Expectations Failed: Different Shades of Disappointment in W. B. Yeats's Selected Poems

Zübeyir Savaş

İzmir Bakırçay University, Turkey / Contact: zbyrsvs@gmail.com

Abstract

In his long literary career that lasted nearly a half-century, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was a prolific author of diverse fictive and non-fictive works. Along with dozens of lyric poems, Yeats also wrote numerous narrative poems, plays, essays, and reviews. It is apparent that he dealt with variety of themes and subjects in his writings, and one might also arguably expect to observe his engagement in political issues, for he was one of the intellectuals of his day with an Anglo-Irish background. Due to the overwhelming agenda of his day, a sudden wish to retreat appears to be a dominant theme in his works. Nonetheless, his escapism that might explicitly be observed in his poetry could not be limited to the political turmoil. He also suffered from separate disappointments caused by his private affairs as well. Accordingly, this study aims to foreground Yeats's particular disappointments reflected in his lyrical poems such as "The Lake Of Innisfree" (1890), "When You Are Old" (1891), "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (1918), and "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939) that emerged from specific incidents.

Keywords

William Butler Yeats; disappointment; The Lake Of Innisfree; When You Are Old; An Irishman Foresees His Death; The Circus Animals' Desertion

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Introduction

During his long literary career that spanned nearly a half-century, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) wrote numerous fictive and non-fictive works. Beside dozens of lyric poems, Yeats also wrote several narrative poems, plays, essays, and reviews. It is not surprising that he dealt with variety of themes and subjects in his numerous

writings, and one might also arguably expect to observe his engagement in political issues, for he was one of the intellectuals of his day with an Anglo-Irish background. To be precise on his "reaction to the political turmoil," one might recognise the fact that Yeats's "spiritual and artistic disposition made him escape into spiritual utopia, including unrequited love and the ideal past" (Hong, 2016, p.123). Nonetheless, his escapism could not be limited to the political turmoil. He also suffered from separate disappointments caused by his private affairs as well. Accordingly, this study aims to foreground Yeats's particular disappointments reflected in his lyrical poems such as "The Lake Of Innisfree" (1890), "When You Are Old" (1891), "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (1918), and "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939) that emerged from specific incidents.

To begin with, the poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" was written in 1890, and first published in one of his collections The Rose in 1893. Composed of twelve lines in three stanzas, the poem is basically about Yeats's incessant passion for an alienated life, a retreat from the turmoil of the urban life to solitude and serenity of an idyllic paradise. As Richard Ellmann informs, Yeats was in London when he wrote this lyrical poem, and despite his prosperous literary circle, he felt diffident from time to time since "to a poor Irishman […] [London] seemed alien and hostile [and] Yeats often dreamed of beating a retreat to Sligo" (1965, p.76). He usually sought for an escape to Sligo where his mother's family used to live, and the Isle of Innisfree is located. In parallel, according to William Flesch, "the poem ultimately may be said to derive from the country-house tradition invented in the 17th century by Ben Jonson and his followers, especially Robert Herrick and Andrew Marvell" (2010, p. 197). As the tradition suggested, Yeats sought for going to the country to find peace and to eliminate all the frivolous and futile anxieties of modern urban life. In the same vein, the poem opens with an instant wish to depart. "I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree" (Yeats, 1934, p. 44). In the first stanza, the speaker mentions his intention to settle down Innisfree where he would "build a small cabin, of clay and wattles made" (Yeats, 1934, p. 44). In that solitary island, he designs a simple life. "Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee / And live alone in the beeloud glade" (Yeats, 1934, p. 44). The speaker is looking for a remote place where he just needs a shelter to accommodate, and bean-rows as well as honeybees. Here, bean-rows might stand for the idea that Yeats himself was in pursuit of wisdom as well as a retreat at the same

time. In his essay "Return to la bonne vaux: the Symbolic Significance of Innisfree," C. Stuart Hunter makes an allusion to Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond (1854) in which "to know beans is to be wise" (1984, p. 73).

