The Lake Isle of Innisfree Study Guide

The Lake Isle of Innisfree by William Butler Yeats

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

First published in the collection *The Rose* in 1893,"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is an example of Yeats's earlier lyric poems. Throughout the three short quatrains the poem explores the speaker's longing for the peace and tranquility of his boyhood haunt, Innisfree. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" suggests that a life of simplicity in nature will bring peace to the troubled speaker. However, the poem is the speaker's recollection of Innisfree, and therefore the journey is an emotional and spiritual escape rather than an actual one. Innisfree may be a symbol for the speaker's passed youth, which the speaker is unable to return to in the "real," or physical, world. Emotionally, the speaker can return again and again to the tranquility of Innisfree.

Author Biography

Born June 13, 1865, in Sandymount, Ireland, to John Butler Yeats, a lawyer turned portrait painter, and Susan Mary Pollexfen, daughter of a well-todo shipping family, William Butler Yeats was raised in London and Dublin, attending schools in both cities. Though passionate about art, Yeats turned to writing after reading Irish poets Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan. His own interest in all things Irish can be seen in poems such as his popular and early poem,"The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in which he expresses his longing to return to County Sligo in western Ireland, where he spent much of his youth. Yeats's chief influences included his father; John O'Leary (1830-1907), an Irish nationalist and activist; and Maud Gonne, a fiery Irish revolutionary with whom the poet fell in love and maintained a long correspondence. Yeats celebrated Gonne's beauty in verse and plays throughout his life, though the two never married. A writer who was inspired by mysticism and occult philosophy as much as Irish literature and folklore, Yeats was deeply involved in organizations such as the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, the latter founded by Madam Blavatsky, a controversial mystic. A lifelong student of philosophy and literature, Yeats was well read in writers such as Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, John Donne, Jonathan Swift, William Blake, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

A shy youth, Yeats grew into a charismatic figure, championing Irish heritage and resisting the cultural influence of English rule. A playwright as well as a poet, Yeats, along with a patron, Lady Gregory of Coole Park, founded the Irish Theatre, which became the Abbey Theatre. He served as the Abbey's lead playwright and later was joined by John Synge, author of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Many of Yeats's plays drew on Irish legends and include *The Countess Cathleen* (1892); *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894); *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902); *The King's Threshold* (1904); and *Deirdre* (1907). His poetry collections include *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889); *The Celtic Twilight* (1893); *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917); and *The Tower* (1928). Yeats was elected to a seat in the Irish Free Senate in 1922 and awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923. He died January 29, 1939, in Roquebrune, France. In 1948, his remains were re-interred in Drumcliff, Sligo. He is widely considered one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

Poem Text

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

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

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

Plot Summary

Line 1

In this line Yeats establishes the opening tone as well as the refrain of the poem. The poem focuses on Innisfree as a place of escape for the speaker.

Lines 2-4

Here the speaker describes Innisfree as a simple, natural environment where he will build a cabin and live alone. Note the rich description in these lines. The language is specific. The speaker does not merely mention that he will build a cabin, but also that it will be made of "clay and wattles." The speaker also specifies that he will have "nine bean-rows," instead of simply a "garden." These are images that conjure up in the mind of the reader concrete visual features of Yeats's poetic fantasy. Notice also the particularly interesting image of the "bee-loud glade." This image invests Innisfree with a magical air.

Lines 5-6

In these lines Yeats introduces the connection between peace and Innisfree in the speaker's mind. The first line of the second stanza repeats the same meter employed in the first line of the first stanza. The reader can sense a refrain developing. The line "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow" is composed almost entirely of iambic feet. This means that one unaccented syllable is followed by an accented syllable. The iambs are interrupted in the middle of the line by an amphibrach with the phrase "some peace there." An amphibrach is composed of two unaccented syllables sandwiching an accented one. It is used for emphasis. The amphibraic foot in the fifth line corresponds with the similar foot in the first line. This may be used to emphasize the metaphor that Innisfree represents escape for the speaker. Line six contains a good example of figurative language. Yeats wants to explain that the abstract idea of "peace" is abundant from morning until night in Innisfree, but instead of relying on that cliche, he transforms morning into the image of veils from which peace falls. Night has also been transformed into "where the cricket sings."

Lines 7-8

Here Yeats continues with transforming midnight and noon into almost eerie images. Evening becomes a dark image of the sky filled with the wings of birds.

Lines 9-12

In the last lines of the poem, the speaker stands in the street surrounded by gray pavement. This image, which is hard and silent, contrasts with the soothing, soft image of the water. The speaker continues to hear the sounds of nature even in the city. The peace of Innisfree is able to transcend the urban environment because it resides in a completely natural one, that of the speaker himself.

Themes

Nature

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" expresses the idea that nature provides an inherently restorative place to which human beings can go to escape the chaos and corrupting influences of civilization. In his autobiography, Yeats writes that his poem was influenced by his reading of American writer Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which describes Thoreau's experiment of living alone in a small hut in the woods on Walden Pond, outside Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau lived in his one-room house from 1845-1847, gardening, writing, and studying natural history. Thoreau championed the solitary, self-sufficient life lived in harmony with nature, considering it more authentic than a life spent balancing ledgers or working for someone else. He disdained the ways working for a living and acquiring material goods can control one's life. Explaining his motivation for the experiment, Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,
to front only the essential facts of life, and
see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not,
when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I
did not wish to live what was not life, living is so
dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it
was quite necessary.

Yeats also expresses this sentiment when he writes of building a small cabin "of clay and wattles" and living alone "in the bee-loud glade" of Innisfree. Yeats seems to refer to *Walden* when he writes of the "Nine bean-rows I will have there," and he underscores the contrast between rural and urban lifestyle in the last lines, when he places himself "on the roadway, or on the pavements grey." Both of these images symbolize the destructive, joy-deadening forces of modern life. Yeats emphasizes the authenticity of the desire to live close to nature, writing that he hears the call to go to Innisfree "in the heart's deep core."

Imagination

A primary feature of Romantic poetry is the idea of the imagination as a faculty that can generate alternate realities. The speaker of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" exercises this faculty by daydreaming about life in the country. The entire poem describes a life that he "will" live, not one he is currently living. The detail of his fantasy suggests that the speaker has entertained this desire previously. Readers can clearly picture the haven the speaker imagines. He enumerates the bean-rows he will have, describes the building materials of his cabin, and lists particular creatures he will hear, i.e., bees, crickets, linnets.

