

11. English and Irish poets of the 20th century

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

Yeats, the 1923 Nobel Prize winner, was an Irish author with English roots. He was born in Dublin and his family had lived in Ireland for several generations but originally they were Protestant Englishmen. Yeats spent a part of his childhood in London where his parents moved for a period of time, and then returned to Ireland, so his childhood was spent in Dublin, London and also Sligo in the northwest of Ireland. Yeats started to write poetry as a young man and was involved in the literary circles in London. He first wrote poetry of the Romantic kind, although he was also influenced by the Irish nationalism of the period and by his experience of rural Ireland in Sligo. At the beginning of the 20th century Yeats became familiar with the writings of Nietzsche and they had a great impact on him; Yeats had religious inclinations but could not conform his beliefs to the traditional Christian doctrines, so he turned to various other philosophies, mysticism, and esoteric ideas. Not unlike William Blake he cultivated an entire system of beliefs which he then projected into his poetry; he was influenced by Neoplatonism, together with theosophy, folklore and spiritualism.

Irish nationalism exercised another kind of influence on Yeats. For many years he was passionately but unsuccessfully in love with Maud Gonne, an Irish actress and strong advocate of Irish independence. He was also influenced by his friendship with Lady Gregory, an Irish writer and promoter of Irish literature; under her influence he got involved in the founding of Irish National Theatre in 1899. He was, however, unhappy with the responses of the Irish audience and after several disputes he moved back to England. He returned to Ireland after the Easter Rising in 1916; by then he was a public figure, and in the 1920's was appointed a senator of the Irish Free State.

His poetry from these later years is marked by a complex esoteric system which he captured in his essay *A Vision* (1923): a symbolic system theorizing the passing of time together with different types of human personality. The poems from his last writing period are sometimes valued most highly for their combination of realism, symbolism and metaphysical elements. Among his collections of poetry are *The Rose* (1893), *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928).

“**Stolen Child**” is a poem that exemplifies Yeats' concern with Irish folklore in which there are legends about fairies who would steal a child and replace it with another one. It is a simple musical poem, rhymed and with a refrain, with a songlike or ballad-like quality, referencing real places in County Sligo. It is an invitation of fairies who are luring a boy to come to live with them in wild nature: they have wonderful tasty fruit (even if stolen), they dance at night, they chase bubbles, play tricks on the trout—in other words the fairies play like children. The boy finally leaves the comforts of domestic life (the calves, the kettle, the mice), coming to “the waters and the wild,” to fairy world—a world of fantasy and imagination. The world of the fairies, however, has a sinister aspect to it: after all what they want is to *steal* the child, just like they stole the red cherries in stanza 1. The final stanza is different from the previous three; it breaks the repetition of “where...” with which the first three stanzas began, and we see that the child comes “solemn-eyed,” not light-heartedly, perhaps realizing what he is leaving behind: warmth, physicality, the basic comforts of everyday human life. So the contrast of the poem is between the luring world of fantasy, which might be free of weeping (unlike the human world), but whether its lure will prove happy or disastrous, we cannot tell.

“**Sailing to Byzantium**” is a poem from the later period of Yeats' career, published in *The Tower*. It is one of the metaphysical, symbolical poems which rely on Yeats' esoteric theories, most notably on a Neoplatonic element and also elements from the Kabbala. The poem is a reflection on old age and mortality, it is also about the soul and the body, and a journey to immortality. The speaking “I” of the poem, which we understand as such first in the middle of the poem at the end of stanza 2, is the persona of an old man who considers the world around him as a place for the young, and decides to sail to Byzantium where he invokes holy wise men to free his heart from bondage to the withering body (“dying animal”); once free from the body, the speaker is resolved to take an artificial form, become an artificial, mechanical songbird whose song will be above the changes of time. The first stanza represents the world of the senses; the second represents the soul and art (“unless Soul clap its hands

and sing”—the soul sings, like the birds in the first stanza, but unlike them it is not physical and sensual); the third stanza represents the spirit (as a higher, transcendental level) which must be separated from the flesh, therefore the physical element must be burned by the fire; and the final fourth stanza suggests how transcendence is achieved: by transcendent art.

“Stolen Child”

<https://poets.org/poem/stolen-child>

“Sailing to Byzantium”

<https://poets.org/poem/sailing-byzantium>

W. H. Auden (1907-1973)

Wystan Hugh Auden was born to an intellectual Anglican family and educated at Oxford where he started writing poetry. Then he worked as a school teacher. In the 1930's he became, like many other intellectuals, associated with the leftist movement; he went to Spain to participate in the Civil War but was so shocked to see the damage done by the left-wing Republicans that he gave up and returned to England. Besides leftist thought, he was also influenced by German culture, old Icelandic literature, by Sigmund Freud and other psychologists. After his “leftist phase” he became more conservative and inclined toward Christianity, which he had abandoned in his youth. In 1939, after the outbreak of WW2, he went to the United States and settled there, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1946. Although he was based in the U.S., he also regularly returned for extended stays to Europe, living in Italy and in Austria; for a number of years he was also poetry professor at Oxford. He was a homosexual and had two major relationships in his life, both with writers with whom he collaborated. Auden married Erika Mann, the daughter of the German writer Thomas Mann, in 1935; this was a fake marriage with the sole purpose of providing Erika with a British passport. Auden was also close to the world of music; he wrote librettos and some of his poems were turned into music by, for example, Benjamin Britten.

