



William Butler Yeats as Precursor of the Modern Age

Derina Kurrey, Dr. Vibha Singh Thakur

Department of English Literature, Atal Bihari Vajpayee University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

Received: 15 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 11 Aug 2025; Accepted: 15 Aug 2025; Available online: 19 Aug 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet who known for his unique style of writing and newness towards the modern era of English Literature. Also recognized as the bridge between 19th century literary traditions and 20th century modernist movements, he played a big role in shaping modern literature. Though he began his career with romantic and mystical poetry inspired by traditional themes like Irish folklore, Hinduism and Symbolism, Yeats gradually evolved into a poet whose themes, style, and vision anticipated many of the complex concerns of Modernism and Romanticism. Yeats lived during a time of great transformation between 19th and 20th century – wars, political struggles and a growing sense of uncertainty in society. His poetry reflects all this, he questioned old beliefs and explored new ways of thinking, which is what makes him a forerunner of the modern age. Yeats's journey is no less revolutionary, his early immersion in Romanticism, his flirtation with mysticism, his engagement with Irish nationalism, and his ultimate stylistic evolution from lyricism to symbolic abstraction mark him as a unique bridge between the old and the new. In this sense, he can be viewed as a ‘Precursor of the modern age’.



Keywords— Irish Folklore, Hinduism, Symbolism, Precursor, Mystical poetry, Transformation, Flirtation, Romanticism, Modernism, Nationalism, Lyricism.

I. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats was the most representative & Irish poet, dramatist, writer and literary critic who was known as the precursor of the 20th century means modern era. He was born in seaside resident named as Sandymount, suburb of Dublin, Ireland on June 13, 1865. He belonged from a merchant and artistic background family who was interested in arts and literary things. Yeats was also interested in arts and literature from very young age and started writing from the age of 17 and written over 100 works in his lifetime period from his legendary mind who took eyes on Mythologies, Hinduism, Irish nationalism and many more, became the pioneer of the modern age. He was the founder of “Abbey Theatre” (National theatre of Ireland) found in 1904 and “The Rhymers’ Club”, also known as the figure of “Irish Literary Revival” & senator of Irish Free State. In 1923, he became the first Irishman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for his inspired poetry. He translated the most famous Indian-Hinduism Bengali work “Geetanjali” (Song Offerings) written by famous Indian author Rabindranath Tagore, for which Tagore was

awarded from Nobel Prize in 1913, he also translated the Indian collection of foundational texts in Hindu philosophy named as “The Ten Principles Upanishads” with Shri Purohit Swami. His works shows his affection towards symbolism, romanticism, realism, interest in mythologies and Hinduism. His last breath was in Roquebrune-Cap-Martyn, near Mentone, France on January 28, 1939 aged 73, but always alive from his transformational works, remembered as the “Last Romantic”. When he was buried to the graveyard of the village Drumcliffe, County Sligo, few lines were written on his grave which was taken from his own poem: -

“Cast a cold Eye on Life, on Death, Horseman, pass by.”

II. LIFE & WORKS

William Butler Yeats was the forerunner of the modern age and also a bridge between literary traditions & modernist movements. He was born in merchant and artistic family background where his father, John Butler Yeats, was

a Barrister who eventually became a portrait painter of some distinction, whose friendship with Henry Irving, and with the later members of the Pre-Raphaelite school of painters, was to be of importance in his son's work. His mother was named as Susan Pollexfen and belonged from the Pollex family of County Sligo. Through both parents were from a great merchant and artistic families and Yeats claimed kinship with various Anglo-Irish Protestant families who are mentioned in his work.

Yeats had 3 siblings, brother named John (who was became painter) and sisters named Elizabeth and Susan (who were interested in art & craft). Yeats family were used to travel from Ireland to England for their artistic work purposes so, soon after his birth, Yeats' parents moved to London, and he went to school in Hammersmith, his schoolmates said that he was interested in Latin language more than others like did spelling mistakes, weak in Mathematics and languages also found interested in Biology & Zoology. Much of his boyhood, and his school holidays, were spent in Sligo, where he stayed with his grand-parents. This County, its scenery, folk-lore and supernatural legends, color much of his work, providing many and complex emotions, and certain symbols. For a short time, he also learnt painting, and retained throughout his life a passionate love, emotions and understanding of that art. Then at the age of 17 he started writing, influenced by romantic poet P.B. Shelley, Yeats called him a magician, later in his writings impact of Edmund Spenser and Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood was shown. He took turn towards Irish mythology and started studying William Blake and Oscar Wilde's writing.

