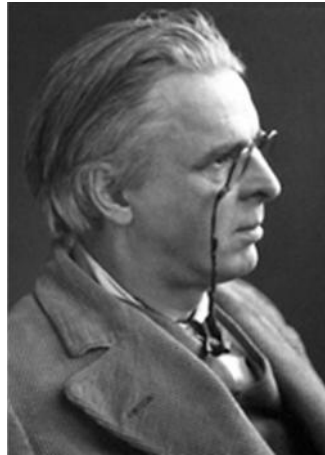


## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1923**



**William Butler Yeats**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1923 was awarded to William Butler Yeats *"for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation"*.**

Very early, in the first bloom of youth, William Butler Yeats emerged as a poet with an indisputable right to the name; his autobiography shows that the inner promptings of the poet determined his relations to the world even when he was a mere boy. He has developed organically in the direction indicated by his emotional and intellectual life from the very beginning.

He was born in an artistic home - in Dublin - thus beauty naturally became a vital necessity for him. He showed artistic powers, and his education was devoted to the satisfying of this tendency; little effort was made to secure traditional schooling. He was educated for the most part in England, his second fatherland; nonetheless his decisive development was linked to Ireland, chiefly to the comparatively unspoiled Celtic district of Connaught where his family had their summer home. There he inhaled the imaginative mysticism of popular belief and popular stories which is the most distinctive feature of his

people, and amidst a primitive nature of mountain and sea he became absorbed in a passionate endeavour to capture its very soul.

The soul of nature was to him no empty phrase, for Celtic pantheism, the belief in the existence of living, personal powers behind the world of phenomena, which most of the people had retained, seized hold of Yeats's imagination and fed his innate and strong religious needs. When he came nearest to the scientific spirit of his time, in zealous observations of the life of nature, he characteristically concentrated on the sequence of various bird notes at daybreak and the flight of moths as the stars of twilight were kindled. The boy got so far in his intimacy with the rhythm of the solar day that he could determine the time quite exactly by such natural signs. From this intimate communion with the sounds of morning and nighttime, his poetry later received many of its most captivating traits.

He abandoned his training in the fine arts soon after he had grown up in order to devote himself to poetry, for which his inclination was strongest. But this training is evident throughout his whole career, both in the intensity with which he worships form and personal style and, still more, in the paradoxically audacious solution of problems in which his acute but fragmentary philosophical speculation sought its way to what he needed for his own peculiar nature.

The literary world he entered, when he settled down in London at the end of the eighties, did not offer him much positively, but it at least offered him fellowship in opposition, which to pugnacious youth seems particularly dear. It was filled with weariness and rebellion toward the spirit of the times which had prevailed just before, namely that of dogmatic natural science and naturalistic art. There were few whose hostility was so deeply grounded as that of Yeats, altogether intuitive, visionary, and indomitably spiritualistic as he was.

He was disturbed not only by the cocksureness of natural science and the narrowness of reality-aping art; even more, he was horrified by the dissolution of personality and the frigidity which issued from scepticism, by the desiccation of

imagination and emotional life in a world which at best had faith only in a collective and automatic progression to the sacred land of Cockaigne. Events proved him to be terribly right: the «paradise» which could be reached by humanity with such schooling, we have now the dubious advantage of enjoying.

Even more beautiful kinds of social utopianism, represented by the greatly admired poet William Morris, did not captivate such an individualist as young Yeats. Later he found his way to the people, and then not as an abstract conception, but as the Irish people, to whom he had been close as a child. What he sought in that people was not the masses stirred by present day demands, but an historically developed soul which he wished to arouse to more conscious life.

In the intellectual unrest of London, things nationally Irish remained dear to Yeats's heart; this feeling was nurtured by summer visits to his homeland and by comprehensive studies of its folklore and customs. His earlier lyrics are almost exclusively built on his impressions from these. His early poems immediately won high esteem in England because the new material, with its strong appeal to the imagination, received a form which, despite its special characteristics, was nevertheless linked closely with several of the noblest traditions of English poetry. The blending together of Celtic and English, which had never been successfully effected in the political sphere, became a reality here in the world of poetic imagination - a symptom of no small spiritual significance.

