

Assessment of yeats through three poems



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

W. B. Yeats is considered one of the greatest Irish writers due to his eloquent, 'otherworldly' early poetry and many of his later dramas and works for which he received the Nobel Prize. Often associated with the Irish Literary Revival, Yeats' early work can be looked at in a postcolonial sense. The poetry utilises Irish and Celtic folklore to "project a strongly Irish element," (Lit 201 Study Guide 2010) as seen through an understanding of cultural ideology. Although the majority of the themes in Yeats' poetry look pastoral and mythical, he is projecting a strong message of promoting the Irish spirit and feeling. Three poems in which the audience can observe this sense are Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea, The Rose of the World, and Who Goes with Fergus, all written in 1893. The goal of Yeats' Celtic mythic poetry was to reconstruct the imaginative processes of the life led by his ancestors in Ireland. As a quote from Yeats suggests, his countrymen had stopped following politics and instead were turning to the literary and cultural arts to revive the traditions and society of Ireland: "Everywhere I saw the change taking place, young men turning away from politics altogether, taking to Gaelic, taking to Literature, or remaining in politics that they might substitute for violent speech more violent action. From that national humiliation, from the resolution to destroy all that made the humiliation possible, from that sacrificial victim, I derive all that is living in the imagination of Ireland today ('Modern Ireland')" (Yeats, Lit 201 Study Guide 2010). The first poem to be examined is Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea, and as the footnotes suggest, W. B. Yeats was very interested in this Celtic legendary warrior Cuchulain and wrote about him numerous times (Yeats, Lit 201 Poetry Anthology). The ancient hero Cuchulain was often considered divine because of his God-like abilities and strength. However, when these

<https://assignbuster.com/assessment-of-yeats-through-three-poems/>

abilities allow his extreme force to take over his reason, it becomes his downfall when he kills his own son. The story begins with a swineherd being told by his mother that he is too strong to idle his life away and should go find his father. The young man goes into the camp and hears that his father is highly praised there; however, his father sees the man and not knowing him thinks he invaded the camp. Cuchulain fights his son and as he kills him, the swineherd reveals that he is actually Cuchulain's son. Enraged for killing his own son, he asks the druids to chant and he fights with the sea instead of humans. This can be paralleled in a political sense to the people of Ireland telling the men to be strong and not passive about the British ruling over their land, but their fight ends in vain. The story becomes tragic and pedantic; the outcome is not what was expected. As this poem is an adaptation from a traditional Irish saga, Yeats uses poetry in this way to educate his people about their own history (class notes). Using the epic form is especially significant. Historically, epic poetry is associated with those of the classical tradition such as Homer; Yeats is commenting that Irish tales are just as important and timeless as those classics. He even incorporates some classical themes such as tragic heroism and the Oedipus complex in reverse. The poem also allows the author to challenge the notion that current faith in logic and reason ignored the imagination (class notes). Clearly Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea allows Yeats creative genius to flourish as it pulls on major themes across politics and cultural identity. Yeats again incorporates differing themes in other early poetry such as *The Rose of the World*. One of the most obvious themes in this poem is the symbol of the rose as eternal beauty. Once again the reader is reminded of classics through allusions to past beauty. One example is the iconic Helen of Troy in

<https://assignbuster.com/assessment-of-yeats-through-three-poems/>

the Iliad: “ Troy passed away in one funeral gleam (21)”. Yeats also brings in the Irish mythic as well; the poem can be paralleled with the Irish legend of the beautiful Deidra of sorrows. This is evident by line 5, “ And Usna’s children died (21),” referring to Deidra’s husband whom died for her. Yeats was always in love with a woman named Maud Gonne, whom he idolised (class notes). This piece represents the distance between them because she never loved Yeats back and he was forced to admire her from afar. It is fairly likely that he wrote this poem as a response to his unreturned love for her. Yeats also has a subliminal political message in poem that Maude represents the strife of Ireland, and that her beauty is likened to Helen of Troy’s; it becomes a catalyst to a war between nations. The symbol of the beautiful Rose is an excellent example of how Yeats makes a political message. He relies on Irish Mythology as a medium to express how his writing is very separate from the writing in England. English writers would only draw on classical Greek or Roman stories, but by Yeats referencing them as well as Irish folktales his writing becomes truly distinct. The Irish audience would recognise this and it would be well received. This poem is littered with mythological allusions to portray a political message, but not as much as another popular early poem by Yeats: Who Goes with Fergus. As soon as one begins to read Who Goes with Fergus, they could infer that the poem is a subtle call to nationalism. If the reader knew the context and history out of which Yeats was writing this becomes increasingly true. The poem is also more about passive nationalism rather than the vain fighting in Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea, or the idealized nationalism of The Rose of the World. Yeats is commenting that the Irish population should retreat to its roots of mysticism and legend; it is in this way they can break free of the political

turmoil and be allowed to live the Irish tradition. Fergus is synonymous with nature here and Yeats is posing this solution to the younger generation to turn to nature for hope. Fergus gave up his political ambitions in exchange for wisdom from the druids, and this is what Yeats urges his audience to do as well. Yeats clearly is preoccupied with the otherworldly aspects and this theme is followed throughout his poetry. Who Goes with Fergus is Yeats asking his countrymen to contemplate with him and to give up the unnecessary political battles. It is a move to pacifism, and in a simpler sense it states that wisdom is the non-confrontational choice. By placing this importance on Irish culture and folklore, Yeats could effectively fulfil his need for national pride. The very rich tradition of mythical tales and folklore in Ireland allowed Yeats to draw from many great sagas. He also referenced his own personal experiences and the underlying message of Irish nationalism. Yeats was a deeply patriotic individual, but it really is an exceptional case to look at the way he treated nationalism. Rather than a strong call to arms as many Irish nationalists wanted, he instead chose to reflect the rich culture and traditional past of Ireland. Yeats also placed a strong emphasis on the use of the imagination, and allowed his ideas to flourish; he created visions of loveliness and expressed otherworldly notions. Through his use of mythic tales and legends incorporated into his poetry, Yeats was able to capture the hearts of his homelands people, and showed them that in order to be an Irish nationalist one did not have to be violent. He looked toward creating the development of an independent national identity. Although his poetry is Irish at its essence, the themes can be universally admired and recognised, which is why Yeats continues to be one of the greatest writers of the contemporary era. Bibliography Molloy, Frank. LIT201 Poetry Anthology. Charles Sturt

University, 2010 Molloy, Frank. LIT201 Study Guide. Charles Sturt University, 2010