

FYSP 127: William Butler Yeats in Context

Fall, 2007

Professor John Olmsted
Rice 108

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. and by appt.

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Writing in 1931, William Butler Yeats described the poets of his generation:

We were the last romantics -- chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme.

Yeats here summarizes the implicit agenda of much Romantic and Modernist poetry: it is rooted in a newly conceived sense of tradition; its aim is beauty and pleasure; it draws its language and thematic concerns from ordinary working men and women, and its intention is no less than to transform human consciousness. We will devote the semester to a study of the poetry and several of the plays of Yeats in the context of literary modernism and of Irish history and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In Yeats' work we will focus on the poetry collections **Responsibilities**, **The Wild Swans at Coole**, **The Tower**, **The Winding Stair and other Poems**, and **Last Poems**, and plays such as **Cathleen ni Houlihan**, **On Baile's Strand** and **Purgatory**.

Like all the first year seminars, this course has as well three distinct goals:

- you will learn or refine skills necessary for close reading of a text, critical thinking, discussion, and research
- the course is designed to provide a good introduction to college-level work in the liberal arts
- students who complete the seminar successfully will earn Writing Proficiency credit

The responsibility of each member of the class is to do the assigned reading, to take an active part in class discussion and in individual group meetings, and to prepare and hand in all written work on time.

Students are expected to attend all classes and to arrive on time.

After the first few weeks we will divide the class into discussion groups. The chair of each group will arrange for one or more meetings of the group each week outside normal class times. In these group meetings you will read the assigned texts aloud, discuss them, and prepare your presentations for regular class meetings.

Groups should prepare each week to read and discuss all the assigned poems and topics. On Thursdays **beginning September 20** each member of the class will hand in a two- to three-page paper in which you report **when and where you met with your group, who attended, and what was discussed**. Then, in the second, longer section of the paper, treat some aspect of the texts assigned which interested you.

The final paper, **due on December 13**, will be twelve to fourteen pages in length and will deal with some important aspect of Yeats' work. Ideally, the topic will arise from your weekly journal papers.

For help with the mechanics of your papers consult the Oberlin English Department site: www.oberlin.edu/english/resources/guide.html or the Harvard writing site: www.fas.harvard.edu/~expos/sources

Evaluation in the course will be based on class participation, on the weekly papers, and on the final paper.

Texts:

W. B. Yeats, **The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats**. A New Edition, ed. Richard J. Finneran. Macmillan.

Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose. Ed. James Pethica. Norton critical edition.

Class Schedule:

Note: A more detailed syllabus with group assignments will be available once the discussion groups are formed.

Week of

September 3 Early Yeats poems: "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," "The Sad Shepherd," "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman," "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," "Fergus and the Druid", "The Sorrow of Love" (see also 1895 version Pethica, p. 16), "When You are Old" (see also 1895 version, Pethica p. 17).

September 10 "The White Birds," "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" (Pethica, p. 20), "The Two Trees," "The Song of Wandering Aengus," "He Gives his Beloved certain Rhymes," "He hears the Cry of the Sedge," "He thinks of Those who have spoken Evil of his Beloved," "He wishes his Beloved were Dead," "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven."

September 17 First group assignments

First journal paper due September 20