“YEATS”: FASHIONING CREDIBILITY, CANONICITY, AND ETHNIC IDENTITY THROUGH TRANSNATIONAL APPROPRIATION

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2012
Unlike many canonized literary figures, William Butler Yeats endures as a curious and multifarious point of reference for both the academic community and for purveyors of more popular media. Yeats allusions, references, and evocations span time, location, and genre. Beginning midway through the twentieth century, Yeats’s words have been used to title a notable sum of books, from those dealing specifically with Ireland’s political history and other concerns related to Yeats’s preoccupations (Tom Grime’s *A Stone of the Heart*), to what might be considered more “highbrow” contemporary literature that has nothing to do with Ireland (Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*), “lowbrow” literature (Robert B. Parker’s *The Widening Gyre*), and something in between (Bradbury’s *The Golden Apples of the Sun*, Woody Allen’s *Mere Anarchy*). Indeed it is hardly possible to identify accurate, comprehensive patterns among these diverse references. Their sheer volume and consistency, however, clearly indicate that Yeats possesses and continues to retain an authoritative, enduring, and uniquely protean capital; his literary signature aids the evoker and affords resources, aligning her with a distinctive, though vaguely defined, literary tradition, historically popular and urbane, that simultaneously exploits, asserts,
and perpetuates Yeats’s eminent and mutable position in the increasingly globalized, transnational cultural memory of the mid to late 20th century.

Despite this apparent phenomenon, recent studies on Yeats have approached his texts by not altogether inspired means that demonstrate little concern for their own shared implicit but fundamental premise: Yeats matters. Yeats Studies seems to have grown particularly insular; recent overviews reveal that many critics simply write back to one another and engage in long standing debates over issues like the ordering of Yeats’s poems (O’Hara, Bornstein, “Of What is Past”). Though academics surely have the propensity to engage largely, if not solely, with those in their own field of study, it is a particularly curious phenomenon here because Yeats is remarkably present outside the academic community. Regardless, the fundamental methodological impulse of these reassignments largely remains the same throughout the latter half of the 20th century: critics have continually approached Yeats in an effort to pinpoint the “true” meaning of his work, and to uncover Yeats’s masks – his capricious identities and intentions. Therefore, a more imaginative direction is necessary, one that is concerned less with how we read, but why we read Yeats. Yeats has been and still may be an important figure for literary critics who try to isolate meaning and work out issues of authorial intent, but his worth outside academia is equally fascinating and probes, and ultimately bridges, the hierarchical division between an academic readership and everyone else. Indeed, it is ironic that Yeats, the canonical 20th-century poet, has been so markedly treasured by a popular readership that otherwise cares little for modernist poetry.

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1 See Ben-Merre, Bornstein’s “Facsimiles,” Maun, and Schmidt.
“Yeats” is a unique cultural phenomenon; by way of compound and diverse appropriations by numerous groups and institutions, his poetry and personage have been tangled in complex notions of national, ethnic and social power across the 20th century. We will see that Yeats has been packaged for different markets, and these varied methods constitute and assert his value, and are often responsible for the reasons why the public has bought into Yeats’s greatness. There is a strong distinction between the canonical Yeats – the poet who has been historically celebrated by academics and nonacademics alike – and the “complete” Yeats, with all his unattractive compulsions, and truly bizarre, and sometimes unreadable, occultist visions. Still, we can untangle these problematic relationships in ways that illuminate Yeats’s work, the work of those who seek his alliance, and the cultural practice of fashioning a literary, transnational figurehead. Yeats remains a productive site, a vehicle by which we can approach numerous complex issues: Irish ethnic identification and construction during the 20th century, the transnational appropriation of art and politics, and the creation and credence of literary celebrity. The appropriation of Yeats as a transnational literary and political figurehead in and outside of Ireland demonstrates an intricate network of notions about ethnic heritages, nationalisms, and literary alliances that deserves to be thoroughly considered.

From Yeats to “Yeats”: George Yeats and Richard Ellmann

Yeats’s posthumous, constructed persona(s) originates with Yeats’s widow and literary executor, George Hyde-Lees Yeats, and her specific choice to put Yeats’s legacy in the hands of Richard Ellmann. The impact of George Yeats on W.B. Yeats’s philosophies and creative output has seldom been regarded by anyone but Richard
Ellmann, whose work, we will see, was very much an extension of George’s own vision; therefore, their efforts provide a valuable lens through which we can begin to comprehend Yeats’s impact throughout the century, the process of canonical construction, and the complicated forces of appeasement that play into biographical composition: those who tell our tales must be granted access, and their voices are necessarily enabled, only, perhaps, because they will write a history that pleases the one who provides admittance.

Though she clearly influenced Yeats’s writing during his lifetime, George Yeats had an even more indelible role in shaping his posthumous construction and is therefore a vital component in understanding Yeats’s function in the twentieth century. Though George and W.B. had known each other for years because of their involvement in the same occultist circles, their marriage was a rather sudden affair that took place in the wake of Iseult Gonne’s rejection of Yeats’s marriage proposal and came as a surprise to Yeats’s friends. As the story goes, Yeats, in the early days of his marriage to George, expressed a melancholic disappointment with his decision to marry, still harboring apparent feelings for Maude Gonne and her daughter Iseult. Yeats seems to have had trouble concealing discontent, an emotion that plagued him throughout life. His attitude, however, quickly changed upon discovering that his new wife had begun practicing what they would later term automatic writing, a process by which, according to George, she could channel and receive messages from Controls or Guides; Yeats, who held a lifelong interest in such matters was instantly and irreversibly captivated. It is evident that George Yeats’s automatic writing strongly influenced W.B. Yeats’s ideas; much of his later poetry and what specifically became *A Vision* were born from the automatic writing
and their subsequent discussions. But it is also clear that these “messages” worked to the advantage of George Yeats, ensuring her power in the marriage and, subsequently, in the management of Yeats’s legacy (Harper).

The primary source of this story, like the majority of biographical details concerning Yeats, was Richard Ellmann. However, Ellmann took some time to further illuminate this situation by revising/updating his account of the automatic writing after the death of George Yeats; this revision has been overlooked, but its details shed much light on the process of canonical construction. Ellmann remains one of Yeats’s most important and influential champions and continues to provide a foundation for Yeats criticism, a foundation that, though its accuracy has been left largely ignored, generates a number of questions and demonstrates that, though Yeats may have adopted many masks that served his own ever-changing visions during his own lifetime, he would continue to be adorned with a range of guises that served his biographers after his death.

In *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, originally published in 1948, Ellmann accounted for George’s automatic writing, a central event in Yeats’s consciousness, rather casually:

A few days after their marriage, Mrs. Yeats for the first time in her life attempted automatic writing. There were a few meaningless lines, and then suddenly she thought that her hand was seized by a superior power. In the fragmentary sentences that were scribbled on the paper her amazed husband saw the rudiments of the system which he had spent his early life trying to evoke through vision, and his middle age trying to formulate through research. Here, in his own home, was miracle without
qualification. The bush was burning at last. (222)

Here the chapter ends, and Ellmann moves on to evaluate “esoteric Yeatsism.” But Ellmann apparently was not content with his original account and decided to fill in the gaps after George Yeats’s death.

In the decades after its original publication in 1948, Richard Ellmann’s *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, became the source literary critics consulted for biographical details concerning Yeats. But it would take Ellmann thirty years to disclose, if not thoroughly, some details concerning the help offered by Yeats’s widow. In the preface to the second edition in 1979, Ellmann describes George Yeats’s role in the construction of the book; in many ways, the illuminating preface stands as a monument to her. One might also note Ellmann’s need, implicit but apparent, to assert the credibility of his and George Yeats’s version of W.B. Yeats this second time around. Though Mrs. Yeats was notorious for not answering letters, she was uncharacteristically welcoming to Ellmann, a young but ambitious scholar who wrote to her in hopes of viewing her husband’s manuscripts. Upon arriving at her home, Ellmann found neatly arranged files and cabinets and quickly learned of George Yeats’s encyclopedic knowledge of where even the most minor fragments of information could be found. According to Ellmann, he would turn to her to fill in the gaps of his evolving narrative and answer his questions, and she would supply him with an old suitcase filled with papers that would provide the necessary information. Additionally, Ellmann recalls, without complaint or distrust, how George Yeats aided him in the interpretation of her husband’s work. He recalls several instances when she disagreed with his interpretation of one of Yeats’s poems, producing memories of her own that always asserted the validity of her own analyses. Ellmann strictly adhered to
her account: “No doubt she was right,” he writes (viii). George Yeats’s apparent influence, though only emphasized briefly and in each case as assistance rather than manipulation, is noteworthy. “She had played a great role with aplomb,” he writes, as though he has little reason to regard the matter any further (ix).

Any reader regarding Ellmann’s account of George Yeats’s utility, rapidity, and self-effacement with even the merest skepticism will here uncover fertile ground for doubt and, at the very least, reason to suspect some unintentional distortion in Ellmann’s account of the life of W.B. Yeats. Such distortions are perhaps inevitable, as biographical construction necessitates at least some imagination, but the preface does little to revise the story of the Man and the Masks thirty years later, save in one particular place. Ellmann writes:

[George] understood that he felt he might have done the wrong thing in marrying her rather than Iseult, whose resistance might have weakened in time. Mrs. Yeats wondered whether to leave him. Casting about for some means of distraction, she thought of attempting automatic writing…. Her idea was to fake a sentence or two that would allay his anxieties over Iseult and herself, and after the session to own up to what she had done. Accordingly on 21 October, four days after their marriage, she encouraged a pencil to write a sentence which I remember saying approximately, ‘What you have done is right for both the cat and the hare.’ She was confident that he would decipher the cat as her watchful and timid self, and the hare as Iseult…. Yeats was at once captured and relieved. His misgivings disappeared, and it did not occur to him that his wife might
have divined his cause of anxiety without preternatural assistance. (xii)

According to George (as reported by Ellmann), she had somehow opened herself to the process through this initial deception, and subsequent forays into automatic writing were indeed inspired and sincere. Regardless, the difference between these two accounts of a single event is significant; though Ellmann is in no way unflattering to George in the second version – indeed, this brief episode may be easily disregarded because it is couched amidst descriptions of George’s immense helpfulness – these two accounts, read alongside each other, at the very least expose the complex web of intent, influence, and agency at work during the time Yeats’s canonicity was still being constructed.

Certainly, George Yeats’s automatic writings, subsequent to her initial foray, can simply be regarded as productions of her unconscious mind, and indeed they most often are. However, despite her admitted initial manipulation, critics tend to ignore considerations concerning the validity of George Yeats’s automatic script, or even the impetus for this venture, perhaps because the automatic writing served as the basis of much of Yeats’s later poetry and the difficult schemes that would finally constitute *A Vision*. When critics do show consideration, it is most often brief and couched in an optimistic idiom; for example, Margaret Mills Harper quickly glosses over her skepticism: “George Yeats provided for her husband feminine self-effacement, unconsciously prophetic wisdom, clever fakery, or patriarchally coerced subordinacy” (292-93). Regardless of these credibility issues, however, it remains resolutely clear that during his lifetime, George greatly impacted Yeats’s outlook and output (“For a time he

\[\text{2 See Jochum.}\]
accepted without qualification the messages that came through the automatic writing”), and that subsequent to Yeats’s death in 1939, George Yeats orchestrated which stories were told about W.B. Yeats, and who told them (293). She alone provided access to portions of Yeats’s personal papers, which she had “arranged with care” (Ellmann xvi, vii). Curiously, only Harper has really tried to evaluate her influence, while other critics fail to even note her obvious impact; she remains a participant, not a possible originator or designer of W.B.’s many visions.

Even though he chose to update this particular anecdote concerning George’s automatic writing, Ellmann’s portrait of George Yeats, albeit a minor part of the biography, is decidedly complimentary. He even goes so far as to make some rather subjective evaluations where she is concerned: “She was more intelligent than Maud Gonne or Iseult,” Ellmann writes, and it is unclear if he is speaking for Yeats or tapping into his own impressions (xi). He also asserts that Michael Robartes and the Dancer, one of Yeats’s best collections and one that manifests the impact of his and George’s venture into automatic writing, “formed an elaborate tribute to his wife” (xiv). But as George’s primary successor in charge of W.B. Yeats’s legacy, Ellmann certainly had good reason to depict her in this way. That’s not to say that George didn’t display such admirable qualities, but Ellmann certainly had ample motivation to portray her in such a complimentary manner, for she was in many ways primarily responsible for his career. Moreover, his apparent drive for further transparency in the second edition was certainly more permissible by the late 1970s because Yeats’s canonicity was even more firmly intact thirty years after the first edition of the book that helped to cement Yeats’s reputation. Ellmann, who no longer had to justify his subject, then chose to write about
George – she is the primary subject – in a curious addendum to the project that launched his career. Ellmann seems to be acutely aware of what is now, in George’s absence, his to shape, just as George realized her own responsibility. He writes:

I did feel at liberty in this book to describe Yeats’s love affairs, but he had several towards the end of his life. Mrs. Yeats knew how important they were to him, and, conscious of her role as poet’s wife, she countenanced more than she discountenanced them. “After your death,” she once said to him, “people will write of your love affairs, but I shall say nothing, because I will remember how proud you were.” (xxv)

Still, even with this new transparency, the preface works to the advantage of W.B. Yeats, George Yeats, and Richard Ellmann. Ellmann provides more details that illuminate issues raised subsequent to the first edition of *The Man and the Masks*, giving critics more to consider and thereby endowing Yeats with a new importance, all the while praising the late George Yeats for her assistance. Here Ellmann takes the time to explain away some of the questions he overlooked the first time around surrounding Yeats’s more unpleasant tendencies by evoking George Yeats. One instance is particularly striking: “She talked about his late preference for blue shirts, and of how people wrongly assumed that he wore them in sympathy with the Irish fascist organization, the Blue Shirts, when in fact blue went well with his white hair” (xix). Such an explanation is laughably simple, and for that reason may very well have been the truth. I am not trying to suggest that George Yeats or Ellmann are not being truthful here, but the means by which Ellmann tackles and directs these matters is quite clever. He is at once revealing and filling in the gaps of his own account, and thereby resolving any questions that may
have arisen in the time between editions, and removing himself from the responsibility of providing answers that, regardless of their genuineness, do excuse Yeats’s fascist tendencies, by allowing George Yeats, who can no longer reply herself, to account for them; Ellmann, though he remains the ever-grateful indentured biographer, has taken every opportunity to implicitly assert his exceptional relationship with George and the rarity and esteem of that station. And in this study, we will see authors who, in various ways, navigate exceptional, if constructed, relationships with Yeats himself.

Nevertheless, here, one gets a sense that Ellmann has realized the impact of his little book, the crucial importance of George Yeats’s seal of approval, and the necessity for that signature’s broadcast. Readers would find her seal of approval yet again, though cleverly transmogrified; Ellmann dedicated his next project, *James Joyce*, “To George Yeats” in 1959.

Ellmann’s initial work on Yeats was built around a larger project; W.B. Yeats had yet to become the canonized figure we recognize now. Much of Ellmann’s early academic career at Yale in the 1930s was spent trying simply to justify his work on Yeats, then a contemporary writer; though Ellmann received three degrees at Yale, he was never given any formal instruction in 20th-century literature (Hart 269). Therefore, Yeats’s canonicity and Ellmann’s legitimacy were bound up in a complicated mutual dependency from the outset; if Ellmann’s new-fangled project was not accepted, his future as a practitioner of literary biography and criticism would be uncertain at best. Clearly, his endeavor turned out to be a successful one, due in no small part to George Yeats. Even the most recent scholarship on W.B. Yeats exists in the wake of *The Man and the Masks*, an unusually seminal work that influenced the way scholars approached
the study of Yeats, Modernism, and literary biography. The book was based in large part on Ellmann’s doctoral dissertation, the first ever accepted by Yale on a 20th-century literary subject. It is clear now that Ellmann was a powerful canonizing figure, just as Yeats was; his subsequent work on Joyce and Wilde would prove equally influential. When he edited *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, he asserted a distinctly *American* literary canon, and consequently came under heavy criticism from his British contemporaries. Continually stretching the rigid standards of his field, he was one of few critics who lauded Modernist writers from both sides of the Atlantic and urged the study of living authors when such critical practices were unfashionable in the academy. Ellmann remains an important critic with a decidedly transatlantic inference – a Jewish American who helped to define American literature, but spent most of his career exploring Irish writers who left Ireland. Perhaps he was drawn to Yeats, Joyce, Wilde, and Beckett – all of whom expressed ambivalence about the country in which they were born – because of his own struggle with national identity; by all accounts, Ellmann always disparaged his separateness in England while simultaneously flaunting his separateness by aiding the emergence of Irish and American literary canons.

Though Ellmann’s biographical constructions remain staples in Modernist Studies, few studies have focused specifically on Ellmann; critics who write about him tend to focus on his work on Joyce. But, as Ellmann would certainly have contended himself, biographical details, and the contexts in which he labored, illuminate the many forces that influenced his criticism and thereby influence how we still think about Yeats. Despite his influence, Hugh Kenner remained brutally critical of Ellmann’s biographies:

3 See Brockman, McCourt, and Sigler.
“What spurred Kenner’s antipathy was his conviction that Ellmann never sufficiently recognized the limitations of the biographical genre” (Hart 281). Kenner’s criticism may be a sound one, particularly given Ellmann’s propensity to esteem his subjects; Declan Kiberd writes, “[he] believed that a good artist cannot really be a bad man” (“Joyce’s Ellmann” 244). Still Ellmann surely never asserted his versions as comprehensive. Hart remembers:

[Ellmann] admitted that all biographies were flawed because, like all texts, they partially misrepresent what they set out to represent. “Words conceal as much as they reveal,” he used to tell me. Yet he persisted in his biographical enterprise because he believed authors should be regarded as flesh-and-blood human beings rather than language machines or puppets of history. (290-91)

Perhaps Ellmann’s awareness of his own limitations as a biographer, and of the tension between accuracy and entertainment enabled him to craft such readable, humanistic accounts. Kiberd writes, “[Ellmann] used each of the three great biographies to explore himself” (“Joyce’s Ellmann” 244). The Man and the Masks remains a rare feat in the field. In its own limited way, the biography bridges the wide gap between a popular and academic readership, in much the same way that Yeats himself remains both read and studied. But, as we have seen, it is also an account of Yeats’s life that is burdened with inconsistencies and the personal motivations of its author and George Yeats that have seldom, if ever, been regarded.

A (Post)colonial Yeats: Declan Kiberd and Edward Said
Through the efforts of Ellmann and then the New Critics, Yeats became firmly established as a canonical poet whose poems warranted close readings. At the very least, literary criticism provides canonical figures with some kind of longevity, and a generation after Ellmann, Yeats’s literary fate – his place on the continuum between the popular and the obscure, the fashionable and the obsolete – was still being fashioned. As postcolonial readings of literature grew in popularity by the 1980s, Yeats’s life and work provided a fertile ground for discussion for another generation of critics; his legacy found new feet. After half a century, critics no longer had to justify the study of an author who was still living or recently deceased as Ellmann had; Modernist critics had secured a mode of discourse that still continues to be productive. In this time, Declan Kiberd became a key figure in appropriating Yeats as a decidedly political poet – a (post)colonial artist, whose poetic renderings and ideological compulsions still bore weight, were both applied and applicable, and, perhaps most importantly, were evident in transnational political struggles. Through Kiberd’s efforts, Yeats was reanimated, and inserted into a budding conversation on postcolonial literatures, even those outside of Ireland. And Kiberd was able to enjoy the benefits of working on a canonical subject; he entered a critical discussion with a rich, if relatively brief, history, offering revitalization, and, accordingly, still finds his name printed alongside “Yeats.”

In his seminal work, *Inventing Ireland*, Kiberd employs Yeats’s observations on national culture to analyze the process of identity construction. Ultimately, Kiberd gives Yeats a lot of credit, utilizing the poet as a kind of patriarch whose work frames Kiberd’s own analysis of the Irish colonial condition. Yeats is a figurehead in the investigation;

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4 See Brooks, chapter eight.
Kiberd’s implicit argument is that Yeats matters as a literary, historical, and political figure. More than any other critic, Kiberd would continually return to Yeats as a source of commentary and as a representative figure for literary nationalism both in and outside of Ireland. For Kiberd, the literary expression of the efforts to decolonize Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th century served as a significant precursor and a strong inspiration to those who would fight related struggles abroad almost a half century later. Though he can’t really provide instances in which those involved in the Négritude movement directly noted Ireland and Yeats as a source of inspiration, Kiberd asserts correlations, sometimes loose, as direct evidence that “the shapers of modern Africa...looked on occasion to Ireland for guidance” (“White Skins” 133). And again, Yeats is the important figure in this cross-cultural analysis because his life and work exemplify the struggle of the poet who attempts to find “alternative modes of expression for a nation struggling to invent an autonomous identity” (134). Kiberd identifies the ideology of Guinea-Bissau’s revolutionary Amilcar Cabral as being particularly redolent of Yeats. For Kiberd, Senegalese leader Leopold Senghor’s anti-materialist philosophy also recalls Yeats; Senghor rejected art that was separated from society in favor of “the Yeatsian ideal of arts....The connecting tissue was to be rhythm...just as ‘an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style,’ in keeping with Gaelic poetic tradition, was sought by Yeats” (138). Moving his attention to the West Indies, Kiberd also asserts some of the finer points in Aimé Césaire’s views on the artist’s role in the opposition of colonial hierarchy as “resolutely Yeatsian...based on the notion that races identified themselves by a mythology that married them to rock and hill” (137). At one point in Inventing Ireland, Kiberd attaches three distinct expressions of colonial experiences to one another by
analogizing Fanon’s linguistic struggle in French Algeria to Salman Rushdie’s complex feelings towards the English language as an Anglo-Indian, and finally brings it all together with Yeats: “Like Yeats, Rushdie clung defiantly to the hope that something was gained rather than lost in the act of translation” (163). Shortly thereafter, Kiberd asserts “Yeats’s repeated invocations” of American Renaissance literature, throwing another context into the mix as if the connection between these distinct designs is altogether apparent.

Kiberd, we see, is always keen on noting that similar pitfalls befell Ireland, Africa, Algeria, and other nations: national sentiment bred the potential for future imperialism, lapses into racism, and delusions of grandeur, and Kiberd constructs intriguing studies by placing these struggles alongside one another. Certainly there is much to be learned through these comparisons, but the act of applying one movement to another, asserting connection and influence by way of familiar patterns and the loose potential for inspiration, is a more intricate enterprise than Kiberd’s analyses often contend. Nevertheless, for Kiberd, what often connects these disparate encounters with occupation is Yeats. And despite any of the oversights characteristic of postcolonial comparative analyses, Kiberd was instrumental in initiating an important dialogue in the 1990s that traces Yeats’s indelible and, at times, apparent impact beyond Ireland; certainly Kiberd often illuminates connections or inspirations that are altogether evident, for Yeats’s influence is indeed far-reaching. Kiberd has displayed a recurring tendency – one which pervades the majority of his work – to trace the influence of Yeats, to expose and assert Yeats’s impact not only on the formation of Ireland, but abroad, in unlikely places. Regardless of geography, Kiberd sees Yeats. Consequently Yeats has enabled
Kiberd to navigate broader issues of colonialism. Kiberd does not always laud Yeats, but even his criticisms endow Yeats with a profound influence; Kiberd, for example, indicts Yeats’s early poetry for infantilizing Ireland to some degree, confirming the stereotypical childlike nature of the Irish who require the parental power of the English. But for Kiberd, Yeats’s capital, his canonical legitimizing status, provides an adhesive that enables Kiberd to attach varied movements and moments to one another with a single mechanism. Kiberd affirms Yeats’s presence and demonstrates how posthumous literary celebrity can be made to endure, and thereby achieve a more profound sense of value by way of its proven sustainability and applicability.

If Declan Kiberd would be instrumental in positioning Yeats as a figurehead of colonial/postcolonial literatures throughout the 1980s and 90s, Edward Said, with the facility afforded to him by Orientalism as a foundational figure in a new critical movement, only concretized Yeats’s position. At that time, Said, like Kiberd, certainly had a stake in asserting the validity of his relatively new field as a viable addition to the academic study of literature. Yeats, we see again, justified the critic’s own pursuits while his evocation simultaneously affirmed his own standing. The poet who had once been listed alongside Eliot, Pound, and Joyce in a comfortable and secure high Modernist canon was being repositioned and could now be found among the likes of Césaire, Neruda, and Darwish. Not only did these new categorizations ventilate the musty corners of a bland, uninspired Yeats Studies that stagnated throughout the 1970s, but the power of “Yeats” placed alongside purveyors of “third world” literatures, hereto left largely ignored by Western academics, was undoubtedly immense. Academics now had incentive to look outside the canon, afforded a kind of paradoxical access by way of one
of the canon’s stabilizing mechanisms.

Before being revised and expanded into a chapter in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said delivered a lecture entitled “Yeats and Decolonization” in the poet’s beloved Sligo and in the United States in 1988. In his lecture/essay, Said notes Yeats’s secure assimilation into the canon of English Literature, but makes his own motives clear from the outset: to circumvent the “customary way of interpreting Yeats” by repositioning him as “the indisputably great *national* poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power” (292). Said spends the majority of the lecture imparting a history lesson, beginning with Ireland’s concession by the Pope to Henry II of England in the 1150s, which, given our advantageous angle of more than twenty years, feels dated at best and alarmingly simplified, at worst; when he writes “Thus India, North Africa, the Caribbean, Central and South America, many parts of Africa, China and Japan, the Pacific archipelago, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, North America, and of course Ireland belong in a group together,” one’s first impulse might be to ask Said, “who else is left?” (292). Regardless, his admirable motives are only emphasized by an apparent and passionate desire to assess the lasting effects of Eurocentrism and to demonstrate that the critical questions explored by (post)colonial theorists are manifested in Ireland too – and, consequently, in Ireland’s greatest poet. But, like Kiberd, for Said, Yeats’s wisdom transcends the geography of Ireland: “we should think of Yeats, I believe, as an Irish poet with more than strictly local Irish meaning and applications” (307). Said explains:

The disquiet of what T.S. Eliot calls the “cunning history [and] contrived
corridors” of time—the wrong turns, the overlap, the senseless repetition, the occasionally glorious moment—furnishes Yeats, as it does all the poets and men of letters of decolonization—Tagore, Senghor, Césaire—with stern martial accents, heroism, and the grinding persistence of “the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.” Thus the writer rises out of his national environment and gains a universal significance. (306)

Here, Said’s assertions are compelling if problematic; surely his emphasis on some kind of overarching applicability is grossly imperfect if only because he collapses various histories, geographies, languages and politics under the postcolonial umbrella. Moreover, it soon becomes clear that, as with the majority of evocations, Yeats is less of a subject in Said’s lecture than he is a securely canonical wordsmith whose poetic phraseology is applicable to ruminations on nationalism. But this manner of employment is not unique to Said in any respect; allusions to Yeats are, across the board, most often employed superficially in fractional morsels that mean to impart to the reader a sense of the secondary text’s inspiration and validity: “It is therefore necessary to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a third nature, not pristine and prehistorical (‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,’ says Yeats), but deriving from the deprivations of the present,” writes Said (298). Ironically, at one point, Said briefly notes that Yeats is quoted in unlikely places (he cites a New York Times article) and notes that these evocations are “minatory” (309). But, in this manner, portions of Yeats are perpetuated as relevant – snippets that sound good, but, due to the reputation of the poet, require little if any contextualization. Remarkably, in a lecture whose purported subject is Yeats, the Irish poet is hardly quoted more than Césaire and Neruda.
There is much to admire in Said’s essay, specifically his provocative account of Yeats’s troubled ideological evolution, and my goal is not to disparage his work or Kiberd’s (the latter will be utilized in later chapters), but rather to exemplify a critical impulse that does not belong to Said or Kiberd alone, but to the postcolonial theoretical approach to Yeats in general. At best, canonical groupings result in consolidation – a kind of diminishing – which one can find manifested in any anthology, but also in the very assumption implicit in the act of anthologizing that evaluative consolidation is both a possible and efficient task. What remains noteworthy in the work of Kiberd and Said is an evident willingness to lump the experiences of colonialism – under the British, French, or otherwise – beneath a single umbrella that all but disregards densely convoluted contingencies, both individual and communal, intrinsic to discrete histories, geographies, and languages: “For an Indian, or Irishman, or Algerian, the land was and had been dominated by an alien power,” writes Said (293). When he notes that “Yeats’s poetry joins his people to its history,” he might more accurately describe the endeavor by saying “a history” (311). But for Said, the progression from nationality to nationalism to nativism is a comprehensive byproduct of colonialism for the Irish, Kenyan, Algerian, etc. This tendency is not dissimilar from the one that which amasses and orders writers in relation to one another by epochal, ethical, geographical, or aesthetic. Though governing principles regarding organization and evaluation are unavoidable whenever information is processed and absorbed, we sometimes spend little time as academics observing their limitations – and the high probability of imparting misinformation – in relation to asserting their obligatory benefits.

As we have seen, there are issues that arise from the ways that Kiberd and Said
have appropriated and utilized Yeats, but their work asserted him as an important and applicable political writer a quarter century ago near the outset of the postcolonial studies movement in literary criticism. Nevertheless, this tendency was being deconstructed by the late 1990s; in “Is Yeats a Postcolonial Poet,” Jahan Ramanzi’s “Is Yeats a demonstrated that Yeats’s published words and posthumously asserted political prowess were, and continue to be, very often at odds with his own fluctuating beliefs. The postcolonial frameworks imposed upon his work, however constructive, are ultimately very limited and maybe, at times, misleading.

The problematic nature of totalizing political applicability is particularly apparent in the postcolonial approach to Ireland’s history, where art becomes a means of resistance if only, sometimes, because of narrow interpretation. Ireland is a country whose literary representations of history have had an indelible if troubled influence on its developing cultural consciousness. For example, Cuchulain, the Irish mythical warrior who single-handedly defended his people against invaders, and who also provided Yeats with the inspiration to compose numerous poems and plays concerning his exploits, has remained a staple in Irish political rhetoric, and in no small part because the Celtic Twilight championed his story. A one-dimensional, packaged reading of Cuchulain’s story, couched on bookstore shelves amidst other volumes of “Irish” history and mythology, could certainly enthuse the Nationalist struggle, from Yeats to the IRA, that, at least up until the last few decades, after centuries of occupation has sought to oust the foreign invaders. But Ireland’s political infighting embodies a curious phenomenon: regardless of ambition or conclusion, whether Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Unionist, “the style of demonstration…is very similar,” as are the archetypal figures (Santino 516). One
might assume that Cuchulain fits firmly within a Nationalist framework, but Cuchulain, like other mythological employments, has remained consistently appropriated as a symbol for those on both impassioned sides of the divide. Scholars like Ian Adamson have theorized the existence of a Cruthinic civilization in the north of what became Ireland that predates the Celts. Unionists, therefore, have identified themselves with a pre-Celtic culture and maintained that Cuchulain defended Ulster from Irish-Celtic invaders; Loyalists simply seek to perpetuate Cuchulain’s legacy. Jack Santino writes:  

Just as the paramilitaries are legitimized by reference to previous military units, Cuchulain is by the same strategy constructed in the image of the contemporary Loyalist, fighting for his non-Gaelicized country and culture, his non-Gaelicized territory. The contestation of the land itself—is the soil Irish or British?—is extended to a mythic hero. Was Cuchulain Celtic or Cruithin? Is he yours or ours? (520)  

While Cuchulain might seem the perfect archetype with which to develop and prescribe a bridge between two divisions by means of a shared heritage, his appropriations remain firmly entrenched within the ideology of these contemporary political ruptures that both lay claim to a geography based, in part, on convenient present-day conceptions of a centuries-old mythical warrior. Santino asserts, “the appropriation of Cuchulain is a contentious move, an encroaching into the other’s territory of symbols…. [he represents] varying and contestive interpretations, or constructions, of history” (520). Yeats, Saint Patrick and the shamrock have suffered similar symbolic fates. But what remains apparent is the power of symbolic identification, regardless of the instability in any given artistic appropriation. Though art by definition is invention, figures like Cuchulain or
Yeats, with the statuses afforded to them by those who appropriate them for their own purposes, aid the passage from artifice to reality in the cultural consciousness; art becomes a weapon, despite a narrowness in its interpretation that is wholly apparent if we take a step back.

The authenticity of Adamson’s assertions continues to be debated, as they are more theories than observations. Regardless, they do illuminate a central issue: it is clear that “Ireland” retains a far-reaching anachronistic existence in the minds of those who identify with it; Ireland always has been. Artists then need only identify themselves with those figures located within a vague geographical terrain to demonstrate roots, as if their contemporary political or aesthetic ideals are hereditary – the products of blood and topography, and not something as impermanent as the present day. The assertion of credibility through the appropriation of Cuchulain is unsatisfactory and misleading. Cuchulain’s instability, his vague mythical status, his historical existence located decidedly outside 20th-century conceptions of geography and politics, all permit his anachronistic appropriations; much can be read onto him. Perhaps Cuchulain was such a particularly productive sounding board for Yeats throughout his life because of this potential; from Yeats’s early poems (“Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”) to his final works, (“Cuchulain Comforted,” The Death of Cuchulain), Cuchulain remained a site where Yeats went to utter, interrogate, and exorcise numerous anxieties. The fact that Cuchulain continued to interest Yeats despite his contradictory compulsions attests to the former’s capricious substance. Surely Yeats, Lady Gregory, and other purveyors of the Celtic Twilight are largely responsible for Cuchulain’s migration into Irish popular expression by way of translation, performance, and repetition. Moreover, Yeats himself
has proven to be just as mutable as Cuchulain: he is a representative nationalist figure, though with his aristocratic Anglo-Irish proclivities, he could legitimately be applied to an opposing ideology. Ultimately appropriating Cuchulain or Yeats has more to do with symbol than reality.

