

## A Closer Look at the Works of Yeats

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### A Look at “An Acre of Grass”

The theme in “An Acre of Grass,” by Yeats, is the speaker’s desire for transformation and his attitude toward life, that is, from facing death to seizing life. The poem examines first the subjective decay of the body and finally a craving for a renewed vigor in the quest for truth.

A paraphrasing of the poem goes as follows:

Picture and book, that is, visual art and literal art are the only things left, and an acre of green grass, a confined garden, for the air and exercise of the mind and for fresh experiences are also left. Now strength of body disappears. At midnight nothing moves except a mouse in an old house.

My temptation is peaceful. Here at my life’s end neither free imagination nor the mill of the mind, the function of my recognition, which is spending rag (my artifacts) and bone (my body) can make the truth known.

Confer on me an old man’s madness. I must transform myself till I reach the madness of Timon and Lear or till I reach the madness of William Blake, who beat at the wall until truth complied with his shout-like request.

A mind that Michael Angelo knew can puncture and penetrate the clouds or, animated by madness, can shake the dead people in their shrouds. Although old age would lead to the forgetfulness of later generations, he has the eagle mind—the winged mind—that rises far above man.

The speaker in the poem seeks to transform himself through madness at the end of his life. When free imagination is no longer easily available to him, and when reason can no longer make the truth known but consumes his artistic works and his own body, he steps up to another world by entrusting himself to madness. He also considers this the way of liberation from every distress, including facing death he is suffering. It is as if through madness he managed to produce the illusion that reality is the only representation of nature. However, in the poem, madness is the violent separation of the individual from the will of nature as far as the example of William Blake is concerned. Through such a separation he would gain the sense of loftiness even though it comes from the madness which is brought forth by the curse on a wicked human nature, like Timon's example, or the madness which is brought forth by the union between the supernatural atmosphere and the inevitability of continuous tragedy produced by one mistake, like Lear's example. This sense of loftiness makes him transcend the will of nature and human recognition freely and consciously. The speaker might believe that the liberation from the sufferings produced by such transcendence leads him to quietness and beatitude. The speaker might also believe that the liberation from suffering brings him the power to face nature, not with his reason or experience but with his pure intuition. He might regard it as the only origin of his artistic creation at the end of his life. The transcendence also leads him to oneness with nature or to a sense of equality between man and nature; therefore, the transforms his grief about nature's indifference toward an individual creature into his joy about an individual encompassing nature itself or creation itself. Because of that, he longs for the genius Michael Angel, who knew to remake the world after his own design of truth. Anyhow, madness is the essence of an old man's eagle mind.

### A Look at "Under Ben Bulben"

"Under Ben Bulben" seems to be a kind of conclusion to the life and work of Yeats. He gives us a summary of his ideas and attitudes as a final statement of the world fully alive. One could put titles on each section: supernaturalism in Section I, humanism in Section II, individualism in Section III, transfiguration and incarnation in Section IV, Yeats' last message for the Irish poets in Section V, and Yeats' epitaph in Section VI.

A paraphrasing of the poem goes as follows:

Section I : Irish poets are to take an oath and show allegiance to their faith, through words that wise sages have told around the Mareotic Lake associated with the origin of Christian monasticism and also over the meaning that the cocks are given the ability to inform the time, which the witch of Atlas, a symbol of timeless, absolute beauty, has already known. Irish poets are to take an oath through the experts of that horse riding and through those women who are recognized to be superhuman from their complexion and figure and through that pale group of long face that shows off indestructibility if the perfection of passion is obtained. They spur on a horse at dawn of winter with the mountain Ben Bulben associated with some of the events, especially death, in the cycle of Irish mythology, for a background.

Section II : Man lives and dies many times, that is, every human is subject to a whole series of reincarnations. Throughout the history of the nation, through religion, ancient Ireland knew it all. Whether man dies in his bed or the rifle strikes him dead, man in general does not have to fear the separation of his soul from his body. What the worst man has to fear is a brief parting. The labor of grave-diggers is long. They have to keep their spades sharp and their muscle strong. However, they do only push back the person who was buried again in the

human mind, that is, the world soul.

