Autobiographies Study Guide

Autobiographies by William Butler Yeats

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Contents

Introduction

William Butler Yeats's *Autobiographies*, originally published in 1955, is a collection of essays written by a man many consider to have been the greatest poet in the English language. The first essays, "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" (1915) and "The Trembling of the Veil," (1922), cover Yeats's life through his late twenties. In 1936, another four autobiographical essays were published, "Dramatis Personae," "Estrangement," "The Death of Synge," and "The Bounty of Sweden," extending *Autobiographies* well into the poet's fifties, when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

While the information contained in these essays is roughly in chronological order, Yeats's goal seems to be not to catalogue exact details about his life but to deliver a sense of how he became the man he was. The pages of his autobiography are filled with the names of hundreds of friends and enemies and of societies formed and joined, contributing to a picture of a man passionate for Ireland and Irish nationalism. Writing from the vantage point of the early part of the twentieth century, Yeats acknowledges many of his past errors in judgment and admits to some bitterness over attempted projects that did not end well. In the later pages of his autobiography, Yeats covers his years of contributing to the Abbey Theater in Dublin, a place in which he made his long-time dream of an Irish national dramatic movement a reality. In addition, in the essays, Yeats reveals his increasing fascination throughout his life with the supernatural and mysticism.

Author Biography

William Butler Yeats was born June 13, 1865, in Sandymont, Ireland, to John Butler Yeats, a lawyer who later became a painter, and Susan Mary Pollexfen Yeats. He was the eldest of four children. The Protestant Anglo-Irish society into which Yeats was born was the minority in Ireland but had dominated Irish life and politics for hundreds of years. Unlike most of his fellow Anglo-Irish, who regarded England as their true home, Yeats considered himself primarily Irish, and his passion for Irish independence from England colored his life as an artist from the very beginning. He incorporated Irish heroes and heroines into his poetry and other writings.

As a child, Yeats was not a good student and instead desired to spend time walking around his beloved Irish countryside. Most of Yeats's childhood was spent in London, but he was able to soak up Irish stories and legends during his frequent trips to Ireland to visit relatives. He attended art school in Dublin between 1884 and 1886 and eventually decided that his talent was not in painting.

In 1885, at the age of twenty, Yeats published his first poem in *The Dublin University Review*. Four years later, he published his first book of poems, *The Wanderings of Oisin*. According to a passage in his *Autobiographies*, this collection received high praise from the well-known writer Oscar Wilde. For the next ten years or so, Yeats joined and organized a variety of societies and clubs, such as the Irish Literary Society and the National Literary Society, all of which promoted the independence of Ireland from England through the development of Irish national literature and arts. Yeats's enthusiasm for the politics of Irish independence waned in the final years of the nineteenth century because of what he saw as a tendency toward increasing violence; however, he never abandoned his interest in all things Irish as they related to his writing.

Also during his twenties, Yeats began his lifelong and consuming interest in the supernatural and the occult. He joined Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society (an organization that promoted a philosophical system associated with mysticism and that claimed to have insight into the nature of God and the world) and was also initiated into MacGregor Mathers's mystical society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

While numerous commentators have called Yeats the greatest poet in the English language, he did not limit his efforts to verse. In the early 1890s, he wrote two plays that showed his devotion to the Irish cause of nationalism, The *Countess Kathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Around the turn of the century, he joined forces with his patron, Lady Augusta Gregory, to produce his own and other Irish dramas; the success of their efforts led to the creation of the Irish National Theatre Society and the renovation of Dublin's Abbey Theatre for their company's home. He served as head of the company until about 1915. Beginning in 1915 with the release of *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*, Yeats published six essays that would eventually be collected into his *Autobiographies* in 1955.

Yeats's one great unrequited love for nearly thirty years was the Irish activist Maude Gonne, widely known for her beauty and her passion for Ireland's independence. At an advanced age in 1917, Yeats married Georgiana Hyde-Lees, a fellow member of the Golden Dawn. The couple had two children. In 1923, Yeats received the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in Roquebrune, France, in 1939 and was buried in the land of his ancestors, Sligo, Ireland, in 1948.

Plot Summary

Chapter One: "Reveries over Childhood and Youth"

The first essay in Yeats's*Autobiographies*covers the author's life through his twenties, beginning with recollections of his maternal grandfather, William Pollexfen, and continuing through the publication of Yeats's first collection of poetry in 1889,*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*.

Yeats remembers having a very unhappy childhood but is never quite able to specify what caused his unhappiness. He suspects: "my miseries were not made by others but were a part of my own mind." As he grew older, Yeats reports that he became happier.

Yeats writes of the first time he experienced hearing an inner voice as a child, which he decided later was his conscience. When he was an adult, this voice continued to come to him "at moments of crisis." He also remembers experiencing various mystical events, such as witnessing the work of "faeries" and seeing a "supernatural bird."

When his family moved to London's North End, Yeats found himself involved in many fights with schoolmates who teased him about being Irish. He rarely won these fights and struggled over the fact that he never felt as brave as his grandfather Pollexfen. Eventually the family moved to Bedford Park, a neighborhood of art aficionados.

The first poems Yeats heard were a stableboy's rhymes. When he was eight or nine years old, his father began reading poetry to him and continued this practice as Yeats grew up. Yeats describes himself as a poor student and not much of an athlete but very interested in collecting bugs and being outdoors. He greatly anticipated the occasions when he was allowed to sail to Ireland and visit his Sligo relatives. Yeats's family moved to Dublin from London when Yeats was fifteen years old.

Yeats's difficulty with his studies continued throughout his teenage years, and he became even more entranced with being outdoors. Yeats even slept in a cave for a period of time, causing great consternation among his teachers.

Yeats attended art school in Dublin from 1884 through 1886 but did not enjoy it. He spent most of his time writing poetry and studying the occult and supernatural. Yeats also frequented a number of clubs and societies involved in political debate and the issue of Irish nationalism - the idea that Ireland should be a country independent from England. He met numerous famous Irish nationalists, including John O'Leary, and began meeting with the Young Ireland Society, organized to promote the idea of Irish nationalism through Irish literature.

Chapter Two: "Book I: Four Years: 1887-1891"

Yeats writes of the four years during which he met numerous poets and artists who would have lasting effects on his life and would become longtime friends and confidants. Yeats was in his early twenties and obviously excited about the numerous philosophical discussions he shared with his father's friends and others. During this period he met Maude Gonne, the Irish beauty and activist who, while becoming an enduring friend to Yeats, never reciprocated his romantic love.

Yeats was involved with many of the intellectuals and literary achievers of England and Ireland during these four years. For example, when Yeats published his first collection of poetry,*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*, Oscar Wilde praised the book. He and Wilde spent some time together; Wilde was quite fond of the younger poet's ability to tell Irish folk tales.

Yeats also began his association with Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society and was initiated into MacGregor Mathers's mystical society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Chapter Three: "Book II: Ireland after Parnell"

Yeats recounts the years he spent organizing the Irish Literary Society, founded in London in 1891, and the National Literary Society, founded the next year in Dublin. Both societies were formed to promote the independence of Ireland from England through the development of Irish national literature and arts.

One of the primary projects undertaken by the two societies was the New Irish Library. Through this effort, the society arranged to have a number of agreed-upon Irish literary works published and distributed to libraries throughout Ireland. A struggle between Sir Charles Gaven Duffy and Yeats ensued over the editorship of the series. Duffy won the editorship, but eventually in-fighting between Yeats and "half a dozen young men" put a stop to the project. Yeats expresses a great deal of bitterness about the effort he put into the project.

The title of this part of the essay refers to Charles Stuart Parnell, Irish politician and founder of the Irish Home Rule Association which supported the idea of Irish autonomy. For many, Parnell's untimely death in 1891 signaled the end of any possibility for a nonviolent settlement of the question of Irish independence. Yeats saw this time as the end of attempting a political solution for Ireland's difficulties and the beginning of an effort to raise the profile of Irish literature and arts to secure a sense of Irish nationalism.

Chapter Four: "Book III: Hodos Chameliontos"

The title of this section, which, according to Yeats can be translated as "The Path of Chameleon," denotes the multiplicity, confusion, and unpredictability in his life. Yeats

recalls with pleasure, though, the times he spent with his uncle George Pollexfen in Sligo, Ireland. During this period, Yeats searched for a unifying philosophy for himself and for Ireland. In support of this effort, he spent many hours experimenting with the symbols he had learned from Mathers's Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats was convinced through his own experiences that a trained person thinking of a particular symbol could prompt a change in another person's mind.

Chapter Five: "Book IV: The Tragic Generation"

Here, Yeats writes about the artists and authors he knew in the late 1890s, many of whom met with such difficulties as public condemnation and serious ill health. For example, he remembers the events surrounding Oscar Wilde's downfall. Wilde was found guilty of homosexual acts and sentenced to prison for two years of hard labor. About three years after his release, Wilde died. In addition to Wilde's story, Yeats notes that a number of his artist friends became drunks or went mad during these years.

Chapter Six: "Book V: The Stirring of the Bones"

In this essay, Yeats recalls with some disappointment the dissolution of what he wanted for Ireland, due to the violence of many Irish activists during the final few years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Maude Gonne gained much notoriety during this period for her fiery rhetoric in support of an independent Ireland, but Yeats expresses concern over the violence to come. One high point in this period is his introduction to Lady Gregory. She invited him to stay at her estate in Ireland to recuperate (from poor health), and together they began collecting folk tales from the surrounding countryside and discussing the possibility of a theater devoted to Irish plays.

Chapter Seven: "Dramatis Personae:1896-1902"

Yeats relates here, too, his meeting Lady Gregory and how they became close friends. Much of this essay is concerned with the two friends' work on developing an Irish dramatic tradition. Yeats and Lady Gregory founded the Irish National Theatre in Dublin and produced a number of plays, including Yeats's *Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's*The Heather Field*. Florence Farr, an actress for whom Yeats had great respect, appeared in many of their productions.

Chapter Eight: "Estrangement:Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909"

This section of *Autobiographies*is a collection of sixty-one diary entries dated from January 14 through March 12, 1909. Most of the brief entries are concerned with Lady

Gregory and the Abbey Theatre, Yeats's family, and his consideration of the occult and philosophy.

Chapter Nine: "The Death of Synge:Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909"

These fifty entries, dated March 12, 1909 through October 1914, primarily cover John Synge's death in March 1909 and Yeats's remembrances of the playwright whom he called the greatest Irish dramatist. Yeats writes also about Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre.

Chapter Ten: "The Bounty of Sweden"

In this final essay, Yeats writes about receiving the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature and his trip to Stockholm to receive the award. He also includes the text of his acceptance speech, "The Irish Dramatic Movement."

Reveries over Childhood and Youth,

Reveries over Childhood and Youth, Summary and Analysis

Autobiographies is a collection of works by W.B. Yeats that explores his life from childhood up until he received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The book is divided into six separate works, each one covering a different point of Yeats' life that he chronicled in essay or diary form. This book gives insight into the poet from his own point of view, sharing with the reader an intimate portrait of his life that might not be available through the biographies written by other people who were not as privy to Yeats' personal writings. This book is a must for fans of Yeats who have always wondered what events in his life influenced particular works that have inspired generations of readers.

Yeats' earliest memories were of his grandparents and their home in Sligo. Yeats remembered his grandfather as a stern, quiet man, an uncelebrated hero. Yeats' grandfather once won the freedom of some Spanish city, a fact even his wife was not aware of until a chance visit by an old soldier. Yeats' grandfather was also a sailor and would often work along side his shipmates, taking on the more dangerous chores when others would refuse. Yeats' grandfather ruled the home sternly, often insisting on locking up the gates at night to keep the servants from getting into trouble. However, unknown to his grandfather, the gates were never really locked, allowing Yeats himself to sneak out one night to borrow a railway pass from a cousin for use by an uncle. Yeats' grandmother was a kind woman whom he can only remember punishing him once. Yeats recalled that his grandmother punished him for having a snack too close to dinnertime.

Yeats remembered a childhood playmate that lived in the next town from his grandparents. The boy was the son of a cousin of the family. Yeats could remember other family members as well; many of who had quirky lifestyles and stories that were passed down from family member to family member. An aunt would often tell the family stories of how a relative was a King's County general and a nephew came to see him, requesting he not be served pork for dinner. Not only was he served pork, but he was served pork on a subsequent visit as well.

Yeats was not a good student as a child. Yeats had difficulty learning to read until his father took over his studies. Yeats began his schooling at the home of a local woman while still living in Sligo. This woman would reward him when he learned a lesson by allowing him to see a sword her father had owned. Shortly after this time, Yeats could remember struggling with his views of religion because his father expressed a disinterest in the subject. When Yeats' brother died, the subject appeared to take on more importance to him for the simple fact that he did not fully understand what was happening.

Yeats and his father moved to England when Yeats was still a young boy so that Yeats' father could further pursue his art. Yeats and his father would travel often between England and Sligo before permanently settling in London. Yeats missed Sligo because he enjoyed sailing his boats and wanted to be a sailor like his father. Only Yeats' mother missed Sligo more. Yeats' mother did not like England. She thought the English people indulged too greatly in public affection, as well as other vices she disapproved of.

Yeats began school in London and found himself the target of bullies. Soon Yeats made friends with an athletic young man who would often come to his rescue during this scuffles. One day, the athletic friend decided it was time for Yeats to learn how to defend himself and attempted to teach him to box. However, the lessons did not go well. Despite this fact, the next time a bully attempted to hurt Yeats, he defended himself well enough that no one bothered him again.

As a young man, Yeats spent a great deal of time with his father's friends, fellow painters. These artists would often read literature to or with Yeats, introducing him to a great number of classic literary works. Except for some poetry read to him by a stable boy as a small child, Yeats gives these impromptu readings the greatest credit for creating in him a love for poetry and the written word. Yeats' father would also read poetry to the family, but he had great opinions of the poetry that often colored the way Yeats understood these words until he was old enough to come to his own opinions.

Yeats would often go to Sligo on holiday. Yeats felt safe here, as though he were home, and enjoyed sailing his small boat or riding his horse. Yeats would go on hunting trips with family members, but never enjoyed it and preferred to fish. When Yeats became a teenager, his family moved to Dublin. Here, Yeats had great difficulties in his studies, until once again his father became involved and threatened him until he was able to learn. However, his father was unhappy with the education his son was receiving because he felt the only important lessons were those of Greek and Latin. At this time, Yeats often had the habit of sneaking out of his house at night to sleep in caves or abandoned castles. Many of Yeats' teachers felt this was the reason for his poor achievements in school.

Yeats' grandfather had retired and an uncle had come to take his place in the shipyards. Yeats would often come to stay with this uncle whom he found to be quite boring. During this time, Yeats had given up the idea of physical pleasures in order to seek wisdom. Once he took a long walk in the night that left him exhausted by the next morning. The uncle's servant found this quite amusing because she assumed he had been with a woman all night. During this time, Yeats fell in love for the first time. However, the object of his affection was engaged to another man, so he never told her of his love.

Yeats and his family moved again and Yeats began attending an art school. The teachers were not impressed with Yeats because he often imitated his father's work, but it was not of the type of art the teachers wanted. Yeats longed to work in different styles, but was too afraid to break away from his father's style. Yeats did not particularly admire his father's style; in fact, he felt his father should return to his earlier style, and felt his

father's opinions in art were often incorrect. However, Yeats himself could not break from his father's style.

Yeats' father introduced him to Edward Dowden, who would be a great influence on Yeats' poetry. Dowden taught Yeats about the Pre-Raphaelites and introduced him to George Eliot. During this time, Yeats discovered mysticism and was introduced to a young man who introduced him to various clubs in the area dealing with the subject. It was the study of mysticism that finally helped Yeats break free of his father's influence and find his own voice.

In Ireland, Yeats became friends with a man named O'Leary who was the president of the Young Ireland Society. It was through this friend that Yeats was exposed to many great Irish writers he had not been aware of before. This too helped Yeats to find his own voice. During this time, Yeats also had his first experience with a seance, an experience that so frightened him that he decided to not do it again. During this time, Yeats published his first book. Shortly afterward, Yeats' grandmother died and in his grief, his grandfather died as well.

Yeats' memories of childhood center on his grandparents and on their home where he lived as a small child. Yeats had great affection for his grandfather who he greatly admired for his many achievements in his occupation. However, his grandfather's stern ways have little to do with many of Yeats' memories, though his occupation served as inspiration to Yeats as he desired to become a sailor like his grandfather for much of his childhood.

Sligo, the hometown of his grandparents and his mother, was a place he deeply loved. Perhaps a great deal of this love came from his mother's affection for her home. Sligo is a great source of nostalgia to Yeats, a theme of the novel, as he comes back to it quite often throughout this essay. Yeats often visited family in this area: not just his grandparents, but many aunts and uncles who also lived in the area. Yeats found the histories these people could tell him fascinating, and he thought highly of the social status of the various members of his family.

Yeats' relationship with his father was a complicated one. Yeats' father had many strong opinions about a great deal of subjects, not limited to his children's education or literature. Yeats and his father often clashed on these opinions, though Yeats himself never contradicted his father or made his own opinions openly known. Yeats was so greatly influenced by his father that he trained to be an artist like his father, imitating his father's style of painting even though he personally did not like the style. It was not until Yeats grew older and discovered mysticism that he found the strength to break free of his father's influence and find his own voice.

The Trembling of the Veil, Book I. Four Years: 1887-1891,

The Trembling of the Veil, Book I. Four Years: 1887-1891, Summary and Analysis

In the late 1880s, Yeats and his family moved from Dublin to Bedford Park. Across the street lived an artist, who was supposed to be related to Pocahontas, who was one of many of Yeats' father's friends that had great influence on him. Nearby lived W.E. Henley, a poet under whom Yeats learned a great deal. Henley would often edit Yeats' work and helped him to become a stronger poet. Yeats also met Oscar Wilde during this time; a man he felt was perfect in his writing. Yeats found Wilde to be the type that would never find joy in humiliating a person, but who had high expectations of those around him just the same. Yeats put this behavior down to Wilde's unusual childhood.

Yeats also met William Morris during this time, a man who reminded him of his grandfather. Morris was a Socialist who influenced Yeats with his political views. However, Yeats was unable to shake his deep beliefs in religion and this caused some tension between himself and other students at a meeting of young intellectuals in Morris' home. Shortly after this, Yeats attempted to reunite his father with an old classmate with hopes of encouraging his father to return to an earlier style of his art. However, the meeting went badly. When Yeats went to apologize the next day, he found that there was no need for apology as the older man had greatly enjoyed meeting him. This man, with whom Yeats shared many opinions, introduced him to Edward Ellis. Ellis was an artist and a poet who introduced Yeats to the writings of Blake.

Soon after the publication of his first book, Yeats met Ernest Rhys, a Welsh poet, with whom he founded a poetry club called The Rhymers Club. Many club members argued that Yeats often spoke like a man of letters rather than a poet during these meetings. Yeats felt this came from his nationality from which he drew much of his education rather than a traditional education like many of his equals had. Yeats found their discussions, their style of clothing, and even their handwriting to be boring. However, it was through these associations that Yeats met two of his good friends, Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts.