As when one aligns oneself with Cuchulain, aligning oneself with Yeats is a decidedly public act that depends on the recognition of the broadcast. Santino writes, “The frequency of public symbolic display is due in part to the ongoing need for such displays in a context of contestation…. [S]ymbols are not merely displayed or enacted, they are used: to assert territoriality and identity, to welcome or warn, and frequently, to offend” (520). We will find through the course of this study that “Yeats” is utilized to each of these purposes; he has both enabled rebellion and assisted the passage into canonicity.

The Yeatses envisaged by George Yeats, Richard Ellmann, Declan Kiberd, and Edward Said loom large in Yeats Studies. Some critics, like W.J. McCormack, are still having to contend with the figure they fashioned, trying to revise, or at least challenge widely-accepted scholarly depictions of Yeats in the latter half of the 20th century. Yeats’s early critics, McCormack notes, “were for the most part explicators, admirers, vindicators,” and he asserts the undeniable role his biographers played in shaping the public and academic response to the man and his work, “quite beyond anything affected in the case of Joyce or Beckett” (133). But McCormack and others continue to unearth certain details regarding Yeats’s creative and personal affairs that have often been disregarded. This “suspect legacy of discretion” disregarded a few major political concerns in the 1930s, namely Nazi Germany and the Spanish Civil War, issues from
which commentators have often chosen to avert their eyes. (134). There is evidence that
Yeats, at the very least, showed interest in Nazi Germany (135). Furthermore,
concerning the Spanish Civil War, some critics note that Yeats wrote a letter of support
for the Spanish Republican government in 1937.⁵ According to McCormack, this detail
is ultimately unverifiable and based solely on a single piece of unsubstantiated evidence.
Ellmann, as we have seen, either disregarded Yeats’s uglier propensities, or attempted to
explain them away with the help of George Yeats; McCormack also notes that many
critics, including Ellmann and others, largely ignore Yeats’s more fascist tendencies,
designating such notions “flirtations.” While oddities and inconsistencies concerning
Yeats’s varied ideological affiliations have turned up periodically in criticism, such
questions are more often ignored than illuminated; it is certainly easier to commit to the
former practice if only because of the sheer inconsistency that characterizes Yeats’s
philosophical frustrations. But in many ways Yeats has continued to mostly evade any
serious vilification because, not only has he played a large role in shaping the 20th-
century study of literature, but he has also been ingrained into the public conscious of
Ireland, America, and elsewhere, as I will demonstrate in the coming chapters. Attaining
the kind of vitality that “Yeats” acquired requires a brand of popularity that the Academy,
though it certainly bears influence, cannot afford alone. Yeats can be found in countless
privileged anthologies consumed for the purposes of degree-based education, but also in
the latest ordinary media consumed for sheer entertainment.

Yeats on Television

⁵ See Cullingford (233); and Foster (468).
I have noted the recurring practice in 20th-century literature that utilizes Yeats’s expressions to title works of literature for the easy attainment of credibility through recognition and association. In many ways, this practice has kept “Yeats” alive, inserting him into countless distinctive discourses; Yeats’s footsteps can be seen in one way or another down many avenues, though we often forget that he was taken there, (mis)appropriated, and that he is manifested in ways that often have very little to do with the reality of his appropriated expressions. But these references are not exclusive to the written word; Yeats can quite commonly be found on television, as well. It is infrequent, if not wholly uncommon, that purveyors of popular television and movies challenge their viewers with literary allusion. Though television has arguably become more literate since the rise of non-network programming from entities like HBO, early twentieth century literary figures rarely appear. Yet, when we look closely, Yeats is bizarrely present.

In late-20th-century popular media, Yeats is appropriated in two distinct ways: often his name is specifically attributed to some bit of wisdom, usually from his simpler work, in order to assert it as wisdom; alternately, his more canonical poems are quoted without attribution, and we recognize it as wisdom because we recognize it as Yeats – and the act of recognition itself provides the viewer with pleasure. Still, regardless of the procedure, the purpose and the effect is largely the same: Yeats validates.

During the second season of Seinfeld, Jerry laments the business of buying birthday presents, and especially birthday card selection. After Elaine expresses her disgust with his gift of cash and his mundane card, the mood is lightened when Kramer enters with his own birthday card. Elaine reads the familiar, though slightly altered, lyric
aloud, and is obviously moved: “Think where man’s glory most begins and ends / And say my glory was I had such a friend.” We can assume that she has also seen Yeats’s name below these words. Kramer, unsurprised by her appreciation turns to Jerry and explains: “Yeats.” Jerry nods his head in acknowledgment and the audience explodes into laughter; they also recognize the “greatness” of Kramer’s gesture and, in contrast, Jerry’s insensitivity (“The Deal”).

_Twin Peaks_, a show that fully embraced its own reputation as a fête of quirky sensibilities, is marked by obscure references and allusions. However, when Yeats finally appears in a celebratory pitch, what might have retained its obscurity is, in similar manner to Yeats’s appearance in _Seinfeld_, blatantly cited to assert in order to assert the knowledge of the appropriator. Pete, a simple, naive man who prefers to spend his time fishing, is reintroduced to his wife Catherine. He had believed that Catherine died in a fire, though in reality she had been spending time around town disguised as an Asian businessman. Opening a bottle of Champagne, Pete offers Catherine a passionate toast:

> “Wine comes in at the mouth
> And love comes in at the eye;
> I lift the glass to my mouth,
> I look at you, and I sigh.”

> “Thanks, Pete,” she says. “That’s very lyrical.”

> “It’s Yeats. He’s a poet.”

> “I know,” she says (“2.12”).

In both of these examples, Yeats is evoked to express a sentiment that common people are apparently incapable of expressing themselves. Yet in both of these examples,
the poem itself is of secondary importance. “A Drinking Song” is certainly one of Yeats’s more quaint, forgettable efforts, and perhaps not entirely inappropriate to a toast, but it’s more a poem about loss than it is about celebration. “The Municipal Gallery Revisited,” on the other hand, is a dense reflection constructed around very specific and personal references. It is a poem about friendship, as it is being utilized, but, though the final two lines certainly sound pretty, they do not encompass the vision expressed in the poem’s entirety, so, in reality, these lines are not really appropriate for a birthday card. But Yeats and his intentions are actually of very little importance here; the poems themselves don’t matter. “Yeats” matters: the great explainer, the canonical hero with the recognizable name who voices our concerns for us in poetic, clever, digestible witticisms. “Yeats,” the word and its emotional resonance, not the man, lends our sentiments credibility, and therefore, as we see in both examples here, his name is necessarily asserted alongside his words.

Yeats’s words are not always specifically attributed to him, however. During a session with Tony Soprano, the psychiatrist Dr. Melfi listens to Tony vent his frustrations about the “level of bullshit bullshit bullshit” accompanying supposed advances in society and technology. Her primary goal in this session is to enable Tony’s realization that rage is depression turned inward. Her apparent method of instruction is to rearticulate his own concerns back to him – to refine his rhetoric – and thereby help him process his irritation. She replies, “I agree. The center cannot hold. The falcon cannot hear the falconer.” Tony regards her with confusion: “What the fuck are you talking about?” he says (“Cold Cuts”).

Though “Yeats” is not mentioned specifically, he is evoked here to explain the
“technological and spiritual crisis” of (post)modernity. *The Sopranos*’ largely literate audience is in on the joke – we recognize Melfi’s reference to Yeats’s famous poem and laugh at Tony’s plebeian frame of reference. Yeats remains the progenitor of the artful expression of human existence for the “educated.” We don’t laugh at the fact that Yeats is inapplicable to Tony – Yeats is not being devalued here – but at Tony’s inability to grasp the awareness that is, apparently, bestowed upon those who “know” classical literature. Surely, few college students in the last few decades of the twentieth century left their literature surveys without having read “The Second Coming,” not to mention the poem’s numerous appropriations in book titles and elsewhere that we will regard later on. Nevertheless, Yeats has been so ingrained in the rhetoric of popular art that by now, perhaps, little education is necessary to the act of recognition.

Yeats appears similarly, in unattributed form, in Steven Spielberg’s *Artificial Intelligence*. Our protagonist hero, a robot named David, embarks on a quest to find Blue Fairy, who he believes can turn his mechanical parts into flesh and blood. In a futuristic metropolis, he pays to use a service called Dr. Know, a kind of three-dimensional, interactive, Google-esque database. After asking a number of questions – the right questions – Dr. Know seemingly shuts down, and David is presented audibly and visually with a familiar passage:

> Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a faery, hand in hand,
> For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.

The message, we find out later, was left there by David’s creator as a kind of clue – a
mystery meant to compel David forward and perpetuate his belief. Yeats is again the
great explainer. The majority of the audience, however, likely does not recognize the
refrain repeated several times in “The Stolen Child,” even if the poem is rarely left out of
canonical selections of Yeats’s poetry. Regardless, the unattributed verse, fundamental to
the mythical Yeats, heightens the magical atmosphere and leaves the audience wondering
about the mysterious possibilities of David’s quest.

*AI* is an uneven film, especially in moments like this. But here, especially, one
feels the imprint of Stanley Kubrick, who developed the project for many years before
Spielberg took over after the former’s death. Kubrick displayed a fascination with and
appreciation for a spectrum of literature throughout his career, adapting the work of
dissimilar writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Anthony Burgess, Stephen King, Arthur C.
Clarke, and William Makepeace Thackeray. He also collaborated closely with cult pulp
fiction author Jim Thompson on two films in the 1950s. Therefore, the adaptation and,
more importantly, the application, of literature are fundamental to many of Kubrick’s
projects. His literate audience recognizes and appreciates this peculiar allusion, even if
David, like Tony, does not.

Ultimately, all four of these appropriations have little, if anything, to do with
Yeats but are merely dependent on Yeats’s singular recognizability and, in some cases,
the loveliness of his words. And, when the appropriations are recognized, his status
imparts justification. “Yeats” has become a symbol, a badge, and an anecdote that is,
even at its most superficial, so deeply rooted in the psyche of storytelling, popular or
otherwise, that he continues to turn up regardless of the medium. If these visual stories
are meant, in one form or another, to represent reality, their allusions demonstrate just
how fundamental Yeats is to Americana; Yeats invades situational comedy, a fantastical small town soap opera, a drama of the criminal working-class, and a dark vision of the future.

**Why Yeats?**

Yeats has been able to survive in a kind of ahistorical state that few other writers have attained, possessing the uncanny ability of bolstering the reputation, literary or otherwise, of those who reference, assess, and apply his work. Readers, both academic and “non-professional,” have been willing to forgive, or be ignorant of, Yeats’s less desirable politics and enabled his emergence as a transnationally applicable artist, despite the obvious problems inherent in the employment of his shifting and geographically specific politics. In most cases Yeats’s work is decidedly *not* an assessment and/or commentary on the manifold issues to which it has been applied; rather, he is a site, made safe by way of canonicity, and made advantageous by way of a lifetime’s worth of variable politics and ideologies, by which evolving schools of criticism can exercise their own concerns. “Yeats” has become a unit of capital, and thereby possesses a powerful authority that still persists in various media in 21st-century culture. And this capital is heavily dependent on a canonical status that developed across a century. Judgments in literary value both create and are created by a complex web of social relations. According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “we usually imply great, good, bad, or middling for something and also, thereby, *as* something” (13). So, when the greatness of a literary figure is given definition, that figure becomes a gauge, but also a reference point for greatness; those who assert an association with said greatness are thereby awarded value.
Yeats’s poetry, through canonicity, attained the capital of a “classic” text, and contains a referential value afforded by its status that those who invoke it can utilize for their own gain.

In this study, I am less interested in asserting the value of Yeats than I am in uncovering how and why Yeats achieved his distinctive lasting value. According to Aaron Jaffe, modernist writers were able to assert their own value, and that of one another, by way of their textual signatures – the valuable and singular modernist imprimatur – through a system of “reviewing, introducing, editing, and anthologizing” (3). But Yeats’s signature is disseminated to this day in ways that those of Joyce, Eliot, and Pound are not, crossing the high/low culture border much more effectively than these other writers. There is something beyond the imprimatur signature granted by the modernist: the appropriated, posthumous signature, a distinctive entity that the author and his own social network can no longer control, but nevertheless, affords referential value.

In order to get at the fundamental essence of Yeats’s exceptional popularity and endurance, I will begin by examining why and how Yeats became important in the construction of individual and communal identity in a transatlantic context at the turn of the 20th century. The first chapter, constructed around an analysis of Frank Norris’s 1899 novel *McTeague*, will specifically examine Yeats’s relationship to Irish-America with the primary goal of understanding why and how Yeats became necessary in America. The initial popularity of *McTeague*, and its own endurance as a literary text across the 20th century, make it a particularly productive site to achieve a clear sense of the status of the Irish people, and itinerant Irishness, at the moment that the Celtic Twilight, and Yeats specifically, were securing early popularity, the latter as a spokesman, a chronicler, of the
ideals of romantic Ireland in the minds of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Yeats’s subsequent transnational appropriations were made necessary in the wake of late-19th and early-20th-century popular representations of the Irish, of which *McTeague* has proven to be exemplary and influential. Norris’s representation of the Irish-American title character and other primary characters enforced gross ethnic stereotypes; Irish, Mexican, or Jewish, they are victims of heredity, unable to control their natural destructive desires, and each, ultimately, is violently undone by their inescapable hereditary markings. *McTeague* initiated a dialogue and necessitated a response. Irish-American writers wouldn’t fully emerge until after *McTeague*, once a public curiosity and fear had been teased by creative depictions of ethnic communities in America. In this political and literary environment, Yeats emerges as a necessity, a figurehead who could legitimize the rebuttal, someone to count on for inspiration, support, and, perhaps most importantly, racial validation. When he made his first trip to America in 1903, he was met by large and impassioned audiences who confirmed his fundamental role in the rise of American Celticism in the early 20th century.

The second chapter will more specifically consider a fundamental question that emerges after Yeats was materializing simultaneously as an important means of racial identification and a canonical writer: what happens when an author aligns himself with Yeats? Here the construction of literary celebrity is explored more thoroughly, as is Herrnstein Smith’s notion that canonicity is utilized for the benefit of the one who canonizes. With a new, secure market in place, the next generation of writers had to contend with the Modernist legacy and utilized it by embracing the textual signatures of the modernists as a means to promote their own work as natural extensions of high
literature; in W.H. Auden’s case, said promotion was also dependent on revision.

Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” composed in 1939, the same year the poet left England for America, associated him with an English intellectual tradition at a time in which English literature was Literature. More than twenty years after it was written, Auden would strategically abridge his poem, removing lines that shed an ambivalent light on Auden, Yeats, and the project of his poem. Auden advantageously revised his poem to affect, anachronistically or otherwise, both his and Yeats’s reputation. Ultimately, what becomes apparent is that Yeats affords Auden a credible site to explore his own anxieties, which were very similar to Yeats’s. It seems no small coincidence that Auden’s canonization depends in part on “In Memory of W.B Yeats.” The poem has been widely anthologized, and this chapter examines how central that poem is to Auden’s reputation and also the degree to which it both utilized and helped to encourage the emergence of “Yeats” as a mode of capital.

Auden’s poem asserts the powerful effect of literary alliance; chapter three will continue to flesh out that notion by examining Chinua Achebe’s 1959 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which demonstrates Yeats’s profound influence in the mid-20th century, and his emergence as a transnational literary figurehead. Achebe was vocal about his intent to bridge the divide between African culture and the English language, and he uses Yeats to enable his effort of achieving a literary voice, publication, and readership. Achebe’s approach is aided by his evocation of Yeats in his novel’s title and its epigraph, and by his interaction with the poem’s structures and ideologies throughout the novel. Yeats becomes a delegate, a bridge that crosses the threshold between two distinct cultures, one through which Achebe can attain a voice and an audience for his keen critique of
colonialism. Achebe’s project was dependent on the credible demonstration that he knew the master’s language. It comes as no surprise, then, that he chose to encompass his venture in a framework built upon Yeats’s role as a vital literary figure and his growing reputation as the executor of the literary struggle against colonialism.

The final chapter returns to issues initiated in the first, exploring Yeats’s role in the constitution of Irish-American identity through an analysis of Alice McDermott’s *Charming Billy* (1998). The Irish-American title character of McDermott’s novel freely quotes Yeats throughout his life, particularly the earlier romantic poetry, like “Down by the Salley Gardens” or “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” His family is proud to say that Billy carried a volume of Yeats with him throughout the war; Yeats serves as a symbol of home – gone and unattainable – wherever they are. When Billy loses Eva, the Irish object of his affections and his connection to an idea of Ireland crafted in his mind by his own embellishment of Yeats’s vision, Yeats becomes a kind of coping mechanism whose words can be applied to evoke or explain various situations. Only after Billy’s death, does his best friend come to realize that what Billy needed most was “someone to tell him that living isn’t poetry” (194). The narrator and her father finally understand that Yeats’s poetry had little to do with reality. Billy’s story demonstrates that the Irish-American Yeats is largely the romantic, approachable, pastoral, early Yeats, fashioned in the wake of *McTeague* – a poet aggrandized by generations of Irish immigrants whose hyperreal Ireland, representative of what they lost, is more accurate in their minds than the real Ireland. McDermott deftly explores the aftermath of such misleading, myopic appropriation on subsequent generations of Irish-Americans who had to contend with the consequences of ethnic literary legacies. She herself takes on their inevitable, inherited
project: to deconstruct Yeats – to both expose and comprehend his hold on Irish-America.

For a century, from *McTeague* to *Charming Billy*, Yeats matters – but why? Yeats’s legacy is intact, largely because he continues to be appropriated in academic and popular media; he continues to have, in whatever limited and ignored form, a hold on our collective imagination. In order to grasp this phenomenon, we must recognize the deliberate crafting of “Yeats.” This is the foundational point from which we can begin to uncover the importance of his poetry.
Chapter One:

Eradicating the Irish: Frank Norris’s *McTeague* and the Rise of Yeats and America

“[Yeats] is regarded by the Irish race the world over as their greatest intellectual leader of the century.”

— Celtic Revival Leader is Here,” *The San Francisco Call* (January 27, 1904)

**Yeats and Norris**

In order to illuminate the transnational ascendance of W.B. Yeats, we must first establish a network of historical and cultural contexts that enabled, and in many ways necessitated, his popularity through the 20th century. Irish emigrants, who are partially responsible for Yeats’s notoriety, possess a historically troubled relationship with America. And this relationship remains a problematic enterprise as Irish Americans continue to identify themselves with an Ireland amidst generational disconnection, geographical distance, and the perpetuation of sentimentalized literary representations by Yeats and others. Rather than construct a broad overview about the constitution of Irishness which can be found elsewhere,6 I wish to regard these many historical and political forces inside and around a specific literary work that has developed and maintained a lasting reputation and readership across the century. Frank Norris’s

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6 See Byron, Fanning’s “Dueling Cultures,” Hirsch, Ignatiev, and O’Connell.
McTeague (1899) embodies many concerns of this project and provides a productive field for evaluating them. The initial popularity of Norris’s McTeague, and its resilience across the 20th century, make it a particularly valuable site to uncover a sense of the status of the Irish people, and itinerant Irishness, in the eyes of “white” America at the moment that the Celtic Twilight, and Yeats specifically, were gaining early popularity; simultaneous to McTeague’s publication and reception, Yeats was becoming a spokesman, a chronicler, of the ideals of romantic Ireland in the minds of the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Subsequent transnational appropriations of Yeats were made necessary in the wake of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century representations of the Irish, of which McTeague has proven to be exemplary and influential.

Yeats and Norris may appear to make an odd pairing, but placing their dissimilar relationships to Irish-America alongside one another will demonstrate the limits of traditional national literary categories and clarify the complex influence and intentions of both writers. Though Yeats frequently wrote about Irish issues, he wrote from a very English context; Macmillan was his commercial publisher, he associated with the decadents, and believed in the Irish Ascendancy. Moreover, he won the Nobel Prize because of his cultural capital in England, not because of his Irish associations. Nevertheless, he would be appropriated by people all over the world, and was a significant Irish artist that Irish Americans could look to in order to counteract the very stereotypes publicized by Norris and his contemporaries. Margaret Conners writes, “literature has shared the responsibility with history for distorting the images of the Irish in the United States” (Conners 1). Literature and history, therefore, must not be
separated, and we cannot underestimate the impact of fiction like *McTeague*. Charles Fanning locates in the American realist movement, “a measure of support for,” or at least an emerging interest in, Irish Americans, “despite the prevalence of slapstick and stereotyping” (176). A number of popular American writers depicted the newly American urban Irish; the “slum fiction” fashioned by Norris, Crane, and Dreiser would serve as “reinforcing models” for Irish American writers in the early twentieth century. Perhaps in reaction to their largely negative portrayals, later Irish-American fiction writers assessed the cost paid by Irish immigrants who embraced “American” ideals. Ultimately, realism and naturalism did no favors for ethnic groups in America, but it did involuntarily expand the possibilities of Irish American fiction; the popularity of ethnic portraits compelled Irish American writers to depict Irish-Americans and develop “a sense of literature as critical self-assessment beyond didactic moralizing or escapism, and a sense of a wider audience of literate Americans beyond their own kind” (177).

Therefore, *McTeague* is a seminal text in the development of Irish-American fiction; its crude ethnic depictions necessitated rebuttals and helped to initiate the literary dialogue on Irish Americans. Nevertheless, a truly effectual rebuttal generated by a “non-white,” inferior race required access to a large general readership controlled by male Anglo-Americans. Perhaps only W.B. Yeats, a successful and popular literary and political figure – one who had been admitted into an environment of literary exclusivity – could legitimize Irish race and rhetoric in America. He had attained access, and his work asserted the possibility of Irish genius and Irish pride.
For many in power at the end of the nineteenth century, Irish success and integration in America was a terrifying prospect. Frank Norris shared these anxieties and exploited them when he began to construct *McTeague*; indeed, the novel’s commentary on race remains the fundamental element in Norris’s project. And Norris, like others, manipulated that fear, fashioning entertainment out of exploitation, providing his fearful readers with the consolation that inferior races would eventually eradicate themselves. If for this reason alone, *McTeague* continues over a century later to be an arresting reading experience. When Norris wrote his novel, the Irish were not considered, popularly or scientifically, to be a part of the “white” race. And Norris creates non-white characters – Irish, Swiss-German, Mexican, and Jew alike – so deplorable that it’s difficult to not fault him for the apparent disdain he holds for the very people he is so intent on characterizing and bringing all the way to their horrible, respective demises. With *McTeague*, Norris contained what was most foul, and what was most threatening to his status as a white, male, American writer. And, therefore, he destroys it while demonstrating the inevitability of “the end” that awaits all nonwhite ethnicities, even those, like the Irish, that might try to pass themselves off as “white.” Nevertheless, out of the fire stoked by Anglo-centric fear emerges Yeats, a literary antidote to those widespread claims that the Irish in America were without any genuine culture and intelligence.

**Yeats in the States**

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7 See Barrett and Roediger; Gibbons; Meagher, especially chapter four; and Watt.
Between 1815 and 1920, almost six million people left Ireland for America, and, as numerous historians have noted, a majority of those emigrants saw their relocation to America as involuntary exile (Miller 490). They came to America already instilled with a sense that they had been betrayed, forced to leave their beloved country because of English oppression. For most Irish, there was little ambition in the idea of emigration; it was simple, essential survival. Though the Irish were largely impoverished, a family could survive in Ireland, however meagerly, on just an acre of potatoes, but the blight that struck in 1845 made this impossible. Unable to pay rent and evicted by their English landlords, and with the Great Famine looming, starvation, disease, and death were a constant reality; by the mid-nineteenth century, at least a million were dead (Takaki 143). Ronald Takaki notes, “So many people died that corpses were placed in reusable ‘trap-coffins’ with hinged bottoms. For the living, the choice became clear: emigrate or suffer destitution and death” (144). Though the blight was over by 1854, the damage was done. Between the Famine’s end and 1920 alone, three million Irish left their homeland for America (Takaki 146).

Those lucky enough to survive the very dangerous passage only faced more hardship in the New World. Because many Irish emigrated from rural areas, they were shaken by “the harsh landscape of urban-industrial America” (Miller 506-07). In the U.S. there certainly was no shortage of “jobs” for the Irish, though they were also faced with a higher cost of living. Most Irishmen worked as physical laborers pitted against other ethnic groups by employers for low wages. Moreover, Irishmen were expendable; an Irishman was regarded as “one made to work” and was, therefore, “frequently assigned to
the hazardous jobs” (Takaki 146-47). Irish women were no better off; more were employed as domestic servants than women of any other immigrant group (Takaki 156).

At odds with their immediate environment, the American Irish remained fixated on what they perceived they had lost. Their alienation formed the real foundation of Irish American identity: a profound sense of community and racial solidarity fostered by identification with the Ireland left behind. Numerous ethnic associations – the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Catholic Total Abstinence Union, Clan na Gael – reinforced this brotherhood by focusing on Irish concerns. The mentality of exile was easily directed. Irish Americans found numerous parallels between their struggles in America and those of their brothers and sisters back home. Patrick Ford, editor of *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*, the most popular Irish weekly in the U.S., equated the Irishman’s battle with his English landlord to the Irish American’s struggle with labor issues and slumlords; the assertion of shared struggles made the paper’s many readers feel closer to their kinsmen across the ocean (Miller 539). Groups that focused specifically on Irish nationalist concerns, like the Clan na Gael and the United Irishmen, asserted Irish independence as the singular objective for all of the Irish Diaspora. The power of these groups was formidable, especially by the 1890s. The Clan, founded in the U.S. in 1867, had over 40,000 members by the 1880s (Miller 539). At the same time, the Irish National Land League of America (established in 1880), is believed to have had a half million members (Miller 540). Group consciousness was only intensifying. These groups, along with the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League, and even the short lived Sinn Fein League of America, employed numerous, successful fund-raising tours. The INLLA was

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8 See Guterl; Meagher, chapter four; and Angela Murphy.
able to collect five million dollars from Irish Americans to aid the struggle back home – “to relieve Irish distress, sustain evicted tenants, and finance the Land War” (Miller 540). Though many Irish Americans were impoverished, the fact that they were still able and willing to give that much demonstrates just how devoted Irish Americans were to the connection they felt with their country of origin.

One key and intriguing feature of the “Ireland” that existed in the minds of Irish Americans was its ability to console, or at least pacify, them in their troubled exile. In order to deal with the “debilitating homesickness and self-pity,” many Irish Americans “took solace in reflecting” (Miller 520). Cultural identifiers, reminders, symbols, stories, became utterly necessary as a means of coping. The milieu of connectivity – clubs, papers, poetry and song – were fundamental to their constructed identity. Thereby the maintenance of Irishness in America took on a very specific form. Takaki writes, “even as the Irish immigrants took possession of America, many of them reaffirmed their Irish identity by telling and retelling stories” (164). According to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, in the 1890s, “the awareness of being Irish came to us as small children, through plaintive song and heroic story” (Miller 164). Storytelling was therefore the fundamental element of the Irish conscious, but so was story retelling – the elaboration of the tale. At the time, Irish Americans were stereotyped on two fronts, both of which drained them of humanity: at best, they were depicted comically as ape-like simpletons, like McTeague in the novel’s opening chapters, and, at worst, they were the brute, uncontrollable, murderous McTeague that increasingly appears as the novel progresses. Their position throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century was largely marginal because they were not “white.” Reverend Theodore Parker of Boston expressed a common sentiment of the
time: “a lower form in the great school of Providence—negroes, Indians, Mexicans, Irish, and the like” (Takaki 149). Since racial ideology was a product of the stories being told, what the American Irish needed, specifically from a literary standpoint, was a legitimizing figure, one who could make them “white.” They needed humanity restored to them, and, derided as Americans, they sought the uplift of Irishness – someone to demonstrate that you could be Irish and legitimate.

Traditional rural beliefs persisted in the Irish American consciousness in large part because such beliefs were diametrically opposed to the economic climate in the United States, and Irish Americans largely showed a propensity to believe in folk history and myth:

…belief in fairies persisted in eastern textile cities and western mining towns, and by the early twentieth century traditional Irish music was more popular and less compromised by modern influences in Irish-American New York and Chicago than in Ireland itself. Such retentions both reflected and reinforced emigrants’ ties to an idealized homeland, and while familiar songs provided a cultural continuity which eased the strangeness of life abroad, they also evoked profound melancholy or bitter anguish among their homesick audiences. (Miller 522)

This peculiar fusion of nostalgia as both pleasure and grief produced “an internalized ambivalence – a yearning for things lost as well as attained” (Miller 547). Such a feeling was the natural manifestation of living in exile. Takaki writes:

…many Irish found their minds wandering across the Atlantic to the hills of Ireland…. They missed the small farming communities where people
engaged in conversation across hedges and stone walls, and neighbors…
[visited] in the evenings. In America, gathering in their homes, church halls, and bars, they created a community of Irish memory through song.

(164-65)

That this “Ireland” was merely a dream didn’t seem to matter, particularly given the nightmarish vision we will see that Norris offered. In many ways, this “Ireland” was as much a vision of an environment that was the opposite of what they were facing in the United States, as it was a reflection of a romanticized vision of Ireland’s premodern past. It was even easier to believe in “Ireland” as an Irish American because of its distance; the constant barrage of nostalgic renderings may have been at odds with the reality that the western peasantry was all but dissolved and the Irish were themselves negotiating a troubled relationship with modernity, but they were far more pleasant and marketable than reality.

W.B. Yeats played no small part in the materialization of this milieu. He was really the first Irish literary celebrity for he wrote about Ireland in a way that made Irishness attractive, unlike Joyce or Synge. Yeats, like Norris, was both reinforcing and reflecting a cultural mindset. By 1890, there was already a market in the United States for “Irish literature”; the Irish literary renaissance was already “gathering steam with the poetic and proselytizing efforts of young William Butler Yeats,” according to Fanning (“Respectability” 167). The American Irish were consuming imported literature and looking for a figure, an ideal, they could believe in. The American Celticism movement grew in popularity through the second half of the nineteenth century as the literature became more attainable. The many collections of Irish folk tales, though they were
purported to record existing folk history, were perhaps more response than
documentation; they were largely written in reaction to the “innumerable republications
of Mother Goose rhymes and English nursery rhymes” wrote P.M. Haverty, author of
*Legends and Fairy Tales of Ireland* in 1872 (Fanning 168). And, interestingly, Yeats
didn’t enter the American literary scene as a poet, but as the purveyor of Irish folk tales;
his first published book in the United States was *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish
Peasantry* published in New York by Thomas Whittaker in 1888, a decade before
*McTeague*. This was followed the next year by *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other
Poems*, a collection wholly focused on Irish myth and romantic renderings of its history
and geography. Following three more collections of folk stories in 1891 and 1892, and
then poetry collections in 1894 and 1895, each of his major books received publication in
the United States by various presses in New York, Boston, and Chicago. By the year of
*McTeague*’s publication, eleven U.S. published books bore his name as editor or author,
and within just a few more years, his folk tales collections were already being reprinted
(Ross 602-04).

The publication history above demonstrates that these stories met a good market,
or at least that publishers thought they would, and it comes as no surprise that Irish
Americans would have enjoyed these tales. The stories told in these collections are all
short, simple, and anecdotal. Yeats paints his own role as that of a kind of bridge
between mythic Ireland and those who wish to read or listen to the tales; he offers Irish
Americans these stories on behalf of western Ireland’s rural peoples. The stories come
from the first and second hand experiences of those Yeats interviews, such as “a little
bright-eyed old man, who lived in a leaky and one-roomed cabin in the village of
Ballisodare” or “My old Mayo woman” (Mythologies 5, 41). The accounts portray Ireland as a magical place, where rural communities survive and tell tales around the fire, and mythical creatures can still be found creating benign mischief, like making a man’s boots dance. It is no small wonder that Irish Americans would have found solace in these undemanding, enchanting stories; Yeats confirmed for them that romantic Ireland existed and remained the antithesis of urban, banal America, and that their heritage was one filled with rich legends and a unified kinship. Moreover, Yeats included a few of his poems: “Into the Twilight” closes The Celtic Twilight, published in the U.S. in 1894. In it, Yeats writes:

Your mother Eire is always young,
Dew ever shining and twilight grey;
Though hope fall from you and love decay…
Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill:
For there the mystical brotherhood
of sun and moon and hollow and wood
And river and stream work out their will. (Poems 141)

Such words would have roused profound longing in Yeats’s Irish American readers, and offer them a sense of belonging, even though they were far away from “home.”

Yeats’s publication in the U.S. is most definitely bound up in the marketing of Irishness at the turn of the century. His volumes are most often green, small and can easily fit into a pocket. The cover of the U.S. version of Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry depicts an Irish fairy goddess. Similarly, The Wind Among the Reeds from 1899 has its title and author’s name in embossed gold, and features a Celtic helmet on its
cover. The John Lane Company, an English publisher, advertised numerous other related books in its final pages by “A Group of Celtic Writers” like James Clarence Mangan, Katherine Tynan Hinkson, and A.E., but bolstered the advertisement with review blurbs from *American* papers like the *Philadelphia Press* and the *Chicago Tribune*. Clearly, publishers had faith that an investment in Irish literature in America would prove profitable.

The Ireland constructed by Yeats in his early books is one of fairies and fisherman and fiddlers, magic and mystery. While his collections of folk tales documents the stories of the rural peasantry, his early poetry documents – elaborates – Irish myth and history (“The Wanderings of Oisin,” “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” “Fergus and the Druid,” “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea”), expresses lament and loss (“The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love,” “Down by the Salley Gardens”) and envisages a premodern country that is profoundly opposed to the Modern landscape (“Into the Twilight,” “The Stolen Child,” “the Lake Isle of Innisfree”). Indeed, this “Ireland” is diametrically opposed to the realities, or unrealities, of the America depicted by Norris.