Ever since William Wordsworth's lyric poems about nature's beauty and power helped define Romantic verse, poets have used their imaginations to conjure worlds in which they would be more content and where their "true" selves could find peace. But for Yeats, this imagined world remained a fantasy: unlike Thoreau, Yeats never lived the rural life. Rather, he was an urban man of letters, an Irish senator, and a Nobel laureate. Moreover, his later poems never exhibited the degree or kind of romanticism shown in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Nostalgia

Less than a hundred years before Yeats penned "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," William Wordsworth wrote in a sonnet that "the world is too much with us," meaning that the human mind and heart are too preoccupied by the material or worldly seductions of urban living. Yeats experienced the urge to return to a simpler, more familiar life as a kind of homesickness which expressed itself as a desire to "return" to Innisfree, a small island at the eastern end of Lough Gill in County Sligo. The poet regularly visited Sligo while growing up, and the inspiration for the poem came when Yeats was living in London and walking Fleet Street, a busy commercial section of the city. The sound of a fountain's water reminded him of the Sligo lake, and the poem was born. Two other early poems by Yeats which deal with nostalgia and escape are "The Stolen Child" and "To an Isle in the Water."

Style

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is written with an *abab* rhyme scheme corresponding to each of the three quatrains in the poem, which are defined as a stanza composed of four lines which may or may not have a set line length. Also prevalent is the use of alliteration and assonance, both of which emphasize the musical tone and rhythm of the piece.

When a stanza in a poem has a pattern of rhymes it is called a "rhyme scheme." "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" utilizes end rhyme in an *abab* rhyme scheme. This means that the end of the first line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the third line, and the end of the second line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the fourth line. All three of the quatrains in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" display an *abab* rhyme scheme.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" uses "alliteration" and "assonance" to emphasize the sound and mood of the poem. Alliteration is the repetition of certain consonants in a poem which are often used in order to stress a word or phrase. Notice the sound of the consonants 'l' and 's' in the following line:

"I hear lake water lapping with the low sounds by the shore." Read the line aloud and notice the emphasis on the words "lapping," "low," and "shore." Assonance occurs when the vowel sounds attached to different consonants are repeated in a poem. Notice the sound of the vowels 'i' and 'o' in the following line:

"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." Assonance is less clear than either rhyme or alliteration, but its use is similar. It links important words or phrases in the poem together.

Historical Context

In the 1880s, when Yeats wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Ireland was in economic and political turmoil, and Yeats and his family were struggling financially. It is not surprising that the sound of a water fountain on a bustling London street would remind him of the lapping water of Lough Gill and stir the boyhood dream he had of living on Innisfree, unencumbered by the demands of modern urban life.

Ireland was an agricultural country in the nineteenth century, but British landlords controlled many farms. Farmers had fought for almost three centuries for greater say in their livelihood. In the 1880s, they finally achieved some success. The leader for Irish land reform and Home Rule (i.e., a subordinate parliament for Ireland) was Charles Steward Parnell (1846-1891), often referred to as the "uncrowned King of Ireland." Parnell, a wealthy Protestant landlord who empathized with the plight of the Irish, was elected to Parliament in 1875 and became head of the Irish Party.

With the backing of Parnell, along with Catholic labor activist Michael Davitt (1846-1906), liberal British Prime Minister Gladstone enacted the Land Act of 1881, which guaranteed tenant farmers fair rent, protection against eviction, and the freedom to sell or transfer the lease on their farm. Parliament also passed a "franchise act," adding some 500,000 new voters to the rolls, most of whom were middle-class and poor Catholics who supported Parnell. Still, a Home Rule Bill was defeated in Commons in 1886, and in 1890, Parnell was disgraced when a court revealed he had been "living in sin" with the wife of William Henry O'Shea, a politician and fellow member of the Irish Party.

A second Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1893 but also defeated, this time in the House of Lords. After this defeat, many Irish nationalists, such as Yeats, turned their attention to developing a greater sense of Ireland's contributions to culture and the arts. For example, Douglas Hyde, who later became president of the Irish Free State, founded the Gaelic League in 1893. The League spear- headed efforts to revive pride in Irish ethnic and national identity, supporting various initiatives to publicize Gaelic language and culture. The "Irish Ireland" movement also included organizations such as The Gaelic Athletic Association, formed to promote traditional Irish sports such as hurling and football.

Almost as soon as the Yeats family moved to London in 1887, Yeats became homesick. The new home, a dark squalid row house in a lower-middleclass neighborhood of Kensington, depressed the entire family, and Yeats often dreamt of returning to Ireland. However, Yeats finally found a measure of solace in the literary scene in London. Not more than a mile from the Yeats's house lived William Morris, poet and father of the Arts and Crafts movement, whose large house and stables were a meeting ground for writers and artists. Morris befriended Yeats, and the poet wrote for Morris's socialist magazine, *Commonweal*.

Yeats returned to Ireland in mid-August, 1887, and stayed there through the end of the year. During this time, he wrote his first major poem, "The Wanderings of Oisin," crafted from Irish folklore. When Yeats returned to London in 1888, he deepened his associations with London's writers, including Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. A few years later, along with Ernest Rhys, Yeats formed the Rhymers Club, founded to help young poets get their start. From this group, Yeats became involved with the Irish National Literary Society, whose members he sparred with on and off in the coming years. Yeats was also involved during this time with Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and later with the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. Blavatsky was an occultist and major figure in England and Ireland in the late nineteenth century; her book, *The Occult World*, was wildly popular among artists and writers. Blavatsky held séances, practiced magic, and encouraged followers to pursue "union with the absolute." Her emphasis on the spiritual aspects of existence resonated with Yeats's own anti-materialist sentiments.

Critical Overview

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is one of Yeats's earlier poems and also one of his best known. It is perhaps so widely known due to its universal subject matter, that of the conflict between youth and aging, and the longing for emotional escape. Author William York Tindall, in his book *W. B. Yeats*, terms "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" "a vision of escape." However, some find the poem overly sentimental and prefer Yeats's later poems. F. R. Leavis, in his book *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation,* cites a statement by Yeats regarding his early poetry:

> I tried after the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisin* to write of nothing but emotion, and in the simplest language, and now I have had to go through it all, cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental from lack of thought.

Edmund Wilson, in his book *Alex's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, explores the conflict between Yeats's world of imagination in his poetry and the world of reality:

> The world of imagination is shown us in Yeats's early poetry as something infinitely delightful, infinitely seductive, as something to which one becomes delirious and drunken□and as something which is somehow incompatible with, and fatal to, the good life of that actual world which is so full of weeping and from which it is so sweet to withdraw.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the relationship between self-image and daydreaming in Yeats's poem.

