

*OCCULTURE: W.B. YEATS' PROSE FICTION AND THE LATE  
NINETEENTH- AND EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY OCCULT  
REVIVAL*

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ABSTRACT

In addition to being a respected poet, dramatist, essayist, and statesman, William Butler Yeats was a dedicated student of the occult and practicing magician for most of his adult life. In spite of his dedication, Yeats' commitment to occultism has often been ridiculed as "bughouse" (as Ezra Pound put it), shunted to the margins of academic discourse, or ignored altogether. Yeats' occult-focused prose fiction—the occult trilogy of stories "Rosa Alchemica," "The Tables of the Law," and "The Adoration of the Magi" and the unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*—has often received similarly dismissive treatment. Some critics have accused Yeats of being an escapist or of being out of touch with the intellectual currents of his time.

However, Yeats was in touch with the intellectual currents of his time, one of which was the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occult revival. This was not a fringe movement; it was one which intersected with some of the most pressing social and cultural issues of the time. These include the dissatisfaction with mainstream religions, the renegotiation of women's roles, the

backlash against science, and nationalism and the colonial enterprise. This intersection is what I have termed occulture.

The central purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First, I demonstrate the cultural and academic relevance of the occult revival by analyzing its connections to these critical issues. Second, I situate the occult trilogy and *The Speckled Bird* as artifacts of the occult revival and its associated facets. Through its main characters, the occult trilogy illustrates a fragmented self associated with literary modernism and with scientific challenges to individual identity from Darwin, Freud, and others. In addition, these three stories exemplify a sacralization of the domestic sphere which conflicts with the officially-sanctioned sacred spaces of mainstream religions. *The Speckled Bird* also reconfigures the sacred space as Michael Hearne contemplates a magical order with Irish nationalist implications. In examining these works within this historical context, I present them as texts which engage with the social and cultural landscape of the time.