Yeats had met many of the poets in his area by the early 1890s and felt he knew what their true characters were. However, Yeats did not believe he understood his own character or anti-character. Yeats began visiting a medium who received her visions from a group of spirits she called the Masters. The medium was often surrounded by a large group of devotees and was constantly in good spirits whenever Yeats was around. Yeats found the woman fascinating, though he did not always fully embrace her visions.

At the British Museum, Yeats met a man who would eventually become known as McGregor. This man was a writer and student of magic and theory of war. McGregor

taught Yeats a great deal about symbolism and helped him to associate thoughts with smells and touch. Yeats was concerned that his writing included too many generalizations; and although he attempted to keep these from his writing, it continued to be a problem. Yeats was a great fan of Chaucer, but he felt Shakespeare was the one to truly admire for his lyrical prose and his use of symbolism. Yeats was still struggling to find himself through the men he associated with.

This essay begins a five piece essay that covers much of Yeats' life from childhood to middle age. Yeats related to his reader in this first section the many different artistic influences he had in his early years as a poet and their affects on his writing. The most profound of these appear to be the older gentlemen who introduced Yeats to various other artists, such as the writer Blake. Yeats took from each of these gentlemen a different sense of style that helped to enrich his own writing. However, Yeats felt as though he still did not know who he was and who he would be.

In a search for his own identity, Yeats began visiting a medium, touching on the theme of mysticism, from whom he hoped to gain some insight. However, Yeats was not even sure he fully believed in the mysticism this woman dealt in on a daily basis. Yeats believed a great deal in many things, but his belief was limited when he could not analyze what he saw on a logical basis, a fact about him that often irritated not only Yeats himself, but his friends as well. Yeats often applied this sense of logic to poetry as well, blaming his Irish heritage, and this made it difficult for Yeats to relate to fellow poets who only used emotion when analyzing their poetry.

Finally, Yeats met McGregor, a man who would later become a revolutionary during the Celtic Movement. From this man, Yeats learned about symbolism and how to relate thought with smell and touch. This began to assist Yeats to get in better touch with his artistic side; a side he felt was too reliant on generalizations. Yeats was continuing to find himself, and it appeared to be a difficult time that often left him feeling isolated-a theme of the book-,a feeling that would follow Yeats the remainder of his life.

The Trembling of the Veil, Book II. Ireland after Parnell,

The Trembling of the Veil, Book II. Ireland after Parnell, Summary and Analysis

In Dublin, Yeats created the National Literary Society with the eventual desire to begin a theater that could bring his own plays and those of others to people in the country. Yeats gathered a great number of people into his group's membership from his pool of friends. Debates began immediately over the appropriate type of plays to put on. Most members leaned toward the traditional, while Yeats wanted to open the door for more original work. During this time, Yeats lived with John O'Leary, the president of the Society. O'Leary was a great believer in the traditional literature, and he and Yeats would often struggle to make their opinions understood between each other. O'Leary and Yeats would often have long discussions about literature and society in general, with O'Leary rarely budging in his strict belief structure.

O'Leary had a close friend named Taylor who was much the same as O'Leary in his beliefs. Taylor was a great speaker but rigid in his beliefs, a state of affairs that left him appearing as though he were always just short of insanity. Taylor and O'Leary's opinions were so profound that Yeats expresses a relief that both were gone before Synge's play, the *Playboy of the Western World* was presented at Abby Theatre, as both would have hated it.

While still dreaming of building his theater and adding members to his Society, Yeats met Dr. Douglas Hyde. Hyde surprised Yeats because he was attending a Protestant college despite his Gaelic background. Yeats felt that Hyde greatly influenced his work while he in turn influenced Hyde's. Hyde was a great poet who could not offer criticism to anyone due to his generous nature. Hyde was a true writer who helped create modern Irish literature with his translations of traditional Irish stories. To his complete opposite was Standish O'Grady, a writer who was passion and judgment wrapped up in one. O'Grady took old Irish stories and breathed new life into them, inspiring a new generation's imagination.

Lionel Johnson, a friend of Yeats, would become his group's critic. Johnson was an alcoholic who was a fervent believer in the Catholic Church, always professing that one day he would give up the drink and enter the monastery. Sir Charles Gavan Duffy joined the group and attempted to promote some of the traditional writers in their midst. Not all the members agreed on what literature their group would promote in their attempted to promote Young Ireland, but they all agreed that they did not want Sir Duffy's more traditional works. In an attempt to win this argument, Sir Duffy arranged with a publisher to begin publishing a series of books for the Society. However, Yeats had already arranged a situation similar to this for his own works. The contracts were already signed, however, and two books by Hyde and O'Grady were published, though their

sales were sluggish. This caused the group to turn against Yeats because Yeats had intended the Society to be his sponsor in promoting his own work, not theirs.

During his time in Dublin, Yeats was wont to visit many members of his family and family friends. However, due to the reputation he and his friends were building through the Society, Yeats found his welcome often withdrawn in these homes. One home where he was always welcome was that of the Theosophists, a group of young men who lived together. There was little discussion of politics in this home, only religion. There was a woman who lived in the house that had been found starving on the streets. The girl was an artist, a profession that her father did not like. The girl attempted to go to school to learn more about art, but did not like the instruction. When she left the house and returned to starvation, Yeats got her a job with an advertisement company, but the woman refused to take it because it would not be true to her art.

On the top floor of the house lived George Russell. The engineer who owned the home resented Mr. Russell because he was regarded as the spiritual leader of the others who lived there. Yeats had known him years before in school and found him full of empty words. However, now Yeats found him to be more articulate in his poetry. Russell was a benevolent man who had visions regarding people that he used to help them resolve their difficulties, such as the time he helped two women fighting over one man to both let the man go.

This section of the long essay, *The Trembling of the Veil,* deals with a time in which Yeats formed a society that he intended to help him begin a theatre and to promote his own work. Yeats discusses in this essay the men who became members of the society, helping him decide what sorts of books should be promoted in their modern Ireland and to get these sorts of books published. These people varied in opinions and ages, some believing in the more traditional Irish works while others believed more strongly in modern and much younger writers. Yeats himself pushed satirical types of writing that would later make room for his friend, Synge, but again found himself a lone wolf among his fellow writers, touching again on the theme of isolation.

Yeats' plan would fail when one of the writers would become discouraged with the societies' decision to disregard his opinions. This writer would arrange a publication of a series of books by the writers of the Society. However, Yeats had already arranged to have his own works published with another publisher and was not prepared to work with this other contract. Two books would ultimately be published, but the notoriety of the Society was not yet strong enough to encourage large sales, causing the members of the group to become angry with Yeats.

In addition, due to this society, Yeats would find himself unwelcome in homes that once welcomed him due to the controversy of the Society. Yeats did become friendly with a group of religious philosophers who lived in a home together in search of religious understanding they could apply to their own lives. Living among them was an old school friend of Yeats that he found to have the ability to see visions about other people's lives, visions he often used to help people. This idea again shows Yeats' fascination with mysticism, a theme of the book.

The Trembling of the Veil, Book III. Hodos Chameliontos,

The Trembling of the Veil, Book III. Hodos Chameliontos, Summary and Analysis

Yeats found a sponsor in his uncle in Sligo. The uncle was a traditional-minded man who did not like talk of the obscene or radical politics. However, the uncle was quite knowledgeable in the mystics because of his second-sighted servant, Mary Battle. Yeats taught his uncle about cabbalistic symbols. When Yeats would work with his uncle, it would often be at night while Mary Battle slept. However, Mary would always wake having seen the same symbol the men were working on during the night. Sometimes when the story told by the symbol was complex, each of the three would see a different symbol, and together it would make a bigger story.

These episodes often left Yeats with many questions that he would discuss on long walks with his uncle. Yeats contended that he began to become interested in these things because of strange things that happened to him as early as childhood, and each left him with even more questions. Yeats began having visions without the help of symbols and would often have visions of oddly dressed women that would match visions reported to him by Mary Battle and another friend. Yeats found it odd that many people would have similar visions or experience sounds that came from someone else's vision. Yeats also discovered that these visions could influence a person's health. Yeats once healed a boy's delirium while he suffered smallpox by giving him a symbol to concentrate on. As an older man, Yeats watched his young daughter act instinctively and found himself wondering if perhaps these visions were some sort of untapped knowledge that every person is born with, like the instinct a girl reveals when she becomes excited at the sight of a boy on the street.

This section gives more detail of the mysticism, a theme of the book, that Yeats believed in. Yeats went to stay with his uncle in Sligo for a time. The uncle had a servant who had second sight, so the uncle was open to the ideas of mysticism. Yeats began to teach him cabbalist symbols as McGregor had taught him. In teaching his uncle, Yeats began to discover things about visions that he had not known before, like the fact that when he and his uncle were creating visions during the night, the maid was seeing the same things in her sleep. Yeats was amazed by this ability and began to develop questions about mysticism that he had no way of answering.

Yeats had been interested in spirituality since he was a small child due to things that happened throughout his life, such as the time he predicted his grandfather would be in a shipwreck. However, it seemed the more Yeats learned about this spiritual side of his psyche, the more confused he became. As an older man, Yeats watched his child grow and saw her instincts appear more and more every day. Yeats realized that perhaps, like a child who knows about certain things instinctually, all people are born with the

possibility of seeing visions and are simply unaware of this power until they began to tap it in some way. This gave Yeats an answer to a great man of his questions and helped him to better understand this mystical part of himself.

The Trembling of the Veil, Book IV. The Tragic Generation,

The Trembling of the Veil, Book IV. The Tragic Generation, Summary and Analysis

After Yeats' return to Bedford Park, an Ibsen play was presented for the first time in an English theatre. It was not received well and even Yeats did not like it. Other Irish plays were put on in the same theatre over the next couple of months, including one of Yeats' own. These too were received badly. When Bernard Shaw had a play produced in this theatre, he blamed the actors for the poor reception by the audience, an idea that made Shaw a hero in Yeats' eyes.

Yeats was convinced that Shaw and Wilde would have both been the most successful of the Irish writers in England if it had not been for Wilde's arrest. Everyone in the literary community was surprised but not shocked, because most everyone who knew Wilde knew of his eccentricities. Yeats inquired about Wilde whenever he had the opportunity, and learned he was deeply depressed by the situation. During this difficult time, Wilde wrote a powerful short story about a man questioning God over the gift of life. Yeats understood it to be a wonderful comedy that most people interpreted as a tragedy, taking away some of the beauty of the story.

In support of Wilde, Yeats collected a group of supportive letters from fellow writers and took them to Wilde. Yeats spoke with Wilde's brother and learned that most of Wilde's friends were encouraging him to run away, but he would have nothing to do with it. Wilde still hoped to be acquitted so that he could save his and his family's reputation. Later, Yeats published an article he wrote for a local paper. Wilde came to the theatre where one of Yeats' plays was being produced and thanked him for his support. It would be the last time they would speak. Wilde would serve two years in prison and by the time he would be released, his brother and wife would be dead. Wilde too would die within a few short years, a fact that added to Wilde's courage at trial, and that Yeats felt added to his long lasting legacy.

Yeats believed that literature grew and changed like the phases of the moon and that each artist was a complimentary part of another. Although Shaw distanced himself from Wilde, he was Wilde's complimentary side, rough where Wilde was gentle; expressing a side of Wilde that he could not while Wilde did the same for him. This analogy was true of Yeats' old friend Henley as well, in the idea of the life span of the moon. Henley was entering the final phase of his life about this time and had become deeply depressed after the death of his young daughter. Henley, who had often discredited Yeats' beliefs in magic, embraced it about this time, hoping it would allow him to see his daughter again.

While in London, Yeats began attending his Rhymers' Club again. The club consisted of a great number of poets who each had a unique style and who shared this style with the

others in order to help them grow in their own work. Tragedy was a popular theme among the members of the club, as though that was all that existed in their lives. Yeats could not remember the members sharing very much of their lives outside of poetry, but was sure most of the members did not suffer the traditional poverty or loneliness that often created a life of tragedy.

Yeats came to realize the world of fantasy some writers lived in when he learned a fellow poet named Johnson would often quote conversations that were all fantasy and that he had never attended Oxford as he often claimed. It was Johnson's attempt to prove himself highly intelligent. However, most of his education came from his extensive library. Yeats thought that Johnson's poetry was some of his best work, but Johnson put more weight on his prose than anything else, often debating for hours the merits of a single colon. When Yeats once went to Johnson to ask his opinion on a speaking engagement in America, Yeats discovered that Johnson was an alcoholic. Very soon after this, alcohol would begin to destroy his life, leaving him poor and destitute. Another friend of Yeats was also an alcoholic who began to lose himself in drink. Dowson drank to bury the pain of a love lost and was aware of the sickness of his alcoholism, but was still powerless to do anything about it.

Another tragic figure in the Rhymers' Club was John Davidson. Davidson was a poet who made money working for a novelist. Yeats found him to be a man of great passion who never found a man of culture whom he could learn from and grow. Davidson would drown himself some years later, a fact that did not surprise Yeats. Yeats would become friendly with another poet, Arthur Symons. Symons too was an alcoholic, but when Yeats would spend time with him, he would feel as though Symons could channel into his mind and help him see his thoughts clearer. While living in London, Yeats moved into a building with Symons. During this time, Symons was offered the editorship of a magazine that would include as art editor a man who had been dismissed from his previous job for illustrating a work of Wilde's. Both Yeats and Symons suffered from this decision due to public opinion that continued to exist against the art director. The art director himself suffered as well, since he had been publicly branded as a participant in Wilde's crime.

Yeats began to spend time in Paris. Yeats would stay with McGregor and his wife. McGregor was obsessed with the possibility of war and would often speak of it with Yeats, as well as encouraging many of his friends to learn first aid in preparation. Less than twenty years later Europe would enter the First World War and McGregor would open his home to the recruiting of troops for the foreign legion. By this time, McGregor and Yeats would have had a fallen out and no longer speak, but Yeats would often hear of McGregor's efforts for the war.

In addition, while in Paris, Yeats met the acquaintance of a childhood friend who told him a story of how he followed a mystical woman through the streets of Paris until he found her standing beside the Seine. The next thing the man knew he was awakening next to the riverbank after he had thrown himself in. Yeats did not believe this story and felt it was a reaction to a failed love affair. About this time, Yeats also met John Synge. They were both staying in the same hotel. Synge had recently come to Paris from Italy.

Yeats suggested that Synge travel to the Aran Islands to find a life unexpressed in literature. The two gentlemen would spend a great deal of time in each other's company before Synge took Yeats' advice and settled in the Aran Islands. Synge would become an important figure in Yeats' life, but not at this point, and so he ends his narration here.

In this section of the essay, Yeats' thesis is to chronicle the tragic lives of some of his many friends. Yeats settled in London for a time and became close to both Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. Yeats saw Shaw as a brave man who confronted the truth of why the Irish plays did not do as well in England as they should have. Shaw blamed the actors for their poor play of the words, a conclusion many other writers had come to but were afraid to say aloud. Shaw became a force in English theatre. Wilde should have as well since he had several successful plays in a short period. However, Wilde was arrested for an act of indecency that forced him to defend himself and to serve time in prison. Wilde could have run away, and was urged to do so by many of his friends, but refused because he wanted the opportunity to clear his name in court. Wilde's bravery on the witness stand garnered him great admiration from a large number of people, and Yeats felt this bravery was part of what helped develop the legacy that Wilde had after his death a few years later.

Yeats also talked of how alcoholism affected the lives of several of his close friends. One lived in a world of fantasy that he promoted to make himself appear more intellectual than he was. Yeats found out late in his friendship with this man that he was an alcoholic. The alcohol eventually killed this friend in the prime of his life. The same thing happened to another friend, but this man did not live in a fantasy world. This friend knew what was happening to him and allowed it to continue. These two men were men that Yeats looked up to and learned from when it came to his own writing. Another friend, Dowson, looked to Yeats for this same guidance. Since Yeats had yet to find his own voice, he was not a proper guide to this young man. Dowson would eventually fall to alcoholism as well and drown himself in despair of the lack of an outlet for his passion.

In Paris, Yeats would meet John Synge, a man who would have a great impact on his life. However, the would be later and so Yeats refrained from going into Synge in detail in this section of the essay, preparing the reader for more details of the friendship later on. Yeats' purpose in this section appears to express the seclusion that most artists felt in their work, touching on the theme of isolation. Not only this, but Yeats seemed to think that most artists felt they needed to be in touch with their tragic side in order to write great poetry, which caused these artists to live these tragedies. Yeats felt the life of an artist was doomed to be tragic for these reasons.

The Trembling of the Veil, Book V. The Stirring of the Bones,

The Trembling of the Veil, Book V. The Stirring of the Bones, Summary and Analysis

Yeats found himself in a position in 1897 to protect the activist Maud Gonne from fellow activists when she received permission to travel to America to do a lecture tour. To do this, Yeats accepted the Presidency of the '98 Commemoration Association of Great Britain. It was a post Yeats did not enjoy. When Maud Gonne returned to Ireland she became the leader of this young group of Irish activists. The group was joined by a group of anti-Parnellites of whom Yeats knew little. A short time later, Yeats and a member of this group met with Parliament members to talk out the question of separate identification. Among this group was Michael Davitt, a man who was bored by these negotiations and claimed to have been close to recovering much of Scotland as it was still Gaelic if it had not been for the split in the Irish party. Davitt had been a part of the movement for a long time and shared a poet's passion for his beliefs. Davitt believed that politicians did not understand the struggles of the peasants.

Yeats joined Maud Gonne in a series of speeches in which Maud called for the withdrawal of the Irish Members, a thought she was the first to voice. Yeats found Maud to be extremely devoted to the cause unlike himself. Yeats knew this was a problem between them but felt it was not a passion he could indulge. Yeats was a witness to Maud Gonne's celebrity, often witnessing her make speeches and being treated like a celebrity among activists who flocked to hear her speak.

After the publication of his first book, Yeats felt his writing was too ornamental, so he consulted a friend who used the cabbalistic symbols to enter a trance-like state. This friend told Yeats he should live by water and avoid the woods. Yeats went to Galway with Symons and began to worship the moon as his friend also advised. During this time, Symons began to have dreams of a beautiful woman. Yeats too began to have dreams that dominantly featured a tree. A friend explained the symbols to him as being a straight line between the moon and the sun, but the friend could not tell Yeats any more except that it might have something to do with the cabbalistic symbol of truth.

Shortly afterward, Yeats met Lady Gregory, and believed that it was a fulfillment of his vision. At the time, Yeats was struggling with a novel he was attempting to write and Lady Gregory helped him to be more disciplined. From that time on, Yeats would end up spending almost every summer at Lady Gregory's because he found it relaxing to his soul. It was also during this time that Yeats shared with Lady Gregory his desire to begin a theatre, and she promised to help him raise the money.

Yeats thesis in this section appears to be about the women who had a large impact on his life. Yeats was deeply in love with Maud Gonne, though he does not reveal that in

this chapter except through illusion and implication. Yeats joined politics to support Maud Gonne, even though he did not enjoy this aspect of her life. Yeats also followed Maud around to her various speaking engagements, overwhelmed by the celebrity she had. It is through his observances of these speaking engagements that the reader sees the depth of Yeats' affection for Maud without his having to allude to it in his writing.