He received many prizes and honors and was widely acknowledged as one of the most influential poets writing in English. Among his famous collections are *Poems* (1930), *Another Time* (1940), or *Notes* (1951).

Lullaby (written 1937)

Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;
Time and fevers burn away
Individual beauty from
Thoughtful children, and the grave
Proves the child ephemeral:
But in my arms till break of day
Let the living creature lie,
Mortal, guilty, but to me
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;

While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell,
And fashionable madmen raise
Their pedantic boring cry:
Every farthing of the cost,
All the dreaded cards foretell,
Shall be paid, but from this night
Not a whisper, not a thought,
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of welcome show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness find you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love.

YOUTUBE:

**Sheila Hancock: Refugee Blues by WH Auden for Holocaust Memorial Day 2017, 2 min
(1939 poem in the blues rhythm)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7fMK8INXMI>

**WH Auden reading Musee des Beaux Arts, by Wdan Coyle, 2 min
(Written 1938)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ha5dZhpuGAQ>

Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

Philip Larkin was the chief representative of a loose group of poets who called themselves **The Movement** (including Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Robert Conquest, Elizabeth Jennings and others) and stood up in the 1950's to break away from the elitist, high-brow ways of Modernism. The postwar years generally brought a significant shift toward egalitarianism in English society and consequently the high cultural pretensions of the Modernists came under attack. Poets in The Movement called for a greater attention to the everyday experience, concrete events and people, and for a clearer, understandable language. They declined to make grand statements, they refused to write for the elite only; their concern was to give insight into the personal experience. This new program of poetry was articulated by Robert Conquest in the preface to their collection called *New Lines* (1956). They admired the poetry of Yeats, Thomas Hardy or W. H. Auden. In fiction this was paralleled by the emergence of the so-called **Angry Young Men**, writers of mostly working-class background, represented by Kingsley Amis and John Osborne, among others.

Larkin was a devoted writer but also worked full time as librarian at the University of Hull. His first published book was a novel but most of his writing was poetry. He became a very influential writer, received some awards and declined a good number of them. His most influential collections of poetry are *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). His poetry is marked by plain diction, and is sometimes deliberately provocative. One of his most quoted poem is "This Be the Verse."

YOUTUBE

This Be the Verse by Philip Larkin (read by Larkin), by mouse geek

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rjRYSfCjvM>

45 s

Philip Larkin reading his poem "Church Going.", by Wdan Coyle, 4 min

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN_vWfSgWe4

Church Going (1956; in *New Lines*)

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
Move forward, run my hand around the font.

From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?

Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these – for whom was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Solar

Suspended lion face
Spilling at the centre
Of an unfurnished sky
How still you stand,
And how unaided
Single stalkless flower
You pour unrecompensed.

The eye sees you
Simplified by distance

Into an origin,
Your petalled head of flames
Continuously exploding.
Heat is the echo of your
Gold.

Coined there among
Lonely horizontals
You exist openly.
Our needs hourly
Climb and return like angels.
Unclosing like a hand,
You give for ever.

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

One of the most famous poets of the second half of the 20th century, Seamus Heaney, was an Irishman, born in County Derry in Northern Ireland. He grew up on a farm but at the age of 12 went to a boarding school in Derry and then went on to study in Belfast, where he also lived for a large part of his adult life. In 1972 he moved to the Irish Republic; he also lived repeatedly in the USA where he taught at Harvard University. His important collections of poetry include *The Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *North* (1975) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). In 1995 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He is also the author of a very successful translation of *Beowulf* (1999).

As an Irish poet Heaney was concerned with the condition and history of Ireland and made it one of the subjects of his poetry. He wrote in English but when he was labeled a “British author” he objected; rather, he saw himself as an Irish poet. At the same time, he was not confined to a narrow tradition of Irish literature. He references English literary history from Beowulf to Wordsworth to his contemporary Ted Hughes, as well as matters related to Irish history in particular. In his most political volume, *North*, he examines issues in the history of Ireland, moving between its prehistoric, Gaelic, Viking and English influences. Nature is also an important topic for him, he pays attention to the details of the Irish countryside and its inhabitants. In form he moves freely from free verse to rhyme and even the sonnet form.

“**Digging**” is one of Heaney’s most famous poems; it comes from the early collection *The Death of a Naturalist*. It brings together several distinctly Irish themes: potatoes, potato mold (the blight), turf; and puts the poet’s work next to the physical labor of his Irish ancestors.

YOUTUBE

Archival: Seamus Heaney reads and discusses his poems; by Max Larkin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvneazagsRI>

stop at 3:55

“**The Act of Union**” also comes from this collection; this poem considers the relationship between Ireland and Britain in terms of male dominance and female pain in childbirth. The title refers both to the Act of Union of 1801 which united politically Ireland and Britain, and to the sexual union, or rather rape, that is the organizing image of the poem. The speaker of the poem is “imperially male”; it is the voice of Britain commenting on its counterpart, Ireland, portrayed as female. The baby (“the act sprouted an obstinate fifth column”) that is the result of this union starts to move in the poem; the baby is already getting ready to fight (“his heart ... is a wardrum”; “his fists ... are cocked at me across the water”). The poem closes with the assertion that no treaty will heal the open wound and pain of the

female body. Notice also that Heaney is using the sonnet form (each stanza has the structure of the sonnet, including the rhyme scheme) and he uses alliteration and assonance.

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