Section III : You have heard the prayer of the Irish nationalist John Mitchel: that is, "Send us war in our time, O Lord!" You must know that something drops from eyes that have been blind for a long time when all words are said and a man is mad enough or angry enough to fight. He completes his partial mind; that is, he recovers his whole mind. He stands at ease for an instance and laughs aloud from his peaceful mind. So far Section III means only when a man is fighting mad does he complete his partial mind, only then is his blindness dispelled and his heart at peace. This is to say, that violence comes before integration. Even the wisest man becomes tense with some sort of violence, a war, till he can make something of his life and till he can know his work or choose his mate.

Section IV : Poet and sculptor must do the work, but they should not let the modish painter evade what this great forefathers did because an artist is passing on the tenets of his artistic creed to the artists who will follow him. Therefore, poet, sculptor, and painter bring the soul of man to God and make him fill the cradles, maybe the coffin too, properly. Measurement and forms that a strict Egyptian thought and that gentle Phidias worked on began our power of artistic creation. Michael Angelo left a proof of power on the Sistine Chapel's roof where only half-awakened Adam agitate and confuse the daughter of Eve who enjoys traveling widely about the world till her bowels are in heat, that is, she is filled with sexual desire. Michael Angelo left a proof that there is a purpose for the artistic creation in the artist's secret mind, and that is the worldly perfection of humanity, in other words, worldly completion of the human race in this secular world. The 15th century used paint to make a garden background for a God and Saint because there a soul is at ease and everything in the picture, that is, flowers, grass, and cloudless sky are similar to forms that are real or ideal when sleepers wake and yet still dream even when the dream has disappeared and bed and bedstead have returned to the consciousness. Gyres run on. When that

greater dream had disappeared, the great artists such as Calvert, Wilson, Blake and Claude prepared “a rest for the people of God” as Palmer’s had put it, but after that our thinking became confused.

Section V : Irish poets are to learn your work and sing whatever is well-made. Scorn the sort of poets growing up now, that is, the sort who are wholly out of shape, and scorn their unremembering hearts and heads which are the base-born products of humble classes. Praise peasants, hard-horse-riding country gentlemen, the holiness of monks, and then porter-drinkers’ lustful laughter. Praise the gaiety of the lords and ladies who were knocked down and put to death, wholly defeated, through seven heroic centuries. Think about your mind in past days, so that in coming days we may be still Irish with the indomitable spirit of Ireland.

Section VI : Yeats is laid in Drumcliff churchyard under bare Ben Bulbin’s head. Long years ago his ancestor was a rector there. The church stands near the church yard, and by the roadside is an ancient Cross. Neither marble nor conventional phrase is there, but these words are cut by his command on limestone quarried near the spot: Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death/ Horseman, pass by!

I will pick one topic from the poem, that is, art and the consolation between life and death. I see the agony of Yeats as a man as follows: Each individual emerges from nothing and receives his own life as if life were a great gift, but sooner or later he loses his life through death and gives back the gift to nothing. Although each individual constitutes nature, nature as a whole never suffers from the life and death of each individual. It is as if nature did not worry itself about some individual death, for it does not matter what happens to the individual for nature. What nature is concerned about is only the species. Nature does consider the preservation of the species although we must admit that it is wasteful; however, the individual does not have much value for nature itself. I wonder if Yeats had

an antipathy against this attitude of nature not only toward the individual but also toward Ireland and the world.