The source of Yeats's inspiration, Thoreau — an American transcendentalist— is widely known for his admiration and respect for nature. He also makes a connection between gardening and ritual, claiming the idea that the betterment of humanity is dependent on farming, especially in the "Bean Field" chapter of the Walden Pond. Yeats's demand for seclusion was first inherited from Thoreau as he explicitly mentions in his autobiography: "My father had read to me some passages out of Walden, and I planned to live someday in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree" (Yeats, 1999, p. 85). In this respect, the poem pinpoints this nostalgia and Yeats's endless longing for solitude, which was clearly shaped by Thoreau in his childhood. Hence, the first eight lines of the poem becomes the embodiment of the need for peace, which might be obtained in collaboration with nature as "the cricket sings / There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow / And evening full of the linnet's wings" (Yeats, 1934, p. 44). He wants to be one with nature, escaping from the mundane and the stressful way of living in an urban city; yet he never explicitly mentions it throughout the poem. Perhaps, the poem, therefore, shares many in common with the Romantic tradition, which leads some critics to interpret this very poem as a good example of a late nineteenth-century Romanticism.

With the last stanza of the poem, the only implication of escape from the burden of urban life comes foreground, and it becomes apparent that the speaker's wish to "rise and go [then]" remains as a dream which he could never practice since he "stand[s] on the roadway, or on the pavements grey, / [he] hear[s] it in the deep heart's core" (Yeats, 1934, p. 44). By means of the 'roadway' he stands, and the 'grey' pavements, readers might grasp the idea that it is just a dream, and he only attempts to escape in his mind. All his passion for solitude turns out to be an object of his unrequited love and dissatisfactions that leaves him in despair, as he could not physically achieve it. In this respect, all elements of nature are nothing but mere desires of his pure imagination which ends up with a total disappointment.

Yeats's another poem "When You Are Old," from the same collection The Rose, is another reflection of his disappointment resulted from his excessive passion for an Irish activist Maud Gonne, who rejected Yeats's marriage proposals for several times. Although Yeats wrote several poems with regard to his hopeless love for Gonne such as "The Pity of Love," "The Sorrow of Love," as well as some others in The Rose collection, "When You Are Old" is basically a paraphrase of one of the poems from "Sonnets pour Helene" (1578) by Pierre Ronsard (1524-1585), a highly influential French poet of the sixteenth-century Europe. As Sigrid Renaux notifies, Catherine de Medicis is the referred woman in his poem who became known not only by her virtue, but also her beauty. According to the story, the queen invites "Ronsard to 'celebrate' her in his verse, because Helene was inconsolable due to the death of her fiancé in civil war" (Renaux, 2010, p. 87). When he sings for her, Ronsard unavoidably falls in love with Catherine, despite the difference in their age. In return, Yeats was barely in his twenty-four when he fell in love with the beautiful actress Maud Gonne. In Renaux's words: "Similarly to Ronsard's Helene, she refused anything more than his friendship and becomes — in spite or because of this refusal — the inspirator of a long train of love poems, starting with The Rose poems" (2010, p. 87).

In parallel to Ronsard's Catherine, Maud Gonne was also in a great despair when Yeats wrote the poem "When You Are Old" for her. She lost her two-years old son, Georges, and she came closer to Yeats in her grief. At the time being, Yeats was one of the members of the organisation called The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, dealing with the practice of the occult, metaphysics, and paranormal activities. To find a possible relief after the devastating grief for her son, Gonne joins the group with the help of Yeats. In his Memoirs (1972), Yeats declares the very moment as follows: "She had come to have need of me, as it seemed, and I had no doubt that need would become love, that it was already coming so. I had even watched her a sense of cruelty, as though I were a hunter taking captive some beautiful wild creature" (as cited in Finneran, 2002). According to David A. Ross, the poem might be the product of "a salvo in this campaign, a reminder of this wistful, solitary old age that awaits those who let slip the chance at love" (2009, p. 284). The poem opens with a sort of foreshadowing, a specific moment when addressee would become old and read the book, a collection of poems written for herself. To Flesch, the so-called book is the upcoming poetry collection of Yeats, The Rose (Flesch, 2010), whereas David A. Ross argues that it is "the book that

was to become The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics" (2009, p. 284). In any case of interpretation, it is apparent in the first stanza that the poem defines the consequence it will have in the future, when the woman he addresses will have survived. Hence, the addressee would not read her current self since she "slowly read, and dream of the set look / [her] eyes had once, and of their shadows deep," (Yeats, 1934, p. 46) indicating the very difference between young and old selves of the addressee.

