

# Unique Yeats, Unique Ireland

## YEATS UNIQUE, IRLANDE UNIQUE

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**Abstract:** W.B. Yeats is considered as one of the most outstanding poets in the world because of his excellent talent and patriotism. However, many people neglect the influence of Irish cultural background on him. This paper is aimed at discussing the uniqueness of Ireland as well as its significant influence on Yeats from the perspectives of history, culture, music and nationalism.

**Key words:** W.B. Yeats, Ireland, nationalism

**Résumé:** W.B. Yeats est considéré comme l'un des poètes les plus célèbres du monde grâce à son talent et son patriotisme. Néanmoins, beaucoup négligent l'influence de la culture irlandaise sur lui. L'article présent vise à étudier l'originalité de l'Irlande et son influence significative exercée sur Yeats dans les perspectives de l'histoire, de la culture, de la musique et du nationalisme.

**Mots-Clés:** W.B. Yeats, Irlande, nationalisme

Ireland is a unique country with a rich history, magnificent cultures and breathtaking landscapes. Of all its splendors, literature, especially poetry plays a very important role. A great many outstanding poets came from this land, including James Joyce, Seamus Heaney and W.B. Yeats. All of them possess the uniqueness of Irish features, especially Yeats, the greatest lyric poet Ireland has ever produced.

William Butler Yeats was Ireland's leading poet, chief architect of the Irish Literary Revival, and, according to T.S. Eliot, "*one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them.*"<sup>2</sup> Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 for what the Nobel Committee described as "*his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation*". His success is due to not only his talents and efforts, but also to the inspirations he got from his beloved Ireland.

Yeats' work is special because it contains an Irish nationalism. Much of his writing stems from his love for his nation, and many of his works have been served as a prototype to other aspiring patriots. Consequently, Yeats' work has influenced the future of Ireland. When Ireland achieved her independence, she faced a problem of her own identity. Time called for a reevaluation of Irish heritage. At that turning point, Yeats became Ireland's spokesman. Although Yeats' family moved to London when he was two and he lived there until he was sixteen, his mother's Irish songs and stories kept him connected to Ireland. Yeats' first collection of poetry being published in 1889 has already showed his concern which was to remain central to his writing— Ireland. In one of

his letters, he mentioned that his work has been done in every detail with a deliberate Irish aim. His early works are mainly budding nationalistic, trying to unite the cultural and political aspects of the emerging movement. Later, increased involvement with nationalist politics made his diction plainer, his syntax tighter, while the traditional form was maintained. During the Irish Literature Revival, Yeats played a key role. As a cultural nationalist, Yeats knew what he wanted to achieve must be reconstructed from the bottom up, so he preferred to decentralize cultural societies to inspire everyone in the community by drawing their attention to their common heritage. *Easter 1916* might be the culminating work in Yeats' establishment of Irish identity. In this poem, he expresses a fear of the future and a disapproval of crazed ideologues.

*All changed, changed utterly:*

*A terrible beauty is born.*<sup>3</sup>

These lines imply the turn of Yeats and Ireland at the time. Yeats asserts that Ireland and its people have been "changed utterly". He memorializes the people who sacrificed their lives in the Easter Rebellion as a tribute to transform themselves and the history of Ireland. By using "terrible" to describe "beauty" Yeats expresses his mixed feeling of admiration and disgust about the independence of Ireland. He does not want to see the independence is at the cost of people's life. This poem well explains Yeats' cultural nationalism. He points out the insignificance of these apathetic people who are as if living in a state of disillusionment. To him, humanity is not instigated by the brave individuals but by common citizens who dare to pursue change and justice. Thus, every one has to take responsibilities for the condition of Ireland and affirm his Irish identity and abandon the

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943, p. 514.

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<sup>3</sup> James Pethica, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama and Prose*, New York: w.w. Norton & Company, 2000, P.73

conformity of the stone.

