Eliotian reliance on past participles: “*The key is turned” “We are locked in*”. What I like here is how Yeats appeals to the “*honey bees*” to “*come and build in the empty house of the stare*”. This trait in Yeats poetry really appeals to me. It reminds me that no matter what happens, I can always look to the natural world for a sense of continuity.

The other theme that really appeals to me in Yeats poetry is his reflection on the theme of old age, the body and the soul. This is one of the big themes in literature and I must admit that I love Yeats perspective on it. In “*Sailing To Byzantium*”, Yeats has a vision that “*religion, aesthetic and practical life are one*” (as he writes in “A vision”). According to Eavan Boland this poem represents “ *an immortal fury against the tragedy of decay and the inevitability of death*”. Yeats contrasts “*The young / In one another’s arms*” with “*an aged man is but a paltry thing*”. I appreciate how he calls on the soul to “sing, and louder sing”. Yeats, in my view, seems to me to be trying to overcome Cartesian Dualism, the idea that the soul which is “*sick with desire*” is “*fastened to a dying animal*”. Yeats is in fact a prisoner in his own body whish he feels has become fastened and wizened. I also love the immensely original and authentic “The Wild Swans at Coole”. In this poem Yeats reflects on the temporal and the atemporal world of the swans. It is a painful reminder that all “*has changed*” since he first felt “*the bell beat of their wings*”. The swans, for me represent an eternal, youthful vigour. References from Yeatsian cosmology and mysticism: “*the water/ mirrors a still sky”,”autumn beauty*” made me contemplate for a time the issue of transience. I would say that this theme alone makes Yeats’ poetry well worth the read.

Although I love Yeats themes it is also his craft that has a huge impact on me. I am of the view that Yeats poems are well worth the read if only for their rich metaphors and images. Two vivid images stood out for me in “Sailing to Byzantium”: “The *young/In one another’s arms, have no enemy but time*”. Also the scarecrow *“a tattered coat upon a stick*” is completely the opposite. Of course I believe Byzantium itself is a marvellous image that represents the aesthetic and contemplative domain of the soul. What a marvellous image Yeats uses in “September 1913” to convey his disgust with the mercenary individuals of a consumerous society “*What need you being come to sense / But fumble in a greasy till*”. The verb “*fumble*” here conjures up for me images of men, blinded by greed groping in the dark, men without vision.

There is also a memorable quality to Yeats’ work which I find fascinating. I find that many of his lines and phrases resonate in my head a long time after reading. This is more true of Yeats than any other poet I have ever read. This comes from the sheer economy of his language and the rhythm of his lines. In fact I find myself constantly reciting lines such as “*The innocent and the beautiful/ Have no enemy but time” “Unwearied still, lover by lover/ They paddle in the cold companionable streams” “An aged man is but a paltry thing” “The falcon cannot hear the falconer*”. In this context Yeats haunts my memory. This in my view lends Yeats poetry a unique quality which makes him the most quotable of poets.

Finally, it is the dynamism in Yeats’ poetry which really engages me. Yeats is always present in his poems and brings them to life with contrast. Yeats, in my experience, sets up dynamic contrasts and dichotomies in nearly every one of his poems. In “Sailing to Byzantium” Yeats contrasts youth and old age, the body and the soul, time and eternity. In “September 1913”, greed clashes with generousity, the past with the present and contempt with admiration. In the “Wild Swans at Coole”, youth old age are set apart, the temporal with the atemporal. These contrasts provide Yeats’ poetry with a unique dynamic quality which gives him a unique voice, a voice which makes me listen. In fact, it is this conflict between form: ( Appolonian – ordered) and content: (Dionysian – conflict) which critics like Denis Donohue maintain provides Yeats’ work with a poetic energy and power.

By way of conclusion, Yeats is my favourite poet. His ability to write political/ polemical poetry, use nature as a theme and his reflection on the soul, body and old age really appeal to me. Yeats is a poet who takes his own feelings and using the raw material of his own life creates powerful and memorable, dynamic poetry. Yeats’ themes and craft amalgamate to produce a beautiful and transcendent body of work. To sum up all that Yeats is really about I will leave you with one of my favourite Yeatsian affirmations: “*Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric, out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry” (WB Yeats)*