Yeats also made his presence known in American journals, publishing several essays in the *Boston Pilot* and *Providence Journal* between 1887-1892, most of which were concerned with the cause of the Irish revival, and published his play “The Hour-Glass” in *North American Review* in 1902 (Fanning 169, Bushrui and Prentiki 13). He recognized the important role that the American Irish could play in the Irish Renaissance, and asserted their importance back home as well; Yeats wrote one of his first Irish essays about the poems of Irish American Robert Dwyer Joyce. In it, Yeats clearly approaches Joyce as an *Irish* poet even though he had emigrated permanently and lived in Boston for
twenty years where he practiced medicine. Yeats writes that Joyce belongs to the class of poets who “speak to the manhood in us, not to the scholar or the philosopher. They are better for a nation than savan[t]s or moralists, or philosophers” (“The Poetry” 105). This “nation,” is apparently the Irish nation, which also exists outside of Ireland’s immediate geographical terrain. He lauds Joyce’s poetry as “characteristic of the Celtic race, ever desiring the things that lie beyond the actual,” and distinguishes the concerns of Irish poets: “we have a poetry of the people, altogether different to those vulgar ballads of modern England…those lower songs of the London streets” (108). Yeats also makes Joyce out to be a very popular poet in Ireland, asserting that one of his poems is “far too well known for me to quote it. It is in nearly all the ‘collections’” and claims of one of Joyce’s collections, “In three or four days ten thousand copies were sold” (109). The latter claim seems particularly bold, and it is unknown if Yeats is embellishing, but the sense of solidarity Yeats expresses among all the Irish, regardless of their geography, is notable, and would have been an appealing idea to the Irish on both sides of the Atlantic who were struggling to get out from under the thumb of an oppressor.

Regardless of the craft and skill underlying Yeats’s work, it’s worth noting at this point the reality that the majority of Yeats’s tales and poetry published between 1888 and 1905 is easy to read, particularly to an audience that already knows the myths he draws from; he provides a reading experience that, for the reasons counted above, was pleasurable to Irish Americans if only because it provided a kind of comfort and entertainment that we will see was radically different from works like McTeague. That is not to say that there is no depth and complexity at work in seemingly “simple” poems, for there certainly is. But much of Yeats’s early work doesn’t require any intricate, academic
understanding of poetry in order to get it: “The Song of Wandering Aengus” is far more digestible than later poems like “Leda and the Swan,” or even “The Tower.”

Therefore, when Yeats made his first trip to the United States from November 1903 to March 1904, he came with his literary reputation already established: “Yeats spoke to large and receptive audiences from Carnegie Hall to California, from Harvard and Yale to the Catholic University in Washington and Notre Dame,” notes Fanning (169). Yeats’s status made him particularly important to the American Irish because his Irishness legitimized theirs; Harvard and Yale in particular would have been bastions of WASP privilege, while his audiences at the Catholic University and Notre Dame would likely have been largely Irish American, yet he could hold an audience in both environments. The lecture tour proved to be “financially successful;” he made $3200 giving thirty lectures over the course of three months, though he had to use it to repay a loan from Lady Gregory (Bushrui and Prentki 13, Malins and Purkis 189). His audiences, which ranged from twenty to two thousand, were passionate about his commentary on Irish politics (Malins and Purkis 189, Bushrui and Prentki 19). He lectured mostly about the Irish Literary Renaissance, in which Irish Americans also had a stake for it legitimized Irish art and history, something they were sorely in need of in America. One man who saw him said that Yeats made so “grand an impression” that “no Irishman since the time of Parnell’s great trip” could measure up (Malins and Purkis 189). Yeats would return for three more tours in the following years, so clearly his visit made some kind of impact and was lucrative. Nevertheless, though we see above that some critics have made short notes and provided an overview of Yeats’s trip to America, they have failed to fully evaluate his reception and its implications.
Contemporary newspaper accounts of Yeats’s trip demonstrate that, for many people, Yeats’s visit to America was no small matter. In January of 1904, a writer for *The San Francisco Call* asserted, “Seldom has the visit of a man of letters been expected with such deep interest. The Irish race regards him as its great leader and representative in the world of letters” (“William Butler Yeats Visit” 34). A century later, the impact of “the Irish race” designation might be lost on us, but a subsequent *Call* article clarifies this remark: “He is regarded by the Irish race the world over [my emphasis] as their greatest intellectual leader of the century, and they take pride in the ‘poet of the Celtic Twilight,’ as Mr. Yeats has been named” (“Celtic Revival” 15). And, as we will see, intellect is precisely what the American Irish needed to have validated in the wake of the kind of ideology works like *McTeague* espoused.

According to the newspaper reports, Yeats seems to have achieved a level of fame in America by the time of his visit that critics have yet to fully regard, speaking to large audiences in different kinds of venues throughout the U.S.; *The Call* emphasizes that Yeats is “famous on two continents as a leader in the Celtic Revival” (“Ireland’s Future” 4). By all accounts, each of Yeats’s appearances drew much interest. “Seldom has there been such anxiety to meet and hear a man of letters,” a writer for *The Call* asserts (15). Another reporter notes:

The reputation of Yeats had preceded him and many were turned away from the doors of the theater without being given an opportunity to see or hear the distinguished speaker. Mr. Yeats is an accomplished orator, and he held the attention of his audience form the moment of his appearance on the stage until he gracefully bowed his adieus. In an entertaining
manner he told of the struggles of Ireland for freedom and the patriotism
of the Irish race. (“Ireland’s Future” 4)

Yeats also apparently read selections of his own work during his speeches/lectures, and
though the specific poems were not documented, we can assume that, due to his targeted
subject matter, and the fact that his last collection of poetry, The Wind Among the Reeds,
had been published a few years before, he was reading poems that focused on Irish
legend and geography (“Poet Yeats” 22).

It seems that Yeats was quick (and wise) to assert a connection between Ireland
and America in many, if not all, of his appearances:

America is very near to Ireland – nearer than England – and influences it
in a thousand ways. American newspapers are being read in Irish
communities where English papers are unheard of, and Dublin
publications are a rarity. This means that the people are following closely
the political history of the United States and they are not interested in that
of England. (“Ireland’s Future” 4)

Several other papers around the country contain versions of the same speech. But both
Yeats and the American newspaper writers would move past articulating the Irish interest
in America to assert brotherhood among the Irish race. This familial relationship that
exists regardless of geography is emphasized throughout the articles concerning Yeats’s
visit. A headline in the Bisbee Daily Review in Arizona from March, 1904 reads:
“William Butler Yeats Seeks To Uplift His Countrymen” (“A Poet” 3). One of the
headlines concerning Yeats’s appearance in San Francisco reads: “They Love America”
(“Ireland’s Future” 4). According to New York City’s The Sun, “Mr. Yeats, like all
Irishmen, is curious about the nation which has proved a second home for the majority of his countrymen” (“The Week’s Output” 4). And in at least one of his speeches in the same city, Yeats asserted, “A poet should be the expression of a whole race” (“A Poet’s View” 7). Such sentiments would surely have provided the American Irish with a sense of belonging.

In his appearances, Yeats also made an appeal to the working class: “The common people will never get culture out of printed books. They must be reached by poetry and song that can be rehearsed at work and at play: something the plowman can sing as he follows his plow, or that the housewife can sing as she sews or drives her spinning wheel” (“Revival in Ireland” 10). Clearly the urban Irish were estranged from such rural jobs at this point, but Yeats’s point still resonates: his poems can be brought with the American Irish to their workplaces. Yeats further clarifies his notion: “Old men and old tales are humored again, and the hills and the valleys are echoing once more with the sweet music of the Gaelic tongue…. The country Ireland, which is most Irish, is winning over the urban Ireland, which is least Irish” (10). Genuine Irishness, then, according to Yeats, is opposed to the urban landscape. And these songs and poems, these reminders of Irishness, these tales of Irish doings, these portraits of the rural, Irish countryside, bring one closer to home, and help one navigate urban, modern oppression. Importantly, Yeats’s work also apparently boosts the social and economic class of the American Irish by providing them with a rich cultural capital: “The renaissance was bringing out the culture that lay within and that entitled the poorest ploughman to call himself a gentleman,” noted an author for The Saint Paul Globe (“Poet-Dramatist” 2).
Clearly, Yeats’s addresses were markedly patriotic in nature. A writer for Washington, D.C.’s *Evening Star* asserts that Yeats “has written several volumes of poems which are popular wherever there is left an ember of Irish patriotism” (“Revival” 10). Obviously, there was more than an ember burning bright in Irish American communities around the country, and Yeats’s visits resonated after he left: “The visit to this country of William Butler Yeats is an event of more than passing importance” (“The Week’s Output” 4). Reverend Philip O’Ryan introduced Yeats in San Francisco in this way: “The Irish race has always been obliged to fight for its existence, and it is little wonder that we have no poets. There is one man who gathered up the folklore and put it into song, the man whom I have the honor to introduce this evening, the poet of the century, William Butler Yeats” (“Ireland’s Future” 4). Yeats, we see, is more than just a source of inspiration or ethnic legitimization; he seems to know the direction that the Irish in Ireland and America need to take. He isn’t just “a good strong man with a purpose,” he is a *prophet*: “the young prophet of the mystic literature of the Celt” (15, “William Butler Yeats Visit” 34). Therefore, when Yeats told his audience in San Francisco, “I am an incurable romanticist. I am a lover of poetry, and I do not want any limitations in the loftiness of speech,” and went on to read from his own work, he also provided them with a model for the kind of poetry which could bolster a decidedly *Irish* identity (“Ireland’s Future” 4).

Yeats would go on to make much use of the memories of his American travels to assert the bond that connects all of the Irish Diaspora. Many of his books contain targeted prefaces by their author, exclusive to the American editions. Just a few years into the new century, Yeats’s poetry and prose was already being organized into larger
collections. In the two-volume *The Poetical Works of W.B. Yeats* from 1906, he writes of his time spent in San Jose while lecturing at a college there:

As I went through the quadrangle to the lecture hall the moonlight fell among the palm trees. I remember how strange and foreign all that beauty seemed to me; and yet the lads I spoke to were moved, as I thought, by the imaginative tradition that would have moved them at home. It seemed to me that they knew the history and the ballad poetry as I did, and were moved as I had been at their age…. I was able to forget the palm trees, and to say what I would have said to young men in Dublin or in Connacht. As I am looking over the proof sheets of these two books, where I have gathered for the first time all of my poetry I have any liking for, San Jose comes into my head with the thought that I also have been true to that tradition as I understand it. (v-vi)

Here Yeats again emphasizes a kind of familial, unbreakable relationship among all of the Irish Diaspora, affirming all Irish as Irish. He invokes the idea of “home” with particular finesse. Though “home” is clearly Ireland in this passage, in the company of Irish American “lads” who come from the same traditions as Yeats, he is able to temporarily forget the “strange and foreign” beauty of California and approach the young men as he would his own kinsmen in Dublin or Connacht. Such a notion would have been profoundly appealing to Yeat’s Irish American readers whose actual American residences they associated with their involuntary exile; these homes were not home. Yet Yeats suggests that “home,” though it may be across the ocean, can be replicated to some degree – that actual geography can be forgotten or circumvented – when the Irish
congregate and talk of their history and poetry, both of which Yeats was actively participating in. Moreover, Yeats’s suggestion that they belong “at home,” would only have intensified his readers’ conviction that they were Irish above all else, no matter their location.

As we have seen, Irish Americans were susceptible to believe profoundly in this connection articulated by Yeats, and Yeats used it to his advantage when he specifically attacked the prospects of American upward mobility. In a speech in New York in 1904, he says: “I think the best ideal for our people…is that Ireland is going to become a country where, if there are few rich, there shall be nobody very poor” (Ellmann 116). Such words would have imparted an intensely hopeful vision to the struggling Irish American. And the key to the maintenance of that hope is clear: “We wish to preserve an ancient ideal of life. Wherever its customs prevail, there you will find the folk song, the folk tale, the proverb, and the charming manners that come from ancient culture” (Ellmann 116). In other words, literature – and, specifically, Yeats’s literature – exists as a lasting testament to and assertion of Irishness. And the American Irish were very much in need of literature that depicted a rich culture and history because it was the most proficient method to combat the insidious ventures of Frank Norris and his contemporaries.

**Norris’s Version: Objects and Animals**

Frank Norris’s *McTeague* survives as an expression of its author’s racial ideology and an exploitation of its audience’s fears. While Yeats emphasizes the embrace of Irish ethnicity and history to impart a sense of belonging to the American Irish, Norris places
an emphasis on objects in *McTeague* as a means to assimilation, and, therefore, belonging and humanity amidst a hostile culture. The catch, however, is that non-white ethnicities cannot achieve this end because they aren’t “white” – their base natures will inevitably overcome them in the end. Yeats and his poetry, then, become vital to Irish America precisely because he offers them a model of identity formation that is an alternative to Norris’s version, one that isn’t a dead end, and also offers them an escape from the modern/industrial/capitalistic machinery that is responsible for their oppression. Norris’s America could only temporarily pacify them with objects, while Yeats provided them with an objective, an alternative cultural capital to the physical capital that Norris’s novel argued would destroy them.

In Norris’s novel, *McTeague*, the Irish American title character, strives to become “American” through the attainment of wealth, but is ultimately and inevitably outdone by the hereditary curse of his Irish ethnicity. Fundamentally, Norris’s novel asserts the impossibility of Irish America’s assimilation in America by highlighting their historically troubled relationship with the notion of ownership. In the nineteenth century, very little of Ireland was actually Irish owned, and most of the island’s grain and cattle was exported for British markets (Takaki 141, 144). Since the twelfth century when Henry II of England sent troops to Ireland, to the rise of Irish nationalism in Ireland and the U.S., the Irish people were estranged from possession and consequently sought the ability to own, a perceived right that had historically been denied to them. If achieving ownership of objects marks victory over oppression for Irish Americans, the downtrodden characters of *McTeague* share a similar identification of material possessions with increasing status and freedom. The pathway towards Americanization is the pathway towards upward
mobility. This is also a pathway that leads to whiteness – a social and cultural capital that accompanies financial success. This is the major ideal that drives the actions of all non-white characters in Norris’s narrative. Each of the major characters – the Irish McTeague, the Swiss-German Trina and Marcus, the Mexican Maria, and the Jew Zerkow – with the exception of the two Anglo-Saxon characters, Old Grannis and Miss Baker – subscribe to the myth that America is a land of gold, even when there is little if any reality to bear the burden of their hope. And though we will see them each meet horrible ends, Norris implies a hierarchy of non-whiteness in the way he treats his characters; the Swiss-Germans, for example, are not as morally reprehensible as Irishmen or Jews.

Sarah Quay notes that the denizens of Polk Street, in their belief that they can become American by becoming upwardly mobile, surround themselves with objects and attain their tenuous identities thereby. Within the first few pages, the reader is situated in a physical space below a higher society. The people of Polk Street emulate those living on “the great avenue a block above,” and that emulation comes from the accrual of possessions as symbols of an American identity:

The process by which the people of Polk Street move toward the promise of American identity is through the possession of material objects, in particular objects that seem to connote an upwardly mobile, non-ethnic American self….ownership of material things was a quick and easy route toward a ready-made identity, making the trappings of assimilation apparently simple to obtain. For if certain things signify membership in a given group, and if those things can be purchased with relative ease, then
the appearance of belongings to that group is quickly attainable. In this light, the characters in *McTeague* see material objects as the key to their future, as an outward way to define themselves and as the most direct and efficient path towards legitimate membership in American life. (Quay 213)

McTeague himself has his canary bird, a steel engraving of the court of Lorenzo de’ Medici, a stone pug dog, and his concertina. Trina hoards the gold she wins from the lottery, “counting it and recounting it, polishing the duller pieces until they shone” (Norris 274). Maria *had* the gold dinner service and the flying squirrel she speaks of so often, and now goes around collecting useless mass-produced items. And Zerkow envelops himself in whatever junk he can find in his little shop. Quay writes, “the objects represent the very identities that the characters seek to adopt…. [objects] help bridge the gap between the characters diverse backgrounds and the assimilation to which they aspire” (215-16). The characters surround themselves with possessions that, though they are largely of negligible monetary value, exist in their minds as some sort of proof that they are indeed upwardly mobile, even though there may be little else to demonstrate the actuality of becoming American. Because they are driven by this singular objective – to become “American” – they make no effort to assert their ethnicities. McTeague, we will see, is Irish, but we never find him reading Yeats, nor does he appear to be interested in or even capable of doing so, despite the fact that Yeats’s work would have been available to him; Norris would never allow him that level of humanity.

Characteristic of the non-white ethnic pursuit of upward mobility is the need for more, the inability to be satisfied. The narrator observes:
But for one thing, McTeague would have been perfectly contented. Just outside his window was his signboard—a modest affair—that read: ‘Doctor McTeague. Dental Parlors. Gas Given’; but that was all. It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive. He would have it someday, on that he was resolved; but as yet such a thing was far beyond his means. (8)

McTeague’s dream only seemingly marks his profession and his identity as a professional; its more fundamental purpose is to assert his social position – to be a physical representation of this position. And this social position can subvert or hide his ethnic position. “McTeague perceives himself only in relation to his material possessions which reflect back to him who he is,” writes Quay (224). Likewise, Trina could live off of the interest from her five thousand dollars, and still save money, but she consoles herself after McTeague’s desertion later in the novel with the physical tangibility of her money. She is tortured by the loss of four hundred dollars worth of gold pieces that McTeague steals and squanders: “she wept over them as other women weep over a dead baby’s shoe” (Norris 273). She fantasizes about them: “she would see in her imagination her wonderful five thousand dollars piled in column, shining and gleaming somewhere at the bottom of Uncle Oelbermann’s vault” (274). She decides that she has to have her four hundred dollars in gold pieces back, as they were the primary representatives of her treasure in the bank. But she can’t stop there and, ultimately, she must collect the entire fortune. She regards her money with “an ecstasy of delight…. It was a passion with her, a mania, a veritable mental disease, a temptation such as drunkards only know” (274-75).
She strips and goes to bed with her money. Norris writes, “McTeague became a memory—a memory that faded a little every day—dim and indistinct in the golden splendor of five thousand dollars” (277). Money and objects in their tangible form can substitute for a child or a lover; the hope, or symbol, of upward mobility can substitute for its reality, and thereby pacify non-whites by offering them the apparent means to attain “whiteness,” even though the effect is impermanent.

Of key importance to Norris’s narrative is his underlying conviction that possession, ownership, the illusion (for we will see that, for non-white Americans, upward mobility/whiteness is wrought by Norris as an impossibility) of becoming American can only temporarily placate the innate hereditary evils at the heart of lower ethnicities. Once those objects are removed, the non-white Americans inevitably revert to their base impulses. Moreover, Norris’s characters navigate their relationships with one another by manipulating their own objects and those that belong to others. For example, when Trina sells McTeague’s concertina, he considers it the ultimate betrayal (273). She seems to realize that this simple object is the key to revenge against him for the money he stole. When she sells it for seven dollars, she is “happy for the first time since McTeague had left her” (273). When he gets a job at a furniture dealership, and finds his concertina, his truly destructive instincts finally surface; without the objects upon which he constructed his identity, he reverts back to his destructive Irish impulses. He drinks a large quantity of whiskey, and soon after, Trina is murdered. Similarly, Zerkow, who is mesmerized by Maria’s tale of the gold plate and marries her in an effort to acquire it, finally beats her, demanding the gold plate; when he does not receive it, he slits her throat, and dies wretchedly himself later, amidst his assemblage of clutter.
The only characters able to apparently control their relationships to objects are Old Grannis and Miss Baker, the lone Anglo-Saxon characters. Though they also possess certain objects that serve as cultural indentifiers – Norris is not critical of the acquisitive instinct, but rather the use of acquisition to disguise inferior heredity and expedite assimilation – they are not tied to their objects in the same way our ethnic characters are. Miss Baker does have a ritual of drinking tea from a specific teacup, and Old Grannis binds his pamphlets (he, of course, is the only character with an interest in books), but it’s the ritual that matters and they actually display little attachment to their objects. Their shared Anglo-Saxon heritage is enough to make them immune from the ethnic sickness troubling their neighbors; there is no base hereditary impulse and therefore no need to disguise it. When Old Grannis’s bookbinding tool is bought by the bookselling firm from which he purchased his pamphlets, the change actually proves to be a positive one, and allows him to finally commiserate with Miss Baker, who offers him a cup of tea.

The sheer amount of objects that appear in the narrative is nearly overwhelming, but the effect is memorable and clearly intentional. Because people and objects are equated in *McTeague*, and we see both of them continuously, and in great quantity, we are meant to recognize their worthlessness. Norris’s narrative offers non-whites the apparent possibility of assimilation by way of their possession of objects, but it results in utter destruction each time. This is not, we will see, meant to be one possible outcome of ethnic assimilation, but rather the outcome.

For Norris, objects can only disguise and delay the emergence of the animal in all non-white ethnicities. On the hierarchy of heredity, non-whites are closer to wild mammals than to civilized Anglo-Saxons. John Dudley writes that, as the novel
progresses, “McTeague becomes less and less able to control the animal within himself” (62). Norris has no trouble asserting the dumbness of his characters outright: the preponderance of straightforward adjectives like “stupid,” “slow,” or “bewildered” to describe McTeague in the first several pages is particularly striking, as if Norris doesn’t want to give his readers enough room to make up their own minds (3, 7, 12). He also is quick to demonstrate their political impotence early; McTeague is bewildered when Marcus blathers empty political rhetoric built from “a few half-truths” and “stock phrases” (14). But, more effectively, Norris displays his attitude concerning his characters in the way he encloses them in constant references to animals. McTeague is a “draft horse,” “bull-like,” and has “jaws like an anaconda” (7, 8, 50). Zerkow is a “hungry beast of prey” with the “catlike lips of the covetous,” “eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx,” and “clawlike fingers” (38-39). When Trina is attacked, she fights “for her miserable life with the exasperation and strength of a harassed cat” (288). Marcus also talks about the other characters in animal terms, calling McTeague “a lazy duck” and Maria “a queer bird” (19, 21). And, in the end, when McTeague is trapped in the desert, his assertion demonstrates the fact that he cannot escape his animal nature: “I’m dog tired,” he says (329). Even more telling is the aftermath of Trina’s demise: when her body has yet to be discovered in the kindergarten cloak room, one of the children, a butcher’s daughter, remarks, “‘Smells like my pa’s shop’; in the end, she is simply old meat (290). Without objects to placate their base natures, they become animal-like in each case.

As “animals,” the characters also literally surround themselves with animals, alive and inanimate. Norris has his canary, the single companion that follows him through the
entirety of the novel. Maria fondly remembers her flying squirrel on numerous occasions. Notably, Old Grannis in his higher evolutionary status is appropriately “an Englishman and expert dog surgeon,” as if to be English is to be expert (13). He is the only competent caretaker of animals; Marcus, who works as his assistant does not possess the same capabilities and is “a bungler in the profession” (13).

Though each of Norris’s non-white characters possesses these similar animalistic, destructive traits, Norris distinguishes McTeague from the others by highlighting his affinity for alcohol, which presents a particular danger to him. It transforms McTeague from a seemingly benign brute into an aggressively destructive animal: “Usually the dentist was slow in his movements, but now the alcohol had awakened in him an apelike agility” (288). Norris suggests that this sedative not only is not powerful enough to mollify the animal, but actually rouses it: “the only effect [whiskey] had upon him was to increase [his] viciousness,” to make him “alert, unnaturally intelligent, vicious, perfectly steady, deadly wicked” (282, 286). The sheer pileup of characteristics here is startling. Up to that point, in the majority of the novel, McTeague has largely been characterized as a bumbling and stupid but good-natured brute. But there was always a sense of impending doom; McTeague’s ethnicity is the wild card in the story. We have known virtually from the beginning that there is some malevolence at the heart of the title character:

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father’s father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation,
tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame? (29)

McTeague’s only option, since this evil is ultimately unavoidable, is to resist with “an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert,” though we soon find that he cannot resist indefinitely, nor can any non-white character (29). The narrator feigns pity here, by way of his questions, but there is nothing to be done. Once the beast is awakened, it cannot be restrained.

For Yeats and his Irish American readers, escape into nature, return to a rural, agrarian way of life constitutes a remedy to the modern world: “the waters and the wild” provide the innocent escape from a world “full of weeping”; Innisfree presents an alternative to “the roadway [and] the pavements gray.” Norris works from a similar notion, but twists it. It should come as no surprise that after McTeague kills Trina, he returns to the mountains; he is especially animalistic and Irish in his longing for the rural environment. Norris writes, “The life pleased the dentist beyond words. The still, colossal mountains took him back again like a returning prodigal, and vaguely, without knowing why, he yielded to their influence—their immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflecting themselves in his own nature, huge, strong, brutal in its simplicity” (298). Pretty words, but Norris’s point is that the Irish are not meant to live in civilized urban society where the higher races dwell. It is better that McTeague returns to the mountains, because there he is less of a threat to Norris and his readers, and his “hereditary evil” will not taint civilized America through interbreeding. And this is a taint that, as we have seen, McTeague cannot wash off.
As part of his portrait of hereditary evil, Norris infuses the characters’ interactions with an undercurrent of aberrant sexuality; he sexualizes these exchanges with the purpose of emphasizing the deviance of non-white sexuality. Certainly Naturalism asserts the bestial nature of sexuality for white and non-white characters alike, but Norris juxtaposes his ethnic characters with Anglo-Americans to emphasize that the former category is unable to control its bestial urges, while Old Grannis and Miss Baker maintain that power. Norris’s narrator asserts early on “that the appearance of sexual desire in a man inevitably awakens a violent beast,” lest we think that McTeague is merely a benign animal (Dudley 62). And McTeague is unable to control his “evil instincts” after he is introduced to Trina (Norris 27). When Trina is unconscious during her dental surgery, McTeague takes advantage of the situation, kissing her “grossly, full on the mouth” (28). Yet, this sexual assault results in an almost heroic act according to Norris’s narrator, for McTeague is ultimately able to restrain himself enough so as not to conclude what he started: “the animal was downed” (29). Still, there exists “this perverse, vicious thing that lived within him, knitted to his flesh” (29). And in the environment Norris depicts, non-white sexuality – Irish, Mexican, Jewish, and Swiss-German alike – is always perverse, uncontrollable, shameful, and paranoid: McTeague possesses an “intuitive suspicion of all things feminine,” while Trina simultaneously regards him with “the intuitive feminine fear of the male” (22, 30).

Non-white sexuality is also defined by vague boundaries: “sexuality was more flexible in non-white and working-class communities than in the higher reaches of Anglo-American society,” notes Rebecca Nisetich (9). Trina is described as “without sex…. almost like a boy” (22). This “blurred distinction between the sexes was
understood as a physical sign of racial inferiority,” as was homosexuality (5).

Accordingly, Norris blatantly eroticizes McTeague’s relationship with Marcus whenever possible: “Norris supplied many hints of a desire between McTeague and Marcus that alert contemporary readers would have found unsavory,” observes Nisetich (3). The game they play with the billiard ball is amusing as a spectacle if only because of its downright strangeness and eroticization; for no apparent reason other than to emphasize the sexuality underlying their relationship, they take turns holding the ball in their mouths until McTeague nearly chokes on it (Norris 49). Norris also emphasizes in the end that McTeague is figuratively wed to Marcus in a way that he is not to Trina when, at the novel’s conclusion, McTeague is chained to Marcus and, thereby, forever bound to his offense; till death do they part. By this time the reader may well have forgotten the narrator’s assertion almost three hundred pages earlier: “What a fine thing was this friendship between men!” (48).

Because objects disguise and subdue the animalistic tendencies of non-white America, and offer the semblance of Americanization, objects also play a part in sexual deviance; on this strange continuum, somewhere between the object and the animal, the inanimate and the animate, rests the ability to produce and reproduce. By the time of McTeague’s publication, there was a serious fear that Irish procreation in America would get out of hand, and the Irish stereotype embodied those anxieties. By the 1850s, the Irish were already appearing in literature as “shiftless parasites spawning large families that they were unable to support…. ‘Paddy’ and ‘Bridget’ were ignorant, unworthy parents” (Conners 2). Takaki observes, “Since sexual restraint was the most widely used method of birth control, the large families of these immigrants seemed to indicate a lack
of self-control” (149). Indeed, Old Grannis and Miss Baker may live among the non-white characters, but they are distinguished by their abstinence; with their English heritage, they both possess a will that our ethnic characters do not and cannot possess. Moreover, they are likely too old to reproduce, a detail that Norris uses to “paradoxically reinforce cultural fears about crumbling Anglo-Saxon dominance, even while establishing the power of the audience to control and direct the spectacle before it” (Dudley 64). Norris bases their “romance,” one of the only lighthearted threads in the novel, on two specific factors: the first is that we, as readers, are meant to be delighted by their lack of consummation; we find their properness and timidity endearing, particularly when held in contrast to the base, animal instincts that govern the other characters’ primary actions. Secondly, Norris suggests that their shared, elite heredity draws them to one another: “Did Old Grannis ever remember a certain face among those that he had known when he was young Grannis—the face of some pale-haired girl, such as one sees in the old cathedral towns in England?” (Norris 17). Though our other characters are cursed by their heredity, this same element enables Old Grannis and Miss Baker to endure. They symbolically occupy a single room that has since been split by a wall into two separate living spaces. After sexually assaulting Trina, McTeague wonders, “Why could he not always love her purely, cleanly?” (29). Clearly, our model for this pure, clean love – the only model – is the affair between Old Grannis and Miss Baker that is, paradoxically, a model that ensures no multiplication of progeny.

When the work of Yeats in the 1890s, then, specifically extolled Irish passion in the form of passionate, virile Irishmen like Cuchulain, Oisin, or O’Driscoll in “The Host in the Air,” these depictions directly contrasted the naturalist portrayals of the
uncontrollable non-white populace. The Anglo-Saxon fear of ethnic sexuality, we see, was twofold: First, non-whites were theoretically capable of reproducing, and thereby reproducing their deviance, in great numbers, while being simultaneously incapable of controlling their passions; because aberrant sexual desire – non-white sexuality – does indeed spread like an infectious disease in the novel, it is potentially uncontainable and therefore particularly dangerous. Second, there was also the ever-looming threat of miscegenation. Because the reality of getting all of America’s “McTeagues,” “Marias,” and “Zerkows,” to congregate outside of civilized society, as McTeague finally does, was unlikely if not impossible, Norris had to provide other alternatives to address the fears of his audience.

Norris confronts the first aspect of ethnic sexuality head on. Notably, though both Trina and Maria attempt to reproduce, neither is capable of completing this task. Trina makes the Noah’s ark figures as some sort of perverted consolation, for her children can only be objects, just as her lover can only be her gold; she cannot reproduce, but she can amass. Norris further confronts this issue while responding to the second fear of miscegenation. He shows his audience the intermarriage between Maria and Zerkow, the Mexican and the Jew. Notably, of all the characters in the novel, Zerkow is perhaps the vilest. Norris doesn’t instill him with an ounce of charm or goodness; he is unadulterated greed and depravity. He marries Maria in hope of acquiring the gold, soaking up her tale repeatedly with a libidinous fascination. The couple comes the closest to reproduction. Norris writes, “The child was a mere incident in their lives, a thing that had come undesired and had gone unregretted. It had not even a name, a strange, hybrid little being, come and gone with a fortnight’s time, yet combining in its puny little body the
blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard” (187). The narrator is clearly disgusted by the whole affair. Quay observes, “the ‘hybrid’ nature of the child—the blending of ethnicities—is more distasteful to the narrator than even the first-generation characters of the novel” (Quay 223). Norris confronts both of his audience’s fears simultaneously: non-white sexuality rarely results in (re)production, and even when it does, miscegenation inevitably results in monstrous offspring incapable of survival.

For Norris, “miscegenation is nothing less than a blueprint for extinction. It is no coincidence, in this context, that the sexual unions presented by McTeague are fruitless, in both a literal and figurative sense” (Dudley 63). This is the very same ideology that produced the field of eugenics:

With its explicit mission to strengthen the Anglo-Saxon race through selective sexual reproduction, the eugenics movement in the U.S. merged discussions of race and sexuality. Under the logic of biological determinism, those who were less “fit” to survive, such as sexual perverts, should theoretically die out. But the eradication of perverts could not be left entirely to natural selection, for sexual “perversities” were not only racial traits that could be spread through reproduction but also social diseases that threatened to infect the masses. (Nisetich 2)

If eugenics is the “scientific” answer to alleviating the problem of miscegenation and, more fundamentally, immigration, the equation also requires the literary pacification of the Anglo-Saxon American public who were under the constant threat that their superior bloodline would be contaminated. And the manner of pacification had better be accessible; the public needed to be shown how the race problem could be solved, or, even
better, how it could work itself out. Norris dramatizes this solution and demonstrates to white Americans that non-white emigrants cannot, ultimately, reproduce. But if this solution was not entirely persuasive enough to allay his audience’s fears, he was willing to go one step further. And though his “final solution” could indeed satisfy fearful WASP readers, it would only compel Irish Americans to grasp more vigorously for an alternative.

**Plunging into Whiteness**

_ McTeague’s_ concluding chapters provide Norris’s ultimate answer to the race problem in the United States by dramatizing its inevitable outcome, and thereby make it wholly apparent why Yeats’s alternative vision becomes so vital to the Irish American. Once McTeague leaves the city and makes his sojourn into the wilderness, Norris packs his narrative with descriptions of color and symbols of white purification; the word “white,” alone, in one way or another, shows up on nearly every page. The symbols are so pervasive and the rhetoric so obvious that Norris’s intentions for the novel’s conclusion are made startlingly clear. There are initially some lovely, colorful descriptions: “The stars winked out, and the dawn whitened…. The whole east, clean of clouds, flamed opalescent from horizon to zenith, crimson at the base, where the earth blackened against it; at the top fading from pink to pale yellow, to green, to light blue, to the turquoise iridescence of the desert sky” (319). But color is only emphasized so that it will be all the more dramatic when it is drained away. Though the novel has already chronicled the effort of non-whites to assimilate, the conclusion demonstrates
McTeague’s literal and figurative entrance into whiteness, the very thing he has desired from the beginning.