In the second stanza, the speaker explicitly declares the reason of his feelings towards the woman which is far from the sense of carpe diem. She is loved and respected due to "the pilgrim soul in [her], / And the sorrows of [her] changing face" (Yeats, 1934, p. 46). For the speaker, it is possible that there might be several men who admire her beauty, yet what differs him is the very fact that he also pays attention to her sorrow rather than her physical beauty. Through the end of the poem, the speaker concedes the lost, but he claims that she would regret since "Love fled /And paced upon the mountains overhead /And hid his face amid a crowd of stars" (Yeats, 1934, p. 46). He would only be appreciated after his own lost, possibly his death. It might be argued that the speaker's feelings would be reciprocated too late and his love remains unrequited and turns out to be a total disappointment at the time being.

The same theme, disappointment, is mirrored in Yeats's another poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," which was written in 1918 and first published in his collection called The Wild Swans at Coole in 1919. The poem is simply a dramatic monologue through which Yeats gives voice to Robert Gregory, the son of Lady Gregory and Sir William Gregory. On 23 January 1918, Robert's aircraft crashed on the Italian front. A week later, Lady Gregory was informed the tragic event by a telegraph. The following day, she wrote a brief letter to Yeats. In his book *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, R. B.Foster quotes the letter as follows:

"Dear Willie - the long-dreaded telegram has come — Robert has been killed in action. I came here [to Galway] to tell Margaret — I will go home in a day or two —It is very hard to bear. […] If you like it sometime — write something down that we may keep —you understood him better than many" (2005, p. 117).

Afterwards, Yeats wrote four different poems in memory of Robert such as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," "Shepherd and Goatherd," and "Reprisals" as well as "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," which had been mostly read as an elegy, yet it has questionably a very different agenda. It is apparently "a critique of Irish involvement in British wars for colonial power and examination of the dehumanising effects of modern warfare" (Riel, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, it might be argued that it is an anti-war poem, taking its inspiration from the long-lasted disappointment of the Irish, caused by the English since, one way or the other, Robert died while serving to the English army.

In "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," the speaker is addicted to flying which ends up with catastrophe. His "love of action led him to an untimely death abroad" (Jeffares, 2014, p. 162). The speaker decides to take part in the war neither for a deep love for his country nor a hatred for the enemy. He claims: "Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love" (Yeats, 1934, p. 152). He has also nothing to do with the intensive propaganda that had been made during the war. It is a highly personal passion for him since "Nor law, nor duty base [him] fight, / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds" (Yeats, 1934, p. 152). He believes that the war has no benefits for his people, and his country would not be damaged: "My country is Kiltaran Cross, / My countrymen Kiltaran's poor, / No likely end could bring them loss / Or leave them happier than before" (Yeats, 1934, p. 152). He is of the opinion that that war would not bring any significant change to the miserable condition of his own country. To the speaker, life is already wretched for himself. He is sure that he would die, yet he feels no fear of death, rather he welcomes it since death would be a sort of emancipation as he claims: "The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind" (Yeats, 1934, p. 152). Apparently, death would not be the worst thing for him. In Jahan Ramazani's words, the "airman bespeaks a final illumination, preferring the lonely joy of death to the monotony of life" (2009, p. 204).

On the other hand, the title of the poem is highly significant in that it refers to 'an Irish airman' rather than 'the Irish Airman,' which connotes numerous anonymous Irish men who wasted in the war for the sake of England. According to Riel, as an Irish victim,

> "the speaker has already died in spirit and has only now to die in body to complete his transformation as an instrument of murder. [Hence], Yeats gives us the portrait of a sociopathic mercenary, who, while fighting to further the colonial power of an empire that fiercely maintains control over his 'country,' advances a cold, 'balanced' argument that advocates bloodlust for not only those he does 'not hate,' but for his own death" (2015, p. 9).