Another unique feature of Yeats' works lies in the use of Irish folklore and myth. Even Yeats himself said, "[I had] worked my way through most, if not all, recorded Irish folk tales".<sup>4</sup> Since his early stage as a poet, he began to incorporate Irish folklore and myth into his writing, which aroused his awareness and proud of his Irish identity, especially in his early work. Poems such as *Fergus and the Druid* and *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* display Yeats' use of ancient Irish mythology as themes to convey his ideas and emotions. One particular legend appears in his poetry and drama throughout his career—that is of Cuchulain, the legendary Celtic hero and the stupendous fighter in Irish hero-tales. Yeats' frequent use of Cuchulain is because of the political as well as his personal surroundings. In this way, a broad base of nationalistic spirit and a shared Irish ancestral identity based on images and ideals of the past is clearly explained. But instead of simply borrowing the stories from the folklore, Yeats revised many of them. A case in point is the drama, *Deirde*. At the end of the drama, the queen commits suicide by using a knife that she has secreted away. The original story about this death scene is that Deirde stays with King Conchobar for one year before committing suicide by flinging herself from a moving chariot, shattering her head against a stone. This revision is in coherent to the character's personality, motivations and relationships and finally achieves a tragic effect. In addition, Yeats also associated his heroes or legendary figures with the situations of Ireland at that time, and viewed what has happened as a starting point to inspire new feelings about modern Ireland. For instance, in *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea*, it is described:

*Cuchulain stirred,  
Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard  
The cars of battle and his own name cried;  
And fought with the invulnerable tide.*<sup>5</sup>

In this poem, Cuchulain's fight with the "invulnerable tide" symbolizes a long battle with British imperialism, as well as the fight for Irish identity. The uncertainty and also the hope in these lines inspired by Gaelic legend represent a unique Irish identity. In other words, Yeats not only uses the folklore and myth as sources of his poems or dramas, but also regards them as a reflection of Ireland's experience as a colony. Finally, Cuchulain's death implies Yeats' political attitude, although he himself maybe did not intend to do so. By using the unique Irish folklore and myth, Yeats successfully inspired the Irish people to look at the heritage of the land. Through his special technique to combine the old legends with contemporary views better related to his readers, Yeats retrieved Irish folklore, and

retrieved the culture of his country.

Besides that, it is said that music is the key to Ireland. Consequently, Yeats' work contains a musical effect. At the end of the eighteenth century the harpists who had been wandering through Ireland, playing the beautiful traditional music, were gathered together. Their music was noted down and published. With such collections the Irish began to realize that they had a national heritage. Music inspired Irishmen to create a special rhythm and metrical structure with a striking feature of Irish songs. Yeats inherited this literary technique and redefined it with his own wit. His poetry soon took to itself not only Gaelic effects of alliteration and assonance, but Gaelic effects of rhythm, a kind of delicate music that seems to come from the rise and fall of intonation in the Irish voice. For instance, he changes the normal order of "*Bishop Berkeley was*" to "*Berkeley the Bishop was a humbug.*" This rhythm has a stressed triple meter which is quite different from English prose. Actually, this tri-syllabic rhythm comes from Gaelic poetry of Irish ballads. Nevertheless, the effect of music in Yeats' work does not solely rely on the rhythm. His passion for music, like every Irishman, lies in every word he chose and every sentence he wrote. Thus we dare to say his works are also designed for the ear.

All in all, Yeats is indeed a unique and great man. Though involved in fierce movements, different schools of thought, he stuck to a constant search for the true individuality and self-worth of Ireland. In order to guard his own believe, Yeats used his literary works as a weapon. Always questioning, striving to explain the folklore of his motherland, his works record his struggle and confusion about the past, present and future of Ireland. He is an excellent singer who has sung the most beautiful melodies of his concern, passion and dream. He opened his soul and heart completely to his motherland, and to all the human beings. It is only Yeats that can possess this greatness; it is only Ireland that can produce Yeats.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Kinahan. *Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism: Contexts of the Early Work and Thought*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988, P116

<sup>5</sup> James Pethica, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama and Prose*, New York: w.w. Norton & Company, 2000, P.94

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