It must be natural, therefore, that Yeats should look for an outlet of his agony toward art. That is to say, the reason why he keeps on engaging himself in art might be to rebel against the indifference of nature. An origin of artistic creation is an artist's recognition of the essence of nature (if it may use the Platonic term, Idea) and the only purpose of the artist is the communication of this recognition. An artist scoops out the object of his intuition among the flow of perpetual motion of the world, and isolates it and looks at it. The individual object which is the almost vanishing, tiny thing among the flow of the world now becomes the representation of the whole for art. It stops the movement of time which produces death and makes time disappear through the work of art. The purpose of art might lie here, and because of that, Yeats proves his boldness against death which is coming soon. He is brave against nature. Nature does not exist till man, who recognizes nature, exists. It is true that the thing to be seen does not exist till something sees it exist. Yeats raises his existence up to the level of nature's existence. Therefore, he discerns that the immortality of nature, the essence of nature, is nothing but the essence of himself. At this point, he can find a reasonable consolation about his own death and even his friend's death.

Yeats seems to be a superhuman because he is equal to nature, or rather, he is nature itself.

#### A Note on the Main Ideas of Yeats' Works

The main ideas of Yeats' artistic works are: man must act out his role given by God like an actor; man must achieve such a role bravely and dynamically; and the history of this world shows a repeated pattern.

Man must repeatedly act his own role, which is probably given by God, like an actor. In "Among School Children" Yeats writes, "Labour is blossoming or dancing where/ The body is not bruised to pleasure soul." "Labour" in this quote must be a mission in life. For a person, to know his own mission is equal to knowing the reason why God sends him to this world. For him, through his soul (the soul comes from the hand of God and it belongs to divinity), to admit his role as his mission in life and to be engaged in fulfilling his role are his duty and his soul's, mind's, and body's pleasures as Yeats writes (of course, agony always follows his efforts). In "An Acre of Grass" Yeats describes "an old man's eagle mind" in order to speak of 'genius' in men. We have the best gateway to explore man's role given by God through analyzing the nature of 'genius'.

For an artist of genius, his mission comes first and he must accomplish his vocation through his life. The nature of genius is the extraordinary ability to grasp the essence of nature or 'Idea' from human life, nature, and world. In order to preserve such an ability or to grasp it in the first place, he needs to forget thoroughly and to ignore his own self and the advantages and disadvantages of self. Because of that, he can acquire the ability to behave through pure intuition or the ability to immerse himself totally in intuition. From the beginning, a genius frees his cognition which exists only in order to serve for the essence of nature from such service; namely, he totally ignores his own advantages, desires, and purposes, and abandons his character in order to be an eye which penetrates nature and the world. Moreover, he reproduces in works of art the essence of nature or 'Idea' which is known by intuition. Therefore, the practical relationship between one thing and another does not interest him. That is why he often neglects to consider his own way in life and tends to live his life clumsily. Sometimes he needs violent madness in order to liberate himself from nature. William Blake serves as an example in "An Acre of Grass"; man threatens the will of nature, although the will of nature usually threatens man.

It is obvious that not only does a genius have his mission but so does man in general. The achievement of his mission is the main purpose of his birth in this world. If a man ignores that, his life is meaningless. The chaos or vice of this world, or the degradation of human nature, comes from the individual's loss of his mission, or rather, the individual's inability of knowing his mission. The source of Yeats' lamentation also goes back to that.

Man must accomplish his role bravely and dynamically. In "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats proclaims, "Nor is there singing school but studying/ Monuments of its own magnificence." Thus, in order to achieve his role bravely and dynamically, man is required to explore his internal nature. Man tends to insist on exploration of his external nature as Yeats says, "Sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/ It knows not what it is." There are seemingly two natures: one is an external nature and the other is an internal nature. Man knows his external nature through an inductive process. On the other hand, man knows his internal nature through a deductive process. The exploration of the external nature ultimately leads him to a universal principle, but the exploration of the internal nature ultimately leads him to various particulars. Therefore, the exploration of the internal nature produces personality and individualism. However, the man who explores the internal nature, if he misunderstands the principle which he bases it on, inevitably takes the tragic way. By the way, 'Measurement' in "Under Ben Bulbin" is such a principle on which man bases his exploration of the internal nature. Man should not be afraid of both explorations even if he cannot protect himself, and even if he finds his misunderstanding of a principle and notices his limitation.