Later, Yeats was led to stay the summer with Lady Gregory in her home in the woods after a vision induced by cabbalistic symbols and guidance by a friend. Yeats was struggling with a novel at the time and felt that Lady Gregory was sent to him in answer to his vision. Lady Gregory would prove to be a valuable friend to Yeats not only because she helped him with the discipline he needed in order to finish his novel, but she provided him with a place of solace to spend his summers. Later, Lady Gregory also promised to help Yeats find financial support for his dream of beginning a theatre, perhaps the most important gesture she could make at this point in Yeats' life as he had been searching for a way to make this dream come true for several years as the reader has read in previous sections of this essay.

Dramatis Personae: 1896-1902,

Dramatis Personae: 1896-1902, Summary and Analysis

Yeats and Symons visited a friend in the country. While there, Lady Gregory came for a visit since her home was nearby. Lady Gregory once lived in London, but once her husband died, she devoted herself to her country estate as well as to her son. Lady Gregory's house would become her passion; from there, she would entertain some of the greatest minds in Irish literature. During one of their visits, Yeats told Lady Gregory of his desire to start an Irish Theatre. Lady Gregory agreed to help but they immediately ran into a problem. Only two theatres in Ireland allowed performances that were not for charity. Lady Gregory and Yeats wrote many letters and enlisted the help of a friend to help change this rule.

Shortly after they founded the Irish Theatre, George Moore, a writer, joined the effort. Moore was a talented writer who published a novel of great acclaim shortly after joining the theatre. Yeats knew little of Moore before he joined them because his writing was not of the lyrical type he had preferred up to that point.

In writing about this time, Yeats went back and began to look over the letters he and Lady Gregory had written to each other. Lady Gregory became a friend and a benefactor to Yeats, giving him gifts such as a leather chair and money so that he could stop writing for magazines and begin concentrating on his poetry and plays. Yeats would often write to Lady Gregory of the events of his life, varying from his cabbalistic beliefs to success in his career, and to the death of Yeats' dear friend, Wilde. It was a tumultuous time in Ireland during the early years of the Irish Theatre. There were many parties fighting for recognition in Parliament. Moore aspired to become involved in politics and would make speeches to this effect, but was not as great a speaker as he was a writer.

One of the first plays the Irish Theatre would put on was Yeats' *Countess Cathleen*. Yeats was grateful for Moore's help with the rehearsals because the actress playing Cathleen was young and inexperienced, often testing Yeats' patience. While the play was still in rehearsals, a financial backer removed his support because of the fact that the main character sells her soul to the devil. Not only this, but a political enemy also released a pamphlet coming out against the play. Yeats and Lady Gregory garnered support from a few priests they knew, but Yeats was still concerned about the audiences' reaction to the play and asked for police protection on opening night. Despite some protest, the play was a success.

Moore brought a play to the theatre that Martyn had written. It was a political play that neither Yeats nor Lady Gregory liked, so they refused to use it. Martyn was unhappy with alterations that were suggested and took his play back. There was much infighting between Martyn and Moore due to this because it appeared that Yeats and Lady Gregory preferred Moore's work because they produced his plays more often. This

affected Moore's writing, as did his tragic love affairs, and made him a better writer. Moore grew an ego due to the success of his plays and began to urge Lady Gregory and Yeats to change their ways in order to become more famous. Yeats began to dislike Moore because of his abrasive behaviors and his many love affairs that went against Yeats' moral code.

Moore and Yeats were forced to work closely together during the rehearsals of a play. Moore would argue over the way a sentence was written or over a particular lyric in such a way that he and Yeats seemed to be fighting constantly. Moore would also imitate Yeats' style of writing, something that particularly upset Yeats and would ultimately lead to their final argument.

Yeats and Lady Gregory decided they wanted to put on a play in Gaelic, so they turned to Douglas Hyde. Hyde wrote a play for them, impressing Yeats once again with his ability to write all day without interruption and come up with a polished work. In order to present the play, Yeats went to a famous actress to give the opening in Dublin more credence. However, Yeats fell ill during the negotiations and Moore followed through, losing the actress because he refused to visit her manager. Yeats repaired the rift and the play was put on successfully.

The theatre began to suffer from a lack of funds and availability of actors. Moore, who was rich and acted like a spoiled child when it came to his home and his habits, was of little help in the financial end of things. Yeats himself had suffered a blow to his reputation due to *Countess Cathleen,* so his books were no longer selling in Ireland. This was not only a blow to the reputation of the theatre, but also to some of Yeats' friends who were being dragged down with him due to pamphlets published by some of Yeats' political enemies.

The thesis of this chapter is the beginning of Yeats' attempts to begin an Irish Theatre. Lady Gregory, a new friend of Yeats, was enthusiastic about the idea and helped Yeats get the finances and legal changes needed in order to make a beginning. To help with the beginning of the theatre, Yeats and Lady Gregory brought in several writers, including George Moore. Yeats knew little about Moore when they first began working together, but often found him useful when preparing for the first showing of his own play, *Countess Cathleen.* However, this appreciation would not last for long.

Before Yeats' play was presented, a controversy began. Yeats' character was to sell her soul to the devil, which outraged some political adversaries and a priest who had offered financial support. Despite this, the play was a success. However, the controversy left Yeats with a damaged reputation. Again, Yeats touches on the theme of isolation here as he describes the difficulties that resulted; including his inability to sell his work in Ireland and the damage it did to some of his friends.

Yeats and Moore would begin to have a falling out the more they worked together. Moore would find some success with his own plays and would use the prestige of this to act superior to Yeats. Moore began to think he could write better than Yeats, often imitating his style of writing in a way that irritated Yeats. Moore was rich and spoiled,

and acted that way toward Yeats, causing yet even more tension between the two. This was a difficult working situation that would eventually lead to the inclusion of John Synge in the theatre, foreshadowing the next few sections of the book for the reader.

Estrangement: Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909,

Estrangement: Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909, Summary and Analysis

Yeats has collected a group of diary entries in which he expressed his feelings of estrangement that comes from his work. In these entries, Yeats lamented the lack of intelligence in society, the lack of understanding of the struggle of the artist, writers in particular. Yeats expressed as well his opinion that this turn toward unintelligence of society was threatening the best parts of Ireland. Yeats then turned his attention to love and how it related to the writer. Yeats believed that poetry was much like a young person in love and that was what gave the words their passion.

Yeats felt that most people were too concerned with material things and politics as well. Yeats knew that philosophy and spirituality were two very different things. Most people believed that philosophy was the same as spirituality and that this was what they found in poetry. However, Yeats felt that it was spirituality, something completely different from philosophy, which was found in poetry. Yeats then goes on to analyze different forms of literary works. Yeats felt that tragedy was about passion rather than character, while comedy was a clash of character. The writer had a responsibility to be able to write about a wide range of different people in different occupations and social status, so Yeats felt that a writer should have the experience as living with these different people. However, most of these cliques would not allow closeness with someone not of their group, so the writer was always on the outside. This, Yeats believed, made the writer a person of many masks who could imitate but not become a part of any group except that of the artist.

Yeats discussed religion often in these diary excerpts, discussing the difference between the blind faith of religion that often was misinterpreted, and spirituality which was more of personal belief and therefore invulnerable to misinterpretation. Yeats then mentioned the dreams of several acquaintances that predicted the death of a good friend, John Synge. Yeats harbored a great deal of anger regarding the lack of understanding of Synge's genius during his life and this comes out in several diary excerpts in which Yeats discusses Synge's great plays and why they did not receive the acclaim they should have. Yeats was greatly concerned over Synge's current play and whether Synge would be able to finish it before his death. Yeats wanted permission to finish it for him, but was afraid to ask this permission as it would reveal his belief that Synge was dying.

This section of the book is based on diary excerpts taken from many journals Yeats kept in 1909. The entries are random and often one has little to do with the one that came before it except for a theme of isolation. Yeats expresses throughout this section his feelings of being isolated, of estrangement not only in his professional life, but also from

his beloved Ireland. Yeats also lamented the death of a dear friend and his inability to do anything to help this friend. Yeats wanted to give his friend recognition for his genius in his writing, but felt unable to find a way to express this desire to his friend or to make it happen.

Yeats also discussed spirituality in this chapter and the difference he saw between spirituality and philosophy, two things that Yeats felt most people were one and the same, but that Yeats saw as completely different. Mysticism is another theme of this book, a theme that Yeats touches on in this section as well. Yeats had a few friends and relatives who would often have dreams predicting events that would take place in the future. Yeats believed in these visions and believed that one of these visions predicted the death of his friend, Synge. This shows a side of Yeats that was unusual, but perhaps fit well with his spiritual view of his own writing.

The Death of Synge,

The Death of Synge, Summary and Analysis

Yeats felt that education in literature was inadequate and that many people did not appreciate genius until the artist was dead and unable to receive his acclaim. Yeats often ran into people who did not understand the depth of many of his and his friends' writings and found these people missed the purpose of the writing completely. Perhaps this was due to a lack of education in the writing rather than the details of the writer himself.

Yeats learned that his friend Synge had accepted his inevitable death shortly before he died. Some people found this acceptance to be a weakness in Synge's character, though Yeats did not feel that way. Yeats was saddened by Synge's death and felt that no one truly understood Synge as a man or a writer. Yeats felt that Synge was a genius in his writing and that no one saw that. When Synge's death passed with little notice from the papers while the illness of another writer of lesser ability was widely spoken about, Yeats became angry and disturbed by this.

Shortly after Synge's death, Yeats learned that a friend of his and Synge had had visions of his death in the years before he died. Yeats also learned that Synge had known about these visions and felt it might have had something about his acceptance of his illness and death. Yeats wondered how much these visions and Synge's acceptance of his death had to do with references to death in his final play, *Deidre of the Sorrows.* Yeats thought it had a great deal to do with it, but was told it did not. Yeats was only glad that his theatre was able to put on the play and that it was finished enough that the first audiences seemed to get enjoyment out of it.

This section of Yeats' writing had a great deal to do with Yeats' opinion on how people felt about literature. Yeats felt that most people were not educated in literature enough to understand true genius. This opinion appeared to be rooted in Yeats' belief that most people did not recognize the genius in his friend, Synge's, work before he died. Yeats felt that Synge deserved a great deal more acclaim than he got while he was still alive.

The theme of mysticism again appears in this section when Yeats mentions the predictions a friend of his and Synge's made of Synge's death long before it took place. Yeats had a deep belief in this sort of spirituality and felt that it showed up often in Synge's final writings. One of these writings was a play that the Abby Theatre performed after Synge's death. This play was not completely finished, but was complete enough that Yeats felt comfortable putting it on and felt that the audience got the enjoyment out of it that they should have. However, again Yeats felt that Synge continued to miss out on the respect and acclaim he was due.

The Bounty of Sweden,

The Bounty of Sweden, Summary and Analysis

In November of 1923, Yeats learned that he was being considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature along with Herr Mann. Yeats did not think he would win because he was aware of Mann's work and felt it was superior to his own. Yeats also felt that his many other works were far better and more important than his lyrical poetry. However, Yeats won the prize. Yeats attempted to learn all he could about Sweden but had no luck in finding any books on the subject. Yeats learned a few facts on the boat that took he and his wife to Sweden. On board the boat, many other passengers had a great number of opinions regarding the country. Upon landing in Esbjerg, Yeats and his wife had lunch with a young poet who furthered their education about the country with a lively discussion regarding the Royal Family and socialized education.

Yeats and his wife took a train the rest of the way to Stockholm where other passengers recognized Yeats. Yeats had not felt the celebrity of his award until that moment and was humbled by it. On December 10th, a celebration took place at which the diplomas and metals were given out. Yeats watched the other recipients walk down the steps to the presenting entity with great ceremony and return to their seats backward in order to keep from presenting their backs to the Royal Family. Yeats attempted to imitate this behavior, but found it difficult to walk backwards once he noticed that the carpet was not nailed down to the steps. However, the crowd appeared to notice his difficulty and encouraged him with great applause.

The next night, there was a reception at the Royal Palace. While Yeats was presented to the Royal Family, his mind wandered over his history and the many men before him who had been in such a position to bow down to either a Royal Family or perhaps to a woman to whom he was obliged to worship. This lead Yeats to think of other such traditions, moving from thoughts of his own ancestors to a Japanese man he once met whose genealogy made him an art authority. Beside Yeats was another man who was also tortured by his own thoughts. However, this man's biggest concerned seemed to be his feeling of inadequacies and the idea that the Royals were laughing at them.

Over the next few days, the winners were taken on tours of local museums. Yeats found the paintings interesting, but could not help to think how simple their subjects, only made special by the emotion the artist somehow managed to express in his strokes. This made Yeats think of his brother, who spent much of his time painting art that would never hang in a museum. When asked his impression of the works viewed, Yeats was unable to think of a suitable response.

On Thursday, Yeats gave a speech to the Royal Academy of Sweden. Yeats chose to speak about the Irish Theatre because he felt if it were not for his work with the Abbey Theatre his name would never have been considered for the Nobel Prize, since much of his lyrical poetry, like those of other poets, was often overlooked. During his speech,

Yeats found himself thinking of his friends, Lady Gregory and John Synge and how they deserved to be there as much if not more than he. On Friday, the winners visited the town hall. Later, they attend a Royal Theatre performance of one of Yeats plays. Yeats found the actors did great justice to the play, although there were many minor details that the actors did not understand regarding the country people of Ireland and therefore did not do justice to in the play. However, Yeats felt that the actors adjusted the play to their own understanding, which was something he believed should be done by each individual theatre group in difference to their audience.

Yeats was given the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yeats felt from the beginning that he did not get it for his work in poetry alone. Yeats believed that it was his work with the Abby Theatre that garnered him the attention needed to win the prize. However, this did not stop Yeats from going to Sweden to accept the honor. Yeats and his wife traveled to Sweden by boat where they met a great deal of people who helped them learn some of the history of the country. Once there, they took tours around the city, often comparing what they saw with what they knew of their home in Ireland.

Yeats received his honor under great ceremony. Yeats attempted to display the same sort of ceremony when he was called to accept his medal, but had trouble climbing the stairs backward. However, Yeats won the sympathy of the audience with his careful performance. Later, Yeats attended a dinner with the Royal Family and found himself thinking about his ancestors possibly being in the position he was at that moment, kneeling down to a person superior to himself. Yeats felt that when it was not a royal family, it was a woman with some control over the man's life. Yeats felt many men in his past worshiped a great many women. This amused Yeats.

Yeats went to the theatre in Sweden shortly after he gave his speech to the royal academy and found that one of the plays being presented was one he wrote. Yeats was amused by the Swedish interpretation of the play, though he felt it was appropriate that this should be the case. Yeats felt that the Swedes fully understood the purpose of plays by making these interpretations.

The Irish Dramatic Movement: A Lecture delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden,

The Irish Dramatic Movement: A Lecture delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden, Summary and Analysis

Yeats presented this speech to the Royal Academy of Sweden after accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yeats chose to speak about the Irish Dramatic Movement, or more specifically, his creation and running of the Abbey Theatre. Yeats felt that the working class people of Ireland needed access to literature in a form they could easily understand. Yeats decided the best way to fulfill this need would be to start a theatre that presented plays the working man could not only understand but also relate to. Yeats met a woman named Lady Gregory who decided to help him in his attempts to begin this theatre. Lady Gregory arranged for funding to begin the project.

Yeats found a group of people willing to be actors for his theatre group. Some were professional actors while others were amateurs who had the same passion Yeats had in bringing literature to the common man. The group began producing plays to be done at various venues throughout the countryside. At first, they put on short verse plays, but they were not long enough to sustain an evening at the theatre. Lady Gregory decided to try her hand at writing and wrote a comedy. However, the comedy was so controversial that the theatre group received a large amount of poor press. This press did lead to a good turn, however, as a woman who had offered to make a donation to the theatre decided instead to find them a theatre of their own as well as a small subsidy.

Yeats met a man named John Synge in Paris while the two gentlemen were both visiting the same hotel. Synge and Yeats became fast friends and when Yeats became involved in Abbey Theatre, Synge joined him. Synge too was a playwright and he wrote a play about a young man who became famous in a small country village for killing his father until his father showed up alive and well. The play received poor press and was highly controversial until enough people had seen it to realize the advance press was unreliable. Unfortunately, Synge would die before this would happen. Yeats sums up his speech by saying that his success in this theatre was a joint effort between him, Lady Gregory, and Synge, and that his partners deserved to be there as much as he.

This speech was written for the purpose of accepting and thanking the Swedish people for honoring him with the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yeats also felt, however, that the award was not only for his poetry, but also for his works in the Irish community, especially the Abby Theatre that he helped to found. Due to this fact, Yeats felt it was necessary to make everyone aware that he was not the only one responsible for this theatre. Yeats spoke of Lady Gregory, a matron who helped Yeats raise money for his

theater and who wrote plays for the theater to present. Yeats spoke of other patrons who also helped to raise money and to find the theatre a permanent home.

Yeats also spoke of John Synge. Synge was a man that Yeats met while in Paris. Synge lived on the top floor of a hotel where Yeats stayed on a visit and the two got to know each other during this visit. Synge came to work with Yeats on the Abby Theatre. It was at the Abby Theatre that Synge presented his *Playboy* for its first run. Yeats thought this play was genius, but the audience rioted due to the controversial subject. This was not the first controversial play the theater would show and would not be the last. Abby Theatre often presented plays that offended people due to its core belief that it should present plays that the common man would understand. Yeats told the Swedish Academy that he was not alone in his achievements, and that Lady Gregory and Synge should be standing beside him to accept this great honor.

Characters

Mar Battle

Mar Battle was George Pollexfen's housekeeper and had worked for the Pollexfen family for many years. She was "second-sighted," according to Yeats. For example, she would know without being told when her employer was bringing someone unexpected home for dinner and would arrange the table with an extra setting before he arrived. So impressed was Yeats with Battle's psychic abilities and storytelling that much of his book *The Celtic Twilight* "is but her daily speech," he noted.

Madame Blavatsky

Madame Blavatsky was one of the leaders of the Theosophical Society in London, an organization that promoted a philosophical system associated with mysticism and claimed particular insight into the nature of God and the world. Between 1887 and 1890, Yeats was a member of the organization and spent much time at Madame Blavatsky's house discussing theosophy and mysticism. He remembered her as an intelligent and personable woman. Eventually, one of Madame Blavatsky's associates asked Yeats to leave the group after the author expressed doubts about the accuracy of some of the society's beliefs.

Thomas Davis

Thomas Davis, with Charles Gavan Duffy, launched the Dublin newspaper *The Nation*, in which many writers, including Yeats, published verse and prose that underscored the need for Irish independence. From this publication came much of the impetus for what became known as The Young Ireland Movement, a group of writers, again including Yeats, who sought to encourage Irish nationalism and identity through their literary efforts.

Edward Dowden

John Butler Yeats introduced Edward Dowden to his son William. Dowden was a poet and professor who, much to the elder Yeats's disappointment, wrote very little after his first collection of poems and focused primarily on criticism. As a young man, Yeats often talked with Dowden about philosophy and literature.

Sir Charles Gavan Duffy

Charles Gavan Duffy was one of the founders of the newspaper *The Nation*, which published Irish nationalistic poetry and prose. He and Yeats both sought the editorship

of the New Irish Library series of books about Irish history and literature, but Duffy got the job. The two also struggled over the direction of efforts to achieve Irish independence in the 1890s, with Yeats on the less radical and less violent side of the argument.