Just as Yeats was telling his readers of Tir-na-nÓg, the magical land of the undying to the west of Ireland, McTeague is also told of a fabled land to the west in the guise of Gold Gulch and Gold Mountain: “It’s over on the other side of Death Valley…. There ain’t many people in that country, because it’s all hell to get into” (311). But in order to get to Gold Mountain, one must cross Death Valley, “the terrible valley of alkali that barred the way, a horrible vast sink of white sand and salt” (321). McTeague tries to circuit the necessary descent into utter whiteness and thereby evade the rite of white purification, but it proves to be impossible. In order to achieve the ultimate source of riches, in order to become American, he must journey into whiteness. Soon, even the sagebrush disappears, and he is surrounded on all sides by the desert, “white, naked, inhospitable, palpitating and shimmering under the sun, unbroken by so much as a rock or cactus stump” (322). Norris emphasizes the points he has already made. Nisetich writes, “As McTeague penetrates deeper and deeper into the waste land, the landscape is increasingly drained of color, implying perhaps that the effects of race mixing on Anglo-Saxon purity will be no more lasting than the short-lived ‘strange, hybrid little being’ produced by the crossing of the Mexican Maria and the Jew Zerkow” (18). This is indeed a unique kind of whiteness that is so bright as to blot out all semblance of color. “The very shadows shrank away,” and even the sand gives way, replaced by “a fine powder, white as snow” (Norris 323, 324). As McTeague journeys through this “primordial desolation,” the whiteness eventually begins to overtake him: “He was scorched and parched from head to heel…. Every step he took threw up clouds of
impalpable alkali dust, salty and choking, so that he strangled and coughed and sneezed with it” (327). McTeague is unable to fully give himself over to white purification; he seeks even the slightest degree of color: “‘I can’t stand it,’ said McTeague at length. ‘I’ll have to stop and make some kinda shade.’” But there is no shade, and the only impression of color comes from Marcus and the other non-white men who are hunting after McTeague for the murder of Trina. The alternative to whiteness, blackness, is made clear: “A score of black, crawling objects were following him…. They were after him” (328). McTeague continues the battle against his hereditary blackness – “The brute that in him slept so close to the surface was alive and alert and tugging to be gone” – but he soon must face it head on (328).

McTeague’s journey ends, appropriately, in the middle of all that is white: “There was the brazen sky and the leagues upon leagues of alkali, leper white. There was nothing more. They were in the heart of Death Valley” (338). When he is finally confronted by Marcus, the latter displays his own ethnic struggle: “Marcus barred McTeague’s way, white with passion” (339). They go at each other, engulfed by whiteness: “rolling and struggling upon the hot, white ground…. Clouds of alkali dust, fine and pungent, enveloped the two fighting men, all but strangling them” (340). McTeague wins, but he is, as we have noted, finally bound to his sin, and unable to complete his purification rite: “McTeague was locked to the body. All about him vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley” (340). This conclusion is particularly sinister because, though Norris has descended to chronicle the most sordid details of ethnic life, he fails to show the death of his protagonist, leaving him “alive.”
McTeague is, effectually, trapped in the hell envisaged by Norris’s Protestant readers: he is bound to his sin in an ever-lasting fire where even death cannot provide relief.

The redundancy of the symbols and metaphors is striking in these final pages, but it appears that Norris wants to leave no doubt in his reader’s mind that non-white ethnicity generally, and Irish Americans specifically, cannot survive the transition into whiteness – cannot become “American.” We will see that McTeague needed to be Irish since the Irish became a particular threat to WASP citizens by proving that assimilation was possible, but it was surely no minor choice that each of the primary characters were of different non-white ethnic groups: Irish, Swiss-German, Mexican, and Jewish. The Irishman certainly, and for Norris’s readers, appropriately, suffers the most explicitly symbolic fate, and his violent end is drawn out to the point of absurdity. But ultimately, what Norris asserts is that all non-white ethnicities are the same in their inability to overcome heredity; each is violently outdone by lust and greed. We watch these characters violently struggle to assimilate, and then encounter Norris’s final answer: they can never make it, no matter how hard they try. The plot is that of “erasure, or even eradication” (Quay 222). The material world does not retain the power to pacify and identify Norris’s characters, and they inevitably regress into a hereditary state that destroys them. Norris specifically has the characters employ methods prescribed by those who would seek to Americanize the immigrant population and has his reader watch them fail, “emphasizing the anxieties inherent in [himself], his readers, and his country, toward the integration of difference into American life” (Quay 230). Norris finally gives his audience a happy ending: There is little to worry about, for non-white America will eradicate itself. And that elimination will be absolute.
If the ending demonstrates that assimilation into whiteness is fatal – that whiteness cannot be achieved by anyone who is not born into it – it also conversely asserts the longevity of the white race. Nisetich writes, “Norris certainly exploits white American cultural fears of over-civilization and over-exposure to the degenerative stimuli of gratuitous violence and sexual perversion, repelling and intriguing readers at once. But he also assures them that they, the favored race, have nothing to fear from the progressive unfolding of their destiny” (19). In McTeague, Anglo-Saxon society received an imagined encounter with non-white America, and was offered a vision of a future in which the superior bloodline would remain forever intact; this vision would have been particularly attractive to those readers, because, in reality, immigrant/ethnic America was only growing.

Norris’s overall standpoint was not unique, but his solution was distinct. He wasn’t merely asserting that non-whites were lower ethnicities and dangerous, for, as we will see, this was a basic premise of scientific discourse and the Anglo-Saxon mindset, but he moved beyond that popular belief to emphasize that non-whites would be undone by their base hereditary impulses. Clearly, then, the stakes were high for Irish Americans: their very struggle for survival was being popularly portrayed, and they, as a species, were eradicated. It should come as no surprise, then, that so many Irish Americans were unwilling to forget their Irish heritage, for they had little else to fall back on for comfort. Norris’s characters are little concerned with the maintenance of their ethnic identities, for there is no place, nor time, for that in the process of Americanization. But the reality is that the large majority of Irish Americans were fiercely passionate about the first half of that designation. Norris’s goal may have been
to quell Anglo-Saxon fear, but in the eyes of Irish Americans, the common narrative embodied and advanced in *McTeague* could only compel them to look for an alternative vision of heredity, such as the one Yeats offered in his own narrative of a rich Irish past and a vitalized future.

**McTeague, Irishman**

Norris’s audience is meant to recognize that McTeague is Irish—ethnicity, as I have asserted, is the novel’s primary preoccupation—yet, interestingly, Norris never specifically mentions names McTeague’s ethnic origins, even though he assigns specific ethnicities to the other primary characters despite the fact that we could certainly infer them. Nevertheless, beyond any reasonable doubt, critics agree that McTeague is of Irish descent,⁹ and recognition of his ethnicity is fundamental to a legitimate reading of the novel. So, if there is overwhelming evidence that, not only is McTeague Irish American, but that recognition of this fact is imperative to the function of the text, then why doesn’t Norris just come out and say he is Irish?

By not specifically granting McTeague a racial designation, Norris suggests that he embodies that particularly Irish threat to WASP society. *McTeague* is an account of lower races seeking Americanization. In order to achieve this end, McTeague sheds himself of his Irishness to disappear into the white social order. He is specifically suspected of his heritage at two points in the text, and is quick to deny it both times. During their early courtship, Trina questions his race in a roundabout fashion: “Are you Catholic, Doctor McTeague?” she asks him. “No. No, I——” he returns, awkwardly

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⁹ See Dawson and Dudley.
Later, having fled the scene of Trina’s murder, McTeague seeks work in a mine and encounters the German foreman who asks him: “Are you a Cousin Jack?” (296). A “cousin Jack” is a Cornishman (Dawson 42). McTeague denies the accusation and aptly asserts that he is “American.” He renames himself with the more acceptable surname, “Burlington,” which distances him from any association with the Irish. Later he goes by the even more inconsequential name “Carter” (Norris 306). We see, then, that McTeague is particularly dangerous in a way other characters are not because, Norris suggests, Irishness can be difficult to recognize. Therefore, it is appropriate that Norris separates our main character and contrasts him with our other ethnically defined protagonists. While McTeague is clearly constructed as “other,” he is decidedly less foreign than any of the other non-white denizens of Polk Street, according to John Dudley:

If, as much racist discourse of the time maintained, Africans, Native Americans, and Asians were clearly inferior, subject to the domination of ‘civilized’ Whites, then those immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and Ireland constituted a transitional evolutionary group who threatened to assimilate in ways not possible for those with more pronounced ethnic differences. For middle- and upper-class whites, the Irish, in particular, with their animalistic behavior and crude customs, served as atavistic versions of themselves which revealed the primal essence lurking underneath Anglo-Saxon civilization. Norris…relies heavily on popular understanding of this role for the Irish. (60) Irish America presented an ominous reflection of Anglo-Saxon America, capable of emulation and integration, and manifested the degenerative primal instinct lurking in the
increasingly real prospect of miscegenation. They were the ideal “other,” an unyielding facet of America’s substructure, but ultimately base and primitive. Because, realistically, the Irish were dangerous to the ideals of the Anglo-Saxon elite, it fell upon the latter to neutralize the threat by demonstrating that the Irish would be undone by their own base natures.

A Man of His Time

Norris’s notions of race were entirely common among his social stratum; his sense of superiority was a product his heritage. Both his mother and father were of English lineage that had long resided in America; his mother’s ancestor was a passenger on the Mayflower. By all accounts, Norris was proud of his heredity and it colored his actions throughout the 1890s.

When Norris in 1898 waxed chauvinistic during the Spanish-American War, displayed in 1896 the airs of an Anglophile as he demeaned South Africa’s Boers, and throughout his writing career privileged certain types of Americans over others, he did so at least in part because of the identity conferred upon him by the confluence of two bloodlines resulting from the marriage of B.B. Norris and Gertrude Doggett [his parents]. (McElrath and Crisler 33)

Notably, in these same years when Norris was showing sincere if naive concern for these varied political struggles, McTeague was gestating in his mind; he had begun working on a story in 1895 that would indirectly assert the superiority of Anglo-Saxon heritage by “positing heredity and awareness of the high standards for behavior modeled by one’s
ancestors as determinants of character” (McElrath and Crisler 160, 32). Still, it’s important to remember that Norris’s views on heredity were not atypical, but very much a product of his position as a white man, of Anglo-Saxon heritage, living, however modestly, in relative affluence. Though he spent some time growing up in San Francisco, time that he would use to justify his depiction of the city and its inhabitants, he moved east in 1894, and his perspective remained very much that of a WASP easterner.

Contemporary to McTeague’s composition, “race” was a term that could be applied in reference to groups based on color, genealogy, nationality, class, or religion. Scientific discourse, dominated by the Anglo-Saxon elite, categorized human beings hierarchically on a spectrum in which the Nordic, or Anglo-Saxon, race was positioned at the apex of human evolution, “higher even than other races, or ethnicities, that today would be considered equally white. In this milieu, ‘white’ meant ‘native’…Anglo-Saxon, and usually middle to upper class” (Nisetich 2). By all accounts, Norris was concerned with miscegenation, and influenced by contemporary studies of criminal anthropology, especially those by Cesare Lombroso, who believed that one could identify those who were born as criminals “through empirical data, of ‘born criminals’ whose ancestry and physical traits foretell the proclivity toward violent or anti-social behavior. Such ideas had gained widespread acceptance by the end of the nineteenth century” (Dudley 61-62). Yet even before Lombroso’s theories came into prominence, studies in craniology were used to justify American xenophobia, so these ideas were already deeply ingrained in upper class discourse. Norris also read Harper’s Weekly and Puck, which caricatured the Irish specifically on these grounds; Norris and his audience “found in caricature a means of preserving their highly qualified sense of Americanness” (Dawson
36, 42). All of these elements combined to shape “The narrative voice of McTeague…[which] cultivates a fierce ironic detachment from the characters, in Norris’s case through clinical, scientific language borrowed from contemporary anthropology” (Dudley 61). McElrath and Crisler note that Norris would occasionally challenge contemporary racial stereotypes, though it is never really clear if he ever did this purposefully; Regardless, they write, “he was a racist, as were the vast majority of his contemporaries in the western world. Even victims of racist thinking…accepted the premise that racial inheritance made a difference” (31). Norris was not abnormal, then, in his acceptance of these theories, but his narratives are founded on the fundamental premises that asserted his own racial superiority. Consequently, there was most definitely something at stake in Norris’s fiction, for he feared “the loss of white male social and political authority” – that Anglo-Saxon domination was being destabilized by the miscegenation that the ever-growing immigrant population inevitably brought with it (Nisetich 15). Norris, as a man of his time with relatively mainstream prejudices may not have created the ideologies he would enforce, but his delivery of the material was particularly clever and determined. McTeague was no aberration, but is exemplary of an ideology that was diametrically opposed to Yeats’s alternative literary vision.

Norris deliberately chose and lauded naturalism as the most appropriate means with which to communicate his fears. There has been much written about what, exactly, naturalism, as a genre, means to do, and anyone looking for Norris’s definition can find him pontificating in “Zola as a Romantic Writer” and other essays. But I am less interested in discussing exactly what contemporary naturalism was in terms of generic convention, and more interested in how Norris used the label naturalism to enable the
telling of his story and assert its truth – to convince his readers that what they were
reading was accurate. The name itself suggested the genre’s verisimilitude and its
separateness from contrived fictions. Naturalism was the perfect designation for Norris’s
documentation and popularization of his conceptions of ethnic and environmental
determinants. He believed that importing the naturalist novel to the U.S. enabled “the
application of a post-Darwinian worldview” (McElrath and Crisler 18). In *Vandover and
the Brute*, a novel written during the same period as *McTeague*, but completed and
published before it, Norris displayed a preoccupation with the mechanisms of survival:
the novel imagines circumstances in which a man must kill another man for the purposes
of self-preservation. *McTeague* would deal with the very same theme, but from a
different vantage; in the novel’s construction, the laws of self-preservation sanction the
author’s killing of every major non-white character, because not doing so, for Norris,
really did mean the death of his own race.

Norris was keenly aware of the economic climate in which he lived; to be
American, one must walk the path towards upward mobility. In his writing, Norris is not
critical of this impulse, but, in his rather privileged racial/economic position, seems to
have accepted it as truth. He did, however, recognize the tendency of capitalism to
induce brutality, especially among lesser, non-white ethnic groups. Ultimately, the result
could only be the working out of natural selection, which would result in not just the
pacification, but even the eradication, of lower life forms:

[Norris] dealt with the nature-versus-nurture question, and he dramatically
emphasized environment as a determinant of human behavior: to be reared
in a capitalistic milieu may also render one especially aggressive as an
economic combatant, determined to prove him- or herself fit to survive and flourish rather than unfit and thus slated for failure or even extinction. Or, such an environment, in its shaping influence over decades, may mightily reinforce the promptings of the acquisitive instinct. (McElrath and Crisler 22)

To acquire, to amass, then, was the natural manifestation of America’s ideological environment. Therefore, as we have seen, objects become the key component of Norris’s artistic vision. Quay notes that for Norris, objects “are not accidental or meaningless ‘details,’ but indispensable participants in the novel’s narrative. Indeed, for Norris characters in a novel can best be understood ‘in relation to the whirl of things’ around them; to discuss characters without their objects is to overlook crucial aspects of the novel’s meaning” (214).

For Norris, there is a sense of inevitability in the natural course. But, despite the rather predetermined nature of human behavior, particularly among lower races, Norris does not necessarily deny free will but, characteristic of naturalism, portrays it as futile. As McElrath and Crisler note, “the concept appears largely irrelevant in McTeague, given the low intelligence of the principal characters and their unawareness of the degree to which they are susceptible to genetic and environmental determinants” (23). Because their “low intelligence” and “unawareness” are overtly due to genetic inheritance, heredity remains the major determinant of behavior working itself out in an environment that exacerbates the savagery inherent in non-white ethnicities.

These are the philosophies, for Norris, underlying the naturalist label, fully manifested in McTeague. And the reader is invited, even encouraged, to be entertained
by observing that which is inexorable. There is indeed something paradoxical about the whole project, for Norris introduces readers to ethnic characters that were new to American literary fiction in a form which asserts its own truthfulness, yet the narrative is entirely partial, and transparently so. Nisetich asserts: “Narrated from the dominant perspective of a white male, McTeague invites readers to share in the happiness of conquest as they observe the downfall of various ethnic types depicted in a ‘phallic rhetoric’ that limits understanding or sympathy” (17). And, according to Dudley, in McTeague, “Norris frequently undermines the narrator’s role as objective observer…. This tension between objective observer and bitter moralist typifies the dialectic present in Norris’s work, and within naturalist discourse” (61). Norris went to great lengths to assert the truth inherent in his type of novel. Quay asserts, “through the genre of naturalism, the novel mediated and denied, produced and consumed, spoke for and silenced, the very groups it proclaimed as its subject” (231). A keen entrepreneur would be required to sell such a complex, original and troubled project to those who could legitimize it, and Norris was a clever self-promoter who had a deep understanding of his readership and the burgeoning business of literature.

Norris, and his target readership – largely middle to upper-class whites – were not used to reading about the kind of unsavory content that Norris chronicled in McTeague. Norris would have to make compromises with the text of McTeague itself too in order to get it in print. The 1895 version contained a rape scene before the infamous murder, but it was cut early on in the drafting process. Norris knew that the scandalous nature of his novel could work against him. In December 1898, shortly before the publication of
McTeague, Norris wrote to William Dean Howells to thanks him for positively reviewing Moran in the Literary World in November:

Mr. Doubleday has now in the presses a novel of mine, to appear in the spring, of an entirely different style from Moran. It is as naturalistic as Moran was romantic and in writing it I have taken myself [and] the work very seriously. I earnestly hope that if you ever have occasion to review it I will be more deserving of your encouragement than I am afraid I was in the case of Moran. (McElrath and Crisler 330)

Here Norris proves to be a brilliant marketer. McTeague was no critical hit initially; early reviews were largely negative. However, the novel was famously given a positive review by William Dean Howells; his assertion, that it is “altogether a remarkable book,” can still be found on the covers of the novel, an effort that likely sold and legitimized it.

Despite the largely negative reviews, McTeague attained and maintained a readership across a century. One reviewer wrote, “[McTeague] is a little inhuman, and it is distinctly not for the walls of living-rooms, where the ladies of the family sit and the children go in and out. This may not be a penalty, but it is the inevitable consequence of expansion in fiction” (Marchand 305). And, given that the novel did not disappear into obscurity even in the early twentieth century, readers were interested in “expansion,” and likely because it reinforced their existing anxieties. Norris’s novel fully manifested and exploited the many fears that were fundamental to the social identity of his class.

Moreover, he firmly believed that the novel possessed the ability to impart this Anglo-Saxon moral code. He asserts “The Pulpit, the Press and the Novel,” as “the great moulders of Public opinion and Public morals today,” but the novel moves a step forward
because it enters the private sphere, and stays there: “Its influence penetrates every chink and corner of the family” (“Responsibilities” 97). But, for Norris, to civilize is to become white; reading books is a matter of refining culture, of making it more white: “We, who were subjugating a continent, who were inventing machinery and building railroads, left it to the older and more leisurely nations—to France and to England—to read books” (“American Public” 126). To read, then, is to embrace a superior heritage. Norris believes, or at least hopes, that the novel instructs its readers in the Truth, teaches them how to live, and imparts morality. Readers and reviewers “found comfort in the fact that the refined civilization…is safe as long as the dangerous other can be contained by, and within, the intellect of the superior race” (Nissetich 17). Quay notes, “Norris claims that novels have the power…to make American what is ethnic and other…. to civlilize its readers, to move them beyond their ‘savage characteristics’ by introducing them to particular ideas, beliefs, and customs” (221). But, we have seen in McTeague that the pathway that leads toward becoming “American” is far more treacherous than his essays make it seem. He is merely marketing here, because Norris’s audience is the literate white populace. And even if he were to reach non-white readers, his novel demonstrates that though they may try, non-whites ultimately cannot become American:

Norris’ novel was not initially read by the class or persons he represents within it but by Easterners and other groups who were already considered American and civilized. As a result, the novel did not civilize its readers, but rather civilized the subject it represents. It did so by denying its ethnic characters the chance to fully integrate—to assimilate over the course of generations—into American culture. (Quay 221)
Norris’s comments, then, are simply empty acts of persuasion; he is making his readers believe in the importance of the purifying project of his novel. Norris doesn’t merely reflect the racist mindset of his day; he clearly exploits it to his own advantage and, with *McTeague*, offers his readers a solution to the “ethnic problem,” and one that will take care of itself. And though Norris’s solution applied to all non-whites, out of these various ethnic groups he chose to specifically target the Irish in America, asserting them as a particularly threatening problem to Anglo-America.

**San Francisco and the Collins Murder**

As we have seen, when Yeats visited the U.S. in 1903-04, he seems to have made a particular impression in San Francisco, likely, in no small part, because of its large immigrant population. And if Norris’s novel is any indication, Yeats’s popularity there should not be surprising, given that his vision of the Irish was antithetical to the Anglo-American vision of the city’s Irish and ethnic communities. Moreover, Norris’s major set piece was no random choice. In 1897, while *McTeague* was nearing completion, Norris wrote a short piece for the *San Francisco Wave* in which he asserted the city of San Francisco as a setting overflowing with possibilities for writers. He implies that the ethnic diversity, specifically, is at least partially responsible for the literary opportunities of depicting such a city, emphasizing its “indefinable air” and “isolation” as compelling and productive elements; San Francisco is a city in which “things can happen” (“An Opening” 247). By this time, Norris had nearly completed *McTeague* and had already finished *Vandover and the Brute*, whose subtitle read *A Study of Life and Manners in an American City at the End of the Nineteenth Century*; that city, of course, was San
Francisco. Norris, then, had clearly had his sights set on San Francisco for some time.

That Norris’s novel was about the West and read by those in the East presents an interesting discrepancy. Though it was certainly of interest to its contemporary eastern readers, reprinted editions now often fail to note McTeague’s subtitle: *A Story of San Francisco*. But San Francisco is a key element in Norris’s project that offered his readers in the eastern U.S. a setting that embodied many of their aspirations, fears, and prejudices.

*McTeague* was composed at a key historical moment in which “a two-fold shift in the contemporary national consciousness about the country’s geographic limits” (Quay 210). Firstly, American imperialism had expanded the westernmost limits of North America and was extending itself elsewhere. In 1898 alone, the United States seized Hawaii and the Philippines and went to war with Cuba. It was becoming a great, politically potent, imperial power. San Francisco stood as the geographic embodiment of expansion, and its limitations, and had a substantial effect on the Anglo-Saxon psyche:

America had begun to recognize its own geographic boundaries, the end of its ability to continuously expand, the end of the frontier. Both outward expansion and inward constriction had an important impact on the American concept of ethnicity. Imperialistic activities led to American interaction with people of vastly different cultures and backgrounds and was legitimized by the rhetoric of a ‘cultivating mission,’ a popular belief that grew out of theories such as Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest.’ Such ideas compelled Americans to consider it their duty to ‘improve’ the non-American peoples they came into contact with through the United States’
territorial expansion. Cultivation, in other words, meant Westernization and, more particularly, Americanization—the effacement of ethnic difference. (Quay 211)

But not all “Americans” were interested in the “improvement” of non-American, or non-white, peoples, nor did they all think such a task was possible. In an essay, Norris defined his conception of “Americans”: “the Frieslanders, the Anglo-Saxons, the Americans” (“Frontier” 115). Again, there is no room for the Irish, not to mention everyone else.

In “The Frontier Gone At Last,” published in 1902, Norris communicates his own anxiety about western expansion and increasingly defined borders, and clarifies the importance of the western United States to the legacy of Anglo-Saxon domination. For Norris, as for many in his relative social position, western expansion, the attainment of the Frontier, was a racial birthright, an ingrained instinct of the Anglo-Saxon race, and the inevitable outcome of their progress:

When we—we Anglo-Saxons—busked ourselves for the first stage of the march, we began from that little historic reach of ground in the midst of the Friesland swamps, and we set our faces Westward…. And the Frontier had become so much an integral part of our conception of things that it will be long before we shall all understand that it is gone. (111)

The result is not the deterioration of the compulsion, for it is a fundamental aspect of the Anglo-Saxon race – “Today we are the same race, with the same impulse, the same power” – but they must now look backward, turning “their faces Eastward” (113). For Norris, the conquest of the Frontier, which has now turned back to the east, has translated
from war into commerce. Expansion is requisite and unavoidable – domination over others is an ingrained instinct of the “American,” and any non-white pursuing Americanization inevitably subscribes to this practice. Norris never constructs Anglo-Saxon heritage, his or his characters, as exempt from the effects of racial heritage. But, Anglo-Saxon heritage is always constructed as worthy and noble. “Races must follow their destiny blindly,” Norris writes, but not all races in America are destined to become American (115). As we have seen, the Irish are struggling simultaneously to be understood as both white and American, but, according to Norris, the effort is a futile one.

San Francisco is a vital component of Norris’s project because of its relationship to Irish America – the ever-growing threat to WASP America that was all too real in the eastern U.S., where the Irish were making great progress. Following the years of the Famine, the Irish trekked west to the California gold fields; by 1880 thirty-seven percent of San Francisco’s “white” population were Irish (Dawson 39-40). Miller notes that Irish economic progress was often greatest in the Far West (495-96). Of course, the major anxiety for whites in San Francisco, and California in general, was the influx of Asian immigrants, but they were being controlled by an ever-growing number of laws, whereas the Irish could “blend in.” Norris and others had taken notice of the fact that the Irish were demonstrating their capabilities on both coasts. Indeed, Norris’s story was “ripped from the headlines”; his readers were already geared to believe in McTeague’s narrative, because it wasn’t an uncommon one.

Norris found inspiration for his novel in the murder of Sarah Collins by her husband Patrick in San Francisco in 1893. Collins, “a common laborer,” had been
arrested a year earlier for cutting his wife with a razor; he was convicted of assault and sentenced to six months in the House of Corrections, “and the wretched wife had peace for that period,” noted one reporter (“Twenty-Nine” 250). According to the San Francisco Examiner, Collins, after serving his sentence, approached Sarah for money at her home where she lived with her two children. She refused and he left. Patrick followed her to Felix Adler Free Kindergarten, where she was employed as a janitress. After stabbing her “more than thirty times” with a pocketknife, he visited a nearby saloon and was later arrested at St. Ignatius Church “on his knees engaged in prayer” (252).

The similarities between the Collins murder and McTeague are undeniable, as much of it made its way into Norris’s story. But, in his obsession with objects, Norris even replicated and intensified small details from the newspaper accounts, modifying even the slightest bit of information that could imbue a scene with implicit sensuality and unease to achieve even the slightest degree of seediness. For example, the Examiner needlessly pointed out that when Collins approached Sarah for money at her home before the murder, he had previously “been out in the country picking grapes” (251). Norris seized this detail but later exchanged the grapes for cherries, a sexier fruit that could emphasize the psycho-sexual undertones that underlie McTeague’s threatening confrontation with Trina. By exploiting these details he achieves a certain sense of realism; his inclination towards itemization, towards the particular, works to validate and tame the story’s more sensational episodes. But Norris’s tendency to imbue each object with some principal significance, symbolic or otherwise, means that he must manipulate each detail to distill its last drop of import. But it also means, as we have seen, that we, the readers, can assume that even the cherries matter.
Patrick Collins was clearly Irish American; Sarah Collins herself was born in County Cork. Moreover, the newspapers show that the Collinses were part of a larger Irish American community in their San Francisco neighborhood. Names like Flannery, Kelly, Flynn, and Foley are scattered throughout the newspaper accounts. Moreover, and importantly, the *Examiner*’s account overtly attributes Collins’s violence to an underlying ethnic propensity.

The *Examiner* account asserts Collins’ guilt and evaluates his physicality and behavior; the day following the murder, the headline read “Sarah Collins Slaughtered By Her Husband Because She Would Not Give Him Money.” Though the reporter clearly indicates that Collins had not admitted to the murder – “That is my business,” he replied to all inquiries – nor had he yet been tried, he allowed no possibility of Collins’s innocence. Four days after the initial report, the *Examiner* is even more pointed in its attack. While Collins had been called “a brute” in the earlier report, his characterization becomes even more acerbic. Though he had just been formally charged and still denied all allegations, headlines christened him “the savage of civilization,” “the murderous human beast,” and “a mixture of moral idiocy, egotism and shallow cunning.” Moreover, the *Examiner* explicitly attacks Collins’s Irishness, the only viable explanation for his savagery:

> If a good many of Patrick Collins’ ancestors did not die on the scaffold then either they escaped their desert or there is nothing in heredity.

Collins fell upon his wife the other morning with his knife and stabbed and slashed until his lust for murder was glutted. Seeing him, you can understand that murder is as natural to such a man when his temper is up
as hot speech is to the anger of the civilized…. He is not a man who has sunk, but one who had made an animal by nature to start with. The face is broad, the brown eyes are set wide apart, the nose is flattened at the bridge and as broad as a negro’s. The jaw is heavy and cruel. Fancy a first cousin of John L. Sullivan’s in Collins dress and situation and you have the man. (“He Was Born” 253-54)

The *Evening Bulletin* presented “John L. Sullivan’s” cousin similarly: “Collins is unquestionably one of the most brutal-looking men ever brought into the City Prison…. He gave his age as thirty-two years and Ireland as his place of nativity” (qtd. In Dawson 38). The *San Francisco Chronicle* dubbed him “a type of all that is low in humanity” (Dawson 12).

These newspaper accounts of the Collins murder do more than just illuminate the underlying racialist ideology that inspired Norris’s narrative; they also offer a poignant portrait of the xenophobia that had so invaded the public consciousness that Irish heredity was itself a satisfying explanation for vicious proclivities. Though this particular murder was a clear inspiration for the events of *McTeague*, the situation, and more accurately, the newspapers’ accounts of the situation, were anything but uncommon. “The hard drinking wife beater [was] a regular feature in the newspapers” by the mid-19th century according to Margaret Conners (2). Therefore, it is important to remember that “the stereotype rather than Collins provided the model for McTeague’s features” (Dawson 39). Nevertheless, that stereotype was distinctly Irish and widespread; the American Irish were certainly aware of how the public viewed them.
Perhaps these stereotypes were so widespread and insidious because of the unique threat the Irish seemingly presented to WASP easterners. This threat was more serious than those from other ethnic groups because the Irish were capable of integrating themselves and attaining power in a way that other non-whites were not. This was possible not only because they looked “white,” but also because of a powerful communal identity founded upon a shared connection with Ireland, in which Yeats, as we have seen, played no small part. They continued to face hardship, but they utilized their numbers and ethnic solidarity to their advantage, latching onto American mechanisms of power and making them Irish. By the 1870s, the Catholic Church in America was dominated by the Irish (Miller 495). By the 1880s, there was one or more Irish American newspaper in almost every major U.S. city in the eastern U.S. By the 1890s, Democratic Party organizations in the northern cities were largely controlled by Irish Americans (Takaki 161). Norris and his contemporaries had much to fear if these trends were allowed to continue.

The American Irish had been on Norris’s mind for some time even prior to *McTeague*, and in a way no other ethnic group apparently did. McElrath and Crisler call the Irish American protagonist in “Bandy Callaghan’s Girl” from 1896 “vulgar” and “none-too-quick-witted” (220). He had also already depicted San Francisco’s Irish on St. Patrick’s Day in “A Defense of the Flag.” Despite the clear influence of the Collins murder and the novel’s plain preoccupation with ethnicity and hereditary behaviors, the recognition of McTeague’s Irishness as a “hereditary curse,” and its imperative role in the story, was not regarded critically until Hugh Dawson did so in the 1980s. By the mid twentieth century, scholars were more interested in both asserting Norris’s place in the
developing American literary canon, and in exploring the boundaries of realism and naturalism in order to provide the movement with some tangible definition. Perhaps Norris’s notions of race, which were already deeply imbedded in the consciousness of his readership, were also deeply embedded in the consciousness of his critics as well. The Irish stereotype was so deep-seated that apart from the Irish American community, few others seemingly recognized it as such; these were merely “facts” concerning the Irish race and their inheritance.

**Inheritance: *Irish American***

We have seen the two visions offered to the American Irish by Norris and Yeats at the outset of the twentieth century. In the hands of Norris they were baseborn; in the hands of Yeats they were descendents of the mighty Cuchulain. Norris demonstrated that objects – worthless symbols of upward mobility – could occupy them until they inevitably and irrevocably outdid themselves; Yeats demonstrated that Irish solidarity founded on the dream of a pre-modern, pre-colonized, pre-capitalistic Ireland could help them navigate life in America. Norris situated them amongst deplorable characters and appalling situations in a greasy urban terrain; Yeats situated them alongside fisherman and fairies in idyllic, green locales. According to Norris, they were cursed by their inherited heredity; according to Yeats, their inheritance freed them from the miseries of a modern, industrialized life. Norris condemned but Yeats consoled.