There are three types of tragic men in such explorations. The first type is the victim as a product brought forth by the contradiction that the external nature contains. He is not timid, but brave and dynamic, because he does not spare his efforts to live his life and to pursue his mission faithfully. He is too innocent, like



a child, and too nonresistant. The second type is an unfortunate self-destroyer who misunderstands the principle on which he bases the exploration of his internal nature, and who deviates from the right way. He is not timid, but brave and dynamic, because he is an active person who notices the contradiction of the external nature, attempts to reject it, and decides to lead the way to the internal nature. Unfortunately, he cannot recognize the difference between the essence of the external nature and the internal nature. The third type is a tragic self-forfeiter who, without being well aware of his own limitations, dashes forward to explore the internal nature. Again he is not timid but brave and dynamic because he admits the meaning of his life that proceeds toward himself. He loyally pursues the way toward himself while listening to the outcries of his soul, mind, and body. Tragically, he flies too much without recognizing the severity of the internal nature and without considering his own limitations. Therefore, man should not fear the pursuit of achieving his mission. At least Yeats proved, through his life, that man is able to accomplish his role bravely and dynamically. The history of the world shows a repeated pattern. In "The Second Coming," Yeats writes, "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer," and sees this as a symbol of the end of the recent gyre of civilization. One might wonder how he became convinced of the idea of an eternal recurrence of the world. There are various precedents to such an idea. For example, Pythagoras says, "Every great universal year (every ten thousand years) all stars finish their movement and repeat the same movement. At that time, when all constellations in the heavens become the same stage, everything is also repeated on the earth to the extent of each trivial detail." The Stoic school also says, "When the world passes many stages, everything changes into fire (world fire) which is the origin of everything. As far as Yeats is concerned, his idea of recurrence might come from Plato's ideas. In "Among School Children," Yeats writes, ". . . , it seemed that our two natures blent/ Into a sphere from youthful sympathy/ Or else, to

alter Plato's parable,/ Into the yolk and white of the one shell." Thus, he might believe in the existence of the previous world as well as that of the present world. In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Jane recognized soul as a priori and body as a posteriori. In other words, soul is recognized as an a priori body, and body is recognized as an a posteriori soul. She herself is well aware of theology, but she values the intrinsic purpose of a creature which contains a body as the preservation of species. When one believes in the existence of the previous world, one spontaneously comes to believe in transmigration. In Yeats' case, the idea of transmigration extends to the idea of the historical recurrence of civilization and of the world. The most important thing that an eternal recurrence of the world implies is the substantiality of the past. By giving a circular motion to the linear flow of time, man can save the past. Then, he changes the saved past into the driving force, and by using the force man can exceed the present into the future. Man could not resist time at all, but now he can actively intervene in time. At this point, he can create a better future. Thus, through the eternal recurrence of the world, Yeats hopes for man's active intervention in time and man's leap into the future.



Yeats is a poet who not only studied the universal problem of mankind but also realized, suffered from, and managed to solve the personal subjects as a human being. He established his poetic spirit to explore and to fight with both the external nature and the internal nature with his great efforts. He knew that man's fatal weakness in of the external nature including his own death and that man's unfortunate tragedy toward the internal nature. However, he never spared his efforts to find the solutions of such problems by his own self and to create his world through the solutions as the driving force of his creativity.

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## 論文要旨

### イエイツの詩 ある詳説

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イエイツの詩“An Acre of Grass”と“Under Ben bulben”を中心にイエイツの詩の主題について考察する。老境に入り、体力も衰え、芸術的想像力も使い果たし、死に直面する詩人の物狂を通しての変容と自由、詩人の宇宙観としての輪廻、そして民族的伝統や自然との一体感を通して永遠たろうとする詩人の姿を検討する。