Yeats's poem is perhaps most interesting for what it does not say. Although the speaker expresses the desire to arise and "go to Innisfree," he never explicitly states what it is that motivates this desire. This absence asks readers to infer what compels the speaker to be other than where he is. People often daydream when they are dissatisfied with their lives. They fantasize about how circumstances might be different and how new surroundings would make them more content, perhaps even how such a change would make them different persons. They see themselves in daydreams differently than they see themselves in their "waking" life. By examining the speaker's daydream closely, readers can deduce the speaker's current situation and speculate about his inspiration for writing the poem.

The opening line of the poem, repeated as the first line in the last stanza, tells readers what the speaker "will" do: "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." Echoing the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament (Luke: 15:18), which begins, "I will arise and go to my father," Yeats, consciously or not, infuses his poem with religious weight. This choice suggests that the person Yeats would like to be is the one who returns home, fulfills his familial duties as a son, and yet nonetheless achieves his own separate identity as a poet. Yeats spent much of his youth in County Sligo, home to his mother's family, but they were not particularly happy years. By picturing himself on Innisfree, an island on Lake Gill in Sligo, Yeats can, imaginatively, both return to the place of his childhood, effecting a kind of redemption, and yet remain separate from it.

In his biography of Yeats, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann notes that Yeats was in London when he wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," and that despite the robust literary scene there, felt shy and out of place. Ellmann writes, "To a poor Irishman . . . it seemed alien and hostile. . . . Yeats often dreamed of beating a retreat to Sligo." Ellmann sees Yeats's homesickness as an unbearable desire, writing that Yeats

> filled his poems and stories with dim, pale things,
> and longed to return to an island like Innisfree, where
> his "old care will cease" because an island was neither
> mainland nor water but something of both, and
> because the return to Sligo, though he knew it now
> to be impossible, would be a return to the prepubertal
> stage when his consciousness had not yet been
> split in two.

Some critics go as far as seeing the poem as a kind of death wish. Henry Merritt, for example, in his essay, "Rising and Going: The 'Nature' of Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,'" argues that Sligo is closely linked with failure in Yeats's imagination because

it is home to Yeats's maternal family, the Pollexfens of Sligo, who largely disliked the poet. A return to Sligo marked a surrender to the stodgy, provincial values of the Pollexfens, Merritt argues.

But Yeats never went to Innisfree; the poem remained at the level of a daydream, albeit one with specific benefits for the young poet. One of these is that he was able to grapple with the kind of person he was becoming by imagining the kind of person he might be. The imagery in the first stanza alludes to the life that Thoreau made for himself at Walden Pond. It is not only the kind of life that Thoreau lived, however, that Yeats is drawn to but also the kind of person Thoreau was. An American transcendentalist who championed civil liberties, Thoreau was known as much for his politics as he was for his nature writing. Yeats's fantasy of living in a Walden-like hut, in Walden-like surroundings, then, is also a fantasy of being the kind of person who could bring about such a dream□ strong, self-reliant, full of conviction and initiative. It is significant that Yeats wrote the poem in his early twenties, a time when most people are still struggling to carve out a place for themselves in the world.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claims that the purpose of creative writing is to fulfill both the author's fantasies *and* the reader's. Poets and fiction writers□those who traffic in fantasies, daydreams, and the world of the imagination□perform a kind of regulatory function for society, in that they give voice to fantasies that readers sometimes do not even know they have. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" remains one of Yeats's most popular poems because of this very fact. Readers vicariously participate in Yeat's fantasy because it is such a popular and generic one. Although not everyone necessarily desires to live alone in a small cabin, the wish to live close to nature and away from the distractions of modern life is common, as is the wish to see one's own self in the best possible light. Compared to Yeats's later more modern poetry, the poem is sentimental and conventional, but these facts have also helped its popularity, as those very features make "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" accessible to more readers, meeting their expectations of what poetry should do.

Yeats moves from simply wishing he were elsewhere to coming up with a concrete plan for being there. The details in the first stanza read as a kind of blueprint for his Eden-like cabin. He imagines himself as a steward of the land and all the life on it. The second stanza, however, paints a more impressionistic scene. In addition to the cabin and "bee-loud glade," the speaker will also find peace, "Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings." Such emphasis on quiet and solitude tells readers something about what the speaker's current life must be like: crowded, hectic, noisy. Living alone on an island in the midst of a lake is about as far away from those circumstances as possible. The imagery and figurative language of the second stanza also underscore the dreamy nature of the speaker's fantasy, highlighting the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the present and the future, the city and the country.

Sights, sounds, touches, smells are often catalysts for memories, and the sound of fountain water on a busy London street has evoked the memory of Yeats's childhood for him. The consuming nature of the speaker's desire to leave his present situation and return to the setting of his childhood is evident in the last stanza, when he says, "for

always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." Such an aural hallucination underscores the intensity of Yeats's memory of Lake Gill and what that memory now represents for him. It is significant that in his autobiography Yeats says the poem is the first he had written with anything of his "own music" in it, for it represents a maturing, both poetically and emotionally, of the poet's relationship to his past and his own self image.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Hunter examines what Innisfree symbolizes to Yeats as a poet.

In an attempt to explain the nature of the attraction he feels toward the Devon farm he calls Thorncombe, the protagonist of John Fowles' *Daniel Martin* refers to a passage in Restif de la Bretonne's eighteenth-century romanced autobiography, *Monsieur Nicholas*, in which the speaker describes the feeling of total peace and joy found in a remote, lush, hidden valley in the Burgundian hills. Fowles' protagonist, after pointing out that the Frenchman "baptized the place simply *la bonne vaux*: the valley of abundance, the sacred combe," goes on to describe the general nature of such places as "outside the normal world, intensely private and enclosed, intensely green and fertile, numinous, haunted and haunting, dominated by a sense of magic that is also a sense of a mysterious yet profound parity in all existence." In the context of Fowles' novel, this section serves to illustrate both the necessity for the artist to find a place of retreat and the fact that such places exist for him, as an artist and human being, not simply as geographic locations but also, and more importantly, as symbolic settings. *La bonne vaux*, while a physical place, is more importantly a state of mind in which the individual is linked by the significant details of his surrounding to a symbolic world that stretches beyond the boundaries of human time and space. In his description of the lake isle of Innisfree, W. B. Yeats presents his version of *la bonne vaux*, an ostensibly nostalgic description of a specific geographic location that, through the particular physical details and the symbolic force of those details, is transformed into a symbolic landscape. Like Daniel Martin's Thorncombe and Monsieur Nicholas' *bonne vaux*, Yeats' lake isle is private and enclosed, in this case by the waters of Lough Gill. It is fertile, as the beans and bees clearly indicate. It is numinous, in that it is both a physical island and a state of mind created by that island. It is haunted by the mythical Tuatha da Danaan and is haunting to the speaker of the poem, as the last stanza clearly reveals. In fact, Yeat's view of the island in his youth was dominated by the magical and mysterious story about the Tuatha da Danaan and the Danaan Quicken tree:

I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island
called Innisfree . . . I should live, as Thoreau
lived, seeking wisdom. There was a story in the
county history of a tree that had once grown upon
that island guarded by some terrible monster and
borne the food of the gods. A young girl pined for
the fruit and told her lover to kill the monster and
carry the fruit away. He did as he had been told, but
tasted the fruit; and when he reached the mainland
where she had waited for him, was dying of its powerful
virtue. And from sorrow and from remorse she
too ate of it and died. I do not remember whether I
chose the island [as the proposed place of retreat] because
of its beauty or for the story's sake, but I was
twenty-two or three before I gave up the dream.

Yeats' attitude to the lake isle of Innisfree, then, is markedly similar to the attitude described by Fowles' narrator in *Daniel Martin*. The importance of Yeats' poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," a work often dismissed as a youthful, nostalgic, derivatively romantic lyric, lies in the very qualities that make the physical setting numinous for the author as young artist. Through a careful examination of the precise details and specific symbolism of the poem, one comes to see that, for the young Yeats, the retreat to the island of Innisfree is a journey in search of poetic wisdom and spiritual peace, a journey prompted by supernatural urgings, a journey in quest of identity within a tradition. The wisdom and peace that are the goal of the quest can only be realized through a poetic and spiritual grasp of the parity and even identity that exists between the legendary past of the Celtic world and the present, and of the presence of that past in the mind and spirit of the artist attuned to the numinous qualities of his particular *bonne vaux*.

Of the genesis of the poem and of its relationship to Yeats' development as a poet we know a great deal. By the time the poem began to take shape, some time late in 1888, the young poet had already published *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (Dublin, 1888), and *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin, 1888), and was about to publish his first major volume of verse based on the Irish legends he had heard and learned during his frequent visits with his mother's parents in Sligo, *The Wanderings of Oisin and other Poems* (London, 1889). Although his thorough involvement in the Celtic Renaissance would not bear significant poetic fruit until the latter part of the 1890s, it is clear from the poems written in the early part of the decade, and indeed in the latter 1880s, that Yeats was fully aware of the poetic potential of the Celtic legends of Ireland and of his relationship, as poet, to the Celtic tradition. The specific background of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is made clear for us both by the commentaries of Jeffares and Alspach and by Yeats' own autobiographical comments. His familiarity with the connection between the Tuatha da Danaan and the island of Innisfree is clear from the passage from the *Autobiographies* cited above. Yeats had gleaned the legend of the Danaan Quicken tree from William Gregory Wood-Martin's *History of Sligo* (1882) and seems to have used the idea of a plant or tree sacred to the Celtic gods not only as the basis for the poem "The Danaan Quicken Tree" but also, with some transformation, in the bean rows of the poem under examination here. The early version of the poem, sent to Katharine Tynan in 1888, contains the text of the first two stanzas, including the details of the dwelling of clay and wattles, the bee hives and bean rows, and mention of the sounds and colours of the island. It lacks, however, the final stanza, the stanza that pulls the poem together and gives it its specific context and direction. Yeats tells us about the genesis of the final stanza□if not the entire poem□in the *Autobiographies:*

I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens,
of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little
island in Lough Gill, and when walking through
Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of
water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which
balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember
lake water. From the sudden remembrance
came my poem "Innisfree," my first lyric with anything
in its rhythm of my own music.

The first printed version of the work appeared in *The National Observer* for 13 December, 1890, and the poem was then reprinted in *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* (London, 1892), and *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (London, 1892), without substantive changes. Yeats then included the poem in more than twenty collections of his works published between 1892 and the time of his death, again without substantive changes. Given that Yeats was constantly and not always productively revising his early work, it is significant that this poem was left virtually untouched through almost fifty years in which it could have been altered. This lack of tampering or revising seems to argue for its being one of the few early poems that Yeats considered to have achieved, in his eyes, its perfect expression at an early point in his poetic development. It is also significant to note that, with the exception of its inclusion in the first two collections, it does not appear in any of the works that Yeats organized around a particular thematic principle. Rather, it stands as a single, isolated work, a world unto itself, which seems to argue for its being considered a central statement in his poetic development. Interesting though the genesis and printing history of the poem might be, however, it is in the content of the poem, in the rich symbolic and mythic matrices for the work, that its major importance lies.

Stylistically speaking, the poem is not remarkable. It clearly shows, in its fascination with detail, the influence of the Pre-Raphaelitism of the Rhymers' Club, and also demonstrates, in its succession of three fairly regular quatrains, the influence of the lyrics of the Romantics. The first stanza, after describing the basic motivation of the speaker, goes on to give details of the habitation he will build in his retreat. The second stanza then details the benefits that he will derive from his solitary existence. The final stanza then adds urgency by contrasting the images of the rural retreat with the bustle of urban life, thereby strengthening the motivation behind the resolution expressed in the first line. In form, then, the poem is a simple nostalgic lyric expressing the speaker's desire to find a kind of peace in a place of rural solitude he has known in his youth. Aside from some minor metrical effects, there is nothing in the form and structure of the poem to indicate a departure from tradition in the work. The music of which Yeats speaks in the *Autobiographies* is heard not through the form of the poem but rather through the symbolic dimensions of the imagery, and one of those dimensions is seen in the role of the speaker. The speaker in the poem is presented as a seeker or questor. The initial line, with its ironic echo of the prodigal son's resolution, strengthens this notion, as does the double mention of the roadway in line 11. The actual location described in the first two stanzas of the poem, both in terms of the times mentioned and the specific details of geographical location, strengthens the idea that the speaker is seeking something more than a place in which to relax. The particular physical details that are provided in the first two stanzas describe not only an actual place but also a state of mind achieved because of the place. The description of time in the second stanza, with its double mention of evening and midnight, also stresses that the place is one in which mental and not physical vision is the important factor. The poem is presented, furthermore, through a first-person speaker. The air of immediacy created through the use of this kind of narrative voice amplifies the subjectivity of the utterance and stresses the importance of the dream or vision to the speaker himself. The retreat to Innisfree will be a solitary retreat; but it will be one that links the speaker, through the visions described, with his natural and, from what we know about the mythic

significance of the island, supernatural world. The simplicity of rhetorical devices in the poem has, at once, a charm and yet an archaic air. The simplicity serves to stress the romantic nostalgia of the poem, but the deliberate archaisms archaisms that, although he later repudiated them, Yeats did not choose to change link the poem to the past, to the traditions of a day gone by and yet still present in the setting described. It is in the imagery and the allusions of the poem, though, more than in the type of speaker, choice of verse form, or particular rhetorical techniques, that Yeats makes his strongest statement, a statement that links the subjective speaker of the poem to a tradition that, because it stretches back to the Celtic vision both of the significance of the lake isle of Innisfree and of the role of the poet/hermit, objectifies the experience at the core of the work.