Florence Farr

Florence Farr was an English actress. Yeats wrote a number of plays for her and also cast her in shows at the Abbey Theatre. Like Yeats, she was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical society. According to Yeats, she was a beautiful woman with a strong and curious mind who did not fathom all of her gifts. The two had a long and enduring friendship; however, Yeats described their relationship as an "exasperation" because he felt she did not play enough roles that displayed her beauty and skill.

Maude Gonne

In 1889, Yeats met Maude Gonne, an Irish nationalist activist, and began a long but ultimately unrequited romantic pursuit of the woman, who was renowned for her beauty and energy. According to Yeats, "her complexion was luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls." Her fiery nature was legendary, and in one instance she praised war "as if there were some virtue in excitement itself," wrote Yeats.

Lady Augusta Persse Gregory

Lady Gregory was an Irish playwright who did not begin her writing career until she was middleaged. She met Yeats in 1896 and became his patron and close friend. Yeats spent much time at her Irish estate, Coole Park, resting from his work and collecting stories and folktales from neighboring farmers and peasants. Lady Gregory and Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre, the Irish National Theatre Society, and the Abbey Theatre.

W. E. Henley

W. E. Henley was an English editor and poet. Yeats did not express much love for Henley's poems but acknowledged that his own education began through the regular discussions Henley led at his house in London. The group invited to Henley's meetings also included Oscar Wilde and Rudyard Kipling, and these and other young men sought out Henley's praise in much of what they did. "Henley was our leader, our confidante," wrote Yeats, remembering that the group listened to Henley partly because he was "quite plainly not on the side of our parents".

Henley started two publications,*Scots* and the *National Observer*. Yeats was a frequent contributor to the *National Observer*. As an Englishman, Henley acknowledged to Yeats

that Ireland had the right to independence but also said that England could not allow it. Henley began to deteriorate after the death of his daughter in the mid-1890s, as Yeats noted in his essay *The Tragic Generation*.

Liddell Mathers

See MacGregor Mathers

MacGregor Mathers

MacGregor Mathers, originally named Liddell Mathers, was the English leader of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats became a member of the order and, in his words, "began certain studies and experiences that were to convince me that images well up before the mind's eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory." Members, who included many of Yeats's fellow writers and artists, were required to illustrate that they held some competence in mysticism. Their activities included using powerful symbols to bring about visions.

William Morris

William Morris was an English poet, artist, socialist, and manufacturer and designer of such household items as carpets and furniture. There are references to his designs throughout the text of *Autobiographies*. Yeats attended debates sponsored by the Socialist League at Morris's house and often had supper with Morris after the conclusion of the discussions. Yeats credits Morris for his brief identification with socialism. While Yeats did not express great admiration for Morris's poetry, he did write that he would prefer to live Morris's life "rather than my own or any other man's."

Jack Nettleship

Jack Nettleship was an artist whom Yeats described as "once inventor of imaginative designs and now a painter of melodramatic lions." Yeats met Nettleship through his father and said that his own admiration of Nettleship was based less on the quality of his art and more on a habit formed in Yeats's childhood. Nettleship drank cocoa all day long, according to Yeats, because he had once been an alcoholic and still needed some liquid to sip constantly.

John O'Leary

John O'Leary was a writer and activist for the Irish nationalist cause. He was a member of the Young Ireland Movement before he was twenty. He was arrested, jailed, and then exiled to France before returning to lead the Fenians, a revolutionary society formed in Ireland and the United States in the mid-1850s to secure Irish independence from

England by force. He also was the center of an Irish nationalist literary group, the Young Ireland Society, of which Yeats was a member.

Yeats remembered O'Leary as "the handsomest man I had ever seen" and maintained extreme respect and admiration for him. He credited O'Leary's debates and conversations, as well as the books which the activist lent him, with providing the inspiration for "all that I have set my hand to since." O'Leary also helped find "subscribers" for Yeats's first book of poems,*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*.

Elizabeth Middleton Pollexfen

Elizabeth Pollexfen was Yeats's grandmother and William Pollexfen's wife. In contrast to her husband's stern nature, Mrs. Pollexfen was a generous and kind woman, deeply involved in charity work and skilled in drawing the delicate flowers she grew in her beloved garden.

George Pollexfen

George Pollexfen was one of William Pollexfen's sons and Yeats's maternal uncle and "dear friend." The poet and his uncle shared an interest in the occult, and George Pollexfen spent much time developing his skills as an astrologer and a mystic. Yeats remembered his uncle as appearing much older than his age because of his dour demeanor. Nonetheless, Yeats reported that his uncle was interested in learning about mystical symbols and visions. The two spent much time together collecting stories of supernatural experiences from their country neighbors around Sligo.

Yeats had pleasant memories of his visits to Sligo, where he stayed with George Pollexfen. Mindful of Yeats's interest in being outdoors and in spending time alone, George Pollexfen would patiently arrange meals around his young nephew's erratic comings and goings.

William Pollexfen

William Pollexfen was Yeats's maternal grandfather, a man who inspired both fear and admiration among his contemporaries and in the young Yeats. Yeats wrote that his grandfather never mistreated him, but his demeanor was intimidating. Pollexfen was quiet, even around his wife, and never spoke about the great military deeds he had accomplished as a younger man. He was a large and strong man, had traveled throughout much of the world, and owned a number of ships. With some awe, Yeats noted that his grandfather "had the reputation of never ordering a man to do anything he would not do himself."

T. W. Rolleston

Yeats referred to T. W. Rolleston as "the second Thomas Davis." Rolleston was one of the founding members of the Rhymers' Club in about 1891, a literary group that met regularly to share poetry.

George "A. E." Russell

George Russell, also known as "A. E.," attended art school in Dublin while Yeats was also there. Yeats remembered Russell as the student who would not paint what was in front of him, painting instead what he saw in his visions. Russell eventually became well-known as a poet and a mystic and was one of Yeats's closest friends.

Yeats was always impressed with Russell's versatility, noting that with only a brief background in accounting, Russell accepted a position as a member of a "co-operative banking system." People often called upon Russell to settle arguments. However, Yeats did not have much praise for Russell's efforts at literary criticism.

John Synge

Yeats considered John Synge the "greatest dramatic genius of Ireland." Yeats remembered meeting Synge for the first time in 1896 and not being especially impressed with the younger writer. Eventually, Synge would work closely with Lady Gregory and Yeats at the Irish National Theatre Society and at the Abbey Theatre. His play *The Playboy of the Western World* generated a storm of criticism when it was produced at the Abbey Theatre in 1907 for its depiction of the Irish rural character and its use of Irish Gaelic dialect.

Synge died in 1909 after a long illness. In his essay *The Death of Synge*, Yeats ruminated on the nature of his friendship with Synge.

J. F. Taylor

See John F. Taylor

John F. Taylor

John F. Taylor was a lawyer and an orator who spoke on Irish literature and history to the Young Ireland Society and other groups. While he and Yeats clashed on a number of issues, including Yeats's belief in the supernatural, Yeats admired Taylor for his powerful speaking abilities. Taylor had a reputation for taking on hopeless legal cases and also for his short temper.

Oscar Wilde

Yeats met Oscar Wilde through W. E. Henley's discussion group and was amazed at the Irish poet and playwright's ability to speak fluently, as if he had already written out in his head what he was going to say. Wilde was also an occasional visitor to Yeats's Rhymers' Club in the 1890s.

Wilde praised Yeats's first poetry collection,*The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* and had Yeats to his house for dinner a number of times. During these visits, Wilde enjoyed hearing Yeats tell long Irish folk tales and flattered the younger poet by comparing him with Homer. When Wilde was charged with indecency and faced a prison sentence and hard labor, Yeats and many of his friends came out in support of the famous wit.

John Butler Yeats

John Yeats was Yeats's father. He was a lawyer who had quit the bar to become a painter, but he also enjoyed reading drama and poetry. John Yeats had a huge impact on his son's education and ways of thinking by introducing him to many fellow artists and writers. These people contributed greatly to Yeats's philosophy by including him in various discussions about philosophy, art, and politics. Most of them, according to Yeats, were "influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement," a nineteenth-century aesthetic movement that often sentimentalized its artistic subjects and made moral judgments against technological and industrial advancement. Yeats's father never fully agreed with his son's interest in the supernatural. In fact, Yeats commented that it was through his study of the occult and the supernatural that he began to break away from his father's strong intellectual influence.

Susan Mary Pollexfen Yeats

Susan Yeats was Yeats's mother and a woman whom her husband described as being extremely honest in expressing her feelings. Yeats remembered that when they moved back to Ireland after living in London, his mother wanted to live near a body of water. "I have no doubt that we lived at the harbour for my mother's sake," he reminisced, adding that it was not uncommon to see her sitting in the kitchen, listening to a servant□a fisherman's wife□tell stories.

William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats, author of *Autobiographies*, was an Irish poet and dramatist who lived from 1865 to 1939. As a young child, he was not a good student and strained against being forced to sit and learn in a classroom. He prefered to learn out of-doors, even though he claimed in his autobiography that he was not a very muscular youth. Yeats especially enjoyed spending his time listening to others tell stories and fairy tales,

which he collected as an adult. He recorded them and incorporated their sense into his poems and stories.

As a young man, Yeats became increasingly interested in the occult and the supernatural, joining Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and MacGregor Mathers's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats's study of the supernatural, as well as his deep interest in Irish culture and his concern for Irish independence from England informed his poetry and other writings. In the 1920s, Yeats became involved in Irish politics, eventually serving as a senator for Ireland.

Around the turn of the century, Yeats began writing and producing plays that reflected traditional Irish life and folklore. With the help of his patron, Lady Gregory, he founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. In 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his autobiography, Yeats reported that after he received the news, he and his wife could not find a bottle of wine in the house and so had to settle for sausages, "as a celebration [was] necessary."

William Butler Yeats

John M. Synge

Lady Gregory

John Butler Yeats

Grandmother and Grandfather

Oscar Wilde

Dr. Douglas Hyde

The Athletic Friend

Maud Gonne

William Blake

Objects/Places

Deidre of the Sorrows

Deidre of the Sorrows was the final play John Synge wrote. The third act contained many references to death.

Playboy of the Western World

Playboy of the Western World was a play about patricide that was written by Synge. *Playboy* was such a controversial play that its first performance at the Abby Theatre resulted in riots. Yeats would reprimand the rioters and the press would later express such a high opinion of the play that it was soon recognized for its genius.

Countess Cathleen

Countess Cathleen was a play Yeats wrote early in his career that inspired his desire to build a theatre company. It was *Countess Cathleen* Yeats saw performed when he was in Sweden to receive his Nobel Prize.

The Russia

The *Russia* was a ship Yeats' grandfather captained during his career. An ornament from the ship adorned the family's garden in Sligo.

Harcourt Street School

Harcourt Street School was the school Yeats attended as a youth and where older children bullied him until an athletic friend taught him how to defend himself.

Hodos Chameliontos

Hodos Chameliontos means Path of the Chameleon, a cabbalistic symbol of losing one's way that Yeats was warned against when McGregor began teaching him the symbols.

The National Literary Society

The National Literary Society was a group Yeats began in order to promote the publication of young Irish writers and to help jump-start his attempts to begin a theatre.

Abbey Theatre

Abbey Theatre was a theater Yeats founded with his friends Lady Gregory and John Synge. The theater was designed as a place where Yeats and his friends could present plays for the Irish people in a language and style they could relate to.

The Nobel Prize for Literature

The Nobel Prize for Literature was a prestigious award given to a person who had achieved outstanding recognition for his work in Literature. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

Sligo

Sligo was a community in Ireland where Yeats' mother was born and raised and where he himself spent a great deal of his childhood.

England

Yeats' family moved to England so that Yeats' father could continue working on his art. This is where Yeats went to school as a teenager.

Howith County Dublin

Yeats and his family moved to Howith County Dublin for a short time when Yeats was a young teen.

Themes

The Supernatural

Yeats's awareness of the supernatural began at an early age. While living with his grandparents in Sligo, he saw "a supernatural bird in the corner of the room." He relates that he dreamed one night that his grandfather's ship had wrecked. The next morning he awoke to find that his dream had come true. These and other events prompted Yeats to consider the existence of spirits or of an alternative plane of reality and launched his life-long interest in the supernatural.

Autobiographies is filled with stories of unexplained events, spirit contact, séances, and other paranormal activities witnessed by Yeats and others. These experiences, in fact, became an integral part of the folk tales Yeats so eagerly collected in support of a national literature for Ireland. After an episode in the essay, "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth," in which he relates seeing unexplained lights in the countryside near his home, Yeats started telling people that they should accept as true "whatever had been believed in all countries and periods and only reject any part of it after much evidence, instead of starting over afresh and believing what one could prove."

Beginning in the mid-1880s, Yeats joined a number of mystical societies, including Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. After testing some of the society's "esoteric teachings" and challenging them, he was encouraged to leave. He became a member of MacGregor Mathers's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890 and commenced learning about symbols and how they may affect the subconscious mind.

Yeats credits his serious study of the supernatural with helping him take a step away from his family and toward adulthood: "It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that I broke away from my father's influence," he notes.

Nature

Yeats describes himself throughout the text of his autobiography as very connected to the land around him and to nature. Yeats expresses a desire for tactile sensations of nature and describes a period in his young life when he had "a literary passion for the open air." These feelings prompted him to do such things as remove the glass in a window so that rain could fall on him as he slept. When Yeats was school-aged and the family lived in London, he longed for Ireland and for "a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand."

Though he was "delicate and had no muscles," Yeats reveled in the outdoors. When his family moved to Dublin from London, Yeats escaped to the Irish countryside on a regular basis, sleeping some nights in a cave or in the woods surrounding a neighboring castle. His holidays were spent in Sligo with his uncle George Pollexfen, who supported

the young poet's outdoor adventures. Uncle George would even arrange meals around Yeats's odd comings and goings. Yeats's "literary passion for the open air" showed itself after his father read aloud from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; Yeats decided that he wanted to live as Thoreau had, "seeking wisdom" through a solitary life in the country.

Irish Nationalism and Literature

Yeats was preoccupied with the theme of Irish nationalism throughout his life, even though he was a member of an Anglo-Irish family□a group that generally identified more strongly with England than Ireland in the 1800s. From the time he was a small child, the traditional Irish stories of farmers and villagers and odd relatives fascinated him. One of the high points of his childhood was visiting his relatives in the country, especially his aunt Micky, whose land included "a shut-in mysterious place, where one played and believed something was going to happen." Here the young Yeats could speak to villagers and his aunt about the family's local history and learn about the deeds of his ancestors. He claims that he "cared nothing as a child for Micky's tales," but the entry in his autobiography about his relatives may indicate otherwise. As an adult, Yeats was "delighted with all that joins my life to those who had power in Ireland or with those anywhere who were good servants and poor bargainers."

Even as a child, Yeats felt strongly that his true nationality was Irish, despite his living in London.Yeats remembers when he was a schoolboy in England, and, even though anti-Irish sentiment was rampant, he was "full of pride, for it is romantic to live in a dangerous country." Living in England, in fact, made him long for his country and encouraged his identification as an Irishman. Once he and his sister were so homesick for Ireland that they came close to tears in their desperation for something, even a clump of soil, from Sligo. "It was some old race instinct, like that of a savage," he remembers.

As he grew older, Yeats received inspiration for his poetry and plays from various sources, including John O'Leary, who was president of the Young Ireland Society while Yeats was a member. O'Leary had also once been an activist with the Fenians, a group that struggled with force to free Ireland from England's rule. The conversations and debates at the Society's meetings, as well as the books O'Leary loaned to Yeats, inspired the young poet to take seriously the idea that creating a national Irish literature was critical for Irish independence. Yeats had a dream that "a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism" could join together the Catholic and Protestant sides of Irish society. He sought a unified mythology that would create a single national identity and wonders whether "all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill."

Yeats researched Irish Gaelic language and Irish history to incorporate the legends and traditions into his poetry. Much of his time spent with Lady Gregory at Coole Park was devoted to traveling around the Irish countryside collecting stories from peasants and

farmers□including stories filled with fairies□night creatures, and eerie lights appearing by roadsides.

Isolation

Yeats felt that artists often lived in an isolated world because they could not fit in with people of other occupations or social class. Yeats also felt it was a writer's place to learn the lives of all people, becoming a part of different occupations and social classes whenever the opportunity presented itself. However, most of these occupations and social classes were loyal within themselves, which made the artist attempting to become a part of their society still an outsider. The artist, as a result, would end up being an outcast who could wear many masks, not just one. This simply reinforced the sense of isolation that most artists would struggle with throughout their careers. However, it would also leave the artist with experience from which to draw when writing, drawing, or whatever their medium might be.

Yeats also felt that artists were isolated because many of them were not appreciated during their lifetimes. Yeats felt that most people never read his poetry more than once, or that it was anything a person might remember for any length of time. Yeats thought his essays were much more profound than his poetry. Yeats also felt that Synge, his friend who was a playwright, would never receive the glory he deserved in his lifetime, which was a shame. Synge was a genius in his work, but one of his plays caused a riot within the audience at the first viewing until Yeats himself reprimanded them. The play later received the critical praise it deserved, but not before Synge had died. In this way, Yeats and his friends were isolated from those who were capable of truly appreciating their work.

Mysticism

Mysticism is a belief in things that are not tangible or can be explained rationally. Yeats began having visions as a small child, once predicting his grandfather would be in a shipwreck the day before it happened. These experiences left Yeats open to a more spiritual take on the world, one that would expand as he grew older. Yeats felt that his father had a heavy influence on his life, often differing in opinions with his young son, but so strong in his own opinions that Yeats could not help but follow. This influence moved into Yeats' artistic side. When Yeats began art school, he found himself repeating his father's methods even though he did not personally agree with his father's techniques. Yeats found himself too weak to explore his own talents and find his own voice in his art. However, when Yeats discovered mysticism, all this changed.

Yeats became friends with a great number of people who taught him varying things about mysticism, including a lady medium and a young man who taught him cabbalist symbolism. Using techniques learned through these friends, Yeats began focusing his spiritual eyes and was able to induce in himself many visions. These episodes caused Yeats to question himself and his ability to indulge in such visions. Yeats would struggle

with these questions for many years, falling down a lost road, until the truth would come to him as an older man watching his daughter grow. Yeats would finally realize that mysticism was a power all people are born with, just like instinct, but not everyone learns how to channel. Yeats' ability to channel these visions and to embrace this controversial side of his personality made it possible for him to break from his father's hold over him and begin to embrace his own talents and personality.

Nostalgia

There is much nostalgia in Yeats' writings in this book. Yeats talks about his childhood and old friends with a great deal of affection, clearly saddened by the passage of time as most people are when they reflect on their past. Yeats had a strong sense of his past, thanks to a close family that always shared stories about their long and varied past. This helped to build in Yeats a pride of his country and his fellow Irishmen that would come back to aid him in his future not only as a writer, but also as a theater owner and activist. Yeats did great things with his theater to bring modern plays to the people of the country who had been exposed for too long to literature that was old fashioned and stiff. Although these actions were often controversial and the cause of one of Yeats' closest friends never getting the recognition he deserved while still alive, it also got the attention of the Nobel Prize committee and helped Yeats win this great honor.