He was interested towards spiritualism and astrology's because of the Indian culture and Hinduism. Yeats started studying about the Hindu culture from the Indian works written by Bengali attorney Mohini Mohun Chatterji. In 1885, Chatterji arrived London and delivered his lectures on Indian-Upanishadic philosophy, theosophy, cultures and mystical thoughts which impressed Yeats deeply and Yeats influenced by him. This influence is evident in his poetries and Yeats dedicated him a particular poem written on Chatterji named as "Mohini Chatterjee" published in 1933.

But while he was still young, his father, always a profound influence upon him, introduced him to two prominent literary figures-Edward Dowden and John Todhunter. It was all because of Dowden's encouragement that some of his earliest poetry was published. His first work because of which he got identified named as "The Island of Statues" in which he used the poetic model of Shelley and Spenser, this work was published in Dublin University Review. His first success came after publishing "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889). He quickly became involved

in the literary life of London of the 1890's: as a founder of the Rhymers' Club which was found by Ernest Rhys and Yeats, and became a friend of William Morris, W. E. Henley, Lionel Johnson, and Arthur Symonds, this was the group of male poets in London who were used to share their poetries by meeting together in pub.

In 1889, age of 23 Yeats met Maud Gonne who was an Irish nationalist & English heiress and compliments Yeats first work, from then Yeats started falling in love with her. In 1891, he proposed her for marriage but she refused and Yeats got refused many times by her. Yeats said meeting to Gonne was the beginning of troubles in his life and also portrayed her as an inspiration towards Irish nationalism & in his literary works. In 1892, his first play *The Countess Cathleen* was published and he became a central figure in the Irish Literary Revival also known as Irish Literary Renaissance, a poetry published as *Celtic Twilight* in 1893. Yeats met Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn in 1896, who encouraged Yeats writing dramas and engage towards nationalism.

As the time passes, Maud Gonne got married to John Macbride in 1903 and Yeats was deeply hurt, felt very disappointed & from this marriage his works faced a worse impact. From here Yeats started to criticize Macbride through his literary languages and compared Maud Gonne to Helen, wrote a volume *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910.

Yeats shifted his interest towards French Symbolism and focused on Irish content. Then in 1904, Yeats founded the Abbey Theatre (National theatre of Ireland) where the Irish playwright's plays were performed like Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge, Edward Martyn, Sean O'Casey, W.B. Yeats and more. The aim to find this theatre was to see the Ireland uncorrupted and full of imaginative audience who will be able to see the future ahead. At the time he published a lot of works. In 1909, Yeats met an American poet Ezra Pound, their collaboration and mutual influence played a key role in the development of modernist poetry and drama. They used to live together for a long time and collaborated on many works; projects like *At the Hawk's Well* first performed in 1916 and published in 1917. Then Yeats wrote his famous work *Easter 1916*, *The Wild Swans at Coole*.

Then he turned into 51 in 1916, thought to get married and again went to propose Maud Gonne for the last time but again got rejected (she was been separated to Macbride from a long time and her husband was died too in 1916), then he proposed to Iseult Gonne daughter of Maud Gonne but she also denied to marry him. After a long-time rejection, Yeats had no generations for future so, he married a 25 years old young lady named Georgiana Hyde Lees in

1917 and had 2 children named Anne Yeats (1919) and Michael Yeats (1921).

At that period, World War-I was started, the situations and conditions of countries involved on that war was all purposeless, everyone were just distracted from their path, feeling hopeless in their life so, at that moment, Yeats wrote a beautiful and inspirational poem which was got popular and boost the power, energy and purpose of everyone named as *The Second Coming* in 1919. After that Yeats life turned into succeed path on literature and he wrote the things based on newness, modernization and the creative way of thinking about everything. In 1923, he got awarded from Nobel Prize in literature for his inspired poetry which inspire a lot to everyone and had use extremely artistic form according to that period, then he became the first Irishman to receive this precious achievement. From that time, Yeats achieved a lot of success and fame in his life through his works which became the new path to build something variant and unique in life.

Yeats wrote and published a lot of works in different genres like poetries, short stories, plays and one short novel but he never wrote extended novels in his life time, the works written and published by Yeats in his entire life long period that contributed the beautiful and unique morals towards literature.

III. CRITICISMS RELATED TO YEATS AS A CRITIC

W.B. Yeats was known for his strong opinions and often criticized other writers, both contemporary and ancient. He was a symbolist poet used symbolic structures, verses, styles and imagery. He usually known as Master of Traditional forms for the use of traditional and ancient forms.

Yeats influenced so many authors and writers from his recognition-able works and movements like Seamus Heaney, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Frank O'Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, Susan Howe, James Longenbach and more. Even Yeats was also influenced by various writers for his works and literary language such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Edmund Spenser, William Blake, Mohini Mohun Chatterji, John Keats, William Wordsworth, John Donne, T.S. Eliot, Robert Southey and so on.