One of the central allusions in the poem, however, seems initially to have little to do with the Celtic. In describing the crops of the island, Yeats specifically mentions two things: honey and beans. Although the latter may seem out of place, when one remembers the two passages in the *Autobiographies* that refer directly to the poem, one notes that, in both cases, Yeats mentions Thoreau, the bean-cultivating hermit of Walden pond. Yeats' youthful desire was to live "in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree", "to live, as Thoreau did, seeking wisdom." Thoreau tells us that, when he went to Walden Pond, he was "determined to know beans." As Thoreau's editor points out, "A common expression in New England is 'He doesn't know beans,' meaning the person is ignorant." To put it another way, to know beans is to be wise. Hence one can see that it is possible for Yeats to have equated, tropologically, Thoreau's cultivation of beans with his pursuit of wisdom. In speaking of Walden Pond, Thoreau comments on the memories he has of a childhood visit there, of his awareness of those who dwelt there in the past, of his awareness of the birds and animals there, of the fact that gardening has long been a venerated occupation of intelligent men, and of the connection between gardening and ritual, of the connection between farming and the making of a better mankind. Familiar with Thoreau's work, the young Yeats was also familiar with the way in which Thoreau saw the retreat to a childhood-visited rural setting and the occupation of oneself in gardening as tropes for the poetic retreat in search of wisdom. In his nostalgic lyric description of Innisfree, Yeats carefully points out his awareness of the birds there, of the speaker's occupation as a gardener, and of the peace that comes from such an occupation in such a place. To connect the retreat to Innisfree with Thoreau's retreat to Walden in search of wisdom, Yeats carefully includes not only the mention of the honeybee, traditionally a symbol of industry, culture, and wisdom, but also the bean plant. Through this latter image, one sees a connection between Yeats' retreat and Thoreau's that places the former's retreat into a particular symbolic context. Through the references to Thoreau in the *Autobiographies*, then, and through the image of the bean in the first stanza, one sees a close connection between the nature and objectives of the hermit of Walden Pond and the speaker in Yeats' poem. Yet the context of the retreat to Innisfree is more specifically defined through the connections that the location has with particular aspects of Celtic folklore, another branch of the tree of knowledge with which Yeats was quite familiar.

Writing in *The Speaker* in 1893, Yeats remarked that "Folklore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, as well nigh all the great poets

have lived by its light, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues." Yeats' interest in folk-lore had already led him to publish *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London, 1888) and to use the material of Irish folk mythology as the basis of many of the selections in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (Dublin, 1888) and *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (London, 1889). As Daniel Hoffman remarks in his recent study of Yeats, Graves, and Muir□ three poets who developed from their awareness of folk-lore a particularly coherent and compelling personal mythology that links the individual to the tradition□:

> Not only ballad tradition but folk beliefs in the supernatural and the body of myths and legends from the Irish Heroic Age contributed subjects to [Yeats'] poems and plays. His firsthand observation, when a youth, of the folklore beliefs in the West of Ireland comprised his initial experience of the spiritual reality denied by the deterministic philosophy of the day . . . Critics have little heeded Yeats' tenacity in holding and remolding the folk beliefs with which he started out. Much though he remade his style and changed his attitudes toward life, he did not repudiate this first area of his experience and research. Instead he found ways to change his use of it to conform with the evolution of his art and of his thought.

Yeats' awareness of folk belief is connected with his desire to retreat to Innisfree, as the *Autobiographies* show. After recounting the legend of the Danaan Quicken Tree, he remarks: "I do not remember whether I chose the island [of Innisfree for my retreat] because of its beauty or for the story's sake . . . " Although the former may be sufficient reason in itself, the latter is more pressing in terms of the symbolism of the poem. The dominance of the Tuatha da Danaan in Yeats' poetic imagination forms a link between the young poet, the folk mythologies, and the island of Innisfree that stretches throughout Yeats' verse. The Tuatha da Danaan, as one folklorist points out, were early invaders of Ireland, closely schooled in the Druidic mysteries. Defeated by the Sons of Míl, they made a deal with the Gaels whereby the Gaels were left to control the upper or human world and the Tuatha da Danaan were left to rule the world under ground, from which world they controlled magic and led a life largely independent of human society. They are creatures of the 'other world.' "Theirs is an idealised, magic counterpart of the natural world into which mortal men rarely intrude except by invitation or by accident." "The Hosting of the Sidhe," the first poem in Yeats' *The Wind Among the Reeds* (London, 1899), has a lengthy headnote in which Yeats gives a lengthy description of the Tuatha da Danaan, or "the Sidhe . . . the people of the Faery Hills." In that headnote Yeats comments, in a passage that deals with the contact between the human world and the world of the Tuatha da Danaan, that "If any one becomes too much interested in them [the people of the Sidhe, the Tuatha da Danaan], and sees them over much, he loses all interest in ordinary things. I shall write a great deal elsewhere about such enchanted persons . . . " As we shall see in a moment, the speaker in "The Lake Isle of

Innisfree" may very well be one of those "enchanted persons," but to grasp the full significance of the enchantment and its connection with the artist's pursuit of wisdom and peace, we must look further into the origins of the Tuatha da Danaan.