Nostalgia is also an important reason why Yeats had such a strong connection to his mother's childhood home in Sligo. Yeats' mother was quite attached to her childhood home and would often speak of it with her children, her nostalgia creating for Yeats memories and stories that would live forever in his imagination. Yeats even took notes of one of these stories and published them in a book of his writings. It was also the nostalgia for home that caused Yeats' mother to move the family to a harbor town in England, a town that reminded her of Sligo and that allowed Yeats to continue his love of boating as a teen. Nostalgia is an important theme to the novel because it is part of what shaped Yeats as a child growing up and it has a great deal to do with why Yeats chose to write this book.

Style

Stream-of-Consciousness Writing Style

In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes very long paragraphs, many of which are more than one page in length. This style gives the reader the feeling of someone telling a story with many characters and numerous plots that are all somehow connected. The stream-of-consciousness style allows Yeats to move from topic to topic as they seem to occur spontaneously in his thought, unrestricted by the demands of conventional order.

Commentators on Yeats's autobiographical essays have noted that places and dates are not necessarily accurate; however, these lapses do not generally disrupt the atmosphere of the work. While the individual essays are generally arranged in chronological order, time is not a central organizing device. More important are the individuals and what they did, according to Yeats's memory, and how they affected his life.

Essays

Yeats's *Autobiographies* is comprised of a series of essays published individually. The two essays Yeats wrote on his life through the late 1800s, "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" and "The Trembling of the Veil," were originally published in 1915 and 1922, respectively. In 1926, these two essays were published as one work. The years from 1896 through Yeats's reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 are detailed in four essays:"Dramatis Personae," "Estrangement," "The Death of Synge," and "The Bounty of Sweden." All six essays were collected in 1955 for presentation in one volume as *Autobiographies*.

Perspective

The entirety of this book is taken from the writings of W.B. Yeats. The writings are personal, some coming directly from journals the writer kept throughout his life, expressing the story of his life from early childhood memories up to the time in which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The title, *Autobiography,* expresses the overall theme of this book. Yeats compiled the work to be his autobiography, to share with his readers the story of his life through his own unique point of view. Due to the fact that Yeats wrote each of these passages at different points in his life and the fact that much of it comes from personal writings, it lends authenticity to a perspective that is highly personal and intimate.

This perspective is designed to give an intimate portrait of Yeats during his lifetime to readers who might have appreciated his talents before his genius was more widely recognized. Yeats felt that he would never be remembered for his talents as a poet, but for his plays and other writings. Perhaps Yeats felt that these essays would help explain

to his readers why he was chosen for the Nobel Prize due to the fact that Yeats himself struggled with the true reasons why he received the reward. It was Yeats' opinion that his poetry was often easily forgotten for all his readers except perhaps those lovers who marked certain passages with a flower saved from a romantic gift. Yeats also believed it was his work outside of literature, his work within the Irish community, which drew the attention of Nobel committee and made him a winner of the prestigious award. This book goes a long way to explaining those ideas to Yeats' readers in a way that only the author himself could express.

Tone

The book is written in a tone of nostalgia. Yeats began the book with reflections on his childhood that are often scattered and written without a sense of a structured timeline. Later, the book offers passages that are better organized in the idea of time, but his reflections are still somewhat scattered until later passages that reach a more recent time in Yeats life and are easier to recall. While the overall tone of the books is nostalgia, especially in the beginning, the latter passages begin to include themes of mysticism and anger. This changes the tone to include a more adult feel, a sense of unhappiness, of anger, and of injustice.

The tone of the book helps the reader to have a better sense of Yeats' emotional state through the various stages of his life. The happy, nostalgic feel of the early passages gives the reader insight into Yeats' childhood, expressing it as an overall happy time despite events that made his childhood difficult at certain stages. Later, as Yeats began to develop his own literary voice and came to be passionate about the state of turmoil in Ireland, the reader can see from the tone of his writing how emotional these times were for Yeats. The tone helps the reader to identify emotionally with Yeats in a way that perhaps only his poetry could have expressed better. In this way, the tone helps to enrich the reader's experience with the book and gives the reader a deeper view of who Yeats truly was as a person as well as a writer.

Structure

The book is divided into six separate autobiographical works. Several of these works are divided into separate chapters that include individual books or episodes relating to the original theme. The works are presented in a timeline that begins with reflections on Yeats' childhood and end with the speech Yeats presented when he received the Nobel Prize. The entire work is presented as a memoir of Yeats' life from childhood until his fifty-eighth year. Although the book is not written in a logical fashion such as one might expect from a traditional memoir, it is extremely personal and invites readers to see a personal side of Yeats they might not see in other works or from biographies written by other writers.

The first three works of the book are written in essay form, each one divided into sections that deal with different aspects of the original subject. The first is *Reflections*

on Childhood, a long essay that is divided into multiple essays that deal with different aspects of Yeats' childhood. *The Trembling Veil* is a longer work that is divided into five books, each dealing with a different time within the author's life. The third, *Dramatis Personae,* is another long essay that deals with middle age and the beginning of the Abbey Theatre. The final three sections are excerpts from personal diaries Yeats kept later in his life. These sections most dramatically show the reader the depth of Yeats' feelings toward his chosen profession, the death of his friend, Synge, and his nomination and award of the Nobel Prize. These sections are divided by date and consist of much shorter sections than the previous essays at the beginning of the book.

Historical Context

Irish Nationalism and the Nineteenth- Century Literary Renaissance

The Protestant English were the dominant economic, political, and cultural force in Ireland beginning in the sixteenth century, when they settled large parts of Ireland. Throughout the seventeenth century, these Anglo-Irish, with the support of the British Crown, confiscated land from local Irish Catholics and instituted repressive laws that prohibited Catholics from working in many professions and from owning property. The English language replaced Irish Gaelic as the language of everyday speech and literature, helping to stifle traditional Irish culture.

Britain granted Ireland's Parliament legislative independence in 1780. Even though the entire Irish Parliament was Protestant, it granted to Catholics a number of reforms in religious practice and land ownership□but not the right to vote. Irish Catholics rebelled against English domination in 1798, but their uprising was quelled and the Irish Parliament disbanded. Three years later, the Act of Union made Ireland a part of the United Kingdom.

In 1842, Irish poet and activist Thomas Davis and other writers founded a weekly newspaper,*The Nation*, which published the political writing and literature that was later credited with sparking in many Irish a renewed sense of nationalism. Before this, much Irish literature was written merely to entertain or to poke fun at local customs; after the middle of the nineteenth century Irish literature began to focus on political concerns.

Literary activities during the final years of the nineteenth century have prompted historians to refer to this period as the Irish Renaissance. The writers of the time were interested in using traditional Irish folk tales and myths as the inspiration for a rebirth of Irish literature. Irish nationalist activists, including John O'Leary and Yeats, met as the Young Ireland Society, organized to promote Irish nationalism through Irish literature. Yeats helped organize the Irish Literary Society in London in 1891 and the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892. Both societies were formed to promote the independence of Ireland from England through the development of Irish national literature and arts.

The Gaelic League emerged in 1893 to work toward the reinstatement of Irish as the spoken language of Ireland. That same year, Douglas Hyde published a collection of Irish Gaelic folktales translated into English, and Yeats published *The Celtic Twilight*, a collection of his articles on Irish legends.

The full force of the Irish literary rebirth was felt especially in the theatre. In 1902, Yeats and Lady Gregory founded the Irish Literary Theatre (later called the Irish National Theatre Society), and in 1904, thanks to the contributions of a generous patron, they were able to produce their plays in Dublin's famed Abbey Theatre.

The Abbey Theater

Yeats and his close friend and patron, Lady Gregory, established the Irish Literary Theatre in 1902 in Dublin to encourage Irish playwrights to create dramatic works that addressed life in Ireland. Many Irish writers at that point hesitated to produce works that did not reflect the dominant Protestant English culture, but Lady Gregory and Yeats believed that Irish nationalism could be strengthened through the creation of a national literature. Lady Gregory and Yeats encouraged dramatists to include in their plays Irish peasants, folk tales, history, and mythical heroes and legends.

The theater company appeared in various locations but by 1904 had use of Dublin's Abbey Theatre through the contributions of a wealthy patron, Annie Elizabeth Horniman, and changed its name to the Irish National Theatre Society. The company soon gained a popular following by producing the plays of such dramatic luminaries as Sean O'Casey and John Synge. Synge presented his controversial play *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre in 1907.

Critics maintain that the quality of the productions at the Abbey declined after Yeats's death in 1939. In 1951, a fire forced the company to move to another theater, but in 1966 the Abbey reopened and by 2001 it contained an acting school as well as a second stage for more experimental productions. The theater also expanded its scope to include classical plays such as those by William Shakespeare and plays by contemporary European playwrights.

Critical Overview

Most criticism on Yeats addresses his poetry, and many critics believe him to be the greatest poet in the English language. However, Yeats's prose has received similar praise. Edmund Wilson, in his book, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, wrote that Yeats's prose matured as the writer himself matured. Writing when Yeats was still alive, Wilson praised the poet's prose as disciplined, adding, "Yeats is today a master of prose as well as a great poet."

Speaking specifically of one of the essays in *Autobiographies*, "The Trembling of the Veil" (originally published as a separate work in 1922), Wilson viewed Yeats's prose style almost with relief, as if it were a gift from a more artful past. "Yeats has achieved a combination of grandeur with a certain pungency and homeliness," he wrote. "The prose of Yeats, in our contemporary literature, is like the product of some dying loomcraft brought to perfection in the days before machinery," he noted. He added, however, that Yeats's prose style indicates that he has "a mind that is not naïve, as the heart that feels is not insensitive."

Diane Tolomeo Edwards,in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, noted Yeats's deliberateness in "The Trembling of the Veil," even though, according to Edwards, Yeats argues in the essay that genius comes from something that is "beyond one's own mind." Many of Yeats's essays, Edwards maintains, "seek to demonstrate this belief," but Yeats was not always successful because of the essays' deliberate and intentional tone. Edwards suggests, "Yeats's essays need to be read together. Many ideas get repeated, and their cumulative effect helps one focus more clearly on ideas that may seem elusive."

In his prose, as well as his poetry, Yeats freely incorporates occult symbols and mysticism combined with Irish nationalism; these elements are certainly present in *Autobiographies*. Critic Theodore Spencer, writing in the book *Literary Opinion in America*, expressed gratitude for Yeats's handling of these challenging subjects in his writings. "Any one of these might have been the ruin of a lesser talent," argues Spencer, but Yeats surmounts any difficulty in this area. "Perhaps a life of action, and the anger it has sometimes generated . . . has helped to put iron into his style," Spencer reasons.

Also lauding Yeats's handling of mysticism in his writing is B. L. Reid, writing in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Reid noted the preponderance of the "visionary" over the visual in Yeats's work, which may express the poet's poor eyesight as well as his ongoing interest in the supernatural. "The gauzy, veiled effects of visual observation down past the turn of the century in Yeats's writings . . . doubtless owed something to poor eyesight," wrote Reid. However, Yeats "always seemed to be able to see what mattered to him . . . [and] his essential seeing was more visionary than visual," Reid adds.

In the end, Yeats's essays, including *Autobiographies*, have been generally praised and respected nearly as much as his plays and poems. In an overarching statement, Edith

Stillwell, in her *Aspects of Modern Poetry*, notes her admiration for Yeats's comprehensiveness in *Autobiographies*. "Few artists can have given us so complete a record of the life of their soul□a record which is clothed in reticence and moves with supreme dignity," she writes.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, she looks at how Yeats's supernatural experiences and stories in Autobiographies *relate to his desire for a unified mythology and national literature for the Irish people*.

Yeats's fondness for myths and legends is well known and much appreciated. Seamus Heaney addressed this issue in*The Atlantic*, acknowledging Yeats's efforts to create a unified cultural identity for Ireland based on stories and myths. From his youth, Yeats was deeply involved in "creating a vision of Ireland as an independent cultural entity, a state of mind as much as a nation-state, one founded on indigenous myths and attitudes and beliefs," noted Heaney.

Yeats's *Autobiographies*, a collection of essays written and published as individual pieces before his death in 1939, deals not only with his interest in traditional Irish rural myths and stories but also with his efforts to understand the spiritual aspects of life. Yeats's interests in Irish culture and in the supernatural in the first half of *Autobiographies* complement each other; in fact, Yeats sought a sense of unity from each of these facets of his intellectual life. These two areas informed and fed each other.

As a young man, Yeats was almost obsessed with creating a unified explanation for many things. "A conviction that the world was now but a bundle of fragments possessed me without ceasing," he admitted as he set out to find singularity in his life. He sought to unify art, the state of Ireland, Irish mythologies, and his own spirituality. He vehemently disagreed with theories of art that proposed "the independence of arts from one another" and thought that all art should be "a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs." In spirituality he sought explanations for supernatural events involving archetypal and primal symbols and images.

Yeats remembered in *Autobiographies*that his interest in Irish folk tales began at a very early age, thanks to relatives. The first "faery-stories" he heard were in the cottages near relatives' houses. He especially enjoyed the numerous colorful stories told by servants. A life filled with tales - many apocryphal and amazing - was the norm for young Yeats, and he could not imagine a life devoid of these. "All the well-known families had their grotesque or tragic or romantic legends, and I often said to myself how terrible it would be to go away and die where nobody would know my story," Yeats writes.

Yeats experienced his first mystical vision while under the care of his grandparents. "I have been told, though I do not remember it myself, that I saw . . . a supernatural bird in the corner of the room," he writes. At about the same time in his childhood, Yeats dreamt of the wreck of his grandfather's ship, describing it before he knew details of the actual event. Yeats remembered the event as a "romantic legend" and noted that his

grandfather returned safely from the wreck, riding a blind horse secured for him by the ship's grateful passengers.

In addition to the numerous Irish nationalist organizations Yeats joined as a young adult to pursue his belief that Ireland could be free and independent from England - but only if she could find a single artistic tradition - he also enrolled in two mystical societies that helped to form his nascent spiritual sense. Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society appealed to Yeats on the basis of its doctrine that some people have a singular or universal wisdom based on special mystical insight. The other important mystical group he joined was MacGregor Mathers's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which focused on the use of images and symbols to produce visions.

Yeats's statements about both theosophy and the Order of the Golden Dawn mirrored in various ways his statements about the possibility of political unification in Ireland. While pursuing theosophy,he asserted that all people, "while bound together in a single mind and taste," have always believed that a few hold a singular wisdom and insight. The Golden Dawn sustained his interest through personal experiences,convincing him "that images well up before the mind's eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory." The primal and archetypal memories that a people have can bring them together under the banner of a nation, he asserted. "[N]ations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or a bundle of related images" that somehow speaks to all people and pushes them toward a single purpose, he believed.

This desire for unity was one of Yeats's great convictions and drove him to collect rural Irish legends, to push for a united and free Ireland, and to search for spiritual understanding. Yeats did not see any distinction between collecting folktales and collecting stories of supernatural experiences to satisfy his spiritual curiosity; these two kinds of tales were often joined in his mind. For example, Yeats relates the story of being near the site of an ancient destroyed village and seeing lights or fires moving much too quickly to have been torches carried by humans. On another occasion, the lights returned to the site where he was walking and began a sort of blinking communication with one another. After asking many of the older locals about the lights, he decided to believe "whatever had been believed in all countries and periods, and only reject part of it after much evidence, instead of starting all over afresh and only believing what one could prove." This incident was one of several that prompted Yeats to collect Irish folktales and mythologies and weave them into his literature.

Yeats also joined these two kinds of stories - folktales and stories of supernatural experiences - while working with George Pollexfen, his mother's brother. The two men shared an interest in both the countryside and the supernatural, and they conducted numerous experiments using symbols and images to provoke visions - an activity Yeats learned as a member of the Golden Dawn. In the midst of this work, Yeats began tracing philosophic ideas back to their origins, certain that there must a "tradition of belief older than any European church and founded upon the experience of the world before modern bias."

In a sense, Yeats was looking for a first image or archetypal symbol that was deep inside everyone, regardless of religion, education, politics, or social status. This search for a single tradition prompted Yeats and his uncle George to study the mystical visions and stories of the rural population. They discovered that the country folks' reported visions were very similar to the visions they themselves had called up with symbols. Mary Battle, Uncle George's housekeeper, was essential in this endeavor, as she regularly experienced visions filled with mythological characters that informed Yeats's writings.

In Yeats's mind, this first image or symbol could unify Ireland's population and galvanize it as it sought independence from England, especially if he incorporated it into his writings. In the truest sense, though, he was not looking for one image but for a series of images that could be transformed into a national mythological literature. "We had in Ireland imaginative stories," he writes, which were well known among the lower and rural classes. Yeats asked himself whether it would be possible to "make those stories current among the educated classes . . . [and] so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design." For these purposes, Yeats organized the Irish Literary Society, the National Literary Society, the Irish National Theatre Society, and Abbey Theatre, all originally formed to promote the independence of Ireland from England through the development of an Irish national literature.

Yeats's "wildest hopes," though, proved of little immediate benefit to Ireland's independence, for Irish nationalism fractured and fell in a period of extremism and violence. He was crushed. The literature that was produced in the name of Irish nationalism descended into propaganda, and "the past had been turned into a melodrama with Ireland for blameless hero and poet," according to Yeats. But Yeats's interest in unification, in all its aspects, still led him to create what many believe to be the best poetry written to date in the English language.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on *Autobiographies*,in *Nonfiction Classics for students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Olney compares other "classic" autobiographies with Yeats's, exploring comic and ironic elements within them.

The question that I wish to explore in this paper is a threefold one and might be expressed thus: (1) Why is comedy so largely lacking in what one might describe as classic autobiography? (2) Why, on the other hand, is comedy so prominent (as I believe it to be) in Yeats's *Autobiographies*? (3) What is the nature, and what are the motives, of comedy when it does occur in autobiography? And as a sort of fourth fold completing this threefold question I want to pose a paradox: that though there are not many humorous passages in classic autobiography yet this type, like all varieties of autobiography, might be said to be essentially and in its very nature of the comic mode.

