

# The contrast between the real and the ideal world in the six poems by yeats

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



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Having studied Yeats' poetry, I agree completely with the statement informing us that it was the contrast between the 'real world' in which he (Yeats) lived and his own vision of what an 'ideal world' should resemble which is the definition of his work, as well as the motivation for a significant amount of his writings in his later life: generally more cynical works with a clear sense of loss compared to the starry-eyed romantic idealism of his earlier works of poetry. I have formed this viewpoint in agreement with the statement upon studying Yeats' poems The Lake Isle of Innisfree, September 1913, The Wild Swans at Coole, An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, Easter 1916, and Sailing to Byzantium.

## **The Lake Isle of Innisfree**

At the time Yeats was writing The Lake Isle of Innisfree, it is quite clear that he was struggling with coming to terms with the grim realities of life, that his

life in the city is loud and restless, with “ the pavements grey” serving only to trigger his fanciful, though ultimately foolish daydreaming of the pastoral utopia that is Innisfree, versus the dull, drab urban world “ the pavements grey” serve to represent. Yeats yearns to escape the trivialities of everyday life, to “ arise and go now, and go to Innisfree”.

Yeats’ vision of Innisfree is one of a place of respite: serving as an escape from the clutches of his true reality. He paints for us, those reading, a most-wonderful picture of his most-deeply-desired lifestyle; there is a musical quality to the island where “ the cricket sings” which contrasts hugely to the barely notable “ roadway” on which Yeats finds himself. The natural, colourful beauty of Innisfree at noon, which Yeats describes as a “ purple glow”, allows us to be able to relate to his struggle with the true “ grey” surrounding his environment. While Yeats is insistent that his departure shall be imminent, his words ring slightly hollow. His fantasy is too idealistic even by typical standards of fantasy, and we are left in a state of belief that he will forever continue to hear the island’s calling “ in the deep heart’s core”, and keep it a fantasy.

## **September 1913**

In his poem September 1913, Yeats (similarly to in The Lake Isle of Innisfree) displays a sense of pure disgust for the society of the world in which he finds himself. At the opening of the poem, he sarcastically remarks that this so-called ‘ society’ has “ come to sense”; they now understand their purpose in life is merely “ to pray and save”, doing both for purely selfish reasons and out of fear of what might happen otherwise. Yeats finds this idea disturbing

— he cannot believe that it was “ for this Edward Fitzgerald died”, along with his fellow men “ of a different kind”. It is clear that Yeats views their deaths as representative of the end of an era; Fitzgerald, his men and the ideals they themselves held were sadly all that Yeats’s idealised view of Ireland ever amounted to.

Yeats implies that everyone should think in the same manner as himself and these deceased men, expressing remorse that said men had died in search of the possibility of a better future for “ Romantic Ireland” (at the time ‘ the Irish Free State’), only for it to amount to people adding a mere “ half pence to the pence”. Reality has become unattractive to Yeats, as he is left having to deal with the knowledge that his dream for a better tomorrow is “ dead and gone”, “ with O’Leary in the grav”.

### **The Wild Swans at Coole**

However, with *The Wild Swans at Coole*, Yeats’ interest in societal values has subsided somewhat in favour of his struggle with the concept of mortality: the gradual but inevitable approaching of death. Observing and counting a group of swans for the second time since his youth, “ The nineteenth Autumn has come upon” himself since that time, Yeats ponders the absentminded bliss and beautiful simplicity of their lives, how they (from his perspective) seem to live forever, looking exactly as he remembers them, while he himself will continue age and die. He describes these “ brilliant creatures” as “ unwearied still” by the troubles of life, though it is likely that the swans are not the same ones as from his youth. Regardless, “ all’s changed” for Yeats, while the swans’ “ hearts have not grown old” (from his perspective) and

they are truly free to pursue whatever they may in the future, while Yeats himself clings to the past, insisting that his most fruitful days are behind him.

His fantasy of the swans serves only to remind him of his own mortality, and as a result he begins to fear that the swans will leave him behind. He is aware of the reality of the situation; it is indeed possible that he will “awake some day to find they have flown away”.

## **Easter 1916**

Another poem that made me examine my own history was Easter 1916. This rather cleverly-structured poem was rather demanding both in terms of subject matter and style. It has four stanzas, two containing sixteen lines and two containing twenty-four lines thus, commemorating the date of the Easter Rising – the 24th of April, 1916. The poem is an interesting retrospective take on the Easter Rising, Yeats admitting how he had had incorrect assumptions about those involved and his subsequent guilt over his feelings of scepticism. The first two stanzas detail said initial scepticism about the Rising’s participants, how he had been “certain they and I But lived where motley was worn”. The term “motley” refers to a pageant or the clothes of a clown, indicating Yeats’ intention to say that he had not taken the Rising’s participants remotely seriously and believed that they were merely outwardly passionate, that their true nature was more ‘clownish’ than anything else. The poem’s theme revolves around the paradox “All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.” I found this difficult to unravel at first but after further thought, I realised that the poet’s views had “changed

utterly". The passion and altruism of the martyrs was beautiful but it also caused much pain and suffering for others.