Robert Graves remarks in *The White Goddess*, that "According to legend, the Danaans had come to Britain [and to Ireland] from Greece by way of Denmark to which they had given the name of their goddess . . . " At another point in his discussion of their origins, Graves describes the Tuatha da Danaan as "Bronze Age Pelasgians expelled from Greece in the middle of the second millenium . . . " He further identifies Danu, their goddess, with the pre-Achean goddess Danaë of Argos, a figure he sees as one of the many embodiments of the White Goddess. Yeats remarks, when speaking of Danu and her followers, that "The old Gaelic literature is full of appeals of the Tribes of the goddess Danu to . . . mortals whom they would bring into their country . . . " It would appear, then, that the Tuatha da Danaan exist as a tribe of fairy people intimately connected with the legendary history of Ireland, who still inhabit the land, and who are interested, from time to time, in luring those mortals interested in them into their enchanted faery otherworld. The enchantment that the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" feels may indeed be seen as a form in that lure. Yeats says in the *Autobiographies* that he recalled Innisfree when he heard the water in the fountain. The speaker in the poem, on the other hand, hears the insistent lapping sound of lake water, a sound that is closely connected with the Tuatha da Danaan:

> To this day the Tribes of the goddess Danu that are
> in the waters beckon to men . . . The people of the
> waters have been in all ages beautiful and changeable
> and lascivious, or beautiful and wise and lonely,
> for water is everywhere the signature of the fruitfulness
> of the body and of the fruitfulness of dreams.

The call felt by the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" may indeed, given the symbolic contexts of the poem, by a call from the fairy people to whom Innisfree was once a holy place, because of the Danaan Quicken tree. In his headnote to the discarded poem "The Danaan Quicken Tree", a poem published originally in *The Bookman* in 1893, Yeats mentions the tree that he speaks of at greater length in his recounting of the legend of the tree in the *Autobiographies*. Yeats' knowledge of Irish folklore in general, then, and his particular awareness of the connection between the Tuatha da Danaan and the lake isle of Innisfree, would argue for a close connection in his mind between the luring habits of the Tuatha da Danaan and the island itself. The peace that comes to the person who inhabits the island, then, is a peace that derives from a poetic, a spiritual grasp of the tradition and the traditional powers of the ancient fairy people to whom the island was once a sacred spot. The vegetation of the island, furthermore, is of particular importance to its sacred nature. The retreat to the lake isle of Innisfree, then, is not only a poetic retreat in pursuit of wisdom but also a retreat in search of and possibly in response to the urgings of the goddess Danu. The direct link between wisdom, Innisfree, and the Tuatha da Danaan becomes quite clear when one examines closely the detailed description that the poet provides of the habitation his

speaker will build there and of the particular horticultural pursuits in which he will engage.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker argues that he will build himself a small cabin out of clay and wattles in a setting that has echoes of Eden, of Thoreau's hermitage at Walden Pond, and of the sacred combe of Restif de la Bretonne's *Monsieur Nicholas*. In the description of the building materials to be used for the cabin one sees not just the traditional building materials of the rural peasant but also a connection between the world of man and the world of the Tuatha da Danaan. The cabin is to be built of clay and wattles. Clay, being a material linked symbolically with man, needs no explication. The wattles, on the other hand, carry with them a symbolic association that links them with Celtic mythology and specifically with the *Aes Sidhe*, the Tuatha da Danaan. It was the people of the sidhe who were responsible for building the circular hill forts known as raths or Dane Raths, the basic component of which structures was wattles from the hazel tree. Robert Graves points out that, in Celtic mythology, "the hazel was the *Bile Ratha*, 'the venerated tree of the rath'□the rath in which the poetic *Aes Sidhe* lived". He also indicates, though, that "with the ancient Irish the tree of eloquence and wisdom was the hazel." Hence it appears that the type of cabin that Yeats' speaker plans to build is closely linked both to the "poetic *Aes Sidhe*" and to the matters of eloquence and wisdom. Yeats' choice of particular detail in this case directs the reader to a specific connection between the apparently simple descriptive surface and the actual symbolic depth of the poem. The connection between the *Aes Sidhe* and the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is further elaborated when one considers the horticultural aspect of the Innisfree garden or grove. The "hive for the honeybee" draws in the traditional symbolism of the bee as a figure associated with sweetness and light, with culture and wisdom; but the key reference in the third line is to the "Nine bean-rows."

Critics have puzzled for some time over the precision of detail in this reference and over the particular significance both of the number used and the bean itself. One critic explains the precise detail in terms of Yeats' stylistic affinities at the time the poem was written:

> Another poem of Yeats which seems to imitate a Pre-Raphaelite painting is 'She Dwelt among the Sycamores,' . . . Here it is the insistence upon 'precision' of coloring and number, and upon a microscopic focus in general which marks the tell-tale Pre-Raphaelite objective of 'truth to nature.' The single 'ash-grey feather'; the 'six feet / lapped in the lemon daffodils'; the 'four eyes'□all these represent the practice of artistic principles which began with the seven stars of the Blessed Damozel's crown and reached as far as the 'nine bean rows' of the Lake Isle.

Though Eddins may be correct about the stylistic source of the precision in the lines, he does not answer the question about the reasons for Yeats' choice of the plant or the number of rows. Alspach suggests a reason in a somewhat facetious fashion when he states that "one clever Yeats Freudian-critic has said of the nine bean-rows of the third line of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree': that undoubtedly they symbolize the nine months of pregnancy." A deeper searching of the Celtic mythology that plays such a large part in Yeats' poetry reveals a much more plausable reason for the use both of the bean and of the number nine. The number can be explained by examining further the reference to the wattles of the cabin. The number nine, Graves remarks, is "traditionally associated with Coll, the hazel, the tree of Wisdom . . . " He further comments that "The letter Coll was used as the Bardic numeral nine□because nine is the number sacred to the Muses and because the hazel fruits after nine years." He also points out the close connection in Celtic mythology between the hazel tree, the number nine, and poetic wisdom:

> The ninth tree is the hazel, in the nutting season. The nut in Celtic legend is always an emblem of concentrated wisdom: something sweet, compact and sustaining enclosed in a small hard shell . . . The Rennes *Dinnshechas* . . . describes a beautiful fountain called Connla's Well, near Tipperary, over which hung the nine hazels of poetic art which produced flowers and fruit (i.e. beauty and wisdom) simultaneously. As the nuts dropped into the well they fed the salmon swimming in it, and whatever number of nuts any of them swallowed, so many bright spots appeared on its body. All the knowledge of the arts and sciences was bound up with the eating of these nuts.