However much Yeats had read of English masters, his verse has a new character. The cadence and the colours have changed, as if they had been moved to another air - that of the Celtic twilight by the sea. There is a greater element of song than is usual in modern English poetry. The music is more melancholy, and, under the gentle rhythm, which for all its freedom moves as securely as a sleepwalker, we have a hint of yet another rhythm with the slow breathing of the wind and the eternal pulse of the powers of nature. When this art reaches its highest level it is absolutely magical, but it is seldom easy to grasp. It is indeed often so obscure that an effort is needed to understand it. This obscurity lies partly in the mysticism of the actual subject, but perhaps just as much in the Celtic temperament, which

seems to be more distinguished by fire, delicacy, and penetration than by clearness. But no small part may have been played by the tendencies of the time: symbolism and *l'art pour l'art*, chiefly absorbed by the task of finding the boldly appropriate word.

Yeats's association with the life of a people saved him from the barrenness which attended so much of the effort for beauty that marked his age. Around him as the central point and leader arose, within a group of his countrymen in the literary world of London, that mighty movement which has been named the Celtic Revival and which created a new national literature, an Anglo-Irish literature.

The foremost and most versatile poet of this group was Yeats. His rousing and rallying personality caused the movement to grow and flower very quickly, by giving a common aim to hitherto scattered forces or by encouraging new forces previously unconscious of their existence.

Then, too, the Irish Theatre came into existence. Yeats's active propaganda created both a stage and a public, and the first performance was given with his drama *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). This work, extraordinarily rich in poetry was followed by a series of poetic dramas. all on Irish subjects drawn mainly from the old heroic sagas. The most beautiful among these are *Deirdre* (1907), the fateful tragedy of the Irish Helen; *The Green Helmet* (1910), a merrily heroic myth of a peculiarly primitive wildness; and above all *The King's Threshold* (1904), where the simple material has been permeated by thought of a rare grandeur and depth. The quarrel about the place and rank of the bard at the king's court here gives rise to the ever-burning question as to how much spiritual things are to hold good in our world, and whether they are to be received with true or false faith. With the claims on which the hero stakes his life, he defends in the supremacy of poetry all that makes the life of man beautiful and worthy. It would not become all poets to put forward such claims, but Yeats could do so: his idealism has never been dulled, nor has the severity of his art. In these dramatic pieces his verse attains a rare beauty and sureness of style.

Most enchanting, however, is his art in *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), which has all the magic of fairy poetry and all the freshness of spring, in its clear but as it were

dreamy melody. Dramatically, also, this work is one of his finest; and it might be called the flower of his poetry, had he not also written the little prose drama *Cathleen ni Hoolihan* (1902), which is at once his simplest folk play and his most classically perfect work.

Here more powerfully than anywhere else he touches the patriotic string. The subject is Ireland's struggle for liberty throughout the ages, and the chief personage is Ireland herself, impersonated by a wandering beggar woman. But we hear no simple tone of hatred, and the profound pathos of the piece is more restrained than in any other comparable poem. We hear only the purest and highest part of the nation's feeling; the words are few and the action the simplest possible. The whole thing is greatness without a touch of affectation. The subject, having come to Yeats in a dream, has retained its visionary stamp of being a gift from above—a conception not foreign to Yeats's aesthetic philosophy.

Much more might be said of Yeats's work, but it must suffice to mention the ways followed by his dramas of recent years. They have often been romantic by virtue of their strange and uncommon material, but they have generally striven after classic simplicity of form. This classicism has been gradually developed into bold archaism; the poet has sought to attain the primitive plasticity found in the beginning of all dramatic art. He has devoted much intensive, acute thought to the task of emancipating himself from the modern stage, with its scenery that disturbs the picture called up by the imagination, with its plays whose features are necessarily exaggerated by the footlights, with its audience's demand for realistic illusion. Yeats wishes to bring out the poem as it was born in the poet's vision; he has given form to this vision following Greek and Japanese models. Thus he has revived the use of masks and has found a great place for the actors' gestures to the accompaniment of simple music.

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