Thus, the airman's motive behind attending the war does not indicate any official duty or responsibility, but merely appears a personal conflict. In other words, "the dead man is seen as fighting not out of duty to king and country but out of a purely existential thrill in encountering death" (Ramazani, 2009, p. 80). Ironically, it is further uncovered that Robert Gregory was killed accidentally by an allied Italian aircraft, that would double Yeats's grief if he ever knew the reality.To put in a nutshell, the young, promising Irish man unreasonably wasted and became the object of Yeats's beautiful poem, indicating his disappointment to a great extent.

Lastly, "The Circus Animal's Desertion," posthumously published in the collection named Last Poems (1939), is chiefly a depiction of the poet as an old man. As David A. Ross argues, "Yeats always believed that approaching death is foremost and invitation to self-summary and self-declaration, and his later poetry seeks concertedly for an epitaph that would express what he had been" (2009, p. 68). In this manner, the poem stands for his self-questioning, a sort of confrontation with his art so far. Implicit in the title, the poem's "pathos derives in large part from its central trope of the poet as a ringmaster whose animals—his poetic images or power over language itself—no longer respond to his commands" (Rawl, 2012, p. 1). In this context, the whole poem is representative of the poet's effort to retrieve his former excellence in his art.

"The Circus Animals' Desertion" is composed of five stanzas in three parts, and each part has a specific standpoint. The first part of the poem involves a single stanza emphasising a certain disappointment, namely the lack of inspiration as the speaker comes towards the end of his artistic life. On the other hand, in the second and the longest part of the poem, there are three stanzas, and each of them bears references to

his former writing experiences. Finally, the speaker seems to find a solution to his disappointment with the last part.

Accordingly, to David Holdeman, there are two major ironies throughout the poem. First, "the poet only acknowledges his art's limitations after his creativity seems to have failed him." Secondly, "in disclosing these limitations he finds renewed artistic purpose" (2010, p. 112). His sense of failure is evident in the very first lines of the poem since the speaker makes an enormous effort to find a theme for his poem, which generates the first part. The poem opens with the anxiety of the speaker if he would experience the writer's block: "I sought a theme and sought for it in vain, / I sought it daily for six weeks or so" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296). Failed and vein, he deplores for his loosening gift for writing poetry, which turns him into a "broken man [who] must be satisfied with [his] heart" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296). As he remembers his prolific days, he complains that"[his] circus animals" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296) already faded away. He could no more enrich his poetry with his successively rich symbols, metaphors, and allusions. Circus, the main metaphor of the first stanza, might be interpreted as a symbolic space where the speaker used to serve a flamboyant display of his poetic creativity in the way that animals entertain the audience with their unexpected abilities and tricks. Nonetheless, the speaker, due to his old age and fading skills, cannot manage to fascinate his readers anymore.

With the second part of the poem, he admits that he could just "enumerate old themes" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296),and makes several allusions to his older works. As the second part includes three stanzas, in each stanza, he refers to his three major works. Interestingly, Yeats primarily reflects one of his long-narrative poems, two of his plays in chronologic order rather than any pieces of his lyric poems. According to Micheal Rawl, his emphasis on his dramatic works rather than poems "provides a hint about how crucial he felt his dramatic works were in his overall oeuvre" (2012, p. 1). In the first stanza of the second part, the speaker mainly recalls his famous narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisin" (1889) in which he investigated the mythic Celtic hero Oisin. According to the story, Oisin abandons his country after falling love with a girl named Niamh. Then, they begin their journey on horseback and visit three different islands. When they return to Ireland, they notice that it is three-hundred years passed and nothing remains the same. Yet, while recalling his ostentatious mythmaking, now

he notes that those were nothing but "[v]ain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose, / Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems," (Yeats, 1994, p. 296). Thus, suddenly, Yeats turns into himself and refers to his unrequited love towards Maud Gonne as he "starved for the bosom of his faery bride" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296). Next, he refers to his play The Countess Cathleen (1892), a significant play in that the countess sacrifices her soul in order to save the Irish peasants who were deprived of miserable conditions of the day. It is another direct reference to Maud Gonne, who was a devoted activist for the Irish liberty. Now, Yeats might be regretful for writing such a political play since the innocence of their fight had already disturbed and turned into a pure violence as the lines follow: "I thought my dear must her own soul destroy / So did fanaticism and hate enslave it" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296).