In the poem Yeats has specified the number nine and has already mentioned the "wattles" for which the hazel has been traditionally prized. Since Innisfree was the place on which grew the Danaan Quicken tree, whose fruit was 'able to endow [mortals] with more than mortal powers", since Yeats himself states that the wisdom provided by the Tuatha da Danaan is "the wisdom of the fools of Celtic stories, that is above all the wisdom of the wise", and since the hazel nut is connected with wisdom, it is logical to assume that Yeats' choice of the number nine is a reflection of his awareness of its connection with the numerology of Celtic mythology in general and its connection with wisdom in particular. This argument is supported by Yeats' use of the bean as well. Yeats' speaker does not plant or cultivate hazel trees, but bean rows. Yet the bean, as was mentioned earlier in connection with Thoreau, is also associated with wisdom: to know beans is to be wise. In this context, it would seem that the bean, like the hazel nut something "compact and sustaining" enclosed in a seed pod, is being used as a tropological analogue for the hazel nut. When one realizes that the bean is, as well, connected with poetic wisdom and with magic, the argument gains greater force. The bean has traditionally been associated with magic and with the supernatural: "Pliny in his *Natural History* records the belief that the souls of the dead reside in beans. According to the Scottish poet Montgomerie (1605), witches rode on bean stalks to their

sabbaths." The bean is also as Graves further suggests, scared to the White Goddess and therefore associated with poetic wisdom. From this group of folk-lore connections, it would appear that the reason for the choice of the particular detail in the third line of the poem lies in the associations made with the numerological significance of the number nine□both in classical and Celtic mythology□and with the relationship between beans and poetic wisdom on the one hand and the hazel nut and poetic wisdom on the other. The "peace" that comes "dropping slow", then, is the peace that comes from the wisdom gained from the bean rows. In the *Autobiographies* Yeats argues that he dreamt of returning to Innisfree to "live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom." In the poem under examination here the particular nature of the wisdom sought is clarified when one examines the symbolic and mythological connections and allusions of the first stanza of the poem and realizes that the wisdom that is gained in the "bee-loud glade" is a spiritual wisdom, a wisdom "above all the wisdom of the wise", a wisdom of a poetic character that is gained through an association with the magic and the mystery surrounding the Tuatha da Danaan and the poet who answers the call of the fairy people.

Whereas the first stanza of the poem establishes the general nature of the *bonne vaux* or sacred combe, the second stanza delineates the benefits derived therefrom. The peace that descends on the speaker in the second stanza is not described in explicit detail, but the colouring and tonality of the stanza, as well as the presence of the linnet, suggest that it is more than a sense of physical relaxation. On a superficial level the imagery of the stanza suggests a quiet rural Irish scene, complete with linnets at evening, mist in the morning, and particular colourations in the skies. The presence of the linnet, however, suggests that the peace achieved is more than physical repose. The linnet occurs in only one other poem by Yeats, "A Prayer for my Daughter," written some thirty years after the composition of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In the "Prayer" the linnet functions as a symbol for the purity and sweetness Yeats hopes will be his daughter's lot:

May she become a flourishing hidden tree
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
And have no business but dispensing round
Their magnanimities of sound . . .

The linnet, like the bees in the first stanza of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," is connected with sweetness and beauty. In the second stanza, it is the sound and the sight of the linnet's wings that attracts the speaker, and in this case suggests an analogy of a spiritual nature, drawing on the traditional association of birds with the soul. This would suggest that the peace achieved through intercourse with the *Aes Sidhe* is a peace that transcends the merely physical and stands sharply in contrast with the urban, mundane images of the final stanza of the poem.

In the final stanza we are returned from the speaker's world of reverie to the world of reality. The resolution of the poem's first line is reiterated, but this time with an insistence not present in the somewhat nostalgic initial statement. Instead we find that now the motivation to return to Innisfree is there "Always night and day" because of the

sound of lake water. "To this day the Tribes of the goddess Danu that are in the waters beckon to men . . . " Yet the beckoning comes not to the physical ear; instead it is heard by "the deep heart's core." The sound that lures the speaker back to Innisfree is less a sound that is audible to the physical ear than a prompting to the ear of the spirit. The speaker is drawn back to Innisfree by the fairy magic of the tribes of the goddess Danu. In the choice of words and the use of images in the final stanza, Yeats skillfully makes explicit a contrast both between the rural and the urban and between the physical and the spiritual that has been implicit in the first two stanzas. In reading the final stanza the reader comes to see the noumenal nature of Innisfree.

Through an examination of the precise detail and specific symbolism of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" the reader can come to see that, for Yeats, this small island in Lough Gill, just "opposite Slish Wood", is more than just a physical place and that the desire to return to that spot is more than simply the homesick reaction of a young man far from his native soil. When one stops seeing the speaker as the author, when one stops viewing the poem simply as a nostalgic lyric, when one looks instead at the poem as an expression of the nature of the artist and his relationship to both the physical and symbolic aspects of his nature, land, and tradition, one begins to see that the lake isle of Innisfree is more than a place; like Byzantium, Innisfree is a state of being. Like Daniel Martin's Thorncombe, like the Burgundian valley of *Monsieur Nicholas*, Innisfree is another *bonne vaux*, a valley of abundance, a sacred combe. In that it is an island, and in that it is enchanted, it is beyond the normal world. As an island it is surrounded by the wall of water, and as a magic place it is enclosed by its superstitions. Green and fertile, it clearly is both a physical garden and a garden or nursery of the spirit. As the former site of the Danaan Quicken tree, it is haunted by the children of the goddess Danu and still exercises its haunting power on those few who will listen through the sound of the lake waters that lap its shores. It is thereby dominated not only by a sense of nostalgia but also by a sense of the magical and mysterious way in which the *Aes Sidhe*, through the wattles of the dwelling, through the nine bean rows, through the power that the Celtic tradition displays, still influence the life of man. For Yeats, the speaker's return to Innisfree is a journey in search of poetic wisdom and spiritual peace, a wisdom and peace that can be realized through a poetic and spiritual grasp of the parity that exists between the legendary past of Ireland and the present day, between the tradition and the mind that the spirit of the poet who is attuned to the numinous qualities of *la bonne vaux*.

Source: C. Stuart Hunter, "Return to *la bonne vaux*: The Symbolic Significance of Innisfree," in *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 1984, pp. 70-81.

Adaptations

As part of their Caedmon Treasury of Poets, Harper Audio has published an audiocassette of poets reading their own poems. Poets include e. e. cummings, W. H. Auden, and Yeats reading "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The tape is 155 minutes in length.

Yeats reads "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Song of the Old Mother" on *In Their Own Voices* (1996), on the Rhino Word Beat label.

Judy Collins sings "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" on her 1971 album *Judy Collins: Living*. Hamilton Camp wrote the music for the song.

John Aschenbrenner's song cycle *To an Isle in the Water* (1998) comprises settings of Yeats's poems including "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The album is published by Isle Enterprises.

