The poetry of Ireland
Irish voices

Ireland is a small island 486 kilometres long and 280 kilometres wide, and is part of the British Isles. St Patrick is reputed to have taken Christianity to Ireland, and it was soundly established as a religion by the fifth century. Today, with a total population of around five million, almost ninety-five per cent align themselves with the Roman Catholic denomination. However, over the centuries many myths and legends from the Gaelic people were passed on to new generations and formed an important part of the spiritual culture of the nation. Many of these are retold by W. B. Yeats in his earliest poetry.

As far as we know, the first claim to Ireland by British rulers occurred in the twelfth century. After centuries of struggle between rival chieftains within Ireland, and with the armies of English kings and queens, the Act of Union was passed by the Irish Parliament in 1801. This document linked the two countries politically. However, almost immediately after the passing of the Act, insurrection occurred under Robert Emmet, as the movement for independent Home Rule of Ireland strengthened. Throughout the nineteenth century various leaders and political organisations were formed, all with the aim of establishing independence for Ireland. One famous uprising against the British is celebrated by Yeats in his poem 'Easter 1916'.
In 1922 the country was divided into the Republic of Ireland, taking up five-sixths of the land, and Northern Ireland. The Republic worked as an independent country, with Northern Ireland still functioning as part of the United Kingdom. In 1949 the Republic was officially renamed the Irish Free State. Although there are great complexities in the ongoing war within Northern Ireland, much of it centres around the desire to reunite the two parts of Ireland, and the difficulties of determining how Catholic and Protestant will cooperate.

The island features a rugged coastline, with a number of small mountain groups, and a large inland plain. This central plain, approximately 160 kilometres by 80 kilometres, is marked by many beautiful lakes and bogs. One of Yeats’ poems, ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’, describes the beauty of a lake on the west coast. Although there are some very large cities, such as Dublin and Belfast, many of the people live on small farms and in rural villages.

Ireland has produced a number of people who have made significant contributions to English literature. Writers such as Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith, and the novelist and playwright George Bernard Shaw, are among the best known Irish writers.

However, when we look at the poetry of Ireland, two figures stand out above the rest: William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney. In 1939, the year of Yeats’ death, Heaney was born. The poems of these men have dominated and enthralled the Irish literary world during the twentieth century. Another Irish poet, who appeared on the scene later and who is now making his mark, is Padraic Fiacc.
W. B. Yeats

Yeats (1865–1939) lived a long and fruitful life, producing more than thirteen books of poems, as well as a number of plays. Many of his initial poems are built around early myths and legends of the Irish people. Other poems celebrate simple themes drawn from the beauty of the Irish countryside and people. In the middle years of his writing his style and themes began to change. His love poetry became more personal, lacking the ornate language of his earlier writing, it was influenced by his love for Maud Gonne, a zealous fighter for Irish independence. Yeats proposed to her but she married another man. Nevertheless many poems derive from his admiration for Maud’s beauty. Other poems from this period are strongly political, praising the action of revolutionaries who risked their life for Irish independence. Poetry written towards the end of his career, influenced by his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees, at times appears more mystical and symbolic; it tends to explore themes that are more universal – themes such as finding meaning in life, ageing, the existence of the soul, and life beyond this life. In 1923 Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for poetry.

In ‘The Lake Isle of Inismore’ Yeats recalls some of the beauty of this part of Ireland, focusing on an island in the lake there. He depicts it in a romantic and idyllic way, using it as a symbol of the home that his heart is always longing for.