He was particularly critic of Rabindranath Tagore, calling his later work "sentimental rubbish". He also expressed his thoughts about the obscurity of William Blake's poetry, though he admired Blake's visionary qualities. Additionally, Yeats' work and criticism engaged with and sometimes challenged the ideas of other writers like John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and even James

Joyce, in various ways throughout his career. The ways and things of writers which were criticized by Yeats: -

- Rabindranath Tagore: Yeats famously criticized Tagore's later work, particularly after Tagore got awarded from the Nobel Prize like *Ghar-Baire* & *The Cult of the Chakra*. In a letter, Yeats stated that he and Sturge Moore "got out three good books" by Tagore, but that Tagore's subsequent work was "sentimental rubbish" and destroyed his reputation as writer. He felt that Tagore's focus on being recognized in English led to a decline in the quality of his poetry.
- William Blake: While Yeats admired Blake's visionary qualities and considered him one of the "great artificers of God," he also acknowledged Blake's obscurity. Yeats, in his own work, sought a balance between the visionary and the more grounded aspects of life, making him less inclined to embrace the full extent of Blake's mystical visions.
- John Keats: Yeats contrasted his own approach with that of Keats, who he saw as remaining closer to the materials of life than Blake or Shelley. While Yeats valued Keats' focus on the tangible world, he was also drawn to the more idealist and visionary aspects of poetry, aligning himself more closely with Blake and Shelley in that regard.
- James Joyce: While Yeats didn't directly criticize Joyce's work in the same way he criticized Tagore or Blake, he did acknowledge Joyce's talent but also expressed some reservations about his style and subject matter. According to *Ricorso.net*, he considered Joyce to be a great writer, but his work was not necessarily aligned with the direction Yeats wanted Irish literature to take.
- Other Writers: Yeats' criticism also extended to his contemporaries and figures from literary history, often using them as a means of exploring his own aesthetic and philosophical ideas. His critical essays often served as a form of self-reflection and a way to articulate his evolving views on poetry and art.

W.B. Yeats has been also criticized by various authors and critics in both ways; good and weakness, particularly regarding his political views, his engagement with Irish nationalism, and his use of esoteric and mystical themes. Some critics have highlighted his complex and sometimes contradictory stances on colonialism and nationalism, while others have questioned the nature of his spiritual and occult beliefs. Specific critiques include:

- Postcolonialism and Colonialism: Some scholars, like David Lloyd, have examined Yeats' role as both a postcolonial and colonialist figure, particularly in the context of Irish nationalism. Others, like Shamsul Islam and Michael Collins, have criticized his exoticizing language when discussing figures like Rabindranath Tagore,

suggesting a tokenizing or unbalanced colonial relationship, according to Scholar Blogs.

- **Political Views:** Critics have debated the nature of Yeats' political views, with some pointing to his association with figures like Maud Gonne and his involvement in the Irish Literary Revival as evidence of his nationalist leanings. Others have highlighted his skepticism towards democracy and his embrace of aristocratic values.

- **Esoteric and Mystical Themes:** Yeats' fascination with the occult, spiritualism, and esoteric traditions has also drawn criticism. Some have questioned the validity of his mystical system, outlined in "A Vision," while others have focused on how these themes influenced his poetic imagery and symbolism.

- **Literary Style:** While Yeats is celebrated for his poetic achievements, some critics have also noted stylistic inconsistencies and a tendency towards the archaic or overly symbolic in his work.

- **Influence on Other Writers:** While Yeats' influence on other writers is widely acknowledged, some have criticized his approach as precursor, particularly in the context of American poetry.

Examples of critics who have engaged with these issues:

- **David Lloyd:** His work explores the relationship between Yeats' poetry and nationalism, examining his complex position as both a product and a critic of colonialism.

- **Seamus Deane:** Deane's "Celtic Revivals" raises questions about Yeats' portrayal of nation and history.

- **Jahan Ramazani:** Ramazani uses Yeats to interrogate postcolonial studies and vice versa, ultimately suggesting that Yeats' work qualifies him as an anti-colonial poet.

- **Declan Kiberd:** Kiberd examines Yeats' reconstruction of childhood and argues that his writing style reflects a search for selfhood in a postcolonial context.

- **W.H. Auden:** In his essay "Yeats as an Example," Auden acknowledges Yeats' loneliness in making choices about his experience but also praises him for some of the most beautiful poetry of modern times.

So as a critic, Yeats went through both ways of criticizing others and criticized by others which shows the interest of every writer towards literature based on the different themes and unique style of each according to their current periods and struggles. Yeats known for his own ways of creation and newness mostly appreciated by others not that much criticized negatively.