I will begin with a definition of classic autobiography, which is not my own but is as good as any other definition known to me: "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his own life and especially the history of his personality." It is clear, I think, that the kind of writing performance described or defined here is not likely to produce books notable for humorous or comic effects. When a "real person" undertakes a retrospective account "of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality," he is more likely to be serious or perhaps solemn than he is to be comic and gay. And indeed in that long - *very* long - volume that Philippe Lejeune takes for his archetypal autobiography,the *Confessions* of Rousseau, there is only one joke as far as I can recall, and that one joke has little enough to do with Rousseau's "own existence," "his individual life," or "the history of his personality." The joke, if that is the right way to describe it, comes at the death of a woman with whom Rousseau found brief employment. "I watched her die," Rousseau says. "She had lived like a woman of talents and intelligence; she died like a philosopher . . . She only kept her bed for the last two days, and continued to converse quietly with everyone to the last. Finally when she could no longer talk and was already in her death agony, she broke wind loudly. 'Good,' she said, turning over, 'a woman who can fart is not dead.' Those were the last words she spoke." This scarcely qualifies as a great deathbed speech but at least it does provide, for Rousseau's readers, a couple of lines of levity in more than six hundred pages of very uncomic, paranoid anxiety - the anxiety of an apologist who has the desperate feeling that his audience is unmoved and unconvinced by his "apology for his own life." If Georges Gusdorf is right when he says that "autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain,frittered away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure," we can see easily enough why it should contain so few laughs - one in the case of Rousseau, none in the cases of Saint Augustine or John Bunyan or George Fox or John Stuart Mill or John Henry Newman (though I do not at all mean to say that these men wrote autobiography for the reasons specified by Gusdorf). Trying to salvage or discover meaning for a life when the life is nearly over may produce a great book but it is not likely to conduce to great risibility. Thus in what I have termed classic autobiography - and it would be easy to multiply examples - one does not find much

comedy, and if one goes to such a work with the same expectations as one goes to *Joe Miller's Joke Book* one will be sadly disappointed.

want now, however, to glance at a certain kind of irony that is typical of classic autobiography and indeed that is there almost by definition of the mode. Jean Starobinski concludes his essay "The Style of Autobiography" with these observations about Rousseau's *Confessions* as a sort of dramatization of his philosophy: "According to that philosophy, man originally possessed happiness and joy: in comparison with that first felicity, the present is a time of degradation and corruption. But man was originally a brute deprived of 'light,' his reason still asleep; compared to that initial obscurity, the present is a time of lucid reflection and enlarged consciousness. The past, then, is at once the object of nostalgia and the object of irony; the present is at once a state of (moral) degradation and (intellectual) superiority." If, as has been claimed, classic autobiography depends for its existence on some sort of conversion in the autobiographer's life, then this great emotional and intellectual divide will almost inevitably be present in, and will indeed rule the autobiography, giving an ironic, if not always nostalgic, distancing to the past. I can clarify what I mean here by reference to Augustine's *Confessions*, which I should describe as a radically ironic but never nostalgic book: radically ironic because the "I" narrating understands every event in the narrative differently from the understanding possessed in the past by the "I" narrated (the reasons for going from Carthage to Rome for example); but never nostalgic because Augustine did not at all share Rousseau's notion of childhood as a time of innocence, happiness, and joy - quite the contrary. This variety of irony that distances the past narrated self from the present narrating self is surely what Yeats intends in a letter written to his father apropos of *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*: "While I was immature I was a different person and I can stand apart and judge." What Yeats describes is present-tense judgment ("I can stand apart") of a past-tense condition of being ("While I was immature I was a different person"). Thus we have in the first couple of sections of *Autobiographies* fairly frequent instances of irony exercised by the mature Yeats on the immature Yeats. This, for example, in "Four Years: 1887-1891":

[W]ith women . . . I was timid and abashed. I was sitting on a seat in front of the British Museum feeding pigeons when a couple of girls sat near and began enticing my pigeons away, laughing and whispering to one another, and I looked straight in front of me, very indignant, and presently went into the Museum without turning my head towards them. Since then I have often wondered if they were pretty or merely very young. Sometimes I told myself very adventurous love-stories with myself for hero, and at other times I planned out a life of lonely austerity, and at other times mixed the ideals and planned a life of lonely austerity mitigated by periodical lapses.

This kind of indulgent and semi-comic irony, exercised at the expense of a younger self, is not uncommon in autobiography. (Parenthetically, I might contrast the gentle self-irony of Yeats with the mordant self-irony of the following wonderful and justly famous passage in Augustine: "But I, wretched young man that I was - even more wretched at the beginning of my youth - had begged you for chastity and had said: 'Make me chaste and continent, but not yet.' I was afraid that you might hear me too soon and cure me too soon from the disease of a lust which I preferred to be satisfied rather than

extinguished." This is a very different matter from the Yeatsian self-irony, but it still results from the difference between the understanding possessed by the self then and the understanding possessed by the self now.) To return to Yeats's letter to his father: after the sentence I have been looking at - "While I was immature I was a different person and I can stand apart and judge" - a sentence that provides the logic for a certain gentle self-mockery early in the *Autobiographies*, Yeats goes on to say, "Later on, I should always, I feel, write of other people," and this opens the door not to self-irony but to irony, or more exactly comedy, deployed against others, a comedy that operates according to a vastly different logic from that of self-irony. It is the logic of this other variety of irony and comedy that I want to examine now.

I call upon a couple of passages from other prose writings in Yeats to explain the comedy of the second kind. The first passage I have quoted elsewhere but it is so excellent, both in itself and as rationale for the Yeatsian practice of autobiography, that any apology I might make for repeating it would be more *pro forma* than heartfelt. It occurs in one of Yeats's annual pieces on the Irish theatre gathered together in *Explorations* as "The Irish Dramatic Movement." Speaking of what was then (in 1902) a new troupe, the National Theatrical Company, Yeats says:

They showed plenty of inexperience, especially in the minor characters, but it was the first performance I had seen since I understood these things in which the actors kept still enough to give poetical writing its full effect upon the stage. I had imagined such acting, though I had not seen it, and had once asked a dramatic company to let me rehearse them in barrels that they might forget gesture and have their minds free to think of speech for a while. The barrels, I thought, might be on castors, so that I could shove them about with a pole when the action required it.

When Yeats titles one of his later volumes of autobiography *Dramatis Personae*: 1896-1902, it does not take much imagination to conceive of the text as a Yeatsian drama, of the family, friends, and acquaintances therein as actors in the drama, each in his or her barrel labeled with the role to be played, and of Yeats as playwright, director, and stage manager, exercising complete control over everybody and everything, complete control over his text and his life, as he shoves the embarreled and imperiled actors about the stage with his pole of comedy and irony.

The second passage, of a somewhat more theoretical nature but still concerned with dramatic literature, comes from a short, intense piece called "The Tragic Theatre." Having remarked that in poetical drama there is supposed to be "an antithesis between character and lyric poetry," Yeats goes on: "Yet when we go back a few centuries and enter the great periods of drama, character grows less and sometimes disappears, and there is much lyric feeling. . . . Suddenly it strikes us that character is continuously present in comedy alone, and that there is much tragedy . . . where its place is taken by passions and motives." Even in Shakespeare's tragicomedy, Yeats says, "it is in the moments of comedy that character is defined, in Hamlet's gaiety, let us say; while amid the great moments, when Timon orders his tomb, when Hamlet cries to Horatio 'Absent thee from felicity awhile,' when Antony names 'Of many thousand kisses the poor last,' all is lyricism, unmixed passion, 'the integrity of fire.'" "When the tragic reverie is at its

height," Yeats declares, we never say, "'How well that man is realised! I should know him were I to meet him in the street.'" Finally, Yeats writes, "I think it was while rehearsing a translation of *Les Fourberies de Scapin* in Dublin, and noticing how passionless it all was, that I saw what should have been plain from the first line I had written, that tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and that it is upon these dykes [that] comedy keeps house." Comedy imagines the world in terms of character, it distinguishes this individual and his folly from that individual and his folly, and it never dissolves the contours of character and social reality in the strains of that pure lyric emotion that Yeats believed specific to high tragedy. "I look upon character and personality as different things or perhaps different forms of the same thing," Yeats wrote to his father. "Juliet has personality, her Nurse has character. I look upon personality as the individual form of our passions. . . Character belongs I think to Comedy." And in *Autobiographies* he confirms this sense of comedy and character when he says, "Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion; while comedy is the clash of character." It may seem somewhat paradoxical, in light of what I have said about autobiography earlier, that I should now suggest that autobiography, at least of the variety practiced by Yeats, is essentially comic rather than tragic - and indeed that all autobiography, not just that by Yeats, is in one sense always comic, never tragic. We should remark that in a tragedy like *Purgatory*, for example, there is nothing to be called character; there is only lyric passion and the keening song; while in the*Autobiographies*, on the other hand, where Yeats intends to catch character with an anecdote, we are offered a string of (as he has it in "Easter 1916") mocking tales and gibes that one imagines were first told, and probably retold many subsequent times, to please a companion around the fire at the club.

Take the character of George Moore first of all. It was apparently Moore's *Hail and Farewell*, with its consistently mocking, and often quite funny, picture of Yeats, that first induced Yeats to start on his autobiographical writings. When I say the picture is quite funny, I don't mean that Yeats found it so; on the contrary - it was largely Moore that Yeats was referring to when he wrote of himself that he had become

Notorious, till all my priceless things
Are but a post the passing dogs deprofile.

Of the first volume of *Hail and Farewell* Moore wrote to a correspondent: "The reviewers look upon my book as a book of reminiscences, whereas I took so much material and moulded it just as if I were writing a novel, and the people in my book are not personalities but human types. . . [A]s a type of the literary fop one could not find a more perfect model than Yeats." Yeats knew nothing of this letter, of course, but he knew well enough - too well, I should say - what Moore was up to, for it was very much what he was to be up to himself when he published his reminiscences of such type characters as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde - and Moore. What Yeats did not want and absolutely would not have was someone else taking over his life and his text, creating character for him when Yeats intended to be the comic playwright creating character aplenty for others: he was determined that he would control Moore and not vice versa. The interesting thing is that when Yeats reacted to *Hail and Farewell* in his journal, he

did so with polemic and direct attack - "Moore . . . is the born demagogue. . . . He has always a passion for some crowd, is always deliberately inciting them against somebody," and so forth; but when he responds in a piece of autobiography intended for publication, Yeats asserts and maintains control over his life and text not through polemic but through a comic reduction of Moore and an ironic rendering of his foolishness and his pretensions.

Moore had inherited a large Mayo estate, and no Mayo country gentleman had ever dressed the part so well. . . . Yet nature had denied to him the final touch: he had a coarse palate. Edward Martyn alone suspected it. When Moore abused the waiter or the cook, he had thought, 'I know what he is hiding.' In a London restaurant on a night when the soup was particularly good, just when Moore had the spoon at his lip, he said: 'Do you mean to say you are going to drink that?' Moore tasted the soup, then called the waiter, and ran through the usual performance. Martyn did not undeceive him, content to chuckle in solitude.

This, which sounds very like a mocking tale to please a companion around the fire at the club, was published after Moore's death but even had it been published during his lifetime there would have been no way for Moore to refute this sly picture of a man who pretends to culture but is undone by a coarse palate. It is as if one could hear Yeats saying to Moore, calling from the text of *Autobiographies* to the text of *Hail and Farewell*, "You imagine that you are the provider of barrels and that you have one for me titled 'literary fop.' Well, you are wrong: I'm running this show; there is your barrel - that one over there labeled 'pretentious and ill-bred fool, also coarse in palate.' Now get in there and stay in there."

"Moore's body," according to Yeats - and no doubt he thought Moore's body merely the outward form of his soul - "Moore's body was insinuating, up flowing, circulative, curvicular, popeyed."

He had gone to Paris straight from his father's racing stables, from a house where there was no culture, as Symons and I understood that word, acquired copious inaccurate French, sat among art students, young writers about to become famous, in some cafe; a man carved out of a turnip, looking out of astonished eyes. I see him as that circle saw him, for I have in memory Manet's caricature. He spoke badly and much in a foreign tongue, read nothing, and was never to attain the discipline of style. . . . He reached to middle life ignorant even of small practical details. He said to a friend: 'How do you keep your pants from falling about your knees?' 'O,' said the friend, 'I put my braces through the little tapes that are sewn there for the purpose.' A few days later, he thanked the friend with emotion. . . . He had wanted to be good as the mass of men understand goodness. In later life he wrote a long preface to prove that he had a mistress in Mayfair.

And so on, with much more to the same effect.

Yeats's treatment of Shaw and Wilde is somewhat different - they hadn't, after all, tried to make Yeats into a character actor and dispose of him in barrels of their own making

as Moore had - but it is still anecdotal, devoted to drawing out character, the stuff of comedy rather than of tragedy. According to that other book of Yeats's, rich in comedy, called *A Vision*, Shaw and Wilde were contrasting types - Shaw of the twenty-first phase, Wilde of the nineteenth, the former entirely styleless, the latter nothing but style - and Yeats so creates them, so deploys them as "characters," as archetypal figures, in his *Autobiographies*. Parenthetically, I might point out here that Moore, too, along with Shaw, was assigned to the twenty-first phase in *A Vision*; and, again like Shaw, he is regularly described by Yeats in the *Autobiographies* as having no style, nor even any awareness that such a thing as style exists. The twenty-first phase is the phase of "the acquisitive man," and Yeats's description of the character of the man of phase twenty-one sounds like nothing so much as an abstraction derived from the figure particularized under Moore's name in the *Autobiographies*. One might even suppose that Yeats has in mind the fact that Moore was to be typed as "the acquisitive man" when he says that he "acquired copious inaccurate French" sitting in a Paris cafe. To return to Shaw: *Arms and the Man*, Yeats says,

seemed to me inorganic, logical straightness and not the crooked road of life. . . . Shaw was right to claim Samuel Butler for his master, for Butler was the first Englishman to make the discovery that it is possible to write with great effect without music, without style, either good or bad, to eliminate from the mind all emotional implication and to prefer plain water to every vintage, so much metropolitan lead and solder to any tendril of the vine. Presently I had a nightmare that I was haunted by a sewing-machine, that clicked and shone, but the incredible thing was that the machine smiled, smiled perpetually.

Thus for Shaw. As for Wilde, Yeats speaks of his "fantasy" having "taken . . . [a] tragic turn," and he says that "men who belong by nature to the nights near to the full are still born, a tragic minority, and how shall they do their work when too ambitious for a private station, except as Wilde of the nineteenth Phase, as my symbolism has it, did his work?" But though Wilde might have been a tragic figure in his own right, in the life he lived, he is not that in Yeats's text; rather he is an archetypal figure, a man of phase nineteen, a character actor, like Ernest Dowson, assigned a humorous role in the comedy that Yeats calls "The Tragic Generation."

A Rhymer had seen Dowson at some cafe in Dieppe with a particularly common harlot, and as he passed, Dowson, who was half drunk, caught him by the sleeve and whispered, 'She writes poetry - it is like Browning and Mrs. Browning.' Then there came a wonderful tale repeated by Dowson himself, whether by word of mouth or by letter I do not remember. Wilde had arrived in Dieppe, and Dowson pressed upon him the necessity of acquiring 'a more wholesome taste.' They emptied their pockets on to the cafe table, and though there was not much, there was enough if both heaps were put into one. Meanwhile the news had spread, and they set out accompanied by a cheering crowd. Arrived at their destination, Dowson and the crowd remained outside, and presently Wilde returned. He said in a low voice to Dowson, 'The first these ten years, and it will be the last. It was like cold mutton' - always, as Henley had said, 'a scholar and a gentleman,' he now remembered that the Elizabethan dramatists used the words

'cold mutton' - and then aloud so that the crowd might hear him, 'But tell it in England, for it will entirely restore my character.'

However tragic Wilde's life may have been, however tragic Dowson's life may have been, they both assume bit parts as comic characters in *The Life of* W. B.*Yeats*, he the master dramatist and stage manager, in control both of his own life and of the lives of others who play minor roles, hostile or friendly, in the one grand design.

The other attempt on his life - other than George Moore's, I mean - that Yeats intended to counteract by writing his life himself was Katharine Tynan's rather awkward effort at homicide in a book she called *Twenty-five Years: Reminiscences*, which was published exactly contemporaneously with Moore's *Hail and Farewell* (Moore's three volumes were published in 1911, 1912, and 1914; *Twenty-five Years* appeared in 1913). Tynan, instead of presenting Yeats as a literary fop and a pretender to an aristocratic heritage that was never his, as Moore had done, chose instead to twit Yeats and make fun of him for his interest in the occult. Now, I think that Yeats's relationship to occult matters was much more complex and his attitude a good deal more ambivalent than Tynan recognized - indeed, he was more ambivalent and skeptical about the occult than his critics have in general recognized. This is why those who were seriously engaged in occult practices and who gave their whole heart to the occult are regularly treated with much humor by Yeats in the *Autobiographies*. Mme. Blavatsky, for example, whom Yeats describes in a wonderful phrase as "a sort of female Dr. Johnson," is surrounded and, as it were, held off by a string of anecdotes and comic tales designed to qualify very carefully any commitment Yeats might be supposed to have made with regard to occult practices. Likewise McGregor Mathers and the man Yeats describes as "an old white-haired Oxfordshire clergyman, the most panic-stricken person I have ever known": they are all rendered as comic figures in a way they would not have been had Yeats been a wholehearted enthusiast for the magic they engaged in. The following scene with the aged clergyman may be taken as typical. "Has your alchemical research had any success?" Yeats asks him. "Yes, I once made the elixir of life," the old gentleman responds. "A French alchemist said it had the right smell and the right colour" - then Yeats interrupts to tell the reader, "the alchemist may have been Eliphas Levi, who visited England in the 'sixties, and would have said anything" - and the clergyman again: "but the first effect of the elixir is that your nails fall out and your hair falls off. I was afraid that I might have made a mistake and that nothing else might happen, so I put it away on a shelf. I meant to drink it when I was an old man, but when I got it down the other day it had all dried up."

For a final example of the uses of comedy and irony in the *Autobiographies*, then, I turn to the contrasting accounts given by Katharine Tynan and Yeats of a seance the two of them attended in Dublin. Here is Katharine Tynan's account of what she calls "a spiritualistic seance in which I participated most unwillingly" (among other reasons, presumably, because she was a Roman Catholic):

In spite of my protestations my host gently but firmly made me take a part. We sat round a table in the darkness touching each other's hands. I was quite determined to be in opposition to the whole thing, to disbelieve in it, and disapprove of it as a playing with

things of life and death. Presently the table stood up slowly: the host was psychic. There were presences. The presences had communications to make and struggled to make them. Willie Yeats was banging his head on the table as though he had a fit, muttering to himself. I had a cold repulsion to the whole business. I took my hands from the table. Presently the spirits were able to speak. There was someone in the room who was hindering them. By this time I had got in a few invocations of my own. There was a tremendous deal of rapping going on. The spirits were obviously annoyed. They were asked for an indication as to who it was that was holding them back. They indicated me, and I was asked to withdraw, which I did cheerfully. The last thing I saw as the door opened to let me pass through was Willie Yeats banging his head on the table.

Passing from this account to Yeats's own in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* one seems to hear him murmur, "Oh, you want to play hard ball, do you? Right . . ." and he starts thus: "Perhaps a year before we returned to London, a Catholic friend" - Katharine Tynan, of course - "brought me to a spiritualistic seance," and then he sets the scene: half a dozen people seated around a table, the medium asleep sitting upright in his chair, the lights turned out, and so on:

Presently my shoulders began to twitch and my hands. I could easily have stopped them, but I had never heard of such a thing and I was curious. After a few minutes the movement became violent and I stopped it. I sat motionless for a while and then my whole body moved like a suddenly unrolled watchspring, and I was thrown backward on the wall. I again stilled the movement and sat at the table. Everybody began to say I was a medium, and that if I would not resist some wonderful thing would happen. remembered that Balzac had once desired to take opium for the experience' sake, but would not because he dreaded the surrender of his will. We were now holding each other's hands and presently my right hand banged the knuckles of the woman next to me upon the table. She laughed, and the medium, speaking for the first time, and with difficulty, out of his mesmeric sleep, said, 'Tell her there is great danger.' He stood up and began walking round me making movements with his hands as though he were pushing something away. I was now struggling vainly with this force which compelled me to movements I had not willed, and my movements became so violent that the table was broken. I tried to pray, and because I could not remember a prayer, repeated in a loud voice-
'Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe . . .
Sing, Heavenly Muse.'

