

Themes in yeats' poetry

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Themes in Yeats' poetry You can find many themes in Yeats' poetry. Pick what suits your own study from the themes, comments and quotes listed below.

There are 86 quotes used to illustrate themes on this page (although some of them are from poems outside the current OCR selection for AS Level). You will need only a short selection of these.

1. The theme of death or old age and what it leaves behind. Death of Patriotism, leaving selfishness as the norm: ' Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, It's with O'Leary in the grave' [September 1913] Death as useless sacrifice, Home Rule might be granted: ' Was it needless death after all?

For England may keep faith For all that is done and said' [Easter 1916] A man in old age alienated vibrant youthfulness: ' The young in one another's arms, birds in the trees - Those dying generations - at their song' [Sailing to Byzantium] Death of innocence: ' The ceremony of innocence is drowned' [Second Coming] The self in old age, forsaken by beauty: ' when I awake some day to find they have flown away' [Wild Swans] Death chosen out of a sense of despair: ' A waste of breath the years behind, in balance with this life, this death' [Airman] Death and destruction during civil war: ' A man is killed, or a house burned ... the empty house...' [Stare's Nest] Demise of the Aristocracy and despair at the vanity of human grandeur: ' We the great gazebo built' [Memory] Old age and the remnants of a confined life: ' Picture and book remain' [Acre] In old age, contempt for the present, defiant admiration for ancestry: ' Cast your mind on other days That we in coming days may be Still the indomitable Irishry' [Under Ben Bulbin] Facing death with contempt for overstated ceremony: ' No marble, no conventional phrase' [Under Ben Bulbin] Death provides a sanctuary from conflict and

hatred: ' Savage indignation there Cannot lacerate his breast' [Swift's Epitaph] 2. The theme of disintegration, chaos, sudden change: They have gone about the world like wind' [September 1913] ' scatter wheeling in great broken rings Upon their clamorous wings' [Wild Swans] ' I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, And now my heart is sore. All's changed' [Wild Swans] ' this tumult in the clouds' [Airman] ' All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born' [Easter 1916] ' Enchanted to a stone To trouble the living stream' [Easter 1916] ' Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' [Second Coming] ' Consume my heart away; sick with desire And fastened to a dying animal It knows not what it is' [Sailing to Byzantium] ' A man is killed, or a house burned, Yet no clear fact to be discerned' [Stare's Nest] 3.

Yeats poetry explored nature under four headings: Transience in nature's beauty: ' A shadow of cloud on the stream Changes minute by minute' [Easter 1916] ' By what lake's edge or pool Delight men's eyes when I awake some day To find they have flown away?' [Wild Swans] ' The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas, Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long Whatever is begotten, born, and dies' [Sailing to Byzantium] ' But a raving autumn shears Blossom from the summer's wreath' [Memories] Paradoxically, Yeats saw nature as immortal in comparison to humans: ' Their hearts have not grown old; Passion or conquest, wander where they will, Attend upon them still. [Wild Swans] The radiance of nature's beauty: ' I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;' [Inisfree] ' The trees are in their autumn beauty, The woodland paths are dry, Under the October twilight the water Mirrors a still sky' [Wild Swans] ' The long-legged moor-

hens dive, And hens to moor-cocks call' [Easter] ' An acre of green grass For air and exercise' [Acre] The unattractive side of nature: ' The bees build in the crevices Of loosening masonry, and there The mother birds bring grubs and flies' [Stare] ' while all about it Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds' [Second Coming] 4. Yeats explored the theme of immortality in various spheres.

You can contrast the following quotes and issues with the many quotes and references to mortality highlighted in the quotes for themes one, two and three above. Politics—in a paradoxical way the Rising has changed politics and this force for change has become an immortal and steadfast national symbol: ' Now and in time to be, Wherever green is worn, Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born' [Easter 1916] Natural beauty—the swans as a species are ageless in comparison to Yeats: ' Their hearts have not grown old; Passion or conquest, wander where they will, Attend upon them still. ' [Wild Swans] The cycles of history [perpetually repeating millennial patterns]: ' And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? [Second Coming] The soul and art transcend time: ' Once out of nature I shall never take My bodily form from any natural thing, But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make to sing... Of what is past, or passing, or to come' [Sailing to Byzantium] 5. The quest for truth is fundamental, whether experienced through the emotional self, reason, imagination or at the expense of sanity. Intuitive truth: ' I hear it in the deep heart's core' [Inisfree] The pursuit of national ideals at the cost of public ridicule: "' Some woman's yellow hair Has maddened every mother's son": They weighed so lightly what they gave' [September 1913] Pursuit of

beauty and truth by a questioning spirit: ' Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool Delight men's eyes when I awake some day To
find they have flown away? [Wild Swans] Truth believed in by political
fanatics: ' Hearts with one purpose alone Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone' [Easter 1916] Truth that is fanatical and yet
unemotional: ' Too long a sacrifice Can make a stone of the heart' [Easter
1916] Truth that is emotional, imaginative and philosophical: ' A lonely
impulse of delight Drove to this tumult in the clouds; I balanced all, brought
all to mind' [Irish Airman] Truth that is prophetic and yet based on historical
cycles: ' Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at
hand' [Second Coming] Cold, rational analysis of falsehood leading to the
truth: ' We had fed the heart on fantasies, The heart's grown brutal from the
fare; More Substance in our enmities Than in our love' [Stare] Truth attained
through educating the imagination with art: ' Nor is there singing school but
studying Monuments of its own magnificence' [Sailing to Byzantium] Truth
that is philosophical, the wisdom of old age: ' Dear shadows, now you know it
all, All the folly of a fight With a common wrong or right. The innocent and
the beautiful. Have no enemy but time' [Memories] Truth that eludes reason
and imagination: ' Neither loose imagination, Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone, Can make the truth known' [Acre] Contrast
between a passionate confession and political truths: ' And maybe what they
say is true Of war and war's alarms, But O that I were young again And held
her in my arms' [Politics] Truth that is sentimental, defiant, emotional: ' Cast
your mind on other days That we in coming days may be Still the

indomitable Irishry' [Ben Bulbin] 6. Yeats had various visions of the model Irish society.