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10 See Walker and Wyatt.
Through Yeats’s work, Irish Americans were offered an identity that was distinctly Irish, but also, by way of their ethnic solidarity, the means to get along in America; they became increasingly “successful,” even as they identified with a homeland far away. It seems that the kind of exploitation faced by the Famine Generation upon their arrival was not sustainable. By 1900, the percentage of second-generation Irish immigrants who were working in domestic service decreased from 61 to 19 percent. Irish women left domestic service positions to become teachers, secretaries, and nurses, while Irish men began seeking white-collar trades and improvements in job conditions (Takaki 160). They were integrating themselves into American society, and were therefore becoming a viable, mounting threat to Anglo-centric concerns; legally, if not culturally, they were considered “white” immigrants, and could therefore become naturalized citizens (Takaki 161). Upward mobility was proving to be possible, even if American authors like Norris would portray it as unachievable. “By 1900, two thirds of the Irish were citizens by birth, and they were better educated and had greater occupational mobility than their parents,” writes Takaki (161). And, according to Miller, “by the early twentieth century a higher proportion of Irish-American youths were attending college than were those of WASP parentage” (495). They were undoubtedly making headway, and we should not underestimate how the racial ideology embodied in McTeague would only have compelled them fiercely to do so. “Exile” was becoming a way of life.

The consequence of Irish achievement in America wasn’t necessarily the loss of what they believed made them fundamentally Irish, but rather the threat that their Irishness, whatever that might be, would be lost. But ultimately, this risk only made them grasp at the idea of Irishness even more passionately. Because exile was so
essential to the preservation of Irishness, so was loss, one of the themes that Yeats would return to again and again. And because many Irish Americans belonged to close-knit communities, the yearning for what was left behind was consequently communal – an act of identification itself that, as time went on, was all but synonymous with “Irishness.”

“How shall we preserve our identity?” asked Patrick Ford in 1872 (Miller 493). Clearly the answers to Ford’s question were many and varied. But, because of the hectic nature of American life, the difficult course towards assimilation and socialization through subscription to upward mobility, many Irish Americans sought a remedy in the idea of a homeland that loomed large in the minds of their parents and grandparents and, therefore, in the stories they told. “Ireland,” however nebulous, was imbedded in the cultural memory of many second and third generation Irish Americans: Ireland had become “a distant, albeit vivid, dream” (Miller 512). Miller’s observation is astute, for in America at least, Ireland and Irishness were hazy notions, particularly with Yeats as a guide, and were being reduced to sheer nostalgia and ceremony based on vague recollections of a country that, even before emigrants left, didn’t exist in the way it was being depicted.

Meanwhile, the designation “Irish” was becoming increasingly empty, or at least indeterminable; the label was more a marker of interests and social affiliations rather than ethnic origin. Nevertheless, Irish identification was unquestionably able to rouse passion, and was therefore a powerful creature:

Under mainstream political and clerical influence the annual St. Patrick’s Day celebrations became increasingly tame and hollow affairs…. The rich raciness of pre-Famine peasant culture was sanitized for bourgeois consumption into green shamrock wallpaper and popular songs…. In
short, many Irish-Americans quickly learned that Irish group consciousness could be profitable not only to politicians and saloonkeepers but also to suppliers of fraternal regalia and the volumes of Thomas Moore’s *History of Ireland* which adorned middle class parlors, and to travel agents…who not only arranged cheap sentimental journeys back to the ‘old country’ but…commercialized Irish emigrants’ most vulnerable emotions. (Miller 537)

Even though the ceremonies and symbols of Irishness were superficial, whether because of poverty, overwork, or the separation from family and rural life, “there is no doubt that homesickness sometimes assumed pathological proportions,” and even produced a kind of “separation anxiety,” and thereby stimulated an emotional dependence on the act of identification as Irish (Miller 514, 515).

Though the American Irish made many advances by the turn of the century, there were still widespread problems that plagued substantial minorities of the Irish American population. As I noted above, there was rampant poverty and unemployment, wage cuts, alcoholism, and disease. At the turn of the century, “Irish-Americans still contributed to a higher proportion of the nation’s paupers than did any other white ethnic group,” and mortality rates remained consistently high, particularly from tuberculosis (Miller 506). Irish Americans also made up an unusually large percentage of those occupying public mental institutions: “many suffered the effects of chronic drinking, but even more from schizophrenia – ironically symbolic of both the extreme disparities in Irish-American society and the still-enormous gap between new emigrants’ naïve expectations and the often unpleasant realities they encountered” (Miller 506). These items not only
demonstrate that Irish Americans continued to face many severe problems in spite of their progress, but also how the public must have viewed the Irish. When Norris offered his version of the Irish in *McTeague*, those who lived above Polk Street and viewed the Irish from a distance could easily buy into his narrative. The Irish American’s difficulties in America, sympathies for Irish nationalistic concerns, and social immaturity often meant that he was easily pigeonholed.

One crucial component of the emigrants’ subscription to their position as exiles was the idea that they were forcibly separated from what was rightfully theirs; consequently, they hoped to reclaim what had been lost. So, the belief that a return to Ireland was ideal, or even possible, persisted in their cultural memory, and was a motivating force. As I noted above, monetary donation to the cause of Irish independence placated many Irish Americans, and in no small part because an Irish-controlled Ireland would notionally enable a homecoming. The reality, however, is that only 10 percent returned to Ireland and few would visit before the Irish tourism industry developed as the century progressed (Takaki 162). But the hope sustained them and was easily exploited. An 1883 newspaper advertisement reads:

Remember the Promise You Made to Father or Mother When Leaving the Old Country and Receiving *Their Blessing*: ‘God bless you! I will never forget you.’ You can Now Redeem That Promise By Sending Some Article as a *Xmas Present* I am Now Prepared To Forward Small Parcels…to Your Home at *Very Low Rates*…. Make the Hearts of the Old Folks at Home Rejoice Picture Your Good Old Mother or Father opening a Parcel from You in this Country, and exclaiming With Tears of
Joy in their eyes ‘God Bless Them. I knew they would not forget me.’

(Miller 537)

Undoubtedly, the American Irish were susceptible to sentimental, nostalgic representations like these, and this regret, expressed in stories and songs – images of suffering oppression, tears, graves – and were manipulated, replicated, and performed during those moments in which these exiles felt most heartbroken and vulnerable.

Integration into American society, as we have seen, was a process of routine, of industry, in an increasingly urban economy, an environment very different from the rural conditions of a distant, unreal Ireland depicted in Yeats’s poetry. If the accounts of his trip to America are any indication, Irish Americans were looking to the rural, the pastoral, the mythic – to Yeats – for comfort. The Irish rise to respectability had been enabled by their numbers, their physical whiteness, their ethnic solidarity, and the work of artists like W.B. Yeats. Clearly the Irish presented a threat to Anglo-centrism, and were additionally, or consequently, a point of interest – a target. In their predisposition toward song and story, literature, as it so often does, served as a battleground for Irish American affairs at the turn of the century.

_The Celtic Twilight_, Yeats’s title for his 1893 collection, “became a catch-phrase for the early phase of the literary revival” (Fanning 170). But in this literary revival, with Yeats as its primary spokesman, the Irish American found a means of Irish identification that declared its artistic and cultural legitimacy. It provided an agency that could combat the diminishment and antagonism of “American” literature like _McTeague_ that disallowed Irish American humanity. Fanning writes, “The Irish-American embrace of Celticism had several meanings, one of which certainly involved respectability. The Irish
had ‘made it’ to the extent that this was their first American generation to be able to afford the luxury of a purely literary self-definition” (170). Yet American Celticism was also very often disconnected from the immediate concerns or problems of many Irish Americans, and, in many ways, its removal from reality was its strength, for the fantasy provided the pacification of hope: “Celticism allowed Irish Americans in the literary life to be both Irish and respectably romantic at once, and also to ignore unpleasant aspects of the contemporary world” (170-71). But it also, thereby, became a kind of propaganda and was increasingly removed from any accurate history; because Anglo-Saxons had constructed their own myths about the Irish, Irish Americans went on the defensive, elaborating and exaggerating Irish history.

There’s no doubt that “Celticism sold—and continues to sell—a lot of books,” writes Fanning (170). The kind of cultural identification Yeats provided certainly had positive effects, and it should be no surprise that his popularity in these years would soon turn into a kind of canonical legitimacy as the Irish did assimilate in America, despite Anglo-centric efforts, and did achieve “independence” back home. His expressions provided the American Irish with identity, solidarity, pride and a means to cope. In his essay on R.D. Joyce, Yeats wrote that Irish poetry can “sweeten the hills and streams for many a long day with memories; and without memories, the most wonderful scenery is like a beautiful soulless face” (106). That’s what he provided to his readers: common memories that gave a soul to the Irish in America. He convinced readers that there was a rural world far removed from America’s urban landscape, that it was fundamentally theirs, and that Irish culture was “high” culture. But the ultimate results could not be entirely positive. Fanning believes that “the negative impact was more significant. A
distorted sense of one’s heritage, extending even to the recent past, is not in the long run good for anybody. As ‘Emerald Isle’ sentimentality and nostalgia became rampant, they led to unhealthy romanticizing of even the least attractive aspects of Irish life” (170).

Books like *McTeague* were so sinister that they erased the American Irish. But, maybe just as insidious was the legacy that prompted the exaggeration of Irishness, which, in some cases, would prove to be equally destructive, and would be examined by Alice McDermott a century later.
Chapter Two:

The “Artful Appropriator”: W.H. on W.B.

“All generations overlap, and the young poet naturally looks for and finds the greatest help in the works of those whose poetic problems are similar to his because they have experiences in common.”

– W. H. Auden, “Yeats as an Example”

“We never read a poet as poet, but only read one poet in another poet, or even into another poet.”

– Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*

**W.H. and W.B.**

I have yet to find a substantial literary anthology that represents W.H. Auden without including his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” It remains one of his most anthologized poems and, therefore, one of his most memorable poems. Taking up the daunting task of writing an elegy for one of the century’s greatest poets – and writing it “well” – not only cemented Auden’s reputation as an important poet, but also established him as Yeats’s literary successor; he commemorates Yeats’s death. Edward Mendelson, perhaps the foremost Auden scholar, famously divided Auden’s body of work into *Early Auden* and *Later Auden* in his two-volume study, divisions that, though perhaps arbitrary, remain a part of the critical discourse on Auden. And “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” stands
at the apex of this division as a valediction of what came before and a vision of what might come. It is a product of the Atlantic journey, a poem constructed from the very traditions it attempts to challenge and ultimately leave behind. And though it is “about” Yeats, it embodies many of Auden’s ambivalences. Auden went through some major transitions in 1939, the year the poem was written, which, if for that reason only, makes 1939 an appropriate turning point from the Early to the Later Auden. All the while, he displayed a keen awareness of how to use canonical and national constructions to his advantage. Auden’s poem, ultimately, has much more to do with Auden than it does with Yeats.

Yeats and Auden followed surprisingly congruent courses, and though Auden would attempt to distance himself from the older writer, he clearly benefited from the literary alliance. Placing them alongside each other, with an eye turned towards national and canonical construction, reveals much about Auden and his efforts to secure a lasting literary reputation. I am not interested in asserting or denying Auden’s “talent” as a writer, nor in making an evaluation concerning the aesthetic value of his poetry, but in examining Auden’s relationship with Yeats in the three major pieces Auden wrote about him to illuminate what the older poet offered Auden: primarily, a site for self-justification and a means toward the attainment of canonicity. Yeats had a patent impact on the younger poet and, therefore, Auden would unavoidably return to evaluate Yeats as a subject; these evaluations allowed Auden to articulate concerns about the value of literature, the importance, or lack thereof, of poetry, the poet’s responsibility, and Auden’s own place in the canon of poets. “Auden,” David Garrett Izzo writes, “was an
artful appropriator” (4). For Auden, Yeats’s life and work remained a fertile playground, likely because Yeats was just as contradictory, naïve, and conflicted as Auden himself.

In many ways, Auden was admitted into the world of literature by Yeats and Eliot, who were largely responsible for the burgeoning literary market by the 1930s. Whether this admission was a product of a Yeatsian pitch, or whether his pitch was a product of his admission is perhaps unknowable, but Auden grew up reading Yeats, in a poetic atmosphere dominated by Yeats and Eliot. Moreover, “Auden [believed] that he was a poetic successor to Yeats” (Davenport-Hines 75). There is a tangible connective literary tissue that links Yeats and Auden, with Eliot resting, perhaps, somewhere in between; according to Encyclopedia Britannica, a standardizing, if stodgy, mechanism of regulated information, “by the time of Eliot’s death in 1965…a convincing case could be made for the assertion that Auden was indeed Eliot’s successor, as Eliot had inherited sole claim to supremacy when Yeats died in 1939” (“W.H. Auden”). Still, Auden maintained much more of a dialogue with Yeats’s work that he did with Eliot’s. Yeats’s formidable presence on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean had only increased after the turn of the century as the Irish continued to ingratiate themselves and, therefore, ingratiate Yeats. And Yeats remained incredibly visible during this time in national and international, political and literary, contexts. He was a member of the Irish Senate from 1922-1938, and in 1923 he had won the Nobel Prize in literature. Clearly his legacy and canonical station were secure, and, furthermore, the role of the poet in a transatlantic society was proving to have the capacity to be vastly influential – as we saw with Yeats’s role in America – by the time Auden was poised to take over.
Auden: Prosecution and Defense

Yeats died in January of 1939. Within days Auden was composing “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” and sailing away from Europe to America in search of a “rootless” existence; he was troubled by the prospect of war and disenchanted by what he viewed as his own misguided and immature belief that poetry could somehow provide a remedy to the various political struggles he had taken an interest in. At the same time, he was working on an essay about Yeats, “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” which was published in The Partisan Review in the spring of the same year. The essay is, in many ways, an explication of some of the poem’s suppositions and clarifies Auden’s conflicted relationship with Yeats and his legacies at that time. But it is also a less cohesive piece than the elegy, likely because Auden had to complete the essay before the poem in order to make a publication deadline (Hecht 136). Therefore, it serves as a kind of introduction to the elegy, which makes it worth examining before we move on to evaluate the poem and the motivations that compelled Auden to write the elegy.

The essay is composed in the rhetoric and structure of a courtroom discourse. The Public Prosecutor makes his case against Yeats before the Counsel for the Defence; the Defence is, presumably, the perspective Auden ultimately subscribes to and is given a chance to respond for Yeats. The question under consideration is whether or not Yeats was a “great poet.” The question itself is surely flawed, and its features are never fully spelled out, but Auden does attempt, to a certain degree, to provide dimension to “greatness” insofar as poetry’s ultimate consequence is concerned.
Though critics agree that Auden’s perspective is that of the Defence,¹¹ I think a more legitimate explanation is that both perspectives belong to Auden, though he did finally side with Yeats if only because he saw the same flaws in himself. But that does not mean that the criticisms to one degree or another are not legitimate, for regardless of the question’s merit, the Prosecutor formulates some apt if scathing charges against the recently deceased. The Prosecutor implies the illegitimacy of the “Yeats” apparatus, questioning his perceived artistic authority by calling *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse,* which Yeats had edited, a “most deplorable volume” (3). He also calls attention to the paradoxical nature of Yeats’s affirmation of the peasant’s virtues:

Had the poet chosen to live in a mud cabin in Galway among swine and superstition…we should admire his integrity. But did he do this? O dear no. For there was another world which seemed to him…a deal more agreeable to live in, the world of noble houses, of large drawing room inhabited by the rich and the decorative…. The deceased had the feudal mentality. He was prepared to admire the poor just as long as they remained poor and deferential, accepting without protest the burden of maintaining a little Athenian band of literary landowners, who without their toil could not exist for five minutes. (4)

He then examines Yeats as the champion of nationalism, affirming that “Easter, 1916” is indeed a masterpiece, but not for reasons its admirers have alleged: “To succeed at such a time in writing a poem which could offend neither the Irish Republican nor the British army was indeed a masterly achievement” (4). The Prosecutor’s final point is against

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¹¹ See Callan, Stan Smith, and Ruleman.
Yeats’s superstitious and mythical meanderings: “In 1900 he believed in fairies; that was bad enough; but in 1930 we are confronted with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India” (5). And, even worse, by the end Yeats had descended into flirtations with fascism: “In the last poem he wrote, the deceased rejects social justice and reason, and prays for war” (5). Most anyone familiar with Yeats’s life and work would find it difficult to argue against these charges, despite the Prosecutor’s aggressive tone, but we should keep in mind that the Prosecutor has, perhaps unfairly, cherry-picked his examples from a vast body of work that focused on numerous interests from as many ideological vantage points. Nevertheless, part of the brilliance of the essay’s construction is that, though the question of “greatness” has hardly been answered, the reader is all but convinced of Yeats’s unattractive hypocrisy, and ready to write him off for it, by the time the Defence is poised to argue in Yeats’s favor.

The Defence begins with the premise that critic Edward Rosenheim took up in his analysis of Auden’s poem and essay on Yeats almost thirty years later, that “the spectacle of anything well-done…must always give pleasure” (5). And he rightly criticizes the Prosecutor’s argument for being based primarily on an attack on Yeats’s character and politics, asserting that the evaluation of his poetry is another matter entirely that has little, if anything, to do with the poet’s unattractive qualities. That Yeats is a contemporary poet works against him, for readers don’t read poetry of the past in the same way they do contemporary poetry: “We are tempted so to judge contemporary poets because we really do have problems which we really do want solved, so that we are inclined to expect everyone, politicians, scientists, poets, clergymen, to give us the answers, and to blame
them indiscriminately when they do not” (5). But this impulse does not dictate “good”
poetry, according to the Defence:

Every individual is from time to time excited emotionally and
intellectually by his social and material environment. In certain
individuals this excitement produces verbal structures which we call
poems; if such a verbal structure creates an excitement in the reader, we
call it a good poem; poetic talent, in fact, is the power to make personal
excitement socially available. Poets…stop writing good poetry when they
stop reacting to the world they live in. The nature of that reaction,
whether it be positive or negative, morally admirable or morally
disgraceful, matters very little; what is essential is that the reaction should
genuinely exist. (6)

Yeats, therefore, is a great poet precisely because he remained excited about and engaged
with the world around him and possessed the ability to instill his well-assembled verbal
structures with this excitement and inspired the reader to feel the same:

In two hundred years…who but a historian will care a button whether the
deceased was right about the Irish Question or wrong about the
transmigration of souls? But because the excitement out of which his
poems arose was genuine, they will still…be capable of exciting others,
different though their circumstances and beliefs may be from his. (6)

Furthermore, the Defence lauds the poems themselves for maintaining, from the earliest
to the latest, “a sustained protest against the social atomization caused by industrialism,
and both in their ideas and their language a constant struggle to overcome it,” though he
does not seem to realize – or chooses to disregard – the fact that this protest is itself a political position, a response to a current problem (7). Despite this paradox, the Defence argues with the same passion as the Prosecutor, but is more reasonable and even-tempered. He is, after all, a lawyer using a lawyer’s criteria for understanding Yeats; while the Prosecutor cares about character and politics, the Defence worries about engagement and aesthetics as well as politics, which he envisions differently than his opponent. His argument is convincing because he clarifies the nature of Yeats’s shifting interests and interprets that very impulse as a courageous act: whether by fairy lore or the principles of Anima Mundi, from local interests to increasingly unanimous concerns, Yeats remained in search of that which could be universally applicable to his many questions – a form that could encompass his inquiry. And, as we will see, knowledge of Auden’s struggles in the 1930s illuminate why he feels so passionately inclined to justify Yeats’s esoteric interests.

Finally, in the last few paragraphs, the Defence asserts that “art is a product of history, not a cause.” Art is decidedly different from technological or scientific creations in that “it does not re-enter history as an effective agent” (7). Therefore he calls the question over whether art ought or ought not to be propaganda “unreal”: “The case for the prosecution rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged” (7). Surely the case can be made that art is more a product of history than history a product of art. And surely the relationship between the two forces is more complicated and less terminal than the Defence makes it out to be; it is arguable, at best,
that poetry has never inspired, affected, or in its function as a chronicle of the present, impacted actions that become what will later be regarded as history. For all its fascinating implications, Auden’s contention remains little elucidated here, and the Defence rests soon after by reiterating that both the Prosecution and Defence agree to the “greatness” in Yeats’s language: “it is precisely in this that the greatness of the deceased is most obviously shown” (7). Still, we will see that when Auden clarifies his notion – that “poetry makes nothing happen” – in “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” he is affirming poetry as a means to cope with the forces of modernity. Poetry makes nothing happen; it has the power to decelerate, to organize, artfully, the chaos of Modern life – it provides stability to what seems wholly unstable – a sentiment shared by Eliot, Yeats, and numerous other poets.

Each of the claims made throughout this essay, both those made by the Prosecutor and the Defence (both of which, as I have suggested, are expressions of Auden’s feelings), those that condemn and those that bolster Yeats, has as much to do with Auden as Yeats. Furthermore, in this essay utilizing the “Yeats” name not only allows Auden to explore complex issues and make an intellectual argument, but also – because of Yeats’s wide popularity and his recent death – offers him a wider audience. Auden utilizes the moment to his advantage. Many were affected by Yeats’s death. The New York Times obituary headline reads “Yeats Is Mourned All Over Ireland,” and goes on to note that “Throughout the day a constant stream of messages of sympathy came from the United States and many parts of Europe” to Yeats’s relatives (27). The Times in London ran remembrances up through February ninth, the final of which asserts, “It was because he believed with Aristotle that the poet should think like the wise man, but use the common
speech of the people, that he held the respect and admiration, not only of his contemporaries, but also of those younger poets whose political opinions differed widely from his own” (“Mr. W.B. Yeats” 19). And nearly all of his obituaries highlighted the assertion of James Masefield, the poet laureate of England at the time, that Yeats was the world’s “greatest living poet.” Yeats wasn’t just fundamental to the development of the literary market, but fundamental to the ethnic identities of numerous Americans and Europeans; indeed, Auden’s elegy will include many of the same points as his essay, but will also take on issues of nation and national identity. Yeats as the ostensible subject of these works legitimizes Auden’s position. To find a platform and an audience for a statement as bold as “poetry makes nothing happen” would necessarily require an agent for the exchange. Who better than the man widely recognized as the greatest poet of his time?

**Rootlessness**

Like Yeats, Auden’s life was one of questions, and though he would often explore pathways that offered some temporary sense of fulfillment, he was never fully satisfied by answers; therefore, his work is more often an expression of inquiry rather than resolution. His dichotomous nature was likely impressed upon him from childhood. When he was born in 1907, his father, a doctor, was practicing psychoanalysis at a time before it became fashionable. His mother, a nurse, was a Protestant conservative. Though Auden himself would spend the first half of his career following in his father’s footsteps, his mother’s influence would prove to be more lasting, especially after her death in 1941 (Izzo 4). His range of influences was considerable, though Yeats would
emerge as one of more visible and direct inspirations. Auden grew up with an interest in poetry while there was a developing market to be a poet, particularly if one were English, educated, and male. Auden attended Oxford from 1925 to 1928, writing poems all the while. In the summer of his final year there, a friend with a hand press printed forty-five copies of Auden’s *Poems*. Over the next few years he traveled and taught while seeking a publisher for *Poems*. To his everlasting luck, T.S. Eliot, poetry editor of Faber & Faber, accepted *Poems* for publication, followed by *The Orators* just a few years after.

Izzo writes, “Auden became the Eliot of the 1930s. He was the tacit leader of the Auden Generation, and writers from Auden country were the new rage” (4). In other words, Auden became the spokesperson for, and the leader of, a number of writers, just as Yeats had been the most visible leader of the Irish Literary Renaissance.

It would be impossible to pinpoint the extent to which Yeats’s influence on Auden – the poetic parallels and echoes – found Auden an audience and also, perhaps, affected Eliot’s decision to publish Auden’s work. Critics of the 1930s seem to have ignored any parallels in the work of Yeats and Auden, but as both the century and the canon-making process progressed, critics began to notice Auden’s Yeatsian pitch. In the early 1970s, Joost Daalder asserts, “[A] number of individuals…have found, together, a not inconsiderable group of Yeatsian echoes in Auden and we may very well still not have found everything there is to find” (335-36). Still, aside from echoing the canonical Yeats, and the public approval of Eliot, Auden had two more forces working to his advantage in the 1930s. Firstly, he rarely stayed in one place for very long, ever seeking new experiences, and thereby made his presence known in multiple geographies. During the 1930s, he spent extended amounts of time in Berlin, Scotland, Iceland, Spain, China,
and America, often settling for a short time as a teacher or lecturer at schools and universities. As a result, Auden had the potential to influence the market beyond the availability of his books; he wasn’t just a writer, he was an educator, and one that educated all over the world. Secondly, though Auden would later be apprehensive about ideas of community, during the 1930s, Auden surrounded himself with other writers and artists like Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and Chester Kallman – what critics like Dorothy J. Farnan and Richard Davenport-Hines call the “Auden Generation” – and he often collaborated with his friends and acquaintances.

Auden’s transcontinental connections ran deep throughout his life, and the nationless aspect of these affiliations – their emphasis on art and experience over notions of what a citizen owes his own nation – would culminate in feelings of rootlessness by the decade’s end.

The 1930s was a globally troubled decade. Auden and his friends, part of the Western liberal left, were given over for some time to embrace, or at least be compelled by, the principles of socialism. While fanning this political flame, they watched, from a distance, Hitler’s emergence, and the oppositional rise of Fascism and Communism. Meanwhile, the Great Depression was plaguing Americans – proof, surely, to the Auden Generation of the failings of Capitalist Democracy. Samuel Hynes emphasizes the profound effect of “the Myth of the Thirties” on the Auden Generation: “how Evil grew powerful and insolent then, while Good dithered and did nothing; how young writers tried to make writing a mode of action, and failed; and how a war that everyone foresaw and only the wicked wanted came at last…. It was an odd, anxious time, between an ending and a beginning” (31). In Yeats, Auden had seen the kind of political impact a
poet and playwright could make. The Celtic Twilight had played no small part in rousing the nationalistic concerns that resulted in the War of Independence and the Irish Free State in the previous decade; though many Irish were clearly unhappy with the results of the War, Yeats demonstrated to Auden that poetry could “make something happen,” though Auden, as we will see, would continue to struggle with the actual nature and extent of this “something.” And, as we have seen, Yeats’s fundraising tours in America, where he espoused the virtues of the Irish Renaissance, had been enormously successful. Auden eagerly took on the role of the political poet, an advocate for oppressed peoples. For a short time, Auden and his compatriots, armed with a youthful idealism, were confident in the poet’s political influence. They sought to exercise it, but also wanted to advance the kind of power Yeats had wielded, trusting that the effect could be profound:

Auden did not wish to look for happiness in Yeats’s mystical (and fictional) “Byzantium,” but in something more immediate and concrete – whatever that might be. However, by 1933 Auden wished to admire and emulate Yeats the activist, if not Yeats’s style and symbolic choices. Yeats…believed the poet should think like a wise man, but express himself like the common people. Auden agreed. (Izzo 283)

In 1937, Auden would even spend several months in Spain during their civil war in support of the Republican government; his poem “Spain” was published shortly thereafter with all proceeds (meager, perhaps) donated to Republican medical aid.

Auden’s transnationalism also emerged in the wake of a powerful mystical experience that would remain with him until the end of his life. In 1933, Auden encountered the Vision of Agape on a summer night, experiencing overwhelming
feelings of love for humankind. Whatever one might make of the incident – and Auden would hypocritically rebuke, though ultimately excuse, Yeats for his “visions” as a roundabout act of self-justification – it certainly exacerbated his tendency, however idealized, to regard people exclusive of geographic boundaries, similar to how Yeats would move from Irish concerns in poems like “To Ireland in Coming Times” to the universal in “The Second Coming.” Izzo notes, “That night was the event in Auden’s life, and he sought to understand it and, more importantly, re-create it thereafter” (4). Though the Vision would initially compel Auden towards the public sphere and excite his bout with activism, his flirtation with being the political poet was, ultimately, just that; outward application meant the neglect of inward exploration: “the mystical Vision of Agape convince[d] him that there was a spirit somewhere begging his indulgence that he might stop his running about the public sphere and listen to his private sphere” (Izzo 3). War was underway by the end of the 30s despite the hopes and efforts of the Auden Generation, so clearly they had failed in some profound ways, or had at least failed to understand the limits of poetic incursions in the public sphere, a fact that troubled Auden. After visiting China with Isherwood and documenting their observations on the Sino-Japanese war for what would become Journey to a War, Auden visited America for the first time; New York City in particular suited Auden’s cosmopolitan taste and he quickly decided he would move there. He wrote that America “allows individuals to base their senses of identity on merit, not class,” a particularly attractive if naïve ideal for Auden (qtd. in Roberts 92). In 1939, Auden abandoned the country of his birth for New York City. Auden’s emigration was no small matter, and critics and biographers
continue to debate Auden’s reasoning. Regardless, Hynes convincingly characterizes Auden’s emigration “as a negative response to the historical situation as he saw it”:

By 1939 it seemed clear to him, as it did to many other Europeans, that the crisis they were facing was not simply another war but the failure of an ideology. *If* fascism existed, and dominated Europe, *if* another world war was coming, then the liberal western conception of man must be wrong in fundamental ways—more than wrong, *dead*. By leaving England when he did, Auden was freeing himself from that dead liberal ideology. Man’s condition would have to be understood differently from now on: as existentially alone, cut off from the old roots, the old comforts and securities. (34)

Auden, armed with the confidence becoming youth, English privilege, and relative fame, had set his sights high; according to Izzo, Auden had sought after “no less than saving the world” (3). Though he had spent the majority of the 1930s seeking “answers” to human suffering in science, art, and politics, he had failed to achieve any satisfying result. Therefore, he abandoned his rational pursuits, and by the decade’s end was steeped in the Christian theologies of Kierkegaard, Tillich, and Niebuhr, urged, perhaps, by the need to fully grasp his Vision. Clearly, he was entering a period of profound change, perhaps even a comprehensive abandonment of his previous ideas. An accompanying geographical adjustment, he believed, which was not a particularly newfangled idea for Auden, might promote his necessary transition.

Auden’s relocation was also representative of his attempt to break loose from Yeats. The point here is not to evaluate the appropriateness of Auden’s decision to leave
his home country, but to illuminate the many forces and anxieties that compelled Auden’s “transition” and would be finally articulated by the decade’s end in “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” The motives behind Auden’s rather timely departure certainly seemed obvious enough, but it was no small matter. In the House of Commons, Major Sir Jocelyn Lucas wondered “whether British citizens of military age, such as Mr. W.H. Auden and Mr. Christopher Isherwood, who have gone to the United States and expressed their determination not to return to this country until the war is over will be summoned back for registration and calling up, in view of the fact that they are seeking refuge abroad?” (qtd. in Hynes 32). That Auden’s actions incited anger from many of his former countrymen is understandable; many of Auden’s peers abandoned their leftist principles and remained in England. Peter Edgerly Firchow writes, “Auden was determined not to remain confined, as Yeats had been, in the ‘prison of his days.’ In America he could break free and become another kind of poet altogether. He could be ‘reborn’” (186). Firchow’s suggestion that Auden was moving away from Yeats is apt; Auden no longer longed to be the political figure that Yeats had been, and his relocation to America was symbolic of his break from those ideals.

Auden’s actual motives aside, his transatlantic journey was as symbolic as it was geographical: “he was sailing away from politics, and toward religion,” writes Hynes (33). Auden’s own explanation for emigration was simple; he wrote to a friend: “What I am trying to do is to live deliberately without roots” (qtd. in Hynes 34). To begin anew, in a new geography, with, expectantly, a new voice or means of delivery, meant the abandonment of much that Auden had written before; Auden came to disparage the propagandistic nature of much of his earlier poetry and prose. In the 1930s he had
increasingly moved from lyrical and gnomic poetry like “This lunar beauty” and “It was Easter as I walked” to write some overtly political propaganda. In “Spain” the country’s republicans (with whom Auden’s sympathized) address their nation: “‘What’s your proposal? To build the just city? I will. / I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic / Death? Very well, I accept, for / I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.’”

Auden realized the futility of such rallying cries in just a few years. Notably, neither “Spain” nor “Spain 1937” (a revised version) appear in Auden’s *Collected Poems* because he later saw his politics as immature, fleeting and impulsive; when it came time for Auden to put the volume together, he apparently disliked the poem enough to excise it (along with other political poems like “September 1, 1939” and “In War Time”) from what alleges to be a complete collection.¹²

Clearly, the tendency for the poet to disparage his early work is entirely common, and Yeats himself displayed a similar distaste for his early poetry. In 1932, Yeats wrote of his youth:

> I was a propagandist and hated being one…. I remember almost the day and hour when revising for some reprint my essay on the Celtic movement I saw clearly the unrealities and half-truths propaganda had involved me in, and the way out. All one’s life one struggles towards reality, finding always new veils. One knows everything in one’s mind. It is the words, children of the occasion, that betray. (qtd. in McDiarmid, “The Living Voice” 168)

¹² See Mendelson’s “Revision” and “We Are Changed,” and Morse for discussions of Auden’s revisions and omissions.
Perhaps Yeats’s own regret fueled Auden’s, though there is no way to be sure. Still, Auden came just a few years later to similar conclusions.

Auden certainly remained productive during his search for a new kind of existence; from 1939 to 1940, he wrote three books, publishing two, and fifty poems, in addition to his lectures, reviews, and other work. All the while he continued to read voraciously about religion, philosophy, and science, in addition to literature, trying, always, to digest his historical moment and the failure of his liberalism. Still, the many influences that produced “the extraordinary fertility of his mind” by the decade’s end were always necessarily turned inwards as a means to analyze his own life (Hynes 37). When Auden wrote about others, and he often did, he was always more interested in himself than his apparent subject and utilized the familiarity of historical figures to enable their use as vehicles by which he could explore his own questions: “he would habitually swerve from his ostensible subject—a life of Voltaire or an anthology by de la Mare—to write about his real concerns,” writes Hynes. Auden wished, fundamentally, to comprehend his own place in history: “where are we now?” Everything that Auden wrote—every review, every lecture, every poem—was a draft of an answer to that question” (Hynes 37). But such questions cannot be easily answered, so his poetry from this time unavoidably embodies his ambivalences. In “September 1, 1939,” he writes:

I sit in one of the dives

On Fifty-second Street

Uncertain and afraid….

The dense commuters come…

Who can reach release them now?
Who can reach the deaf?