IV. YEATS AS PRECURSOR OF THE MODERN AGE

W.B. Yeats is often considered one of the most important figures who bridged the gap between the 19th-century literary traditions and the emerging modernist movement of the 20th century. In other words, he helped to shape the way modern literature talks about the world, especially in times of confusion, war, and change.

His poem "The Second Coming", written in 1919 right after World War I, is one of the clearest examples of this. It's a poem that feels both ancient and futuristic. It's mysterious, predictive, disturbing, and full of imaginary images that reflect a world that's falling apart, just like the world that Yeats saw around him.

1. Chaos and Breakdown of Order

In the opening lines:

**"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,"**

Yeats describes a world where the usual systems: political, moral, even spiritual, are collapsing. This sense of loss of structure and certainty is exactly what many people in the modern age felt after the trauma of World War I and the growing instability of the 20th century. Modernist writers were deeply influenced by this idea, the feeling that the old ways no longer worked, and that something darker and unknown was coming.

2. A New and Frightening Future

Yeats was not just mourning the loss of the past; he was also warning about a disturbing future. In "The Second Coming", he writes:

**"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"**

This "rough beast" is a symbol of a new era being born, but not a hopeful one. It's wild, unpredictable, and possibly dangerous. This reflects how modernism often rejected the idea of progress as automatically good. Instead, it questioned whether humanity was heading toward something better or something worse.

3. Merge of Mysticism with the Modernism

One of Yeats' great strengths was using myth and symbolism to talk about the modern world. In "The Second Coming", he uses Christian imagery (like the "Second Coming" of Christ) but twists it, instead of a savior, we get a "rough beast." This kind of writing, blending the old with the new, the symbolic with the real, became a major feature of modernist poetry. Writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others followed Yeats' example.

4. Spiritual Crisis and Inner Conflict

Yeats often wrote about spiritual confusion, something many people in the modern age could relate to. In a time when science, war, and politics had shaken old beliefs, Yeats explored how humans could make sense of the world without clear answers. In "The Second Coming", there's a deep sense of uncertainty, as if humanity is being pulled toward something it doesn't understand. That sense of being lost is one of the central feelings of modernist literature.

So, W.B. Yeats, especially through "The Second Coming", helped to create the foundation for modern literature. His ability to express the fear, confusion, and transformation of the early 20th century made him a precursor of the modern age. Even today, lines like "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" are quoted whenever the world seems to be in crisis. That's because Yeats captured something deeply human and timeless, the fear of change, the loss of certainty, and the haunting question of what comes next.

V. CONCLUSION

In the favor of literary history, few figures loom as mysterious and influential as William Butler Yeats. To regard him merely as a poet of the Irish Revival is to overlook the vast reach of his creative intellect and the deep fissures he explored in the human condition. As the world transitioned into the 20th century a time marked by global conflict, societal fragmentation, and spiritual dislocation, Yeats emerged not just as a chronicler of these shifts but as a seer who anticipated them with prophetic clarity. In this regard, Yeats deserves recognition not only as a monumental figure of his own era but as a true precursor of the Modern Age.

Yeats' poetry did not emerge in isolation. His life was rooted in a rapidly transforming Ireland and a Europe unbalanced on the brink of reinvention and collapse. This dual heritage imbued his work with both a reverence for tradition and an acute awareness of change. His engagement with mysticism, cyclical theories of traditions, and Irish mythology gave birth to a poetic voice that looked both backward to spiritual anchors and forward to cultural upheaval. This tension between continuity and rupture defines Yeats' significance as a bridge between Romanticism and Modernism.

In his early work, Yeats embraced the ideals of the Celtic Twilight, invoking the myths and legends of Ireland in a romanticized fashion. However, as his perspective matured and the 20th century began to unfold with its harrowing realities, his poetry evolved into something darker, more symbolic, and more modern in its exploration

of human frailty and existential uncertainty. Yeats' stylistic evolution from lyrical Romanticism to symbolic Modernism mirrors the cultural direction of his time.

REFERENCES

- [1] Forester, R. F: W. B. Yeats: A Life: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- [2] Jeffares, A. Norman: W. B. Yeats: A New Biography, 2001.
- [3] Brown, Terence: The Life of W.B. Yeats: A Critical Biography, Wiley-Blackwell, 2001.
- [4] Bhabani S. Baral & Sujata Muduli: Portrait of W.B. Yeats: As a Poet, 2022.
- [5] <https://www.ijrar.org/papers/IJRAR2001324.pdf>
- [6] <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1906U05.pdf>
- [7] <https://ijellh.com/index.php/OJS/article/view/11221>
- [8] https://www.worldwidejournals.com/global-journal-for-research-analysis-GJRA/recent_issues_pdf/2018/February/February_2018_1517837818__68.pdf