But the conclusion to this account, so far as Katharine Tynan is concerned, comes in the next line: "My Catholic friend had left the table and was saying a Paternoster and Ave Maria in the corner."

Briefly, I would suggest that in this very funny and quite typical passage we can see the mature Yeats directing irony at his own immature self à la Starobinski; we can see him, by the distancing effect of the comedy, holding in balance commitment and non-commitment with regard to spiritualistic phenomena; and we can see him taking his life

back from Katharine Tynan by making her a minor - even unnamed - comic figure in his own drama rather than agreeing to be an actor in a play - and that play a farce - scripted by someone else.

One final remark on the tragic and the comic: Yeats, as everyone knows, calls one section of his *Autobiographies* "The Tragic Generation," and a tragic generation it no doubt was; but all is "changed, changed utterly" when the autobiographer makes it a part of his own triumphant story, transforming it into an element of his text and thus making of a figure or an event that is locally or in itself tragic a detail in a larger pattern that taken overall must play as comedy. This is the sense, mentioned earlier, in which any autobiographer, taking command of his life through inscribing it in a text, triumphs over insignificance, dead ends, and momentary tragedies by the very act of writing his autobiography. I believe that in certain sports they say that the best defense lies in offense, and one might put the matter this way: that to defend and preserve his life, Yeats adopts the strategies of comedy and irony, but he subtly transforms those defensive tactics into offensive ones, so that in the end he is triumphant, in text as in life, the actor become also the dramatist and the stage manager, and free thereby to live his life as he will.

Source: James Olney, "The Uses of Comedy and Irony in *Autobiographies* and Autobiography,"*in Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies,* Vol. II, edited by Richard J. Finneran, 1984, pp. 195-208.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Johnston examines Yeats's attempts to define himself and integrate various aspects of his personality in Autobiographies.

Although an access has been opened to Yeats's autobiography by two astute essays on this work as well as by the many recent studies of this newly discovered genre, at least three critical problems continue to block a full understanding and appreciation of this autobiographical masterpiece. First, it is not clear which edition to prefer, the 1926 *Autobiographies* or *The Autobiography* of 1938. Secondly, and most significant, both works seem built on contrary intentions: the memoirist's desire to define his own place in a fluctuating and discontinuous society and the apologist's efforts to recreate an integral self - an essential, unique, and continuous self-image. Finally, the conclusions to both works seem to abandon the apologist's problem and to offer a somewhat artificial solution to the problem of disunity in society.

A careful critical re-reading can establish that *Autobiographies* is the more unified and controlled work, and that the apparently antithetical intentions - the recreations of both a historical and an integral self - are fulfilled in this edition. And finally, in both editions, the concluding images of unified cultures are less conclusive than they appear, and in their intentional inconclusiveness, they comment as much on Yeats's self as on his society.

Critics agree that "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" and "Trembling of the Veil," which constitute *Autobiographies*, are superior to the four sections added in the 1938 edition - "Dramatis Personae," "Estrangement," "Death of Synge," and "Bounty of Sweden," although they disagree over how much authority to grant to the more complete 1938 edition. Ian Fletcher, in the most perceptive study yet of the autobiographical writings, decides, somewhat arbitrarily, to consider only the first three parts, although they were never printed separately, and to disregard "Estrangement," "Synge," and "Sweden" because they are "disjunct, aphoristic, the raw material for composed autobiography." On the other hand, Joseph Ronsley in his thorough study, *Yeats's Autobiography*, argues for the acceptance of the entire 1938 edition, "although it seems fragmentary and lacks unity of form," in preference to the 1926 edition which "actually appeared to be more unified . . ." Further on, Ronsley describes "the pattern evolving out of his [Yeats's] struggle for unity in both his own life and that of his country" as it appears in the 1938 edition: *"The Autobiography* begins as if it were the beginning of the world. It closes, in Yeats's vision of unity of culture as the ultimate stage in the world's spiritual evolution, as if the apocalypse had at least drawn nearer." Ronsley fails to recognize that this pattern is completed in the first two parts and that only recurrence is added to the pattern and then only by "Bounty of Sweden." "Dramatis Personae" is both narrow in scope and poorly organized. Its original intention, to eulogize Lady Gregory, is outweighed by the less admirable attempt to redress the errors of Moore's*Hail and Farewell*, errors that remain more colorfully and attractively stated than Yeats's defensive rebuttal. "Estrangement" and "Death of Synge," written in diary form, abandon the apologetic intention and slacken into aphorism and memoir. And although "Bounty of Sweden" extends the search for a unified culture, it comments only ironically

and indirectly on Yeats's search for a unified self-image, for "unity of being." Whereas the 1938 edition becomes what H. G. Wells called "cosmobiography," comments on civilization from a limited perspective, the 1926 edition, which Ronsley admits "appeared to be more unified," achieves actual unity through a dramatic interweaving of intentions. Therefore I will concentrate in this study on *Autobiographies*, which is comprised only of "Reveries" and "Trembling of the Veil."

The plot of *Autobiographies*, which is organized initially by place and later by dramatic conflicts, reveals the development of Yeats's identity in four fairly distinct stages: first, the child inherits an identity from his West Ireland ancestors; secondly, he loses direct possession of this inherited identity as a consequence of his father's uprooting of the family, and he achieves a negative identity by reacting to his father and then to the modern forces ultimately responsible for his father's and his deracination; and, thirdly, he defines himself in terms of six groups in Dublin and London. The fourth phase, in which Yeats separates himself from each group and develops a unique self-image, is only suggested in the direct narration of the events of Yeats's life. Yeats's integral self actually emerges in a pattern of repeated actions; the pattern is developed through certain static effects, through the autobiographical point of view, and through a concatenation of mythological images.

Before considering Yeats's integral self as it appears in this pattern, we should discuss in more detail the plot of his apparent growth. The initial stage of Yeats's self-development is set in Sligo and the west of Ireland prior to his tenth year. Although his early years were actually almost as vagrant as his later, in *Autobiographies* the hero is deep-rooted, drawing sustenance for his later life from family and folk. His principal concerns, here, are to separate all his people - the Butlers, his most ancient forebears, and the Yeatses, Middletons, and Pollexfens - from the paudeens and hucksters he found so inimical to modern Ireland, and to establish his grandfather, William Pollexfen, as the standard of heroism for all of *Autobiographies*. After recounting some of his grandfather's fabulous exploits, Yeats says, "Even today when I read *King Lear* his image is always before me and I often wonder if the delight in passionate men in my plays and in my poetry is more than his memory."

In addition to this proud family tradition, Yeats inherits the histories and myths associated with so many locations near his Sligo home. He recalls, "The servants' stories . . . interested me. At such and such a house . . ." To the anecdotes that follow Yeats adds this comment: "All the well-known families had their . . . legends, and I often said to myself how terrible it would be to go away and die where nobody would know my story." This opportunity to develop his own "story," to have an identity compounded of family and place and imagination, is his inheritance. From this he is separated by his father's move to London and their subsequent alternations between Dublin and London.

Yeats clearly associates the first move to London with a loss of identity. He writes, "At length when I was eight or nine an aunt said to me, 'You are going to London. Here you are somebody. There you will be nobody at all.'" The English places are mythless for Yeats - "I was a stranger there. There was something in their way of saying the names of places that made me feel this." This instinctive longing for "sacred places," which

prevents him from putting down roots in his new soil, persists throughout adolescence and up to the moment of writing, connecting the child and the youth to the autobiographer:

A poignant memory came upon me the other day while I was passing the drinking fountain near Holland Park, for there . . . I longed for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand. It was some old race instinct. . . .

This lost inheritance is sought in each subsequent phase of Yeats's development, and the values of Sligo are later transformed into his theories of unity of being and unity of culture.

Separated from all other sources of identity, Yeats still had his father as a model for development. Although he could imitate his father in his style of painting and speaking, he was forced to react against him when Jack Yeats diverged from the traditional values with which Yeats had been imbued in Sligo. The first reaction he records was during childhood: "My father's unbelief had set me thinking about the evidence of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety . . ." But more serious differences developed in adolescence over their divergent theories of art. The son continues to admire Blake and Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite practice of painting heroic, literary subjects after the father has abandoned Pre-Raphaelitism. Yeats attributes the father's apostasy to the influence of "Victorian science" against which Yeats had "a monkish hate." Furthermore, the father and son also differed over their preferences in poetry: the father argued for dramatic statement while his son contended that personal utterances are the only noble poetry.

Yeats's emphasis on this filial rebellion typifies that of most post-Romantic autobiographers, who wish to demonstrate that their essential qualities were not completely dependent on their parents' influence. When Ronsley argues that "the relationship between his father and himself which he describes in 'Reveries' . . . is suffused with an atmosphere of rebellion, but in the end they shared more beliefs than they quarreled on," he is actually describing a reconciliation that took place in the life rather than in *Autobiographies*, and he is ignoring Yeats's stages of development. Yeats expands this conflict over theories of art and literature to include other contrasting values. The father was an agnostic, an empiricist, a free-trader, and a follower of Mill, while the son was a spiritualist, a dreamer, an oligarchist, and a student of Blake and Rossetti. Finally, and most significant, the father believed in progress and followed the fashion whereas the son sought an image from a past age that would free him from the flux of time.

The rootless, anti-traditional tendencies of the age, of which his father is merely a victim, become Yeats's ultimate antagonists. He reacts specifically to English empiricism of Irish journalism or, as in this quotation, Parisian art and its advocates: "'A man must be of his own time,' they would say, and if I spoke of Blake or Rossetti they would point out his bad drawing and tell me to admire Carolus Duran and Bastien-Lepage." But more frequently he groups his antagonists as "the Huxley, Tyndall, Carolus Duran, Bastien-Lepage rookery."

Soon Yeats discovers he is not alone in his reaction to his father's generation and their mechanistic and scientific values. Yeats writes:

I was to discover others of my own age, who thought as I did, for it is not true that youth looks before it with the mechanical gaze of a well-drilled soldier. Its quarrel is not with the past, but with the present, where its elders are so obviously powerful and no cause seems lost if it seem to threaten that power.

At this point in *Autobiographies*the hero began to associate himself with various groups and to take on their values, in my term, to "define" himself. The remainder of the book takes on the aspect of a memoir, giving detailed sketches of many of Yeats's contemporaries while emphasizing the relation of the hero to each individual and each group. We finally know what this hero sought in each group, what lessons he learned, and what effect each group had on his search for unity of being and unity of culture. This period of self-definition begins toward the close of "Reveries" and continues into the chapter entitled "Ireland After Parnell." In this stage Yeats suggests a basis for his own distinction from each group, although he is not fully distinguished until the fourth stage, beginning in "Ireland After Parnell" and culminating in the last scene of *Autobiographies*.

Yeats first associated with a group of Irish patriots loosely formed around the heroic figure of John O'Leary. This old Fenian spoke in phrases worthy of "some heroic Elizabethan play" and in other aspects was reminiscent of Yeats's Lear-like grandfather. O'Leary led his group in opposing Gavan Duffy's attempt to impose a false history on Ireland and in seeking heroic images in Ireland's past by which to educe a cultural renaissance. All six groups with which Yeats aligned himself pursued some historical ideal - except the second, the circle of W. E. Henley. Yeats was drawn to Henley because he championed youth in their conflict with the older generation. Yeats writes, "I think we listened to him, and often obeyed him, partly because he was quite plainly not upon the side of our parents." As he was to Henley's and O'Leary's cliques, Yeats was first attracted to the socialist debates at William Morris's house by the heroic figure of the leader who, Yeats recalls, "reminded me of my old grandfather in Sligo . . ." While desiring to alter the future, this group rooted its politics in Morris's medieval ideal. The Theosophists and Hermetic students, two other groups with which Yeats associated, also sought images from the past and recognized strong leaders. Mme Blavatsky was "a great passionate nature" and Macgregor Mathers "a figure of romance."

Of the six groups in and out of which Yeats wandered, he suggests that the last, the Rhymers, contributed most to his self-definition. They lacked a grandfather-figure and philosophical ideals, yet "all were pre-Raphaelite" and "not one had hearkened to the feeblest caw, or been spattered by the smallest dropping from any Huxley, Tyndall, Carolus Duran, Bastien-Lepage bundle of old twigs . . ." He suggests through his collective pronouns that he felt a greater unanimity within this group than in the other five groups: "We read our poems to one another;" "Our clothes were . . . unadventurous;" "We were all seemingly equal. . . . "

All six groups are introduced in the first half of *Autobiographies*. In line chapters entitled "Ireland After Parnell" and "The Tragic Generation" Yeats returns to these groups to distinguish himself from individual members or to recount a break with the group. In establishing these distinctions, Yeats has begun the narration of his fourth phase, in which he developed his positive identity.

Yeats dissociated himself from several of these groups because of a conflict of ideals: the Marxists in the Socialist League denied the existence of his spiritual world and the Theosophists were too fond of abstraction, a divisive and isolating force. From other individuals and groups Yeats became separated by the passage of time which revealed some failure by the other party. Henley's group was an unstable coalition which divided over Wilde's fall, and the Rhymers collapsed as a generation with the close of the old century.

In considering the tragic lives of the Rhymers and of individuals in other groups, Yeats contrasts their pursuit of an ideal self-image with his own quest for unity of being. Most of these individuals attempted to fulfill a romantic self-concept based on an image from the past which, later to be "the mask," Yeats here describes in these terms:

Every passionate man (I have nothing to do with mechanist, or philanthropist, or man whose eyes have no preference) is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy. Napoleon was never of his own time, as the naturalistic writers and painters bid all men be, but had some Roman emperor's image in his head. . . .

Of the other characters in *Autobiographies* only Wilde, Sharpe, and Verlaine consciously sought this "anti-self," this "emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature," but all of the characters in their conscious or unconscious pursuit of images are judged by Yeats according to the degree to which they achieved a state of unity of being.

Curtis Bradford maintains that these judgments are systematic and suggests that Yeats had fully developed "his analysis of personality-types in terms of the phases of the moon." Yeats's analyses, however, are obviously closer to the poetic, sometimes vague, language of *Per Amica* . . . than to the abstract and diagrammatic analyses of *A Vision*. "Unity of being," for example, Yeats can only define metaphorically - like "a perfectly proportioned human body" or like "a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly" - and he cannot explain in what relation one must be to the mask to achieve this condition. Yeats does not insert mechanically into each character-sketch this theory that every passionate man seeks an anti-self. While at times he explicitly states that he is judging the characters according to their success in this search, as this summary of three character studies illustrates: "I have described what image - always opposite to the natural self or the natural world - Wilde, Henley, Morris, copied or tried to copy . . . ," at other times the theory is only a submerged standard.

The failures of his friends to achieve a unified self Yeats attributes ultimately to the rootless, divisive age. A permanent relation to the mask can be achieved only in a society that relates ancient images to everyday tasks through custom and a shared mythology. This unity of culture the hero sought at first for all of Ireland. He dreamed of restoring the Irish mythology and so disseminating a common literature "that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design." Later in the narrative the disillusioned hero reduces his expectations: "The dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false; though it may be we can achieve it for some small circle of men and women, and there leave it till the moon bring round its century." *Autobiographies* concludes with the suggestion that the hero has found, if not unity of being, at least the basis for this in an elite coterie drawn together by a common culture. Around Lady Gregory had gathered a poet, a dramatist, a politician, and a benefactor of the arts, united by a love of Irish tradition. Prefigured by supernatural dreams and placed at the conclusion of *Autobiographies*, the meeting with Lady Gregory symbolizes Yeats's unity of culture, achieved in a "small circle of men and women."

To this point, I have described the plot as having a beginning and four stages of progressive development and a definite end, while I have ignored the cross-weavings of spatial organization, fused point of view, and mythological allusions, which tend to obscure chronology and reduce the progressive effect of the plot, to emphasize patterns of recurrent actions, and ultimately to convey the idea that Yeats's self-image is static and perpetual.

Although *Autobiographies* does reveal four stages in Yeats's growth, within each stage there is little sense of progressive development. The plot is organized within these four phases geographically or dramatically so that the narration moves from place to place or from one group to another rather than from one month or year to the next, a method Yeats suggests in his opening paragraph - "All thoughts connected with emotion and place are without sequence" - and later attributes to a quirk in his memory: "I only seem to remember things dramatic in themselves or that are somehow associated with unforgettable places."

Much of "Reveries" is organized by place. Some sections recount interesting events that occurred in one location over a long period of time, while others tell of Yeats's own association with a place without regard for chronology. From the autobiographer's perspective the different moments during the early stages of his life are merged in a habitual past tense:

When my father gave me a holiday and later when I had a holiday from school I took my schooner boat to the round pond sailing it very commonly against the two cutter yachts of an old naval officer. He would sometimes look at the ducks and say . . . The pond had its own legends. . . . Sometimes my sister came with me, and we would look into all the sweet shops and toy shops on our way home. . . .

While the usual narrative transition is temporal - "the following month," "next," "after this" - Yeats's narration moves more often from place to place than from moment to moment.

The beginning of section three on page 22 is a typical transition: "Some six miles off towards Ben Bulben and beyond the Channel, as we call the tidal river between Sligo and the Rosses, and on top of a hill. . . . "

Yeats is not interested, as the autobiographers Wordsworth and Ruskin were, in the visual appearance of a place; he sees only the human associations established by one people living in one place for a long period of time. When Ruskin contemplates a scene, he views formations and colors and recalls his past self, while Yeats recollects past history as well as his past self. Of course, descriptions of his "holy places," places rich with human associations, serve as a preface to his theory of unity of culture, expressed later in *Autobiographies*. And organization by place allows Yeats to discuss with freedom the historical and personal themes associated with each location. For example, Sligo suggests the ideal of a unified culture; Ballisodare, an area even more remote than Sligo, is rich with legends and fairy tales; Bedford Park represents Pre-Raphaelitism; London, generally, is the modern deracinated population; Liverpool is the transition between the modern and old worlds. Yeats can juxtapose places in his narration to contrast ideas, as he does on the first page when he recalls a room in Ireland, where "some relative once lived," and then remembers a room in London, where he felt threatened by unfamiliar children in the streets. Or he can make direct comparisons between London and Dublin, as he does on page 191 where he contrasts the romantic faces of the Dublin peasants with the "fat blotched" faces of the London poor.