~ The Lake Isle of Inismore ~

I will arise and go now, and go to Inismore,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

W. B. Yeats
Peaceful considerations

1. What does the poet achieve by the repetition of 'go' in the first line?
2. What does the second line tell us about the kind of lifestyle the poet wants to lead there?
3. What does Yeats convey to us by the use of the word 'bee-loud'?
4. From the second stanza what quality is the poet seeking in his idyllic home?
5. 'The veils of the morning'. What is there about the morning that might suggest a veil?
6. What impression of nature does the poet convey by the description in the second stanza?
7. 'I will arise and go now'. What does the use of the word 'now' tell us about the strength of the poet's longing?
8. 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'. Try saying this beautifully crafted line to yourself to feel its rhythm and sound. What does the word 'lapping' achieve here?
9. What do the 'pavements grey' in the second last line stand in contrast to in the poem?
10. What does the poet mean by his last statement?
11. What emotions does the poet reveal in the poem?
12. What does the poem tell us about the poet's character and the things he values?

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, many young Irish men chose to fight for Britain against Germany, even though the war did not seem very relevant to Ireland. This simple poem describes the thoughts and feelings that led a man to serve in the air force.

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

W. B. Yeats

One of Yeats' ambitions was to create a distinctive Irish theatre. A wealthy widow, Lady Gregory, helped him collect folktales and provided a place for him to write at her country estate, Coole Park, in County Galway. In this poem, Yeats sees in the swans a symbol of the romantic Ireland he has longed to recreate in his people's hearts.

’Tis The Wild Swans at Coole

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky,
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count,
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.
Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
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?

W. B. Yeats

Viewing the wild swans

1. What is the 'autumn beauty' that distinguishes the trees at this time?
2. 'The water / Mirrors a still sky'. What is the poet helping us to feel about the scene?
3. 'Are nine-and-fifty swans'. Why has he not simply written fifty-nine? Try saying both lines out loud. What is added by the way the poet has written this line?
4 'I have looked upon those brilliant creatures, / And now my heart is sore'.
What do you think has led to this pain in his heart?
5 From the third stanza, how was the poet different when he first visited this
place and encountered the swans?
6 'Their hearts have not grown old'. By implication, whose heart has grown
old?
7 'Passion or conquest ... Attend upon them still'. What do we sense the poet
feels about his own life at this time?
8 From the final stanza, what two descriptive words are used to present the
swans as a powerful image of the enduring greatness of Ireland?
9 What personal feelings is the poet expressing through this poem?
10 How effective do you think the use of the swans as an image of the greatness
of Ireland is in this poem? Why?

On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, a group of Irish nationalists rose up to take
control of Dublin and to drive the British out of Ireland. They failed, in part because
of insufficient support from the rest of the Irish population. In a dramatic over-
reaction, the British executed fifteen leaders of the uprising. The second stanza of
the poem 'Easter 1916' identifies four of these. 'That woman' was Constance
Markiewicz; 'this man' was Patrick Pearse, an Irish poet; 'this other' was Thomas
MacDonagh, a young poet and literary critic; the fourth one was John MacBride,
the man who had married Yeats' beloved Maud Gonne. Connolly, another revolu-
tionary, named near the poem's end, was leader of the Irish Citizen's Army.

News of the event stunned Yeats, causing him to reassess the despair he had
felt about his people expressed in the poem 'September 1913'. He wrote 'Easter
1916' as his response.

~ Easter 1916 ~

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song,
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.

We know their dream, enough
To know they dreamed and are dead,
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

W. B. Yeats

Reliving Easter 1916

1 'I have passed with a nod of the head / Or polite meaningless words'. What does the writer convey about his attitude to these people by these actions?
2 How does the poet emphasise the shock he received on hearing the news of the executions in the last two lines of the first stanza?
3 'This man had kept a school / And rode our wingèd horse'. What words is Yeats using here to convey that this man was a poet?
4 What does Yeats mean by 'Was coming into his force'?
5 What does Yeats mean by 'the casual comedy'?
6 At the start of the third stanza what word does Yeats use to suggest a magical transformation? What was it that was turned into 'a stone'?
7 The stone's purpose is described as being 'To trouble the living stream'. What do you think Yeats means by this?
8 In the last stanza, why does Yeats suggest that our part is 'To murmur name upon name'? What purpose would this serve?
9 What feelings does the poet have about the events that have taken place?
10 What line stands out for you in this poem? Why?