In the video *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* actors Stephanie Beacham, Gabriel Byrne, Julian Sands, Minnie Driver and others read Yeats's poems and discuss his life.

The Yeats Society of New York, online at http://www.yeatssociety.org/yeatsny.html, contains a wealth of information about the poet and links to other Yeats sites on the web.

In 1953, Audio-Forum released an audiocassette of poet Stephen Spender reading Yeats's poems. The title is *W. B. Yeats*. The tape can be purchased from Jeffrey Norton Publishers, 96 Broad St., Guilford, CT 06437.

The video *Yeats Country* (1965) juxtaposes Yeats's poetry with scenes of the Ireland he wrote about. It is distributed by International Film Bureau.

Insight Video distributes the documentary *Yeats Remembered*, a biographical film using period photographs and interviews with the poet and his family. It can be purchased from Insight Media, 2162 Broadway, NY, NY 10024.

Topics for Further Study

Parodies are imitations of another work, written to deflate the subject matter of the original. Read Ezra Pound's poem "The Lake Isle," then write an essay explaining what his poem says about "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Write a detailed description of the place you would most like to call home, both the geographical location (e.g., New York City, French Riviera, etc.) and the kind of structure (e.g., a palace, a log cabin, a hut, etc.). What are the qualities of the home? What do these qualities say about your own values?

Get together with your classmates and brainstorm ideas for your ideal house. If possible, sketch a floor plan. How does your idea of an ideal home differ from those of your classmates?

What are some of the sights, smells, sounds that remind you of pleasant experiences in your life? When do they occur, and how do you respond when you encounter them?

Yeats's poem was influenced by his reading of Thoreau's *Walden*. Make a list of books that have most influenced your own way of thinking, then write a short essay explaining how they have done so.

Poll your classmates, asking them what place they most remember from childhood. Then categorize their responses. What do these places have in common? Why are they memorable? What does this tell you about your relationship to childhood?

Compare and Contrast

1880s: Unionists and Catholics are locked in battle over the sovereignty of Ireland. Scores of people die in riots.

Today: Despite progress in talks, violence continues between Unionists and Catholics in Northern Ireland, with numerous casualties on both sides.

1880s: Groups advocating occultism and magic gain a high degree of popularity in England and Ireland. Yeats himself participates in a number of these groups, including the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn.

Today: The western world experiences a renewed interest in occultism and various forms of magic. The Order of the Golden Dawn remains in existence and now has its own web site.

1880s: The Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland, seeks to promote the spirit of Ireland's native heritage.

Today: Irish Americans flock to Ireland to explore their ethnic roots and cultural heritage.

What Do I Read Next?

Yeats was a playwright as well as a poet. To sample some of Yeats's plays, read *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (1966), edited by Russell K. Alspach.

In *Yeats at Work* (1965), Bradford Curtis examines selected manuscripts of Yeats, showing the progression of various poems through numerous revisions.

Mario D'Avanzo compares "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" with "The Song of Solomon" in his 1971 essay in *The McNeese Review*.

Susan Johnston Graf's 2000 study entitled *W. B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* examines Yeats's membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn, an occultist group. Graf also documents Yeats's magical practices and their relation to his work.

To learn more about Innisfree itself, read Tadhg Kilgannon's 1926 book, *Sligo and Its Surroundings: A Descriptive and Pictorial Guide to the History, Scenery, Antiquities and Places of Interest in and around Sligo*.

Bernard G. Krimm's *W. B. Yeats and the Emergence of the Irish Free State, 1918-1939: Living in the Explosion* (1981) examines Yeats's writing and career in relation to Ireland's drive to free itself of British control at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Tom Mulvany's essay entitled "The Genesis of a Lyric: Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'" explores how Yeats came to write the poem. It is part of the Winter 1965 volume of *Texas Quarterly*, pp. 160-64.

Maire and Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Ireland: A Concise History* (1972) presents a compact and unbiased history of Ireland, complete with informative photographs. Maire O'Brien is the daughter of Sean Mac Entee, veteran of the Rising of 1916 and former Irish politician.

Many poets have parodied Yeats's poem. One of the best-known parodies is Ezra Pound's 1916 poem entitled "The Lake Isle."

A. G. Stock's 1961 book from Cambridge University Press, *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought*, is one of the more useful and accessible critical introductions to the writer's work.

Oliver Stonor's 1933 essay "Three Men of the West," published in *John o' London's Weekly*, recounts the author's trip to Innisfree to get a first-hand view of what inspired Yeats's poem.

In *Builders and Makers: Occasional Studies* (1944), Gilbert Thomas argues that Yeats never built a cabin on Innisfree because he was better off living the life of the imagination.

Yeats was much influenced by Thoreau's book *Walden*, originally published in 1854, and he alludes to a passage from the book in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Students would benefit from comparing Thoreau's ideas on nature and the solitary life with those of Yeats.

J. B. Yeats's *Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others* (1944) provides an intimate portrait in letters of the close friendship between Yeats and his father.

Further Study

Alldritt, Keith, *W. B. Yeats: The Man and the Milieu*, Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1997.

This is a very accessible study of the ways in which Yeats carefully constructed his public image as poet, nationalist, and literary activist. Alldritt explores the ways in which Yeats's social environment contributed to his identity.

Graves, Robert, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922-1949*, Hamilton, 1949, pp. 186-88.

Graves's reading of Yeats's poem is one of the harshest pieces of criticism written about it.

Jeffares, Norman A., *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988.

This is Jeffares second biography of Yeats. His first appeared just ten years after the poet's death. In this biography, Jeffares charts the stages of Yeats's career, telling the story of his turbulent personal and public lives.

Bibliography

Ellmann, Richard, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Norton, 1978.

Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, edited by James Strachey, Avon, 1983.

Leavis, F. R., "The Situation at the End of the War," in *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, AMS Press Inc., 1978, pp. 27-74.

Merritt, Henry, "Rising and Going: The 'Nature' of Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' " in *Journal of the English Association*, Vol. 47, No. 188, Summer, 1998.

Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden: An Annotated Edition*, edited by Walter Harding, Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

Tindall, William York, *W. B. Yeats*, Columbia University Press, 1966, p. 31.

Wilson, Edmund, "W. B. Yeats," in *Alex's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, Charles Scribner's, 1931, pp. 26-63.

Yeats, W. B., *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, Collier, 1967.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) 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, PfS 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 PfS 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 PfS 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 PfS 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.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- 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

PfS 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 Poetry 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 PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS 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.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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 Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

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 Poetry 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:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535