Who can speak for the dumb? (583-85)

Auden saw many of the previous decade’s failures embodied in the malfunction and manipulation of romanticism – a state of mind and a means of expression that was misleading and had ultimately failed in its impact. Hynes writes, “romanticism was, to him…the generic term for all the errors in men’s thought—political, philosophical, and religious—that converged at last in Nazism, and in the war” (40). For Auden, an era had ended, and a world war “was the final disintegration of order” (39). Therefore, he would have to give order, to reorder, and put the pieces back together in an unfamiliar way:

“All I have is a voice / To undo the folded lie, / The romantic lie in the brain / of the sensual man-in-the-street,” he wrote (“September” 85). Despite his many companions, this was to be a lone venture, a choice that mirrors Yeats’s own growth. Yeats, in hopes of collapsing the divide between the poet and the audience, had also been initially motivated by the folk tradition, which emphasized the communal experience and the collaborative medium of performance; he did, however, come to believe that “duplicating the folk situation is not always conducive to literature. Too many bards spoil the ballad” (McDiarmid, “The Living Voice” 169). Auden, who had often collaborated with his friends, now rejected the artistic partnerships that had sustained him, a step that, at least in his mind, was necessary in order to achieve rootlessness.

If Auden were to truly begin anew, to live without roots, to find a new means of expression and a Modern life, he would have to bid farewell, symbolically or otherwise, to his previous life. Rootlessness meant “confronting the present potent poetic and moral influence whom one must thank and acknowledge…while at the same time liberating
oneself from him” (Firchow 194-95). Auden had presumably modeled his own role as a political activist poet after Yeats, despite their political differences, so saying goodbye to Yeats would have a significant symbolic resonance. Furthermore, at that point, Auden had all but ignored Yeats as a subject; he had only ever published two lines on Yeats in *Letters from Iceland* in 1937; in the sarcastic final chapter entitled “Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament” (which was later removed by Auden in subsequent publications), Auden and McNeice write, “Item, we leave the phases of the moon / To Mr. Yeats to rock his bardic sleep” (234). The lines are rather inconsequential, but even though they are expressed in humor they do display that Yeats is an indelible part of the life Auden feigns leaving behind. Fatefully, Yeats died the very same month that Auden made his trek to the United States and was in the midst of his ambivalent conversion. And who better to “honor” W.B. than W.H.?

**Marking Death: The Elegy**

“In Memory of W.B. Yeats” may be the fullest expression of Auden’s pre-conversion ambivalence, and remains one of Auden’s most anthologized and recognizable poems. It is perhaps best known critically for its assertion that “Poetry makes nothing happen”; though Auden made the same statement in his essay on Yeats, the line is most often remembered and referenced through the poem, likely because it is given a fuller expression here. The actual meaning and intent of this divisive allegation has remained a matter of critical discussion, and its placement in a poem that is apparently meant to honor a great poet seems odd initially. But it’s a line fraught with

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13 See Cappeluti, Kuch, and Robinson.
questions and possibilities – a fundamental reconsideration; Auden, for a time at least, like Yeats, became far more interested in positing questions than answers. Ultimately, the line’s purpose is not indeterminable, and we will see how the invocation of Yeats enables the articulation of this pronouncement. Yeats’s death presented Auden with a singular opportunity at a pivotal moment in which he could accomplish multiple purposes. First, he could honor and mourn the man who had profoundly affected his career. Second, he could both emulate Yeats’s style and experiment to demonstrate his own mastery of poetic form and his difference or even advancement from Yeats. Third, he could express his own anxieties about poetry’s actual importance, or lack thereof, by situating the discussion around Yeats for, at that point, if any poet mattered, it was Yeats. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he could utilize his elegy as a means to both repudiate and validate the poetry he was now rather ashamed of; by proxy, this might also mollify the controversy of his emigration. To apologize for Yeats would be to apologize for himself.

Auden began “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” just after Yeats’s death as he traveled by boat to the United States, and finished it shortly after he arrived in New York City. Indeed, it is the first poem Auden completed in the United States, and is acutely attached to its moment of construction (Fuller 287). The title marks the apparent priority of the poem; it will, presumably, lament and praise Yeats. Under the title Auden notably includes the date of Yeats’s death: “(d. Jan. 1939).” Therefore, this poem is a memorial for a specific person at a specific moment in time; Auden historicizes the poem’s context from the outset. The date becomes even more poignant when one reaches the end of the poem and sees that Auden completed the poem in February. In reality, he didn’t
complete the poem at least until March, but the rhetorical effect of listing February as the date of completion is effective; presumably, this is Auden’s *gut reaction* to the passing of Yeats and, lest anybody else also offer up an elegy, he might show that his came first since it’s unlikely one could compete with such a short interval of time (Mendelson, *Later* 12). Rosenheim asserts the boldness of Auden’s venture, committed to in the title, of memorializing “the greatest poet of the twentieth century”: “It is a precarious undertaking, requiring audacity to begin with and a talent, in some measure comparable to Yeat’s [sic] own, if the performance is not to be entirely graceless—and, indeed, outrageous” (423). Therefore, the “simple” title alone works many functions, not the least of which is Auden’s implicit assertion that he is the one to honor Yeats; his name will be in print next to that of “the greatest poet of the twentieth century.”

Because “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is so firmly and intentionally positioned in a specific moment in time, we are made aware of the poem’s circumstances in ways we otherwise might not be, and consequently approach the poem with the historical moment in mind, one which is unsure and infused, presumably, with grief for the departed. Moreover, it is apparent that, from the beginning, Auden is making his reader aware of what he intends to do, and the difficulty of completing the assignment, and “our awareness of the work as achievement, our admiration for relevant and laudable virtuosity, contribute crucially, if not predominantly, to our aesthetic satisfaction” (Rosenheim 422). Rosenheim’s explication of Auden’s elegy remains one of the most illuminating because he attempts to understand why/when/how poetry generally, and Auden’s elegy specifically, creates feelings of enjoyment, and thereby becomes “good” poetry; surely, a poem that questions the value of poetry must be considered on its own
terms. In order to comprehend the poem, we must account for why, presumably, so many readers have derived pleasure from it. One of Rosenheim’s crucial assumptions is that we derive pleasure from poetry when we recognize the difficulty of the task the poet sets up for himself, and observe his completion of the task; we then recognize the work as an achievement. The notion is reasonable, but Rosenheim also asserts a balance between a poem’s historic identity and certain “timeless, anonymous qualities which we traditionally regard as sources of aesthetic delight” without ever spelling out these qualities or uncovering exactly how one is conditioned to recognize them (422).

Nevertheless, I do concur that this elegy is specifically able to produce pleasure in its reader because Auden mourns and honors Yeats in a satisfactorily cathartic manner that asserts Yeats’s enduring legacy – which is no small feat – but also because he moves beyond the traditional formula to challenge the very validity of poetic expression and simultaneously provoke a reading experience that parallels the function of poetry that Auden articulates.

Auden’s elegy is a true funeral song, one that memorializes Yeats, a nation, and Auden’s own discarded convictions. The historical moment, concretized in Yeats’s date of death, also marks the month Barcelona fell and the Spanish Civil War concluded. Rosenheim writes, “For Auden, as for most of the British and American liberal intellectuals for whom he spoke, the defeat of the Spanish loyalists was a hideous and irretrievable loss—the murder of an authentic people’s government, played false, or so it was said, by the professed democracies of the western world” (424). If we do indeed, derive pleasure from recognition of the accomplishment of a difficult task, we see, from the beginning, that Auden means to achieve much in his poem.
With one foot planted in tradition and one poised to break from all that has come before, Auden composes his elegy to fully display his understanding of the form. He must express his own individualized feelings of loss and lament for the departed, but this is also a poem about poetry and he means to move beyond convention. Any break from tradition is dependent on the tradition itself, and is therefore, simultaneously, building on that tradition – changing or altering it, maybe, but ultimately not fully rejecting it.

Numerous critics have noted Auden’s usage of poetic techniques in the classical, pastoral, and characteristically English elegies,\textsuperscript{14} which we will not rehash here, but we should keep in mind the effect of manipulating these traditional models: Auden is displaying his poetic prowess. If this poem is a farewell to his previous poetic impulses built upon the foundations constructed by Yeats and others, it is one that must necessarily fully exhibit his ability. To validate his rootlessness – for that is at least a purpose of this poem, as Auden was not immune to the criticism that his emigration stirred – he first wisely chooses to demonstrate just how well he can work within traditional poetic structures. Thereby he also demonstrates their limitations, and even the inability of those traditional models to answer the questions that his elegy will pose; he first aligns himself with his predecessors so that his imminent challenge to their ultimate significance will be all the more poignant.

After concretizing a particular historical moment with the title and date of death, Auden presents us with a three distinct sections. In the opening section, the first stanza characterizes the moment specifically by two factors: bleakness and modernity. All is cheerless in “the dead of winter,” even the “airports.” We know the cold by the images

\textsuperscript{14} See McDiarmid’s “Poetry’s Landscape,” Michael Murphy, and Warren.
of nature, but also because of the “mercury” of a thermometer. Auden juxtaposes the natural and the artificial, a dichotomy much regarded by Yeats; the snow defaces public statues. However, the natural and the artificial acquiesce in one regard: “What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day” (48). By the time Auden repeats these two lines at the end of the first section, they will have taken on more meaning.

Auden leaves the day of Yeats’s death and momentarily skips backward in time to the hours before Yeats died. Auden contrasts Yeats’s illness with images of wolves in a forest and a “peasant river” far from where Yeats lay dying, surrounded by “nurses and rumours.” When Yeats dies, a profound change takes place, one that is fundamental to comprehending that which follows in the rest of the poem. Auden ends stanzas two and three with complex statements that begin to unravel the relationship between the poet, his work, and his audience: “The death of the poet was kept from his poems” and “he became his admirers.” The first statement distinguishes the life of the poet from the life of his poems; he is succeeded by his work. But it also suggests that the poet attains some sort of immortality, or at least a lengthened or altered kind of existence, through his poems; there is an implicit transference of “life”: the poet wrote the poems, but now the latter survives him and survives as a testament of him. Moreover, this line confirms that this poem will as be much about Auden as it is about Yeats because the poet cannot write about his own death. This transmission that takes place after the death of the poet is clarified in the second assertion. That Yeats becomes those who admire him suggests a kind of enduring, transmogrified life that depends upon his enthusiasts, including Auden, who bring the poet life through their appreciation of his poems and the fact that this
appreciation means that his work will color their experiences. It’s a romantic notion and, because of that, we can assume that Auden will complicate the idea.

The language in the fourth stanza suggests that the nature of Yeats’s afterlife may not be so idyllic; words like “scattered,” “unfamiliar,” “punished,” “dead,” and “guts” produce an ominous tone. Yeats – for Yeats still exists in some form for Auden, who continues to use first-person pronouns when referring to Yeats’s posthumous presence – who has become “his admirers” in the previous stanza is now, consequently, “scattered among a hundred cities” because his readership is so widespread. Here he experiences “unfamiliar affections” in “another kind of wood” to “be punished under a foreign code of conscience.” Auden’s own search for a rootless existence clearly colors these declarations, for he has come to understand that poetry is often and inevitably misunderstood and misused by its audience. He asserts that Yeats is now being appropriated by those living under “foreign code[s]” and, therefore, Yeats’s actual intentions – or, in other words, the meaning his poems offered within the specific geographical, historical, and ideological contexts in which they were constructed – are lost, irrelevant or unknowable to them: “The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living.” So Yeats’s poems are twisted, and that this happens in the appropriator’s “guts” suggests that those who utilize Yeats’s words modify them on emotional impulses, on “gut feelings,” on how those words might suit any given occasion. That they are “modified” in “guts” also means that Yeats’s words provide his admirers with some kind of nourishment, that they are incorporated into their bodies, that Yeats has been transubstantiated. The poet, then, does indeed survive in some form.
Yeats is now scattered, digested, and assimilated in many places; there are now many “Yeatses.”

Though we have seen Auden juxtapose the Modern and the natural world, his apparent disdain for the former – one that mimics Yeats’s stance in many of his poems – becomes more clear in the penultimate stanza of section one. He now looks to the day after Yeats dies and envisions what two opposed sects of society – the brokers and the poor – will do in the wake of Yeats’s death. It is clear to which group Auden grants his sympathies: the “brokers” roar “like beasts” in the Paris stock exchange while the poor continue to suffer in ways which “they are fairly accustomed” to. Nevertheless, “A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something unusual.” The claim is a particularly vague one. But we might assume that these opposite sects of society, the rich and poor, have little interest in Yeats’s poetry, which is emphasized in the next section. Poetry, it seems, exists for all those in between.

Nevertheless, Auden has situated these seemingly opposed groups together, collapsing the capital that stands between them: “each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom.” Freedom was surely a concept on Auden’s mind as he sailed away from Europe, and that he groups both the rich and poor together, and that each is imprisoned, suggests his disdain for the systems that compel capitalistic aspirations, if only because such a lifestyle leaves little room for poetry.

Auden’s choice to situate this stanza in Paris also suggests a few things. Auden is writing an elegy for an Irish poet as he sails from England to America, yet he regards the day after Yeats’s death in Paris. Yeats did die in the south of France, but he was far from Paris. It seems an odd choice, but it is appropriate given Yeats’s transnational audience
and Auden’s own struggles with the idea of nation and the legacy of nationalisms. Paris is also a bastion of modern European cosmopolitanism, and one that is comprised of varied social positions; yet, all, it seems, are captive in this city, and in themselves. This is the world Auden is sailing away from, the world he is affirming both Yeats and himself as different from, though the former will now have a presence there and throughout the world.

The last two lines of the fifth stanza (“A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual”) are also crucial because they comment, however vaguely, on the nature and impact of Yeats’s posthumous life. Yeats has now become a faceless “one,” and there are thousands of these “ones.” And the “doing” throughout this first section has changed from Yeats’s act of dying to one doing “something slightly unusual.” Clearly Auden wants the reader to struggle with the vagueness of this “doing,” since “something unusual” can include many things, even banal actions. It seems, however, that Yeats, having now been incorporated into the bodies of his admirers, subtly influences the actions and memories of that day. The effect is “slight” but tangible, for they will remember the day as if they “did something slightly unusual.” Amidst the monotony, one remembers the days that are unlike the others, and the effect of Yeats’s incorporation into the bodies of his admirers makes this day different somehow; the experiences of these faceless ones are all connected by this atypical day. Whatever this “doing” is, Yeats has achieved some kind of transubstantiation and, like Christ, his death seals the deal, making this transubstantiation possible.

Consequently, the man that is the asserted subject of this elegiac act emerges as a peculiar enigma in the poem’s first section. Though his physical body is gone, he
continues to impact the material world. And a legacy appears to be intact. Yet the
section ends on a solemn note. When Auden repeats the lines from the first stanza
(“What instruments we have agree / The day of his death was a dark cold day”), he has
moved from gauging darkness and cold by mercury to utilizing his own instruments – his
poetry and experience – to interpret Yeats’s death. The world, very much the
embodiment of Auden’s contemporary disenchantment and his awareness of class
struggles, remains cold and indifferent to suffering, even if the death of the poet is
something that will apparently have a lasting effect on many, including Auden. Here it
becomes more clear that the author has been preoccupied with examining his own
emotions in these stanzas; the depiction is so bleakly personal, that we already discern
this elegy has more to do with him than it does with Yeats. The meaning of Yeats’s
death has been broadened to encompass a much wider loss. We have a sense that the day
would be “dark” and “cold” regardless of the death of Yeats.

Auden continues to regard Yeats’s afterlife in the second section. Here it
becomes clear that Auden is utilizing form to distinguish the function of each section,
though we should also not underestimate Auden’s motivation to flex his poetic muscles,
to show his mastery of form, for writing an elegy about Yeats means that he will be held
up against Yeats; and he will begin to dismantle and reverse this very impulse by the end
of this section.

Auden now regards Yeats’s gift in the past tense: his poetic gift “survived”
throughout his major struggles: “The parish of young women, physical decay, /
Yourself.” The most obvious turn in the second section is that it addresses Yeats
specifically: “You were silly like us.” Firchow rightly reads it as a piece of criticism:
“Auden too now believed that he had been silly to think that poetry could affect social behavior, either individually or collectively, that it could make anything ‘happen’” (148-49). Certainly we have seen that Auden was struggling with the “silliness” of poetry in terms of its efficacy, and both Yeats and Auden were themselves “silly” because of their many fleeting, and sometimes embarrassing, flirtations. The “us” aligns Yeats directly with Auden. Who this “us” is isn’t entirely clear, but given the personal nature of this poem, we might assume that it is the Auden Generation and/or the lineage of “great” poets in which Auden, importantly, includes himself.

Auden moves on to suggest that poetry is the natural culmination of pain; and, notably, as it is so often was with Auden, the nation is responsible for Yeats’s need to create poetry: “Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry,” he writes. But, notably, the Ireland Yeats leaves behind has not changed: “Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still.” The adjective “mad” functions similarly to “silly”; it isn’t clear what kind “madness” characterizes Yeats’s home country, though it had certainly been a troubled “nation” during Auden’s lifetime. Nevertheless, it doesn’t appear to be a complimentary assertion. It seems to be a dismissive gesture, though this “madness” did compel Yeats’s poetry. And though Yeats was a vital player in much of Ireland’s madness in the previous decades, its madness and weather remain intact. So it appears that, for all his struggles, Ireland remains unchanged by Yeats’s poetry: its political madness is as persistently uncontrollable as its weather.

“For poetry makes nothing happen,” is the pivotal line of Auden’s famous poem. Hecht calls it “the little phrase that has raised as many hackles as nearly anything else Auden ever wrote” (144). It isn’t an easy line to decipher, but, as I said, Auden wants us
to *slow down* in this section, for that slowness and attention is what poetry can make happen. The line may initially seem a devastating commentary on Yeats specifically and art generally, and therefore it seems an odd choice to make such a statement in an elegy that is apparently going to honor a great poet. Auden would make the statement, that “poetry makes nothing happen,” four times: in the poem, the essay “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats” regarded above, and twice again in “The Prolific and the Devourer” (also written in 1939 but abandoned until its posthumous publication in 1981). We should not underestimate its importance, but we should also remember that Auden was likely delighted by the mischievous nature of such a remark; that Auden repeated himself four times that year means that he surely reveled in the statement. Firchow writes, “The Auden of the thirties is the naughty infant of English literature, playing games with and against the establishment, cocking snooks and pulling faces” (149). And its “naughtiness” itself may be an appropriate tribute to Yeats, who could “be naughty too, especially when he meets Crazy Jane” (149).

The function of “nothing” in Auden’s sentence makes it difficult to interpret; in this series of undefined words like “madness” and “silly,” “nothing” stands as the most equivocal. Poetry makes *nothing* happen. According to Hynes, “he doesn’t simply say that art doesn’t affect politics, a notion much on his mind at the time: it makes *nothing* happen, it is not an agent in reality in any sense” (42). Certainly Auden, having resituated himself and no longer limited by the confines of a community made up largely by the European left, expresses a newfound awareness that the people of the world – those whom his poetry and political ideals failed to save – are relatively unconcerned with art when confronted by the realities of survival. But if we were to accept Hynes’
interpretation, then Auden’s insinuation is confounding and futile; making “nothing” happen does not mean that poetry isn’t an instrument “in reality in any sense.” Firchow more lucidly considers the statement’s erroneous qualities:

[E]ven if Yeats’s poetry has not changed the Irish weather, it has changed our response to the Irish weather…. Surely the fact that a great poet like Yeats involved himself poetically in the struggle for Irish independence… made that struggle worthy and respectable in the eyes of others, not least in the eyes of the English enemy. In this way, Yeats’s poetry made something happen, or prevented something from happening, even if there may not be a single actual historical event for which his poems could be adduced as the specific cause. (147)

Firchow is correct, but he is still interpreting “nothing” rather simplistically; Auden is not making a negative assertion, but a positive one. This common interpretation may be justified, but it ignores some of the nuance in the rest of the stanza.

The latter half of the section clarifies Auden’s remark. He ends his assertion (“For poetry makes nothing happen”) with a colon, so the following clause that comprises the rest of the stanza is an explanation of the statement. Auden writes that poetry “survives / In the valley of its making.” This is a place of fertility, fed by its surroundings, by that which drains into it, and this is a place far from the capitalistic ventures he disdained above “where executives / Would never want to tamper.” For this reason alone, poetry is unique for it apparently exists outside of, in spite of, the Modern world. He returns to the image of a river from the second stanza of the first section and suggests that poetry flows through our lives, “From ranches of isolation and the busy
griefs” to “Raw towns that we believe and die in.” These “ranches” and “raw towns” clash with the image of Paris offered above. They are places of very basic living, close to the earth. A ranch means cattle and crops, while a town that is “raw” is a place of life stripped to its bare essentials. This is where poetry flows. This doesn’t necessarily mean that poetry is “not an agent in reality” as Hynes asserted. We have seen Auden struggle with the notion that poetry can beget change. It does not make one act, but it can stop one from acting for a moment; indeed, this stanza has made the reader stop and consider several times. It is an answer to the Modern world and to the busyness of survival. Here poetry “survives” – he repeats the word twice. And the last words of the lines underscore this point: “all…decay…poetry…still…survives.” His final explanation for “poetry makes nothing happen” is linked by a semicolon: poetry is “A way of happening, a mouth.” It is a manner of occurrence. Making nothing happen also enables; the section ends on the mouth, poised to speak.

It should be clear that Auden’s line is an embodiment of his own internal debate, and the longevity of the short statement – the fact that we are still talking about it – is substantial proof that, regardless of the varied interpretations, Auden struck a nerve. Readers responded, and continue to do so, to Auden’s challenge; and that challenge, that moment of thought, of escape from an indifferent world, is what poetry makes happen. Auden had grown frustrated by the belief that art could or should ever provide direction; he wrote, “One of the romantic symptoms has been an enormous exaggeration of the importance of art as a guide to life” (qtd. in Hynes 42). Critics often ignore the fact that Yeats went through similar reconsiderations. In “On being asked for a War Poem” from 1915 he writes:
I think it better that in times like these
A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter’s night. (*Poems* 205)

Yeats also came to believe, at least for a time, that poetry had no function as instruction, as a cause of change. But it could provide moments of pleasure or escape for a “young girl” and “old man” alike. It could provide a reprieve, a delay before one must return to the “griefs” and “isolations” of Modernity. Auden’s comment, then, is actually a summation of the sentiment expressed by Yeats in his poem; therefore, “poetry makes nothing happen,” is itself a fitting tribute to Yeats. Auden, like Yeats, isn’t trying to provide answers, but to articulate his anxieties, his doubts. And, furthermore, “The goal is not to resolve doubt, but to live in doubt without anxiety”; to this end, poetry functions as a remedy (Hynes 50). Auden means his statement to stun, even if, paradoxically, that the statement is able to do so demonstrates poetry’s ability to shape one’s ideas and thereby affect one’s actions – in that regard, at least, it makes *something* happen.

The poem’s third section doesn’t necessarily add any significantly new ideas to what has already been articulated in the first two, for, as I have argued, Auden makes his crucial point in the second section. But it is the most conventionally elegiac portion of the poem. Whereas the first two sections had irregular meters and stanza patterns, the final section is in trochaic tetrameter quatrains, and its straightforward language and rhythms stand in contrast to the more fractured forms in the first two parts. And Auden
does still want to “please” his readers in his final farewell to Yeats. Disregarding the second, third, and fourth stanzas, which we will return to shortly, the remaining six stanzas do in fact provide a cathartic resolution. He asks the earth to receive Yeats as “an honored guest” and suggests that since Yeats now exists in transubstantiated form, he can finally rest “emptied of [his] poetry.” However, there is still a strong sense that the world is on the brink of war and, notably, Auden specifically targets that which he is sailing away from (“All the dogs of Europe bark”) before broadening his perspective to the rest of “the living nations,” the citizens of which he characterizes by their hatred, pity, and an “intellectual disgrace” that was surely part of Auden’s own psyche as he mourned the failure of Western intelligence to solve the problems at hand. Yet there is hope, and that hope rests at least partially in Yeats who, now unbridled by these worldly concerns, with an “unconstraining voice,” is summoned by Auden: “Still persuade us to rejoice.”

Yeats’s verses are “farm[ed]” from the earth and turn the “curse…of human unsuccess” into a vineyard by the “rapture,” or delight of “distress,” a constant human condition. Yeats, who has been fixed to fertile images and is now a part of the earth, is beckoned to the infertile “deserts of the heart” to heal by springing a “fountain” – again, we see him supplying nourishment. Man may be imprisoned, as Auden suggested in the second section, but Auden implores the transubstantiated, transmogrified Yeats to “Teach the free man how to praise.” Man is and can be free despite his imprisonment, for to be “human” is to be “unsuccess[ful],” to be in a state of distress. Yeats cannot change that state, but, as Auden asserted in the second section, he can provide an antidote to the Modern, human condition, if only for a moment. The mouth was poised to speak at the
end of the second section; now, at the end, Auden fills the mouth with words. He has both praised Yeats and carved out his own space.

Auden fulfills the elegiac act: Yeats persists in a different form, and his poetry is a temporary means to manage the human condition. The sentiment expressed here – that poetry can provide some order to disorder – obviously isn’t unique to this poem, but it is an appropriate, reformulated Modernist expression that makes it a particularly fitting sentiment in an elegy for Yeats. And Auden modifies and advances the notion by applying it specifically in an elegy. Grief over death, managing feelings of chaos and instability, mirrors the Modern problem. The grieving period, during which one absorbs and makes sense of death, is enacted by the elegy that gives the emotions form; death is granted significance, and grief is granted order. Just as poetry provides moments that offer the modern distressed life order or hope, it also promises the living a way, however temporary, to make some kind of order of their mourning.

**Revising Yeats**

Auden’s own repute was clearly on his mind when he composed his elegy in 1939 – not just Yeats’s reputation, but his own, and certainly the latter was very much dependent on the former: “Yeats is provided with his own kind of eternity, but the ultimate emphasis is on the poets who survive him (including, one judges, Auden…)” (Rosenheim 423). That the elegy is more about the author than the subject isn’t unique to Auden. Shelley wrote, “I weep for Adonais.” “And with that cry I have raised my cry,” wrote Yeats in “In Memory of Alex Pollexfen.” According to Firchow:
As with the other great elegies in the English tradition—including Yeats’s own on the Easter Rising or on Major Robert Gregory—this elegy is really more about the mental and emotional state of the author himself than about its ostensible subject. Indeed, it seems clear that Auden is preoccupied with Yeats at this crucial period in his life—in his criticism as well as his poetry—because he sees in him a mirror image of himself. Yeats too tried to change the world around him using his poetry as the means. (147)

Though “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is an expression of Auden’s emotional state, it is more focused on crafting Auden’s reputation as a poet. An elegy for Yeats provided a perfect, safe site for Auden to explore his own numerous anxieties concerning his own work and reputation because Yeats could serve as a surrogate for Auden. And, as he does in “The Public v. the Late W.B. Yeats,” if Auden upheld and secured Yeats’s reputation in spite of certain less attractive tendencies, he did the same for himself. Nevertheless, he eventually came to the apparent conclusion that a few specific stanzas that are clearly functioning to apologize for Yeats/Auden may have been working antithetically to that purpose. In the end, less is more; by bringing the issue up in the first place, he suggests that there is something worth apologizing for. The insinuation that Yeats, and by extension Auden, had embarrassing personal motivations and political ideas that should not negate the value of their poetry could itself negate the value of their poetry.

Therefore, when Auden revised “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” after its initial publication, he was depoliticizing his poetry and protecting his own reputation as well as Yeats’s. By expunging these stanzas (and also whole poems, as I noted earlier) from his work, Auden sought to control his reputation— one that he would lose when he dies, just as Yeats did—
the very process he represents in his elegy for Yeats when the poet is “judged under a foreign code of conscience” and the poet’s words “are modified in the guts of the living.” Having seen the potential for the critic to focus on Yeats’s embarrassing ideas – for, indeed, Auden had done so himself – Auden had substantial motivation to insistently attempt to control his own reputation.

After the publication of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats in the Partisan Review” in 1939, Auden removed stanzas two, three, and four from the third section in all publications subsequent to The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden published in 1945. Since his death in 1973, the stanzas are now generally included when the poem is reprinted, likely the product of a completist critical impulse; indeed, Yeats scholars have been doing the same – regarding different versions and debating differing ordering mechanisms for the poetry – over the last several decades. Regardless, an examination of these stanzas illuminates much about Auden’s intentions with his elegy, and also allows us to make several observations about what this particular act of revision suggests about Auden, Yeats, and the construction of canonicity.

These stanzas are concerned primarily with the idea of time, which is personified as an entity indifferent to bravery, innocence, and physical beauty. Yet time “Worships language” and absolves the unattractive qualities – cowardice and conceit, specifically – of those who, though there is certainly ambiguity here, live by its tenets. Having expressed this basic principle, Auden regards three specific figures who will, according to him, inevitably be forgiven for the suggested injustice of their ideas:

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons [Yeats] for writing well.

Auden would also justify Yeats in his essay in a roundabout fashion, wisely refusing to
demonize Yeats for his unappealing whims by separating them from the “greatness” of
what he wrote, and the idea here is largely the same. The difference, however, is the
form in which these justifications are articulated. The essay’s title made the reader aware
that Yeats would face accusations and also be defended against them. The poem,
however, is an elegy. One might indeed honor Yeats by asserting that time has
“pardoned” him, but the question arises: what does Yeats need pardoned for? One might
better honor Yeats by sweeping what may need to be pardoned under the carpet.

His motivation for the original inclusion of these stanzas is readily apparent, for,
mostly, they reiterate the resolution that pervades the entire section:

In the deceptively simple lines of the long final section there is, I think, a
kind of resolution of the bitterness…. [Poetry] emerges as the only source
of hope for the “nightmare world” in which these verses are written….  

Time worships language and thus, though a tyrant over virtue and beauty,
pardons and spares those who keep language alive. Language flourishes
in time, and time is therefore bound to treat kindly those who write well,
whatever their political sins. Thus poetry and poets alone survive to face
the task of redemption…. the poets will survive. (Rosenheim 424)

The idea is a pleasant one. But what distinguishes these three particular stanzas is
Auden’s choice to specifically name Kipling and Claudel, and these references illuminate
the complex negotiations occurring in this poem. Though India wouldn’t be
“decolonized” for several more years, by the end of the thirties – and certainly among Auden’s leftist circle – there was already much to detest in Kipling’s imperialist perspective, though he held a kind of canonical power and was widely read; as we have seen, even Frank Norris spoke his praise from another continent. Similarly, Claudel’s right-wing political views were unpopular to many, though his plays were popular in France and England. So in these stanzas Auden is commenting on what it means to attain canonicity. For Auden, the “canon” is created through the power of time; historical removal can whitewash a political past in favor of artful linguistics. It’s a troubling and simplistic explanation of canonicity, but it is, perhaps, not too far off the mark. One element of the equation left untouched, however, is exactly how “greatness” is both derived and judged.

Situating Yeats alongside Kipling and Claudel also creates a series of associations that condemn Yeats, for all of Auden’s talk about time’s forgiveness. Indeed, time is given a lot of power here, separating the views of these men from their individual readers. The stanzas imply that these men need to be redeemed, and that time will do that. Regardless of Auden’s intentions, then, Yeats, by way of association, is consequently evoked as right-wing, as imperialist, as reactionary, as controversial (and, certainly, Yeats showed more than a passing fascination in fascist ideology), even if he will be “pardoned.” But nothing else in the poem mirrors this stance; if anything, these political views are the “silliness” Auden mentioned earlier, which suggests passing flirtations, and Auden himself was one of the “silly” ones. Mendelson considers these stanzas a kind of backhanded jab against all three men: “Auden took the trouble to score partisan points against the right-wing views of Rudyard Kipling, Paul Claudel, and Yeats
himself, views that needed to pardoned by time; his own left-wing views, implicitly, need to be pardoned by no one” (15). While this is plausible, and I agree to a certain degree with the second half of his assumption insofar as Auden’s pardoning of these men is really about Auden’s own politics, it seems to me less of a jab and more of a sincere attempt to whitewash unappealing politics, to separate the writer’s work from his politics—a notion clearly much on his mind in this poem; Auden was fond of the work of Kipling, Claudel, and Yeats, even if he did disagree with their politics. Regardless, the pardon asserts that there is a need for a pardon, and though Auden may have felt the need to pardon his own politics or naïveté in the 1930s, the effect here is antithetical to his own purposes and those of his elegy. Auden, who surely realized the profound effect of placing his own name alongside Yeats’s and used that to his advantage in this poem, must have come to recognize the adverse results of the associations made in stanza four.

The employment of particular names does indeed make the stanza stand out in comparison to the rest of the poem because of its specificity and the transparency of its pardoning purposes; Hecht writes that Auden was likely “embarrassed about the insoluble issues he had raised in naming them” (148). Despite the legitimacy of Auden’s stance on Yeats’s greatness and its separation from Yeats’s more unsightly dimensions, the placement of Yeats alongside the likes of Kipling and Claudel politicizes “Yeats.” Yet, Auden was trying to distance himself from a political type of poetry, and he also, in this poem and in the essay, sought to depoliticize Yeats in order to justify him; but these stanzas work specifically against that purpose. It has been argued that Auden’s removal of these stanzas was simply an attempt to depoliticize his poetry; such an action would not be unlike him:
Having suggested, rather than resolved, such contradictions in Yeats’s “silliness,” Auden may have found, on second thoughts, his quatrains on Time rather diversionary. That explains, in a way, his omission of them in the revised versions of ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats.’ He would have considered it unnecessary, if not improper, to belabor the greatness of writers beside the smallness of Time, especially because his quatrains are apt to give us the impression that it is dubious politics rather than their supreme mastery of language that immortalizes a Kipling, a Claudel, or a Yeats. (Chandran 84)

This is assuredly an element of Auden’s revisionist motivation, but, though critics have assessed how the stanzas could affect the depiction/reputation of Yeats, they have failed to regard how the stanzas could also affect Auden’s reputation by extension.