David A. Ross asserts that the play is highly significant since "it represents a 'counter-truth' to the 'Wanderings of Oisin,' as it renounces rather than embraces the world" (2009, p. 68), which might be a natural outcome for the author because he recognises the fact that he is closer to his own death and finds himself totally frustrated not only by his unrequited passion for Gonne, but also the final situation of the Irish trouble as the speaker claims "And then a counter-truth filled out its play, / 'The Countess Cathleen' was the name I gave it, / She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296).

The final allusion that the speaker makes is in the third stanza of the second part, where he refers to another play On Baile's Strand (1903), through which Yeats handled the story of Cuchulain, one of the greatest heroes of the Celtic mythology. The speaker mentions the story of "Cuchulain [who] fought the ungovernable sea" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296). In one of the legendary stories of Cuchulain, he is failed by Conchubar, his antagonist, and kills a young stranger on the shore. When he learns that the stranger was actually his own son, he desperately chops the waves in fury until he drowns. Similar to the vain struggles of Cuchulain, the speaker moves from one myth to another in order to find a solution in his own block. "Alternately, taking "old" to mean ancient or traditional rather than familiar or accustomed, the question implies that he can do no better than recycle the kind of folk themes that Oisin, Cathleen, and Cuchulain represent" (Ross, 2009, p. 68). Yet, suddenly, he turns his attention to the reason why

he frequently goes back to the ancient myths and heroes. To the speaker "[i]t was the dream itself enchanted [him]: / Character isolated by a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296).

According to Rawl, "the heroic ideal became not so much a prospect for the future as a decayed edifice, a survival from the past" (2012, p. 10). Like the animals in the circus, Yeats' great ambitions for Irish revival once seemed to be attainable. Similarly, the heroic ideal appears to an alternative reality that could be experienced; but, like the abandoning of the animals, his hopes totally left him alone during the very last days of his life. Not only poetry, but also theatre could not be a remedy for Yeats since "[p]layers and painted stage took all [his] love / And not those things that they were emblems of" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296).

With the last stanza, the speaker not only closes the poem, but also symbolically refers to the final conclusion of his artistic life with a fundamental question that "[t]hose masterful images because complete /Grew in pure mind but out of what began" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296)? Shortly after, he reaches the conclusion that he "is forced back to the sordid material from which his 'masterful images' derived"(Brooks, 2011, p. 173). He should definitely go back where he began. Although he sought for various myths that require cultural, historical, and spiritual knowledge, the source of inspiration might be hidden behind the very material existence such as simple objects such as "[o]ld kettles, old bottles, and a broken can, / Old iron, old bones, old rags" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296) as well as his fleshly-body which he calls "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" (Yeats, 1994, p. 296).

To conclude, William Butler Yeats left numerous poems after his death. During his prolific career, various issues became his subject matter. Nevertheless, the common point in some of his lyrical poems that the readers might grasp is disappointment. As it is briefly argued, his disappointment resulted from divergent matters that were not only political, but also personal. Once he desired to escape from the turmoil of the urban life, yet he could not. Then, he fell in love with the young Maud Gonne, but rejected more than once. Moreover, he witnessed the loss of Robert Gregory that was not easy neither for him nor his close friend Lady Gregory. Step by step, Yeats became closer to his own death and he experienced his final disappointment with the anxiety of experiencing

the writer's block. Notwithstanding, his closing disappointment left his readers a beautiful lyrical poem that is still being read and told by us.

Notes on the contributors

Zübeyir Savaş is an Instructor of English at İzmir Bakırçay University, School of Foreign Languages where he has been a member since August 2018. He completed both his undergraduate and M.A. studies at Pamukkale University, Department of English Language and Literature. Currently, he is a Ph.D. student in the English Language and Literature Department at Hacettepe University.

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