The conclusion to the quite long section V in "Reveries" illustrates how Yeats's organization by place and theme allows him to disregard chronological progression. The section does represent a period in Yeats's life, his "year or two" at North End in London, but it concentrates on the environs of North End and their associated memories. The last five pages of this section discuss Hammersmith School and the theme of "companionship and enmity." The hero nurtured his distinction from his schoolmates and attempted to develop himself, in his "enmity," according to certain heroic ideals. In the final paragraph, the first sentences discuss an American runner, whom the hero admired; then follows a sentence on heroism and his schoolboy dreams of himself as a hero; then a recalled statement by his father: "One day my father said, 'There was a man in Nelson's ship at the battle of Trafalgar, a ship's purser, whose hair turned white; what a sensitive temperament; that man should have achieved something!'" Yeats's next sentence concludes the section: "I was vexed and bewildered, and am still bewildered and still vexed, finding it a poor and crazy thing that we who have imagined so many noble persons cannot bring our flesh to heel." The anecdote of Nelson's purser exemplifies only in a metaphorical, poetic (and humorous) manner Yeats's conclusion about our bringing our "flesh to heel." The organization of this paragraph illustrates, in a general way, the organization of the entire *Autobiographies*. Organization by place breaks down strict chronological narrative and allows Yeats to move freely from one idea to a related theme, from thematic statements to poetic statements, and from an idea in the mind of the immature hero to the same idea developed by the autobiographer.

Organization by "things dramatic in themselves," the dominant organizational method in the last third of "Reveries" and in "Trembling of the Veil," also permits Yeats to minimize chronology and to emphasize themes. The character sketches, which comprise the last portion of *Autobiographies*, are dramatic in that they portray individuals in conflict with themselves and with their milieu. These sketches are significant thematically because they illustrate Yeats's theory of the mask by showing various possible relations between individuals and their self-images. Most of the sketches include Yeats's impressions of the individual gathered over a period of time. Consideration of the character's particular problem often leads Yeats into abstraction and, as in the scenes organized by place, into poetic connections. For example, in his consideration of A. E.'s misdirected energies, Yeats praises A. E.'s religious imagination and regrets his political involvement and, then, concludes with a poetic comment on politics: "Is it not certain that the Creator yawns in earthquake and thunder and other popular displays, but toils in rounding the delicate spirals of a shell?"

The sections in which Yeats describes a location or a character and some theme, often conclude with this type of rhetorical question, with a metaphorical statement, or with a stanza or line of Yeats's latest poetry. Each of these conclusions renders the mature autobiographer's complex and sometimes profound thought on the young hero's subject of inquiry. As a consequence, the distinctions between the youth and the adult and between the different stages of development are obscured. In the manner of Gosse in *Father and Son*, Yeats sometimes merely imposes the adult's knowledge on the child, as when he says, "To-day I add to that first conviction . . . this other conviction, long a mere opinion vaguely or intermittently apprehended," or when he says, "I thought there could be no aim for poet or artist except expression of a 'Unity of Being' . . . though I would not at the time have used that phrase." More often, however, the autobiographer's intrusion is interrogative or poetic, elevating the youth's inquiry to a complex or metaphysical level but not resolving it. For example, after a consideration of Aubrey Beardsley, Yeats asks, "Does not all art come when a nature . . . exhausts personal emotion in action or desire so completely that something impersonal . . . suddenly starts into its place . . . ?" The question suggests Yeats's idea of *Spiritus Mundi* about which he had written in *Per Amica*. It is a more complex question than he would have asked in 1890, but a question for which the mature Yeats has only a tentative hypothetical answer. The poetic conclusions function in a similar way by substituting for simpler questions almost impenetrable symbols which raise greater questions. On page 238, Yeats concludes an inquiry about the possibility of achieving a unified culture with this statement: "One thing I did not foresee, not having the courage of my own thought: the growing murderousness of the world;" followed by the opening stanza of "The Second Coming," a conclusion which displays the complex and symbolic level to which the hero's initial inquiries about culture have been raised.

Ultimately, as a result of this "interrogative method," this connection of the child's question to the adult's elaboration of that question, Yeats presents an image of himself as a perpetual enquirer, one who constantly asks questions about his self and his society and who finds not answers but questions of a more complex nature. This self-image does not correspond to Yeats's anti-self, which is "proud and lonely," "hard and cold," much like Shelley's figure of Ahasuerus. As he states, the attempt to assume

one's mask is "an intellectual daily recreation" which requires an alternation between the Will and the Mask and which can never be finally successful.

Yeats's self-image arises not merely from the point of view and from the organization of plot but also from the recorded action of the hero, who is constantly attempting to remake himself to fit an image which varies over the years. We have read of the youthful hero "walking with an artificial stride in memory of Hamlet" or wearing a "tie gathered into a loose sailor-knot . . . like Byron's tie in the picture"; of the slightly older adolescent frequenting a club "to become self-possessed, to be able to play with hostile minds as Hamlet played"; and of the young man inquiring after Morris or Mathers and seeking out Madame Blavatsky to find in these heroic figures a self-defining image.

Yeats's integral self is not his anti-self, not Ahasuerus the cold savant, but Yeats in search of this mask, or Ahasuerus the Wandering Jew. On page 212, when Yeats suggests Ahasuerus as the type of his mask, he presents a long passage from Shelley's poem. The page-length excerpt, however, describes not Ahasuerus but the search for Ahasuerus by Mahmud who must go through an elaborate *assage duré* to encounter his symbol of wisdom and experience. He is told, "Few dare, and few who dare / Win the desired communion." Yeats supports this self-image with other literary images - Hamlet, Athanase, Alastor, Manfred - which represent the perpetual wanderer or the divided self seeking a unity. A suggestion of the Ancient Mariner in the "Preface" to "Reveries" seems intended to introduce the image of the poet errant: "Sometimes when I remember . . . the past, I wander here and there till I have somebody to talk to. Presently I notice that my listener is bored. . . . "

This self-image is supported in *Autobiographies* by a mythical-historical pattern which emerges from Yeats's images and from his overt statements. During the eight years in which Yeats wrote the two books of *Autobiographies*, he was developing the elaborate psychological and historical system presented finally in *A Vision*. When Yeats admits his responsibilities as a historian in *Autobiographies*, he writes, "As I have set out to descrbe nature as I see it, I must not only describe events but those patterns into which they fall. . . ." Yeats's historical vision, which measures historical events by a mythology or paradigm and which minimizes chronology and physical causality, is similar to the historical view of other modern writers, who, in the words of Joseph Frank, 'spatialize' time by "transmuting the time-world of history into the timeless world of myth."

The myth that underlies *Autobiographies* is based on a Biblical teleology converted to a cyclic historiography. "Reveries" opens, as Ronsley has remarked, with a reference to the Biblical Creation: "My first memories are fragmentary and isolated and contemporaneous, as though one remembered some first moments of the Seven Days." Although Yeats recalls much unhappiness during his Sligo childhood, he represents West of Ireland as a lost Eden, the land of his youth from which he is forever exiled. In this Eden, his grandfather, William Pollexfen, was God: "He was so looked up to and admired that when he returned from taking the waters at Bath his men would light bonfires along the railway line for miles. . . . I think I confused my grandfather with God . . ." As I have shown, Pollexfen continued to represent, after the hero had left Sligo, the standard of nobility. Then in the penultimate paragraph of "Reveries," Yeats describes

the death of this god-figure and the ensuing chaos: "Before he was dead, old servants of that house where there had never been noise or disorder began their small pilferings, and after his death there was a quarrel over the disposition of certain mantelpiece ornaments of no value." The apocalypse should follow to accord with the suggested Biblical teleology, but in "Reveries" the pattern is incomplete. *Autobiographies* concludes with Yeats, the time-conscious autobiographer, speaking of his situation in 1915:

For some months now I have lived with my own youth and childhood . . . and I am sorrowful and disturbed. . . . All life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens.

Frank Kermode has described in *The Sense of An Ending* man's need to create a fictional end to the world to give our own lives a sense of completion. Although Western man traditionally has shaped history according to a Biblical teleology, which moves from Creation to Apocalypse, the modern writer has such a strong "sense of an ending" that he represents himself as suspended in the period preceding the Apocalypse, and living with "eternal transition, perpetual crisis."

Yeats infuses "Trembling of the Veil" with the sense of a still moment of crisis, in which he awaits the answer to his question, "What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" Out of respect for this dark chiliasm, we must re-examine the apparently affirmative conclusion of *Autobiographies*. The book closes with Yeats's predetermined meeting with Lady Gregory. He recalls the sessions with two aristocratic patrons, Lady Gregory and a French Count, which led to the establishment of the Irish Theatre:

On the sea coast at Duras, a few miles from Coole, an old French Count, Florimond de Bastero, lived for certain months in every year. Lady Gregory and I talked over my project of an Irish Theatre looking out upon the lawn of his house, watching a large flock of ducks that was always gathered for his arrival from Paris, and that would be a very small flock, if indeed it were a flock at all, when he set out for Rome in the autumn.

Following this, Yeats specifies the accomplishments of some members of this group - of Yeats, Hugh Lane, Shawe-Taylor, John Synge - under Lady Gregory's personal influence, and adds: "If that influence were lacking, Ireland would be greatly impoverished, so much has been planned out in the library, or among the woods at Coole."

In tone this is like the conclusion of "Bounty of Sweden," where Yeats represents Sweden as a paragon of cultural unity. However, the Swedish conclusion is more impressionistic and romanticized than the Irish scene, and as a poetic ideal it is certainly less realizable than the ideal represented by the Coole Park coterie

Yet, if this "small circle of men and women" has achieved under Lady Gregory's influence a temporary unity of culture, it is only a momentary stasis in the advance of history toward the impending Apocalypse. Through the description of the seasonal peregrinations of the Count, enforced by the image of migrating fowl, a familiar symbol

in Yeats's poetry for historical recurrence, Yeats suggests the repetitive cycles of history. The very distance the narrator maintains from his twenty-year-old scene and the fact that those who comprised the circle had passed into obscurity or ignominy suggest that they could not reverse history's decadent course. "They came like swallows and like swallows went," he says of them elsewhere. He concludes *Autobiographies* by commenting on this unified, elite group: "I have written these words . . . that young men to whom recent events are often more obscure than those long past, may learn what debts they owe and to what creditor." The statement recalls to the reader an earlier pronouncement characterizing, in an appreciative tone, the attitude of youth: "Its quarrel is not with the past, but with the present, where its elders are so obviously powerful . . ." The ironic echo suggests that this small circle, which preceded from no immediate cause and which found its pattern in eighteenth-century culture, would effect no change in the next generation or in the inexorable, gyring course of history. Yeats achieves a similar ironic reversal in "Bounty of Sweden," where the conclusiveness of the court image is undercut by a curious final paragraph. Ronsley praises this conclusion, saying Yeats wished to "give Ireland a model on which to build the unity of culture that the Stockholm Town Hall symbolized." He fails to recognize that the concluding paragraph -

While we are packing for our journey a young American poet comes to our room, and introduces himself."I was in the South of France," he says "and I could not get a room warm enough to work in, and if I cannot get a warm room here I will go to Lapland."

-reminds us of such poems as "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland" and suggests that the quest originates in the poet's romantic, insatiable nature and is therefore interminable.

A year or so after the publication of *Autobiographies* Yeats wrote to Sean O'Casey advising him about the proper treatment of history in literature: "The whole history of the world must be reduced to wallpaper in front of which the characters must pose and speak." In *Autobiographies* the action of the hero and the historical background form a complementary design. Between a lost Eden and a suspended Apocalypse the hero wanders in a patterned course of seeking and finding and seeking again on a higher level. The patterned search begins in Eden, where the hero's unhappiness was caused by his own nature, and continues, Yeats suggests, beyond the temporary stasis at Coole Park toward some larger, more inclusive symbol of unity, such as the Swedish court. But Yeats's self-creating entelechy will demand that this image, too, must be transcended. Consequently, the pattern of self-seeking and self-creating is complete in *Autobiographies*, and its recurrence in "Bounty of Sweden," the last section of *The Autobiography*, suggests its perpetuity.

Source: Dillon Johnston, "The Perpetual Self of Yeats's *Autobiographies*," in *Éire-Ireland*, Vol. IX, No. 4, 1974, pp. 69-85.

Quotes

"My first memories are fragmentary and isolated and contemporaneous, as though one remembered some first moments of the Seven Days."

Reveries Over Childhood and Youth, p. 41

"I spent my days at the British Museum and must, I think, have been delicate, for I remember often putting off hour after hour consulting some necessary book because I shrank from lifting the heavy volumes of the catalogue; and yet to save money for my afternoon coffee and roll I often walked the whole way home to Bedford Park."

The Trembling of the Veil, Four Years: 1887-1891, p. 137

"I generalized a great deal and was ashamed of it. I thought it was my business in life to be an artist and a poet, and that there could be no business comparable to that. I refused to read books and even to meet people who excited me to generalization, all to no purpose."

The Trembling of the Veil, Four Years: 1887-1891, p. 163

"When Carlton was dying in 1869, he said there would be nothing more about Irish literature for twenty years, and his words were fulfilled, for the land war had filled Ireland with its bitterness; but imagination had begun to stir again."

The Trembling of the Veil, Ireland after Parnell, p. 180

"I know now that revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusk and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest; and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind." *The Trembling of the Veil,* Hodos Chameliontos, pp. 216-217

"I have written these words instead of leaving all to posterity, and though my friend's ear seems indifferent to praise or blame, that young men, to whom recent events are often more obscure that those long past, may learn what debts they owe and to what creditor."

The Trembling of the Veil, The Stirring of the Bones, p. 286

"Lady Gregory, as I first knew her, was a plainly dressed woman of forty-five, without obvious good looks, except the charm that comes from strength, intelligence and kindness."

Dramatis Personae, p. 293

"Neither Christ nor Buddha nor Socrates wrote a book, for to do that is to exchange life for a logical process." *Estrangement, Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909*, p. 342

"My father says, 'A man does not love a woman because he thinks her clever or because he admires her, but because he likes the way she has of scratching her head.'"

Estrangement, Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909, p. 343

"No art can conquer the people alone - the people are conquered by an ideal of life upheld by authority. As this ideal is rediscovered, the arts, music and poetry, painting and literature, will draw close together."

Estrangement, Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909, p. 362

"A good writer should be so simple that he has no faults, only sins."

The Death of Synge, p. 388

"But certainly I have said enough to make you understand why, when I received from the hands of your King the great honour your Academy has conferred upon me, I felt that a young man's ghost should have stood upon one side of me and at the other a living woman sinking into the infirmity of age." *The Irish Dramatic Movement,* p. 418

Topics for Further Study

Research the current religious unrest in Northern Ireland. Write a brief summary of the situation, and then explain how the historical relationship between England and Ireland contributed to this situation.

Read a brief biography of Yeats. Discuss some differences between the biography and *Autobiographies*. Does one include events or personalities that the other omits? Are any events described differently in the two works?

Many critics believe that Yeats was the greatest poet in the English language. Read a few of his poems. Do you agree with the critics' opinion? Explain why or why not, using the poems you have selected to support your conclusion.

In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes a lot about his experiences and experiments with the supernatural. Choose one type of supernatural event he experienced□such as visions or extrasensory perception□and investigate what scientists, religious leaders, and philosophers have to say about this subject. How do they differ in their interpretations of such events? Have you ever experienced anything similar to what Yeats referred to in his book? If so, how do you explain what happened to you?

Yeats was heavily influenced by the English writer William Blake. Research Blake's life and work. Then, in a chart or essay, compare and contrast the two men. What elements in Yeats's life and work do you think were a result of Blake's influence? In what ways were the two men and their work very different?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: In 1923, Yeats wins the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Today: The Irish poet Seamus Heaney wins a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. The 1998 Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to two Irishmen seeking to find a solution to the violence still besetting their homeland. The Nobel Prize Committee describes Roman Catholic co-winner John Hume, leader and one of the founders of the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party, as "the clearest and most consistent of Northern Ireland's political leaders." The prize's other recipient, David Trimble, Protestant head of the Ulster Unionist Party, "showed great political courage when, at a critical stage of the process, he advocated solutions which led to the peace agreement," according to the Nobel Prize Committee.

1920s: Ireland suffers through the Anglo-Irish War, three years of guerrilla warfare between the Irish Republican Army supporting Ireland's independence from Britain. The Anglo-Irish Treaty creates the Irish Free State consisting of twenty-six counties in the southern Roman Catholic portion of Ireland. The Irish Free State exists within the Commonwealth of Nations with a status equal to that of Canada and only a modified oath of allegiance to the British monarch. Yeats serves as a Free State senator from 1922 through 1928. The remaining six Protestant counties accept limited home rule as Northern Ireland. Many Protestants in Northern Ireland view their separation from the Catholic south and union with Britain as a way to maintain their religion and dominant position. Many Irish Catholics, however, view the partition as simply the most recent evidence of British injustice against the Irish people.

Today: The Irish Free State is now the sovereign Republic of Ireland, without an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. Northern Ireland remains politically connected to the United Kingdom, and tensions continue between the Catholic minority and the Protestant majority.

1920s: Autobiographies and memoirs such as Yeats's essays are written and published primarily by famous people or those who have held important positions in government, the arts, or science.

Today: Published autobiographies and memoirs are hugely popular and are written as often by the non-famous as by the famous. The Internet bookseller Amazon.com lists more than thirty-two thousand titles in this category.

1920s: The monetary award for the 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature, won by Yeats, is the smallest ever issued by the Nobel Committee, 114,000 Swedish kroner.

Today: The prize for the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature is nine million Swedish kroner, or about $915,000. This amount is the largest sum of money ever awarded for this prize in literature.

What Do I Read Next?

William Blake, the English artist and writer, had an enormous impact on Yeats. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, William Golding, and Harold Bloom and first published in 1965, is widely regarded as the best available source of Blake's works.

Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats's patron and close friend, collected stories of Irish heroes and powerful gods in *Irish Myths and Legends*. Originally published in 1904 as *Gods and Fighting Men*, the book has a preface by Yeats.

Yeats referred to John Synge as the greatest Irish dramatist. All of Synge's play have been collected in one volume, *"The Playboy of the Western World" and Other Plays*, published in 1998 and edited by Ann Saddlemyer. The volume's introduction sets the plays in the context of the times and the Irish Literary Movement, also focusing on Synge's role with the Abbey Theatre.

Oscar Wilde, who took part in a couple of discussion groups with Yeats and praised the young poet's first collection, published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890. The novel, about a young man who sells his soul for eternal youth, prompted scandal and attacks on Wilde. Many in the late nineteenth century considered Wilde's book decadent.

The second revised edition of *The Collected Poems of* W. B. *Yeats* was edited by Richard J. Finneran in 1996. It includes all of the poems Yeats authorized to be included in such a volume.

Further Study

Bogan, Louise, "William Butler Yeats," in *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 161, No. 5, May 1938, pp. 637-44.

This article, published not long before Yeats's death in early 1939, expresses appreciation of the aging poet and dramatist and includes an overview of his life and accomplishments.

Cahill, Thomas, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995.

This book covers, in a relatively light manner, the early history of Ireland, including the legends and myths of many characters in whom Yeats was interested in his search for a unifying Irish literature.

Foster, R. F., W. B. *Yeats,A Life*, Vol. 1: *The Apprentice Mage 1865-1914*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

This is the first in a planned series of two biographical volumes on the life of Yeats. In this volume, R. F. Foster covers the writer's life through his middle years, when he was especially involved in Irish drama and in running the famed Abbey Theatre.

Shaw, Robert B., "Tragic Generations," in *Poetry*, Vol. 175, No. 3, p. 210.

In this article, Robert Shaw compares the state of poetry at the end of the twentieth century with poetry at the end of the nineteenth century, with an especially close examination of those poets Yeats referred to in his essay "The Trembling of the Veil" in *Autobiographies*.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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