Hecht writes, “I think the sacrifice of those lines was mistaken, and not least because they contain clear allusion to some of Yeats’s” (148). Though they may indeed contain these allusions, I disagree from an aesthetic standpoint because of how different the lines – with their specific names and overt political purpose – are from the rest of the elegy. Given the potential adverse effects of these stanzas, it makes sense that Auden would excise them from all subsequent publications. It certainly isn’t unusual for a poet to revise her work after publication, and it was not unusual move for Auden either, who continually sought to mold his reputation by reformulating his own body of work:

[S]everal famous poems, such as “Spain 1937” and “September 1, 1939,” on which the poet “harangues” a contemporary audience, disappeared from his collected poems after the forties. A 1932 political poem
(‘Brothers who when the sirens roar’) met with a more private retraction.

Going over an early volume of his poems for a new collected edition in 1943, Auden (then teaching at Swarthmore College) wrote in the library copy, “O God, what rubbish.” The poem was not reprinted in his lifetime. (McDiarmid 173)

Clearly his motivation for revision in each of these cases is similar; the politics and propaganda of the moment negated, as Auden saw it, the value of an artful expression of language. Though he would abandon many of his beliefs by the end of the 1930s, this notion is one of the few that he would continue to abide by throughout his life: “the older Auden became, the more he became indulgent of artists with oversized egos that he called ‘monsters’ as if they could not help themselves; this included Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Wagner, whom Auden believed may not have been the best human beings, but should never be denied their credit as artists” (Izzo 283).

Thereby, Auden’s poem evolved to be less transparent and more subtle in its suggestion. And Auden was not too far off in his estimation of time’s ability to “forgive” – though “forget” would probably be a more realistic term – an embarrassing past that only becomes visible through retrospection. The revised version of Auden’s elegy is indeed a more cohesive piece since the specific references distract from the apparent matter at hand. Yet, while Auden continues to appear in literary anthologies, it is the original, unaltered version of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” that is most often reprinted. Auden’s estimation, then, is right, it seems, for few of the poem’s readers now have likely even heard of Claudel, and have footnotes to explain the reference if they care to explore them.
The Final Word: Ten Years Later

If Auden’s minor publications are any indication, in the years following the publication of “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” Auden was viewed as a kind of authority on Yeats. He was asked to review each of Yeats’s seminal posthumous publications – Last Poems (1940), The Letters of W.B. Yeats (1955), and Mythologies (1959) – for The Saturday Review of Literature, The New Yorker, and The Mid-Century respectively. These reviews are short, generally positive, and contain little of consequence concerning either writer, but their existence asserts Auden’s ongoing association with Yeats. Apart from these reviews, the last time Auden turned to Yeats as a subject was nearly ten years after “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” in 1948, and by that time he was a very different man and artist. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, his development in the 1940s was quite similar yet again to Yeats’s evolution. It is ironic that Auden so harshly disparaged Yeats for his inclination towards mysticism and clandestine spirituality, for Auden would take a very similar route. Yet, the major transitions that occurred in 1939-40 were perhaps the natural progression of a poet leaving behind his youth. In “September 1, 1939,” Auden called the 1930s “a low dishonest decade” characterized by dishonesty, anger, fear, and self-obsession. The end of the decade and his move to the United States symbolized for him a pathway to leave the 1930s and all of its concerns behind.

Shortly after arriving in United States, Auden did indeed find an answer that resolved many of his struggles. He had been raised Anglican, and began attending church services again in 1940 in New York. Before the year’s end he was attending regularly and considered himself part of the church (Hynes 33). Like Eliot’s, Auden’s
sudden conversion is surprising, especially given the struggle and toil that resulted in a relatively quick acceptance of these religious principles. Critics like Hynes view the conversion hopefully: “what we are observing in Auden’s writings through 1939 and 1940 is not the record of a conversion experience and its consequences, but the evidences of a strenuous and open-minded effort to reconsider his ideas of man and history. His Christianity was not a cause of this effort but was a logical conclusion of it” (44).

Though the parameters of the compatibility are not entirely clear, Protestant Christianity provided Auden, as he saw it, with a system that could encompass the conclusions he came to by the decade’s end: “the ethic of loneliness; the aesthetic of imperfection; the paradox of necessary freedom. He found, you might say, that Modern Man and Christian Man were the same” (44). The conclusion is a curious and undeveloped one. Though Christianity would have been an acceptable Modern spiritual lifestyle in the Western world, Auden would soon move towards more esoteric interests; the irony of Auden’s zealous renovations are not lost on us, given his vitriolic attack on Yeats’s pagan and religious interests.

This period saw many major changes for Auden. Though he was likely trying to make a statement and knew very well the inevitable outcome of his attempt, he tried to enlist in the U.S. Army in 1942, but was rejected due to his homosexuality (Roberts 97). Yet, as time wore on, the Christianity that had imparted so much comfort initially to Auden was not in itself altogether satisfying, perhaps because it had become rather commonplace in his daily life. In the coming years Auden would continue his spiritual quest:
Auden’s interest in kabbalah, the esoteric tradition of the Jews, is...[an] aspect of Judaism that he found immensely attractive. Even after his conversion to Christianity, and even though he denied any belief in spiritualism, he retained an intense interest in arcane knowledge and even the practice of magic. Among the more exotic supernatural processes and capabilities in which he believed were feline telepathy, graphology, chiromancy, metoposcopy (the interpretation of one’s forehead lines), and phrenology. (Roberts 101)

These spiritual experimentations were only encouraged by Auden’s knowledge of Yeats’s own journey. Farnan contends that Auden’s mystical fascinations specifically began when he studied Yeats and the Order of the Golden Dawn; Auden himself was not immune to their numinous lure, though he might have sought to depict himself in that way (71-72).

As Auden continued to explore new spiritual and poetic avenues, his canonical standing was being concretized. His *Collected Poetry* was published in 1945. Auden was granted American citizenship in 1946, and much of the bitterness over his emigration was mollified with time. In 1947, Auden won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Anxiety*. The following spring, “Yeats as an Example” appeared in *The Kenyon Review*. The essay is very different in execution from “The Public vs. the Late W.B. Yeats” from 1939; Auden expresses many ideas similar to the previous decade, but he does so with a kind of authority and reflection suggestive of a more mature, or settled, personality. No longer does he choose to hide behind the guises of a prosecutor and defender, but perhaps as a result of his confidence, many of his claims are left undeveloped. Ultimately, a
characteristically ambivalent and evasive air pervades the essay because Auden, true to form, is still more interested in questions than answers. And, true to form, Auden utilizes Yeats as a site for self-justification one final time, for he seems to be aware that his rather esoteric interests might someday be regarded with suspicion or dismissal, the same way he had regarded Yeats’s esotericism.

In the essay, Auden immediately demonstrates that his relationship with Yeats is still characterized by an ambivalent kind of admiration:

Those of us who, like myself, have learned, as we think, all we can, and that is a good deal, from Yeats, are tempted to be more conscious and more critical of those elements in his poems with which we are not in sympathy than we ought to be. Our criticisms may sometimes be objectively correct, but the subjective resentment with which we make them is always unjust. (187-88)

Auden’s assertion that he has learned all he can from Yeats is notable. This simple statement emphasizes his own position as something after, outside of or beyond Yeats – that he is tethered no longer – for despite what Yeats once offered Auden, something has apparently been brought to conclusion.

Auden goes on to express an implicit trust in the canon in his articulation of the essay’s primary goal: “to consider [Yeats] as a predecessor whose importance no one will or can deny” (188). It is Auden’s job as Yeats’s successor to provide them both with literary longevity; he leaves no room for the denial of Yeats’s greatness. Moreover, Yeats, according to Auden, is applicable to the present: “What were the problems which faced Yeats as a poet as compared with ours? How far do they overlap? How far are
they different? In so far as they are different, what can we learn from the way in which Yeats dealt with his world, about how to deal with our own?” (188). Yet Auden largely abandons this line of inquiry because, perhaps, they are difficult questions to answer. Nevertheless, Auden seems to suggest that Yeats is the canon, or at least an apex from which everything after can only be viewed in its relationship to that milestone: “there is scarcely a lyric written today in which the influence of his style and rhythm is not detectable.” (188). Yeats has indeed been “scattered among a hundred cities” and “[become] his admirers” as Auden asserted almost a decade before. But it soon becomes clear that Auden has reinforced Yeats’s relevance because he, once again, wishes to address Yeats’s mystical pursuits; and he has good reason to, considering his own spiritual experiments.

We have seen that Auden himself displayed more than just a passing fascination with multiple spiritual avenues, many of which Yeats also explored, even subscribing specifically to Christianity for a time. What Auden had that Yeats did not, however, was a feeling that he should separate his poetry/plays and his spiritual explorations, or at least disguise their relationship; because of Yeats’s shifting concerns, and his own propensity to outgrow ideas, Auden was aware that minds often change and one is often embarrassed by past explorations. Yet surely Auden was aware that his own life, as a canonical successor to Yeats, would soon be under critical and biographical scrutiny just as Yeats’s life was, so he now, more than ever, had good reason to further justify Yeats and himself, and further obfuscate his own mystical/spiritual meandering by asserting its ultimate unimportance to Yeats.
Auden asserts that Yeats’s *Vision* “has left virtually no trace,” which, even at the time, wasn’t fully true,\(^{15}\) even if critics tended to focus on Yeats’s other work at the time (188). Nevertheless, Auden’s observation positions him to consider Yeats’s obscure explorations so that he can finally dispel them: “However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to all that occult is, I fancy, the same: How on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats’s gifts take such nonsense seriously?” (189). Knowing that we could easily substitute Auden’s name for Yeats provides his hypocritical statement with a resonance beyond its surface meaning. He moves on to once again suggest that he is beyond all of those immature mystical flirtations, though it is now clear that he is not:

I have a further bewilderment, which may be due to my English upbringing, one of snobbery. How *could* Yeats, with his great aesthetic appreciation of aristocracy, ancestral houses, ceremonious tradition, take up something so essentially lower-middle class…. mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient—*how* embarrassing. In fact, of course, it is to Yeats’s credit….that he ignored such considerations….nor [can we] deny that the poetry he wrote involving it is very good. (189)

Auden’s offensive posture here is understandable, even if it isn’t, perhaps, fair. But he moves quickly to justify Yeats once again, or at least to explain his mystical explorations in a way that makes them seem not so “silly” after all in their historical context. His asserted intention is to understand why Yeats was attracted first by Celtic mythology and

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\(^{15}\) See Weeks and Zabel.
then occult symbolism, and compare these modes to the present, in an effort to uncover “the relationship between myth, belief, and poetry.”

Auden writes, “Yeats’s generation grew up in a world where the great conflict was between the Religion of Reason and the Religion of Imagination, objective truth and subjective truth, the Universal and the Individual” (189). So, for Auden, Yeats’s taste for the occult is a manifestation of Modern ambivalence:

[I]f we find Yeats adopting a cosmology apparently on purely aesthetic grounds, i.e., not because it is true but because it is interesting; or Joyce attempting to convert the whole of existence into words…we must see their reactions…if we are to understand them, in terms of a polemical situation in which they accepted…the antithesis between reason and imagination which the natural sciences of their time forced upon them, only reversing, with the excessive violence of men defending a narrow place against superior numbers, the value signs on each side. (190)

But Auden positions himself in a decidedly different historical moment, characterized by a specific and monumental event, past the Modern conditions that affected Yeats, that forever changed the world: “natural sciences…no longer claim to explain the meaning of life…nor – at least since the Atom Bomb – would any one believe them if they did” (190). Auden seems to believe that in the wake of the atomic bomb, a symbol of utter destruction and militarized power, everything has changed. People no longer look to the natural sciences to understand life because they produced the atomic bomb, and therefore can no longer be seen as disinterestedly pursuing truth; they were co-opted and corrupted in the name of power. Regardless, Auden asserts that artists of his own day are not as apt
to claim the importance of their social role, but are “more likely to sacrifice [their] artistic integrity for economic or political reward” (191). In other words, in Yeats’s day, the poet’s role was to advance the causes of imagination and the spirit in opposition to rationality and science. But for Auden, living in the wake of the atomic bomb that proved the corruptibility of science, the poet has lost some sense of his mission, and is more tempted to regard himself as one who provides goods to particular kind of consumer. Nevertheless, one could certainly argue that all those who achieve a public audience, both before and after Hiroshima, are enabled by and within their political environment, and urged, in one form or another, by economic compensation.

Nevertheless, for Auden, poetry still has value in this decidedly Modern milieu, and myth attains significance:

[A]ny poet to-day, even if he deny the importance of dogma to life, can see how useful myths are to poetry—how much, for instance, they helped Yeats to make his private experiences public and visions of public events personal. He knows, too, that in poetry all dogmas become myths; that the aesthetic value of the poem is the same whether the poet and/or the reader actively believe what it says or not. He is apt then to look around for some myth—any myth, he thinks, will do—to serve the same purpose for himself…. the only kind of myth which will do for him…must be a personal one. (191)

Here Auden is collapsing Yeats’s many occultist beliefs and practices under the umbrella of “myth,” and asserting that the aesthetic value of poetry is not, or should not be,
diminished by Yeats’s often bizarre tastes. After all, Yeats’s myths enabled him to make sense of his experiences and translate them into poetry.

At this point, it becomes more apparent that what’s at stake in the essay, for Auden, is the canon; in order to justify Yeats and himself as “great” poets, he must finally assert, even to a superficial degree, a proper methodology that enables the construction of greatness. As an artist, he is frustrated by the mass of authorities in all fields that one may consult to answer any given question, because the artist now has to spend much of his time being a critic rather than an artist. According to Auden, Yeats is a major poet because he accepted this reality, and successfully navigated through it. His assertion isn’t entirely lucid because he leaves it behind as soon as he articulates it and provides little dimension to his idea, but, as we have seen, this is characteristic of much of the essay. Nevertheless, it appears that Auden begins to imply that “great” poets navigate their condition “greatly.” In a landscape where there are many poets and the poet has to be a critic, Yeats succeeds. It is not lost on us that Auden is praising Yeats for having done exactly what Auden is doing here and elsewhere; again, Auden’s compliment to Yeats is also a compliment to Auden. Moreover, this navigation, this struggle with an appropriate means of expression, makes Yeats, and, by extension, Auden, “major poets”:

[I]t is one of the distinguishing marks of a major poet that he continues to develop, that the moment he has learnt how to write one kind of poem, he goes on to attempt something else, new subjects, new ways of treatment or both, an attempt in which he may quite possibly fail. He invariably feels, as Yeats put it, “the fascination of what’s difficult.” (192)
Yeats greatness, then, is at least partially a product of his continued exploration of that which vexed or fascinated him. Because Yeats endured, and continued to search for the right way, or the best way, to express his concerns, he remains important. The assertion certainly overlooks, if not conceals, Yeats’s more distasteful flirtations with fascism and eugenics, but the move is not new on Auden’s part; indeed, he is still, a decade after writing his poem and essay on Yeats, making the case for Yeats, while also making the case for himself.

Because Yeats encountered and confronted the problems of the Modern condition, he can and should serve, according to Auden, as a representative model to all later poets; he “produce[d] results which are available to his successors” and “effected changes which are of use to every poet.” (193). Auden notes two specific legacies: “First he transformed a central kind of poem, the occasional poem, from being either an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial vers de société into a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest.” He uses “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” as an example, though he does little to demonstrate how it advanced the form, likely because his audience is not necessarily an academic one. “Secondly,” he writes, “Yeats released regular stanzaic poetry, whether reflective or lyrical from iambic monotony” (193-94). He attempts a deeper explanation, through an examination of “The Results of Thought,” though it is humorously muddled; he writes, “the iambic trimeter…and the rhyme patterns which supply coherent dignity and music, these remain audible” (194). As he often seems to do, here specifically, Auden may be hiding behind his words.
The ultimate purpose of this essay, to again assert Yeats’s importance and apologize for his stranger antics, and to protect the reputation of Yeats and Auden, should be clear; that this essay, overall, is a curious and not always coherent affair also sometimes works to the advantage of Yeats and Auden, for the author does not always substantiate his claims. His final words emphasize this overall purpose:

Does a man feel prouder of what he achieves himself or of the effect he has on the achievements of posterity? Which epitaph upon a poet’s grave would please him more: “I wrote some of the most beautiful poetry of my time” or “I rescued English lyric from the dead hand of Campion and Tom Moore”? I suspect that more poets would prefer the second than their readers would ever guess, particularly when, like Yeats, they are comfortably aware that the first is also true. (195)

Yeats (and Auden, of course) was able to “rescue” the tired lyric because of his peculiar fascinations, because of his penchant exploring myth. Moreover, Yeats and Auden remain better – they remain different – than those lesser poets who could settle for that one particular legacy; they revive poetry and make it beautiful.

Auden ends his last major address of W. B. Yeats in justification of the poet and his influence on those who came after. Yet Auden doesn’t simply justify Yeats and himself, he resurrects Yeats and demonstrates his relevance in an effort to also assert his own. In the end, Auden’s influences were as numerous and diverse as Yeats’s, and profoundly affected his poetry, plays, and essays. Nevertheless, his singular relationship with Yeats was acute, lifelong, and readily apparent in ways unlike any other influence. In the end, Auden remains one of Yeats’s most important, and most invested, defenders,
and enjoys the benefits of the affiliation to this day, even while he was also a member of the prosecution. His work on Yeats celebrated the older poet, even while it often took issue with some of Yeats’s designs. And Auden had no small stake in the maintenance of Yeats’s reputation; a canonical successor’s standing remains forever tethered to those from which he inherits the mantel. By defending Yeats, Auden defended himself, and by asserting his own code of justification, he ensured, or at least hoped to ensure, that he wouldn’t be “judged under a foreign code of conscience” after his death. “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” one of Auden’s most remembered and anthologized poems, eulogizes both poets; remembering Yeats means that we will remember Auden.
Chapter 3:

“The Prospect of Annihilation”: Things Fall Apart and “The Second Coming”

Becoming “The Second Coming”

Of all Yeats’s poems that have maintained a visible presence in varied forms of media, “The Second Coming” above all others seems to have taken on a life of its own. Though there is no way to visualize its ultimate impact because its references are protean and malleable, often empty, and serve different purposes and agendas, we might detail its becoming by observing its literary life. At the close of the 1990s, Harmon noted that it was one of the hundred most anthologized poems in English. As a primary canon-conferring force, the rise of the anthology over the course of the twentieth century also saw the rise of W.B. Yeats and the availability of his work. Though we have seen that editions of Yeats’s books were readily available on both sides of the Atlantic and specifically marketed to homesick American Irish and those with nationalist sentiments back home, he was also being read by academics; his place in anthologies facilitated the engagement of poets and critics like Auden. Indeed, Yeats is present in most anthologies published in both America and Europe between the 1920s and 1950s, though as the years progress, his value – his position as a type of poet – visibly changes.

Long before Yeats was being lauded in anthologies as one of the world’s greatest poets, the anthological process was shaping what we read by Yeats and how we read him.
A sampling of early-to-mid twentieth-century poetry anthologies, particularly those that were successful enough to garner successive editions, reveal much about Yeats’s development as a critical subject. Though critics in early anthologies were including Yeats, collections like *Modern British Poetry: A Critical Anthology* (1925) published by Harcourt Brace and edited by Louis Untermeyer (who had been responsible for other anthologies like *This Singing World* and *Modern American Poetry* previously, and would later edit *MBP*’s subsequent editions) provide a curious and informative selection of Yeats’s poems. Though Yeats had published numerous collections years before the anthology’s publication, including *Responsibilities* (1914), *The Wild Swans At Coole* (1919), and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which contained “The Second Coming,” *Modern British Poetry* ignores all of his work after the turn of the century even while it includes twentieth-century poetry by other writers. The six poems represented, like “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” and “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” were all written and published before 1900 and are certainly among Yeats’s more conventional or appealing poems. Within a decade, the fourth edition of the same volume also inexplicably ignored *Michael Robartes*, but did update its selection with later poems like “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Among School Children.” Still, the emphasis on Yeats’s earlier work continued.

This tendency to focus on Yeats’s early poetry is perhaps best explained by *Century Readings in English Literature* from 1940. Even at that time, Yeats was largely understood in his relationship to the Celtic Twilight. *Century Readings* places Yeats under the umbrella of Victorian literature under the subheading “The Irish Literary Revival.” Consequently, he is represented by poems like “The Lake Isle,” “Into the
“Twilight,” “A Coat,” “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland” and “September 1913.”

Moreover, the Irish Revival caps the Victorian Era; the rest of the anthology is concerned with “The Twentieth Century.” This concentration may have been symptomatic of anthological aesthetics as a whole, which tended to focus on more conventional, anodyne poetry. Regardless, even in the years immediately after Yeats’s death, his anthological representations squarely position him as the Irish, political poet and concentrate largely on his more straightforward articulations.

In the following decade, with the Second World War over and practitioners of literary study enjoying a more secure academic field, there is an apparent, though initially slight, turn in attention towards Yeats’s more complex works. Clearly the critical taste was moving further and further away from the Irish nationalist political concerns from a half century before, which would have appeared very distant and perhaps even trivial in a world recuperating from the War. *Literature in English* (1948) shows a markedly different focus than its predecessors. It is one of the first major anthologies to include “The Second Coming” along with “A Prayer For My Daughter,” also from *Michael Robartes*. Even its earliest poems, “Michael Robartes Remembers Forgotten Beauty” and “The Folly of Being Comforted,” are not visibly localized in Irish geography or politics like many of the poems that surround them in their respective collections. *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1953) published in London continues this trend; though it contains many forgotten poems like “Lullaby” and “Parting,” it also introduces more intricate works like “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” and “Lapis Lazuli” into the mix.
By the mid-to-late 1950s, Yeats’s anthologized poems are largely taken from a markedly different selection. *Modern Verse in English* from 1958 abandons the pastoral lyrics and Irish Renaissance poetry in favor of more complex poems like “Leda and the Swan,” “The Second Coming,” “Among School Children,” and “The Tower.” *Major British Writers* (1959), which contains one of the largest selections of Yeats’s poetry, also focuses principally on poems from the 1920s and 30s, including “The Second Coming.” This new preoccupation was likely at least a partial byproduct of the dominant New Critical method of poetic explication at that time, which required poems of more complexity than “The Song of Wandering Aengus”; Yeats already enjoyed popularity and canonical status but also had a large body of work that had been generally ignored and could provide practitioners of New Criticism with a fertile playground. Nevertheless, though we cannot make the assertion that “The Second Coming” was *the* representative Yeats poem, it is quite clear that the anthological/canonical Yeats was almost always represented in part by the poem by and since the 1950s.

“The Second Coming,” which is a simplification of Yeats’s *A Vision*, was itself distilled down to an interesting, if digestible, take on historical change by critics in the 1940s and 50s. Harry K. Russell, William Wells, and Donald A. Stauffer write, “Yeats recognizes that his own time…is transitional, confused, without unity…. His system suggests that there is a pattern of repetition, however; for the uncentered age has its counterpart in an earlier age in that great cycles (forming a spiral or gyre) of history” (60). Obviously, Yeats’s poem imagines more malevolence than some of these early critics might suggest. Though the Yeats who wrote the poem believed the world was approaching a fundamental transition, the promise of a better world, so often manifested
in a heroic, ancient Ireland, had vanished. Ellmann writes, “there was little in the post-war era to inspire him with such hopes” (235). When he composed “the Second Coming,” Ireland was in the midst of its war with England, and, as his poetry demonstrated, he was intensely affected. “For all that come into my mind are dead,” Yeats wrote “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” a year before composing “The Second Coming.” Curiously, he found it rather easy to ignore the First World War, but now war was in his midst and he could no longer ignore the destruction. Ellmann emphasizes the fundamental change that came over Yeats by 1920: “now he gave utterance to a chiliastic prophecy of the transvaluation of values, but saw in it only evil” (236). The enduring, compelling nature of “The Second Coming,” then, might be partially attributed to its preoccupation with explaining history as a violent force whose sequences can, to some extent, be foreseen even if what approaches is unknowable, at historically ambivalent times. Indeed, Yeats’s poem seems to have anticipated much of what befell the world over the years after its publication; Russell E. Murphy writes, “the emergence not only in Nazi Germany, but in Italy, Spain, Russia, and China of strongman dictators, all of them potential avatars for that “rough beast” whose own impending appearance in a desperate and chaotic world Yeats’s ‘The Second Coming’ had not so much prophesied as anticipated” (101). And Yeats himself seemed to recognize the enduring value of “The Second Coming” for the same reason. In a letter written to Ethel Mannin in 1938 concerning political struggles all over the world, he writes, “If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called The Second Coming. It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening” (Letters 851). Nevertheless, as Western readers continued to regard the poem, they often did so
accompained by a rather narrow view of world history. Outside of Europe and America, the rest of the world was subject to be constructed by Western artists and anthropologists foreign to those geographies and cultures they documented.

When, in the late 1950s, a young, British-educated Nigerian chose to write a novel that could both fit into and modify World Literature – a body of work that contained no work about Africa by Africans – much was at stake. Chinua Achebe later asserted, “To write a book about your people is a big undertaking. And there was no help” (qtd. in Moore 31). Of course, African literature existed, but European scholars looking for literature about Africa would look first to the likes of Conrad, Kipling, Haggard, and others, not within the “dark continent.” Moreover, the mere articulation of an African story by an African for a European audience would necessarily and foundationally require “help” in the form of legitimation up front. If stories about Africa were always told through European eyes, the reader, used to the likes of Marlowe and other white protagonists that could interpret foreign experiences, could not simply be dropped into the middle of a story about native Nigerians without some kind of genuine medium to bridge the divide before the story even commences; one must have a familiar structure, even a sense of what’s to come and how to proceed in this alien story before embarking.

Contemporary reviews of Things Fall Apart demonstrate that not all were ready for African literature. Though the novel would grow to be immensely popular and influential in a short time, initial reviewers displayed a lot of ambivalence and often misinterpreted Achebe’s gestures. The Times Literary Supplement reviewer notes, “Mr. Achebe himself owes much to missionary education, and his sympathies are naturally
more with the new than the old. His picture of the collapse of tribal custom is perhaps less than compassionate” (“The Centre” 341). Walter Allen, writing for the New Statesman asserts, “the tragic downfall of the central figure, Okonkwo, is muffled because, admirable though he may have been in his tribal context, he is scarcely a sympathetic or subtle character” (814). Other reviewers simply found the book perplexing: Hassoldt Davis, who titled his review “Jungle Strongman” for New York’s Saturday Review writes, “The flashbacks are confusing [and] the narration undisciplined” (18). Nevertheless, these reviews also make it clear that Yeats’s language, perhaps above all else, serves as a bridge between Achebe’s novel and the critic unused to reading literature of this sort, providing them with a way to talk about the novel. The critics themselves take on Yeats’s vocabulary: The Times Literary Supplement titles its review “The Centre Cannot Hold.” And Allen writes, “The anarchy that is loosed upon this African world is the result of the arrival of the missionaries followed by the guns and justice of colonial administrators” (814). Already we see that Yeats was collapsing the divide between the reader the novel, even if they didn’t entirely know what to make of Achebe’s story. Ironically, these reviewers also did not grasp that Achebe’s appropriation of Yeats had done so. Adebayo Williams writes, “The profound symbolic import of the title of Achebe’s novel escapes the rash reviewer” (11). And, as we see here, reviewers tended to assert the difference of Igbo culture to their own and generally disregard apparent similarities, of which, we will note, there are many. It would take what Williams calls “perceptive readers” to realize that, “by borrowing his trope from Yeats’s powerful poem, Achebe seeks to reconnect with the essential humanity of the conquered and their conquerors in order to draw attention to what the novelist memorably describes
as ‘an immemorial anxiety’…. Empires rise and fall in the remorseless grind of history and no human society is exempt from falling apart” (12). Despite the shortsightedness of these contemporary reviewers, Africa, Achebe would demonstrate, shared much with West.

In a letter to Edmund Dulac, Yeats wrote: “I do not know what my book [A Vision, which contains “The Second Coming”] will be to others—nothing perhaps. To me it means a last act of defence against the chaos of the world, and I hope for ten years to write out of my renewed security” (Ellmann 294). Achebe’s novel is most often viewed the same way: as a means of resistance. Though critics have portrayed Achebe’s use of Yeats as primarily critical, we will see that Yeats offered much more to Achebe than a simple site for criticism. “The Second Coming” is as much a model for Achebe as it is a means to complicate Western ideology. William Cook writes, “[Achebe] saw…[his] own experiences of loss of order and future debilitation confirmed within the lines of Yeat’s [sic] apocalyptic poem… This is the vision which [Achebe] see[s] as relevant to the Africa [he] experience[s]” (Cook 53). Moreover, Achebe’s most obvious project, to use literature as means of “reducing ethnocentrism in an interracial context,” precisely mirrors Yeats’s project in the Celtic Twilight movement at the turn of the century, and both have also been criticized for the contradictions inherent in such profitable, problematic ventures (Merriam 67). And, as we have seen with the protean nature of Yeats’s words, Achebe’s novel has also taken on its own mutable life:

[T]he novel has not only been read differently at different times, it has also been read by many readers, all of whom, expectedly, brought various insights and perspective—ideological, historical and cultural—to bear on
their readings. In the process, it has had different values for its various readers who are not just spatially and temporally separated but are also located within diverse discursive spaces. (Okunoye 43)

Yet this “life” began with (and because) an English-educated Nigerian novelist wisely introduced his audience to an unfamiliar subject matter with Yeats as his emissary. Oyeniyi Okunoye asks the vital questions: “But what really accounts for [the novel’s] reputation? Can we locate this in the story itself, the manner of its rendering, the issues it engages or the import of the very act of writing a story about Africa?” (45). For Okunoye it’s all of these things, and the fact that the novel “continues to excite readers of various orientations and readers are adding new arguments and perspectives to existing ways of reading it.” Yet Okunoye and others fail to account for Yeats’s role in the novel’s popularity. Excitement over “The Second Coming,” compels excitement about Things Fall Apart, and vice versa.

“The Second Coming” is often included in its entirety as supplementary material in editions of Things Fall Apart, but Things Fall Apart is also a supplement to “The Second Coming”; Yeats does indeed illuminate Achebe, but Achebe also illuminates Yeats and, thereby, both works legitimize each other. Though plenty of critics have examined how Chinua Achebe utilizes and breaks from Western literary traditions in his novel,16 few have regarded how Achebe appropriates the themes and structure of “The Second Coming” in his novel. The title is of no small consequence, nor is the four-line epigraph: Achebe insists on the comparison. Indeed, Achebe has seldom mentioned Yeats after Things Fall Apart (he certainly never publically disparaged him as he did

16 See Desai, Gikandi, Quayson, and Snyder.
Conrad) except to note in an interview that he was displeased that an early edition of the novel inadvertently omitted the epigraph: “the title drawn from Yeats was my choice,” asserts Achebe (“Conversation” 100). Yeats’s poem serves three purposes to Achebe: to move the reader and critic into the text through familiarity, to provide legitimacy to a first-time African author, and to function as a structural/thematic parallel for the novel. Yeats’s poem seeks to comprehend the fate of the world, but the world Yeats lived in leaned little regard to Africa. In “Africa and Her Writers,” Achebe writes, “In talking about the world here we really mean Europe and the West. But we have all got into the bad habit of regarding that slice of the globe as the whole thing” (623). Therefore, Achebe skillfully appropriates not just the words, but also the literary structures and philosophies of Yeats’s poem, modifying, criticizing and extending their implications and consequences in order to insert an authoritative African history into a World History written by those who knew little about Africa. Both works reveal how historical change affects humankind, but Achebe literalizes “The Second Coming” by applying Yeats’s largely elusive schematic in the unlikeliest of places.

_African Literature: Things Fall Together_

When C.R. Larson lauded Achebe in 1973 as “the most significant Anglophone novelist in tropical Africa,” he did so failing to also recognize that Achebe was ostensibly the first African writer to emerge in the modern English publishing marketplace and came to possess all but total control over the African literature subsequently published (qtd. in Merriam 63). In order to account for just how necessary Yeats was to Achebe’s project, from the publication of his novel to its enduring popularity, we must comprehend
exactly what Achebe was up against when he published *Things Fall Apart*. Though the supposition is a complex one, most critics tend to regard Achebe’s novel as the starting point for modern African literature. “[I]t is not possible to dissociate the publication of the novel from the emergence of modern African writing in general and the African novel in particular,” writes Okunoye (42). It was the first widely available Nigerian text in print, written in English or otherwise, and, necessary to its availability, spawned a marketable interest in African literature in English. *Things Fall Apart* went on to sell more than eight million copies by the end of the twentieth century (Stec 141). Therefore, we must not underestimate the economic value of Achebe’s novel, nor the extraordinary barriers of the publishing market that Achebe was able to surmount as we proceed; giving birth to an institution requires a number of enabling benefactors who in turn require varied compensations.

Gareth Griffiths writes, “it was the publication of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 that modern Nigerian writing in English can date its birth as an institution rather than a series of sporadic texts incorporated into English publishing lists as exotica” (132). Griffiths attributes the emergence of this institution to several primary factors. *Things Fall Apart* was the first text published from a generation of African authors educated in an English-language university curriculum. And Achebe wisely emphasizes this education up front with his Yeats quotation, which “reflects this curriculum as the defining discourse within which the text locates itself, though in an ironic and appropriated way” (132). We will return to the significance of Achebe’s act shortly, but it is clear that the rise of modern African literature is an immediate counterpart of Anglo-African educational practices:
[I]t coincided with the demand within these institutions for an expression of the new nationalism which accompanied those years between the first awareness of the possibility of independence and its arrival; and…it coincided with the perception on the part of astute overseas publishers such as Heinemann that this demand and the development of education institutions at both secondary and tertiary levels in Nigeria as elsewhere in the postcolonial world would result in a market for local material produced in a cheap, readily-available paperback format and priced to sell to the local market. (Griffiths 132)

Effectively, Anglo-African literature was, then, both a confirmation and extension of a (post)colonial education. Therefore, while we may credit Achebe as both the forefather and an early champion of modern African literature, we should not regard the emergence of the genre as some revolutionary reversal of all that came before because it exists in a close relationship to the kind of imperial power its stories often criticize.

