

## James Gallagher

***“William Butler Yeats was a nationalist poet” Using ideas from the critical anthology, to what extent do you agree with this view?***

William Butler Yeats is widely regarded as one of Ireland’s greatest poets, awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921. Writing predominantly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, his work is believed to have encapsulated an uncompromising feeling of Irish nationalism that continued to grip the nation as separatists challenged ongoing British colonial rule. However, various examples of observable ambivalence in his poetry lead one to question whether he was truly, unequivocally committed to achieving Irish independence. He was indeed determined to revalorise Irish identity through the rediscovery of historical folklore, but the sincerity of his attempts is undermined by his indecisive attitude towards rebel groups and his seeming refusal to de-Anglicize his work. By applying a postcolonial lens to the poetry of Yeats, it is evident that his relationship with Irish nationalism was a complex one that he himself struggled to navigate, and thus, it is perhaps inappropriate to simplistically categorise him as a ‘nationalist poet’.

It could be contended that Yeats was a nationalist poet due to his exploration of Irish folklore and mythology in his earliest works. According to C.J Ruffner Grieneisen, an inherent aspect of postcolonial criticism is examining the way writers “articulate and even celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from their colonisers” (Grieneisen, 2008). In his poem ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, Yeats recalls the beautiful Irish landscape from his childhood and considers the somewhat spiritual connection between him and his homeland. Stood on Fleet Street in London, he contrasts the “pavements grey” with sounds of the “lake water lapping” in Innisfree (Yeats, 1956). The juxtaposition of idyllic auditory imagery with the bleakness of city life emphasises the natural magnificence of Ireland and Yeats’ unquestionable preference for such picturesque scenery. That he hears these sounds in his “deep hearts core... always night and day” suggests that his attachment to Ireland is both indestructible and ingrained within him. The repetition of the adverbial “there” when alluding to Innisfree gestures away from England towards Ireland, further reinforcing his innate fondness of his native country. The poem was written during ‘The Celtic Revival’ in the late nineteenth century, a period that revitalised Irish folklore through literature and challenged the stereotypes of Irish people as primitive savages and peasants plagued by famine (McAteer, 2019). This is reflected by the mystical connection between Yeats and his homeland that appears to transcend the laws of nature. Therefore, it would seem that Yeats was a nationalist poet as he sought to create an Irish identity free from English contamination by glorifying the landscapes that he cherished as young child.

Furthermore, Yeats’ famous work ‘September 1913’ would also strengthen his status as a nationalist poet. The poem was written in response to the ‘Dublin Lock-Out’, an industrial dispute over desires for workers’ unionisation which descended into violent riots - two were killed and hundreds were injured (BBC, 2014). Yeats vociferously condemns both the Catholic bourgeoisie and the Protestant business classes, asserting “you have dried the marrow from the bone” (Yeats, 1956). This metaphor reveals that, by extracting every “halfpence to the pence” from exploited workers, their material obsession with money has

consequently drained Ireland of its very identity. The refrain “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone / It’s with O’Leary in the grave” emphasises Yeats’ dismay at the abandonment of the nationalist cause in search for individual prosperity. Perhaps the most poignant section of the poem is when Yeats asks the rhetorical question “Was it for this that all blood was shed / For this Edward Fitzgerald died / And Robert Emmet and Wolf Tone?”. He idolises the nationalist heroes who have sacrificed their lives for Irish independence and whose names have been immortalised in “childish play”. The graphic description of their deaths highlights the excruciating struggle against British rule, and the use of anaphora shows Yeats’ disgust over the way profit is now valued more than the patriotic efforts of these men. Assuming that postcolonial writers “develop a perspective whereby marginality, plurality and perceived ‘Otherness’ are seen as sources of potential change” (Barry, 2002), it could be contended that Yeats was a nationalist poet because he implores Irish readers to emulate the bravery of previous revolutionaries and confront their imperial oppressors.

Despite this, it could be posited that Yeats was not in fact a sincere nationalist poet due to his ambivalent response towards the Easter Rising of 1916 – an unsuccessful rebellion launched against the postponement of Irish Home Rule during World War 1 (Editors, 2009). In his poem ‘Easter, 1916’, Yeats battles his own conflicting convictions as he attempts to decide whether he truly supports the revolutionary efforts or not. This internal struggle is manifested in the repetition of the oxymoron: “A terrible beauty is born” (Yeats, 1956). Yeats acknowledges that the rising will be consecrated in history as a monumental step towards independence, but also laments the devastating violence and loss of life that has occurred in the conflict. His indecisiveness is evident once more as he questions, “Was it needless death after all?”. With this sombre reflection, Yeats struggles to determine whether the principal conspirators and plotters were martyred in their executions, or whether their deaths were in fact meaningless and futile. He suggests that their “excess love bewildered them till they died”, implying that the rebels were blinded by their patriotism and misguided by their irrational love for Ireland. By no means was Yeats himself a violent revolutionary, and this nonaggression very much aligns with his unwillingness to endorse the events of Easter Monday in 1916. Importantly, postcolonial criticism is largely concerned with the way in which “the struggle for independence and national identity” are presented in the “literature produced in countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries” (Grieneisen, 2008). Given that Yeats displayed considerable scepticism and a reluctance to support Irish independence movements, one could subsequently argue that it is wrong to characterise him as a nationalist poet.

Moreover, it could be postulated that Yeats wasn’t a nationalist poet as his work didn’t embody many crucial features of typical postcolonial writing. In B. Ashcroft’s *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, he raises the question: “Can one use the language of imperialism without being inescapably contaminated by an imperial world view?” (Ashcroft, et al., 2006). Though many critics understand that English can be a “cultural vehicle” to instigate change, Yeats’ decision to not write in Gaelic can certainly be interpreted as problematic. During ‘The Celtic Revival’, there was immense pressures for writers to ‘de-Anglicize’ and use their native language so that traces of British influence were entirely removed from Irish culture. Yeats’s identity was multi-faceted due to his Anglo-Irish heritage, thus his insistence

to write in English is perhaps indicative of his qualified commitment to Irish nationalism. In addition to this, Yeats' later poetry is very much predominated with similar feelings of doubt and reservation. In 'The Man and The Echo' (1938), he confesses "I lie awake night after night" and asks the rhetorical question "Did that play of mine / Send certain men the English shot" (Yeats, 1956). Yeats' work was believed to have provided much of the inspiration for nationalist leaders like Patrick Pearse, and so he feels inadvertently responsible for their deaths. That he is so tormented by such agonising feelings of guilt emphasises the extent of his regret and indisputably detracts from his status as a nationalist poet.

In conclusion, it is evident that the term 'nationalist poet' is an oversimplification of William Butler Yeats. Although he expressed an irrefutable admiration for Irish revolutionaries of the past, his trepidation when endorsing the Easter Rising signifies a clear sense of uncertainty and indecision regarding his stance on nationalism. Yeats valiantly sought to confront British colonialism by cultivating a traditional Irish identity, but such attempts were immediately undermined by his failure to adopt the Gaelic language in his poetry and truly embrace the prevailing sentiment of The Celtic Revival. Despite this, it is equally important to affirm that nationalism was an essential aspect of much of his poetry - indeed, Yeats himself proclaimed that "There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature" (Khalifa, 2015). While his support for Irish nationalist groups and the struggle for independence may not have necessarily been unfaltering, there is an explicit feeling of discontentment in Yeats' poetry and a desire for Ireland to be restored to its former splendour. His love for Ireland is unquestionable, but his feelings towards Irish nationalism are far more indiscernible. Therefore, it can only be argued to a limited degree that William Butler Yeats was truly a 'nationalist poet'.

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