Primitive, Celtic, peasant and rural: ' I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made' [Innisfree] Romantic, patriotic and heroic: ' Yet they were of a different kind, The names that stilled your childish play, They have gone about the world like wind' [September 1913] Pastoral and aesthetic: ' But now they drift on the still water, Mysterious, beautiful' [Wild Swans] Comely and simple: ' My county is Kiltartan Cross, My countrymen Kiltartan's poor' [Irish Airman] Aristocratic, classical and youthful: ' and speak of that old Georgian mansion, ... recall That table and the talk of youth, Two girls in silk kimonos, both Beautiful, one a gazelle' [Memories] Heroic, feudal and ancestral: ' Sing the peasantry, and then Hard-riding country gentlemen, The holiness of monks, and after Porter-drinkers' randy laughter; Sing the lords and ladies gay That were beaten into the clay Through seven heroic centuries; Cast your mind on other days That we in coming days may be Still the indomitable Irishry' [Under Ben Bulbin's Head] 7.

Yeats explored conflicting dualities, often counterbalancing the ideal and the real: The beauty of nature versus the sombre monotony of city existence: ' I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey' [Innisfree] The meanness of municipal policy versus the generosity of patriots: ' For men were born to pray and save: Romantic Ireland's dead and gone' [September 1913] Mortality of the self versus immortality of the swan species: ' And now my heart is sore... Their hearts have not grown old' [Wild Swans] Major Robert Gregory's

ambiguous approach to fighting for his country; this involves inversion of emotion: ' Those that I fight I do not hate, Those that I guard I do not love' [Irish Airman] The immortality of political heroes versus the fickleness of politics: ' Yet they were of a different kind, The names that stilled your childish play' [September 1913] ' Yet I number him in the song; He, too, has resigned his part In the casual comedy' [Easter 1916] The inversion of the relationship between commitment and morality: ' The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity' [Second Coming] Soul versus Body and Nature versus Art: ' O sages ...be the singing-masters of my soul.

Consume my heart away... Once out of nature I shall never take My bodily form from any natural thing' [Sailing to Byzantium] Love versus hatred, moral inversion: ' More substance in our enmities Than in our love' [Stare] Time versus beauty: ' But a raving autumn shears Blossom from the summer's wreath... The innocent and the beautiful Have no enemy but time' [Memories] Love versus politics as a shaper of human destiny: ' How can I, that girl standing there, My attention fix On Roman or on Russian Or on Spanish politics' [Politics] The contemporary versus the historical, the plebs versus the aristocracy, the masses versus ancestors: ' Base-born products of base beds ... Still the indomitable Irishry' [Under Ben Bulbin] Two contradictory positions on the duality of life and death, one neutral, the other favouring death as a refuge from the stresses of life: ' Cast a cold eye On life, on death' [Under Ben Bulbin] ' SWIFT has sailed into his rest; Savage indignation there Cannot lacerate his breast' [Swift's Epitaph] 8. Yeats made various protests against reality during his life: Alienation from city life in

London: ' While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey'
 [Inishfree] Despondency at short sighted and self-serving civic attitudes regarding the 1913 lockout and hypocritical religious devotion: ' You have dried the marrow from the bone?

For men were born to pray and save: Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, It's with O'Leary in the grave' [September 1913] Hurt at disrespect for the memory of political martyrs: ' You'd cry, " Some woman's yellow hair Has maddened every mother's son": They weighed so lightly what they gave' [September 1913] Disillusionment at war: ' Those that I fight I do not hate, Those that I guard I do not love;' [Airman] Disgust at insincere nationalism, patriotic bluster: ' Being certain that they and I But lived where motley is worn... The casual comedy... ' [Easter 1916] Criticism of political fanaticism: ' Too long a sacrifice Can make a stone of the heart. ' [Easter 1916] Disillusion at war, lack of civic responsibility and an apocalyptic spiral: ' Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The lood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity' [Second Coming] Disenchantment at materialism, hedonism and neglect of art: ' Caught in that sensual musical neglect Monuments of unageing intellect' [Sailing to Byzantium] Anger at the inhumanity of political ideologies: ' We had fed the heart on fantasies, The heart's grown brutal from the fare: More substance in our enmities Than in our love' [Stare] Rage at the pettiness of national politics: ' for men were born to pray and save' [September 1913] ' Conspiring among the ignorant' [Memories] Fierce resistance in old age to the demise of the mind: ' Grant me an old man's frenzy, Myself must I remake' [Acre] Mockery of world

affairs: ' How can I, that girl standing there, My attention fix On Roman or on Russian Or on Spanish politics? ' [Politics] Yeats Fascistic or class hatred against the Irish working class: ' Scorn the sort now growing up All out of shape from toe to top, Their unremembering hearts and heads Base-born products of base beds' [Ben Bulben] Dislike of pompous burials: ' No marble, no conventional phrase' [Ben Bulben] Contempt for materialistic and unthinking people: ' Imitate him if you dare, World-besotted traveller' [Swift]