This is why he considers it a "terrible beauty". I had not considered this concept before or the fact that those with a patriotic nature had to be completely single-minded. I was fascinated with the imagery Yeats used to describe this: "Hearts with one purpose alone Through summer and winter seem Enchanted to a stone". Yeats reinforces this idea by providing images of movement and change as "The stone's in the midst of it all". The poem provoked me to think about the nature of fanaticism and like Yeats, I hold an admiration for the men and women of the rising, whilst still acknowledging the "terrible beauty" it caused.

### **An Irish Airman Foresees his Death**

"My country is Kiltartan Cross, My countrymen Kiltartan's poor." Despite the title of this poem being An Irish Airman Foresees His Death, there is little sense of patriotism at the national level typically displayed by Yeats in his poetry. Rather, his allegiance is to Kiltartan Cross, a small parish in the Co. Galway in Ireland, a remote part of the British "empire" which is unlikely to be greatly troubled by the concurrently-occurring First World War and then-upcoming War for Independence: this Irish airman's 'sacrifice' matters next to nothing to the "poor" citizens of Kiltartan Cross, who are likely to remain poor no matter the victors of either war. The concept that soldiers in the First World War had fought "for King and Country" indeed made for good propaganda, and was undoubtedly true in the case of many English poet, but it wasn't true of everyone, and many were motivated by more regional or

local pressures: fighting to protect their loved ones, or to avoid the scorn of their neighbours incurred by not fighting. And this was even truer, Yeats seems to suggest, of Irish fighters, who had less invested in England or Britain than, say, a young man from Shropshire or the Home Counties. The Irish airman described in Yeats' poem fights out of a sense of duty rather than national pride, whether it is British or Irish doesn't matter in the slightest. Therefore, Yeats gives insight into the thoughts and feelings of an Irish Airman, perhaps minutes before his death. These words are so simple, and yet so profound, resonating across generations with all who have felt the seemingly senseless tragedy of war; they construct for those reading a pathway into the heart, mind and soul of one who gave his life for a cause which was not his own. With this poem, Yeats gives a voice to an Irishman in his dying moments, speaking for him with a sense of having known the man personally, sharing his feelings and belief about the war. An Irishman himself, Yeats knew those to have fought having fought a war not their own, having fought another's enemy and defended another's homeland. The understanding of these feelings gives Yeats' the authority to speak from his friend's point of view, allowing the readers into the thoughts of a man about to die for a country not his own. In the final lines of *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*, the speaker reveals his thoughts in the final moments of his life to be of his initial reasons for joining the war effort and risking his life in the first place. Although having previously cited impulse as his reasoning behind joining the Air Force, these lines reveal the true source of the deep-rooted impulse to risk his life, that after having thought about everything, and "balanced all", he had come to the conclusion that the years behind him and

the years in front of him were but a “waste of breath”, i. e. that everything is meaningless, and that if his life is destined to be short anyway, and that everything seems without meaning, then dying for such a cause would give his life more meaning than it had before. For this reason, he decides to risk his life and join in the fight. Although he does not love the people he is protecting, nor hate those he is fighting, he does want his life to have a purpose. Therefore, he risks having a shorter life in order to have a more meaningful life. This is the Airman’s way of embracing his death in his final moments.

### **Sailing to Byzantium**

Yeats struggles with his mortality once again in *Sailing to Byzantium*. Again, the reality of the situation he finds himself in is unappealing. He has become aware that Ireland “is no country for old men”, but has instead fallen into the hands of the young, who serve only to “neglect” its various forms of “unageing intellect”. As a result, Yeats retreats to his ultimate fantasy, his ideal world; Byzantium. In this seeming utopia, Yeats sees immortality in the form of the appreciation of art. He wishes to take on the form “of hammered gold”, as he sees his body as nothing but “a dying animal” to which his heart and soul are “fastened”. The image of Byzantium is almost the opposite of the world in which he currently lives, and so there is a powerful contrast between the two in the poem. He now views Ireland as a place to die, while Byzantium represents to him an everlasting life, and the knowledge of “what is past, or passing, or to come”.



## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, it is Yeats's struggle between his ideal version of the world and the uncomfortableness that is his reality which drives his poetry. These six poems in particular are the result of his perpetual longing for a better life, the descriptions of which allowed for the creation of some genuinely beautiful and thought-provoking poetry.