Publishers obviously bear a large responsibility for both the creation and preservation of “literature” – a pool from and about which canonicity is constructed. Therefore, as Loretta Stetc notes, “Canons ultimately have as much to do with profits as with ‘artistic worth’” (140). The emerging interest in postcolonial and ethnic literatures in English (whether written in or translated into English) over the latter half of the 20th century can be, and often is, viewed as one of the fundamental forces contesting traditional canonical construction. But publishers have played a central role in this movement by making these articulations possible. Griffiths explains:
Clearly for a writer to be successful in the Heinemann African Writers series in the early days the text had to have two qualifications. First, it had to be demonstrably of sufficient “substance” to justify its use as a text on a secondary-school and tertiary syllabus where it would replace or supplement the study of English classics and the modern literary canon of England and America (which, in practice, meant being able to win approval from the overseas critics as a valuable text, with all that entailed as to the importation of critical assumptions and European evaluatory criteria); and secondly, since the tertiary market was still relatively small, it had to be a text suitable in its use of English, its style and lexis, to be accessible to secondary-school students. Almost no attempt has been made to see how these demands, created through the selection of a particular marketing strategy by the companies who were involved, literally constructed the forms and in many cases the styles of successful writers in the 1960s and 1970s. (135)

It may be impossible to determine whether Heinemann assisted writers crafting African literature in English, or whether Heinemann was fundamentally responsible for the commodity’s production. But it is clear that Heinemann’s African Writers Series only became possible after Things Fall Apart whet the appetite of its readers and scholars. Stec observes two reasons for the Series’ creation: “The African Writers Series was launched in 1962 because the editors saw both an opportunity to bring new writers into print and a potential for making profits in new markets” (141). But these two purposes might perhaps be distilled into a single directive: to bring new writers into print because
of the potential for making profits in new markets. Consequently, because of the profits of Achebe’s novel, he was the natural, if only, choice to serve as the African Writers Series’ editor in chief.

By 1970, there were 80 books published under the AWS imprint and 200 by the early 1990s (Stec 141). These numbers certainly suggest that this Series served the creation and extension of an existing publishing empire. Heinemann, whose African Writers Series was edited in England, may have been establishing a new catalog for an international audience, but its value was very much embedded in the way in which its works could be and were read alongside established canonical texts, necessitating knowledge and study of the established Western Canon. What we see, then, is a troubling and complicated form of economic allowance and ownership not so unlike its earlier colonial counterpart. The very name, “African Writers Series,” seems to suggest that the reader is being introduced to something like Africa’s “Greatest Hits,” the best literature it has to offer, though critics have noted that Achebe’s “picks” were inevitably wrought in the image of Achebe, their maker. Griffiths asserts, “[T]he early volumes of the series contain clear evidence of Achebe’s novels’ serving not only as examples to would-be young writers but also as literary templates of what a modern Nigerian novel in English might be. So much so, in fact, that each of Achebe’s novels can be said not only to have established a text but also a genre” (133). And, since Achebe helped establish and edit the single major series searching for works by African writers, each of the texts published subsequent to Things Fall Apart asserted and established the model for what the publisher desired from its authors. These early texts “therefore reflexively created the images of Nigeria which they were then subsequently used to ‘prove’ to have existed”
Therefore, though we might view Heinemann’s development of “African Literature” as an attempt, to some degree, to diversify the Canon, diversity within “African Literature” – an extremely broad designation – was severely limited. Stec writes, “Heinemann has had a very strong effect on what Anglophone African literary works are considered valuable enough to read, discuss, analyze in print, and teach: hence their value transmutes them into a canonical list” (144). Bearing the responsibility for its “creation,” and the extraordinary resources to carry out such an undertaking in the first place, Heinemann maintained all but total control over African literature in English for decades.

The maintenance of a canon ultimately requires the limitation of its participants. Therefore, it should be no surprise that the numbers of African writers published leveled off during the 1980s because of economic trends in Nigeria, which “went a good way towards stabilizing an Anglophone African literary canon” (Stec 143). By the end of the 90s, Heinemann had slowed its publication of African texts; no more than eight titles appeared each year, which were primarily novels – an economic decision. The editor of the African Writers Series at the time, Jean Hay, said, “We aren’t even trying publish poetry; it doesn’t sell” (qtd. in Stec 144). So the designation “African Literature” became a rather narrow category of novels written about Africa by writers born there but most often living elsewhere, most of whom were men. Heinemann closed its African branches early on, and subsequent editors generally procured manuscripts by soliciting African writers living in the United States who wrote in English and were products of a privileged education; very few were published in translation, but even those were originally written in French and Arabic (Stec 144).
If those who crafted African Literature were heavily dependent on the graces and
tastes of massive Western/international publishing firms, than their acquisition of an
audience was contingent on their application of certain conventions:

[W]hen the postcolonial world wants to employ the resources and
technology of the metropolitan world to speak, it had better learn to do so
in voices and accents (for these read formats and structures) which people
in the West want to hear, since only by assuring the Western publisher or
media baron that there exists a large audience outside his country of origin
for the material he wants to disseminate or a ready local market for their
reissue within a specialist market (for example, the school textbook
market) can the writer be heard. (Griffiths 131)

Moreover, we should emphasize that what people in the West want to hear may shape,
but is likely more prominently shaped by, those providing them with materials to
consume. The African writer, then, from the outset, is confronted by a difficult choice: if
he chooses to speak to a Western (and, by extension, international) audience, his
articulations are inevitably limited. And, in Achebe’s case, with no “African Literature”
to serve as a representative model, he necessarily and cunningly appropriates his model
from within the existing canon, thereby infusing his text with a nuance “which people in
the West want to hear,” or, even more precisely, a nuance which people in the West have
been taught to hear.

Consequently, “African Literature” came to have a fairly specific flavor for a
time: novels, generally, about Africa, not unlike Achebe’s, written mostly in English by
Africans. It may have been an economic question of ease, but, though the byproduct may
have been unintentional, the language in which these texts were written (English) inevitably became a key determinant of a text’s value. Therefore, we can assume that available African literature does indeed resort to Western literary convention, but a few points must be emphasized before moving on. First, the critical tendency to regard Western devices in modern African literature can only regard those works that have published: “Authors writing in styles closer to the oral tradition tend to be shut out of influential publishing endeavors like the African Writers Series” writes Stec (145). Though small publishers do exist in Africa, the majority of consumed texts are produced by a few publishing giants: “The ‘publishing empire’ substitutes in this case for the British empire in Africa” (Stec 145). Therefore, we must approach Things Fall Apart and the Canon simultaneously as devices shaping each other. Heinemann certainly gave numerous Anglo-African writers an international audience, but an inevitable preoccupation with revenue disqualified texts for reasons of genre, gender and language. Secondly, since Achebe was the first of these writers, and much that came afterwards was essentially similar in nature to his own work, it becomes imperative to determine the Western substructures woven into Things Fall Apart; if Achebe is in many ways responsible for the European and American conceptions of “African Literature,” and Yeats is vastly influential on the construction and reception of Achebe’s first novel, then Yeats’s vitality and that of “Third World Literatures” may be bound by some wholly peculiar, overlooked kinship. Indeed, Yeats helped to legitimize his own country’s literature just a half century before the publication of Things.

Heinemann and numerous other imprints were purchased by Random house at the end of the 1990s. Such a consolidation meant an even more focused, limited,
conglomerated perspective. Limiting the availability of texts is inevitable if one is to contain and regard a literary category and maintain profitability. However, one resulting phenomena of the emergence of “African Literature,” and Heinemann’s – and, by extension, Achebe’s – all but total control for a time over that which fell under its umbrella, is that its eventual stabilization concretized a very specific kind of “African Literature”; the texts written by those authors who were admitted are extensions of what those who admitted them conceived of that which they admitted them into. And clearly these authors were not unaware of the confines of the category they wished to enter.

Some homage needs to be paid to the admitter; if he who controls the Canon, even partially, is responsible for its creation and maintenance, his own literary reputation needs to be upheld in some capacity by those who succeed him. It should come as now surprise then, when we see that Achebe needed Yeats, just as African writers needed Achebe.

Numerous critics have debated the lengths to which Achebe’s novel encompasses, or doesn’t, the style(s) of African storytelling, but that approach – the attempt to determine the “best” methodology to preserve the *African* element in Anglo-African literature – too easily ignores other forces acting upon the text: the simplicity of Achebe’s language, style, or narrative progression ultimately have as much to do with publishing concerns as they do with any attempt to recapture *African* storytelling mechanisms, as critics are disposed to read them. Griffiths asserts, “The terms in which the debate had been constructed assume that the choice of style is only and absolutely determined by the attitude (literary, political, and social) of the author, and ignores the possibilities that Achebe’s [style]…may be determined, at least in part, by other and more institutional factors,” like those of the publisher mentioned above (135). Therefore, as I move on to
make connections between “The Second Coming” and *Things Fall Apart*, I do so with the purpose of suggesting two things: first, that the novel greatly and deliberately utilizes the structures and philosophies of the poem; and, secondly, that its successful function as “literature” and its enduring popularity are dependent, in part, on its engagement with “The Second Coming.”

It is worth emphasizing that “The Second Coming” originated in Yeats’s esoteric, widely dismissed *A Vision* for a few reasons. Firstly, this fact highlights the myriad occult/pagan/astrological/Judeo-Christian schemas that amalgamate in its expression; there is a fundamental cosmic significance to what he prophesies – its philosophies are meant to encompass the global population, despite its actual narrow-sightedness (i.e., its actual disregard for Africa). Secondly, by observing how the poem functions without any extra explanations of its underlying philosophies or background, we can see that, though Yeats pursued his rather bizarre tastes, he was not beholden to them too intensely to forget the needs of his audience. Ellmann asserts that, though Yeats required his *Vision* in order to grasp that which he would articulate, “an awareness of the system was more useful for writing than it is for reading the poem. Yeats was careful not to require knowledge of his prose from the reader of his verse” (237). Essentially, Achebe takes up the same methodology. The reader does not require an awareness of Yeats’s own system regarding the gyre in order to grasp the poem. Though recognition of the latter can enrich one’s reading of the poem, it isn’t ultimately necessary. What is necessary, is the audience’s recognition of the Judeo-Christian symbol of the second coming. Achebe similarly relies on his audience’s Western education, and, as we will see, he displays a keen awareness for their conception of language and their understanding of the
rules/boundaries of narrative. Though a deeper cultural consideration, one that regards biography, Igbo storytelling devices, and the methods by which Achebe weaves them into his tapestry seamlessly, expands avenues into the text, awareness of these is not compulsory. And, I would argue, that both texts use deeper systems and simultaneously work against the necessity to know them prior to encountering their respective works, accounts at least partially for their success, in terms of longevity and fertility. Though we cannot know that Achebe models this specific facet of his project after Yeats, we again see a corresponding approach.

As I asserted earlier, the popularity of “The Second Coming” can be in part distilled down to its engagement with explaining history at a time that was anxious about the rise and fall of nation/civilization, and its apocalyptic vision – its ability to provide an image for the impending doom, and its relatable uncertainty at the final implications of this fate. That “The Second Coming” has continued to tap into the 20th century’s cultural imagination, even well after World War II, should come as no surprise given the relative instability of geographic communities over the course of the century, Western dominance over educational practices in the “Third World,” and the struggles of postcolonial populations all over the world; Jamake Highwater, for example, titled his novel about the struggle with American Indian identity *The Ceremony of Innocence*. Populations experiencing the effects of both a Western education – with Yeats as a part, however small, of its curriculum – and the dissolution of order that follows (de)colonization, were experiencing profound civil collapse, but *within a specific literary vocabulary*. And, we should not underestimate the great divide that Yeats was able to straddle, despite the
multiple paradoxes, between being both a representative of “British Literature” and a politicized figure whose poetry and plays were often at odds with colonialism.

If we mean to demonstrate that many aspects of “The Second Coming” are intentionally woven into the fabric of Things Fall Apart beyond just the title, and that its abnormally swift acceptance into the Western Canon does indeed have something to do with these numerous appropriations, we must read both texts alongside each other, examining first the many angles of Yeats’s poem to determine just what, exactly, Things Fall Apart has to do with “The Second Coming.” Critics have tended to overlook just how much Achebe’s text interacts with Yeats’s, and simply assert some of the more superficial similarities. For example, Marie-Denise Shelton writes, “Chinua Achebe found inspiration in ‘The Second Coming’ by the Irish poet Yeats…. the images of gyrations, violent cycles, and death evoked in Yeats’s poem parallel the whirlwind of violence and destruction unleashed by colonialism on the Ibo world described by Achebe. Again, the intention of the postcolonial writer is to…escape the finality of the colonizers’ Word” (138). Shelton is right, though she forgets that, despite the complexities of his “plight,” Yeats was also the colonized. Moreover, comments like these demonstrate a tendency among critics and postcolonial writers alike to regard postcolonial appropriations of canonical literature solely in terms of subversion. But Achebe’s rebellion is gentler than those made by the writers mentioned above, and necessarily, given that he would inaugurate a movement. Shelton writes, “The exercise of reworking a masterpiece…can be viewed as strategy of subversion…. working from European literary history is not mere mimesis. Rather, it is the product of the contradictions of history” (138). Similarly, Lloyd Brown writes, “whenever Achebe draws upon English
literature for his titles and themes…he uses the literary traditions of the English tongue to liberate the African’s identity and history from the ethnocentric images that have been enshrined in the psychopathology of the colonizer’s language” (27). Derek Walcott also approaches his appropriated subjects from an analogous standpoint: “the masterpieces of the language in which I work are from a white literary history. That must not prevent me from mastering the language; it is not a matter of subservience, it is a matter of dominating. One becomes a master, one does not become a slave” (Baer 48). Certainly Achebe’s use of Yeats displays the fact that he knows European literature and can be readily admitted into its ranks. It may be comfortable to see Achebe’s appropriations solely in terms of subversion, but we must not overlook the economic viability these references provide because they are recognizable to the readership and draw attention to these earlier works.

When we place both texts alongside each other, the first and obvious dissimilarity is genre. Fiction, as Heinemann recognized, sells in numbers that poetry cannot. This is an element that cannot be overlooked, but if Yeats’s words provide a kind of bridge between a foreign subject and a relatively familiar presentation, so does Achebe’s employment of the novel. Allen Merriam explains: “While such cognitive developments as knowledge of a new culture could be gained from anthropological studies and social science textbooks, the appeal of fiction stems from its presentation through a medium that is at once dramatic and entertaining” (61). *Things Fall Apart* is indeed entertaining, and there is a kind of safety when one confronts the unfamiliar under the umbrella of fiction; “Fiction can serve as a window through which the reader can see the inner workings of another value system” (Merriam 62). And it allows them to explore with little
consequence. We will come to see that where Yeats regards the macrocosm, Achebe watches the microcosm. A.G. Stock writes, “Achebe is not interested in prophecy but in analyzing the way things happen…. But his instrument of interpretation is the same; his Umuofia is a civilization in miniature” (106). We will see Achebe apply Yeats’s assertions in a specific place and time to regard their resonance. Despite this fundamental generic difference, their parallels are numerous.

**Act One: The State of Things**

“The Second Coming” has been reprinted in two stanzas, but, notably, when the poem originally appeared in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1920, there was a page break after the third sentence, between lines 17 and 18, which makes this division uncertain. Given Yeats’s participation in the aesthetic design of his books, he might have initially intended three distinct blocks of type before later settling on a two-stanza presentation. Regardless, the poem contains a rather traditional three-act structure; both the sense and the syntax break down into three distinct movements. The first establishes the themes and violent imagery on which the second and third depend. Though we cannot attribute this rudimentary structure specifically to Yeats, Achebe’s novel also contains three parts and employs the basic strictures of a three-act narrative. In the first, he introduces us to the major participants in our narrative. What Achebe does also, and in a rather clever way, is build his characters and thematic concerns in the context of numerous cultural practices; we come to know Unoka, Oknonkwo, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, by watching them participate in traditional Igbo ceremonies and customs. Meanwhile, predispositions towards cultural understanding – recognition of the
second coming’s significance, for example – are taken for granted by Yeats, and he moves promptly into the problems at hand.

Indeed, one difference between the first acts of both works, at least at first glance, is the poem’s preoccupation with constructing an atmosphere in which all is collapsing and severely upset by the dissolution of order. Yeats embodies his image of collapse in a falcon and falconer, symbols of ancient intelligence that combine instinct, training, and hierarchical culture. The falcon, notably, has lost its guiding agents – instinct and education – altogether; in its uncontrollable spiral, inward intuition and the falconer’s outward instruction no longer provide any protection. That this noble animal is used historically by its master for hunting or delivering communication – to sustain life through nourishment and contact – emphasizes that this disconnection, this spiral out of control, is absolute and grave. Simplified, the gyre represents Yeats’s cyclical view of history, a key component of which is the fact that civilizations are inevitably overthrown. These conclusive elements are further emphasized in Achebe’s appropriated title and one of Yeats’s most memorable lines, an articulation of the ultimate demise of this historical cycle, and all historical cycles. Yeats’s terminology is particularly important: “Things,” a word most rhetoricians would likely avoid because of its nebulous, indeterminate nature, does indeed stand apart from the specific language of the rest of the poem. But in this line we find a microcosm that is representative of the entire poem: “things” is most often used to designate that which is too broad, too difficult, or too impractical to express completely in units of time and language, and the entirety of the poem is dedicated to this purpose. The image that we will eventually confront is the speaker’s attempt to give some kind of shape and definition to that which is looming, even though it may
ultimately prove unknowable. Therefore, we can view this vague line as an utterance communicating the overwhelming, the inexpressible. Since “The centre cannot hold” is connected to the former assertion by a semicolon, both clauses exist in a close relationship. Indeed, the second clause is similarly vague. We know that the center cannot remain fixed or bound. But one might also ask what the center is incapable of holding but the answer is in the subject; given the gravitational elements intimated by the gyre, the turning, the falling, and the phases of the tide, the center has, at least until now, held all “things” together.

The end of that which provided stability means descent into “mere anarchy,” a violent force that apparently overcomes all communal progressions. The modifier “mere” is initially off-putting in the way it reduces anarchy to something small and measly, but it also illuminates the speaker’s notion that anarchical baseness apparently resides in the souls of all people and is only kept, the opposite of “loosed,” by inward and outward constraints. The “ceremony of innocence,” the formal, public maintenance of traditional standards is overco

me by a force that Yeats paints as natural, inevitable. But this tide, that which will bring change, is infused with the life force of that which it has destroyed. Time, then, the earth’s seemingly natural cycles, will bring violence. That both anarchy and the dreadful, bloody deluge have been “loosed upon the world” emphasizes two things: that this force has been waiting, and that, again, this is applicable to all peoples regardless of geography. Indeed, the Egyptian air of the desert-dwelling beast we will soon meet will only emphasize that all parts of the globe are involved.

The final lines of the stanza continue to confront the reader with forces of opposition and reversal. Yeats does not provide the reader with specific definitions of
“best” and “worst” in this text; we know what characterizes each, a “lack of conviction” and “passionate intensity” respectively, but insofar as why one is “best” and “worst” – what comes along with inhabiting either hierarchical position is unclear in the poem itself, and rightfully so, as traditional categories of meaning are clearly deteriorating.

Yeats, of course, held an affinity for the Protestant Ascendancy, so one might read this hierarchical dichotomy through his biography; Susan Johnston Graf writes, “Yeats believed that in human society there was a natural hierarchy, an aristocratic elite composed of natural leaders and administrators, those well-bred few who are born to be, as he once wrote, “the captains that govern mankind’” (101). Moreover, Yeats’s beliefs had only been strengthened in the years before he composed “The Second Coming”: “His idealization of the Protestant Ascendancy was strengthened by the Easter Rising in 1916 and the consequent revolution and civil war” (Graf 99). Indeed, Michael Robartes is filled with poems grappling with the revolution and war, including “Easter, 1916,” “Sixteen Dead Men, “On a Political Prisoner,” and “A Meditation in Time of War.”

Read in this context, those elite who, in Yeats’s mind, should be governing society lack the conviction to do so and those who have no lack of passion are too low on the hierarchy to be able to govern. Few readers, however, have apparently applied such an interpretation to “The Second Coming,” perhaps because knowledge of Yeats’s own proclivities are not essential for one to grasp the poem, and, perhaps, because few of Yeats’s readers even knew of these proclivities.

This “best” designation can also be read rather basically as referring to people with “good” hearts or intentions, and even though these best/worst or good/bad dichotomies are vague at best, such a reading holds up in light of Yeats’s other work.
Daniel Albright notes that Yeats expressed similar conviction in “Why should not Old Men be Mad?”: “Some think it matter of course that chance / Should starve good men and bad advance” (621). What “the best” might look like is further clarified in “A Statesman’s Holiday”; Yeats writes, “Some knew what ailed the world / But never said a thing.” Those referred to here must be “the best” in “The Second Coming,” because of their lack conviction. Therefore, “the best” are those with knowledge or insight into history, which certainly lines up with Yeats’s hierarchical notions of culture, though these texts never specifically refer to Yeats’s notions of the natural elite. Because of Yeats’s ever-shifting viewpoints, we might also clarify these lines by looking at “A Prayer for my Daughter,” an intensely personal poem written around the same time as “The Second Coming.” In “A Prayer,” Yeats wishes “the best” for his daughter, and his notions of goodness are again pretty simple. He hopes for his daughter to possess a modest sort of beauty balanced by “natural kindness” and “the heart-revealing intimacy that chooses right,” and a soul free of “all hatred.” So when the speaker of “The Second Coming” uses the best/worst designation, he may indeed, after all, mean them in a rather simplistic sense – one that doesn’t need to be entirely spelled out, as both “the best” and “the worst” will apparently suffer the same fate – and Achebe, we will see, will characteristically complicate these kinds of dichotomies by applying them in the context of colonial Christianity. Nevertheless, it is clear by the end of this stanza that regardless of one’s position in the hierarchy, she will face the same impending doom. And the reader, now left with this sense of doom from having moved at a breathless pace through forceful verbs and images of violence and decay, is finally given a moment to rest before the next stanza.
At this point, some of the parallels between the poem and the novel might initially be unclear because most of the novel’s first section is dedicated to the observation of Igbo cultural acts and the establishing of characters, and is not as engrossed in the rapid viciousness of Yeats’s first stanza. While it is true that the pacing is necessarily different in a novel than it is in a poem, Achebe’s first section is strikingly analogous to Yeats’s; As Stock notes, the first section of the novel is a depiction of “the ceremony of innocence” (196). Things Fall Apart does indeed take some time before plunging the reader into the same kind of darkness that Yeats imposes from the beginning, but Achebe is making a vital gesture here regarding “darkness.” Achebe is introducing his readers, ostensibly for the first time, to what really happens in “the dark continent,” and in a story whose time period parallels that in works like Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Achebe has famously disparaged this work and its author, calling Conrad “a thoroughgoing racist” and seeing in the novel the embodiment of “the need—in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (“An Image” 257, 250). Though he will reverse this notion upon the arrival of Europeans in Umuofia, he has already begun his contestation in the novel’s first section. When Achebe drops his reader into middle of “the dark continent,” he is plunging his reader into darkness, and this gesture wisely defies the familiar but distorted literary representation Africa, and we thereby come to realize there is little darkness in this continent. The first section of both works, as first sections often do, describe the current times – things as they are. Additionally, Achebe has the added work of providing his audience with not just an explanation of the state of things, but with an introduction to a world entirely new to the majority of his readers. Therefore, we do
spend much time observing the way of life in Umuofia, much of which is quiet, agrarian, and dignified, and bears little if any resemblance to Conrad’s Africa.

We realize early on in Part One that Okonkwo is faced with the same predicament as Yeats’s falcon; he continually faces challenges stemming from the balancing of inward and outward guidance. He may be in touch with traditional Igbo culture, to a fault, but it comes at the price of a disconnection with his father, his son, and his wives. This order that rules his consciousness, destructive as it may prove, along with our burgeoning awareness of a rich Igbo culture directly contrasts the “mindless savage” directive of previous literature about Africa; it seems that, after all, African society is not anarchical, at least not yet, though, as we will see, there is a definite sense of impending doom. Moreover, Achebe is moving to literalize Yeats’s line. Because the Igbo understanding of the world is so geographically limited, it is the entire world that is being changed in the novel; for our characters, there is no escape because there is nowhere to escape to. Achebe continually emphasizes this by referencing distant tribes, despite the fact that members of Umuofia are close enough to hear their neighbors’ drums at times. Yeats’s asserted threat to existence seems even more severe here, and less nebulous, because we see it applied to a comprehensible unit, as opposed to a totality.

Notions of “passion” and “conviction” from Yeats’s first stanza are also employed by Achebe as essential thematic ingredients in Part One of Things. We know from the beginning that Okonkwo possesses a deep fervor for his culture; his conversations with the elders here in Part One and throughout the novel demonstrate that his “conviction” has to do with the embrace and perpetuation of traditional Igbo values. Okonkwo is among “the best” in Umuofia, “one of the greatest men of his time” because
of his socially accepted accomplishments (he is “the greatest wrestler in nine villages”, “a wealthy farmer,” and has three wives and two titles) all of which he had to work especially hard for because his father didn’t work (8). Unoka, though he is “a failure” to Okonkwo and brings his son a great amount of shame and consequent motivation, is depicted as contented and peaceful with his less than respectful existence: he loves music, food, fellowship, and the seasons (5). In direct contrast, and because of such behavior constitutes a direct contrast, Okonkwo is the most furiously passionate character in the novel, and it is this very “passionate intensity,” that leads him to cut down his surrogate son to avoid the appearance of weakness, slaughter the messenger, and ultimately to a complete sense of despair at the overwhelming and inevitable loss of the traditional, masculine structures by which he constructed his existence. Though he has yet to commit these specific acts, he still, by the end of the first section, is forced to flee his homeland when he fires a patriotic salute and his gun bursts and kills a young man; therefore, we already, at this point, have a sense that Okonkwo’s ferocity may lead to his undoing.

Once the first section of both works ends, there is a sense of impending doom, though perhaps less so in the novel. Regardless, both writers offer a kind of conviction concerning the feeling that “things” are wrong and something critical is going to happen. If we localize the destruction even further, from Yeats’s globe to the Igbo’s community to Okonkwo’s compound, there is utter destruction; his home is entirely destroyed for an accidental offense. Yeats offers a very brief respite from the onslaught of impending doom in the first section. Similarly, Obeierika questions the order of things at the end of the first section: “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense that he had
committed inadvertently” (125). And Okonkwo is offered a kind of respite himself when he is granted a new life, a chance to recreate the vitality he must leave behind, even if he is disappointed to leave his destroyed home. Okonkwo’s eventual return home — his second coming — is a cause for joy, one that he looks forward to, just as Christians look forward to the second coming of Christ. But the second coming both Yeats and Achebe go on to depict is not a cause for joy, but for apprehension and doom, however unknowable; we do not look forward to this fundamental transition.

**Act Two: Second Comings**

The second sections of both works commence on the notion of renewal. In the poem, the breathless pace gave little room to relax until the speaker tries to assure himself of some salvation, some answer to the inconceivable problem at hand. And the speaker of “The Second Coming” and Okonkwo are equally compelled to find solace in culturally enforced structures of relief. Yeats’s speaker’s beacon is spiritual; more specifically, it is the Judeo-Christian reliance on the return of Christ. When he first references the Second Coming, the reader recalls the impending return of Jesus Christ, who will save the righteous and condemn the evil to eternal damnation; his capitalization of the two words marks them as this specific reference. Yeats does indeed invert the metaphor, however, for it is not Christ whose coming is imminent. Nevertheless, immediately evident in Yeats’s evocation of the Second Coming is that the terminology of these few lines conveys a kind of last-ditch, desperate hope. The speaker asserts the Second Coming with a fierce intensity; he uses the word “surely” twice, as if frantically trying to convince himself. Notably, the avenue of reason by which the speaker finds himself confronted by
the idea of Christ’s return emphasizes the frantic nature of this hope. The speaker begins by searching for “some revelation,” not Christian salvation. But the immediate connection made to “some revelation” is the Second Coming, and, importantly, he immediately grasps onto the metaphor; after finding the Second Coming in his articulations, he repeats it (“The Second Coming!”). Here Yeats emphasizes that the speaker’s literary vocabulary – his constructed understanding of his condition and actualized ability to articulate his desperation – is profoundly dependent on Christianity’s dominance over Western thought for two millennia. It appears to us, then, as a logical sequence. The exclamation point also stresses the speaker’s desperate excitement in discerning a specific means of salvation. When Christ returns, the “innocent” will be saved and the “guilty” punished. Initially, at least, it seems the speaker has willingly forgotten the fate of the innocent in the previous stanza. Moreover, since “the best” lack conviction and “the worst” are full of intense passion, the return of Christ becomes more complicated. How Christ might determine, and thereby judge, the innocent and wicked, the best and worst, is uncertain, given the shifting, inexact meaning of these terms; how can the best be judged innocent if they lack the necessary faith to be raptured? Yeats has inverted these traditional designations. And, we must emphasize that Yeats’s ostensible stance isn’t necessarily that of the speaker; moreover, the logical sequence of the speaker’s journey towards a discovery of the Second Coming in his culturally-informed linguistic code is sensible. The speaker does not fully recognize the (il)legitimacy of that which he is compelled, at least initially, to depend on, even if Yeats and his readers do.

Yeats’s parody of the Christian metaphor, and his consequent dissatisfaction with his means of deliverance are echoed in Okonkwo’s experience. Just as Yeats’s speaker
seeks salvation in the Second Coming, Okonkwo also will apparently be saved, however begrudgingly, by a “second coming,” for he will return to Umuofia after his seven-year exile, and, he believes, will reclaim all that he has lost and more. Though he does express his gratitude to those who aid him, he is entirely dissatisfied by being forced to seek shelter among his mother’s people. Perhaps more than the exile itself, the symbolism of his maternal exile is most aggravating, for Okonkwo’s greatest struggle is not only with the assertion of his masculinity, but the complete eradication of any semblance of femininity. Yet he is literally situated within his Motherland because of the cultural practice of his specific exile for a “feminine,” or unintentional, crime. But the weakness Okonkwo associates with his punishment is a matter of his own perspective. Uchendu assigns a unique power to the qualities which Okonkwo so despises: “when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme” (134). Yet Okonkwo fails to recognize this truth; Stock notes, “It might have been a healing experience, as his uncle Uchenda gently showed him, if he had understood…a symbolized man’s need of the tender and consoling qualities which are the woman’s side of his nature” (108). In this way, however minor, Achebe is able to subvert the masculine domination of his narrative and his native culture. But Okonkwo, like Yeats, remains ever resistant to culturally enforced reliance on constructions of deliverance.

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17 See Anyokwu, Bamiro, Osei-Nyame, and Uhummwangho for discussions of gender and masculinity in the novel.
In this section, both the novel and the poem also seek to regard the capabilities of language and issues of cross-cultural translation. Once the speaker in “The Second Coming” arrives, in his mind, at this particular hope for salvation amidst the destruction depicted in the first stanza, he instantly receives a vision that specifically imagines the beast that is coming in place of Christ. Two points should be emphasized about the attainment of this vision. First, that the speaker is granted a vision from Spiritus Mundi, or the spirit of the world, implies that whatever fate awaits is universal, and common to all humanity. Second is that the speaker is granted the vision almost simultaneously with his actual articulation of the Second Coming: “Hardly are those words out / When a vast image….” In this way, Yeats emphasizes both the connection and disconnection between language and actuality. The speaker’s utterance does appear to bring on the vision, but because the poem is preoccupied with the literalization of that which exists but cannot be fully summed up in language, we might be more correct to read the manner of the image’s arrival as Yeats’s assertion that the realization itself, not its utterance, is the force that brings the vision. Either way, the poem is engaging with the efficacy of linguistic codes and cultural insight, and thereby emphasizes, even before we “see” the image of the beast that encompasses an idea that can’t be fully explained, the distinction between thought and articulation, and the latter’s inability to contain all dimensions in the former.

Achebe takes up Yeats’s language question and, characteristic of his relationship to the poem, works them out; he localizes and applies Yeats’s ideas and the reader gets to watch, specifically, how they play out in this context. And in both texts, we must remember that we are talking specifically about the English language; both authors are telling their stories in the same language, a language imposed on their cultures by
colonialism. Though Yeats in the 1890s was passionate about the reclamation of the Irish language, this zeal would taper off, probably because Yeats himself never mastered the language and knew that, in order to have the literary career he wanted, he would have to write in English. Achebe makes the same choice. Much of Achebe’s narrative, then, is necessarily concerned with asserting that English can encompass an African story; indeed, Achebe asserted as much directly in “English and the African Writer” in 1965: “[the African writer] should aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience” (347). Therefore, again, we are offered as readers numerous portraits of cultural practices and African proverbs throughout the novel’s first few sections. And, indeed, Yeats spent much of his own early career trying document folk sayings and practices in Ireland. For Achebe, the primary rhetorical effect, at least early on, is not to just to teach the reader about Africans, though this is certainly a result, but to assert the many similarities between European and African society. We regard courting rituals and wedding customs, official judicial proceedings, festivals, sporting events, and agrarian procedures that are not unlike their Western counterparts; indeed there are numerous similarities. Mercedes Mackay writes, “Altogether the African villagers appear as happy, self-contained people, who like most men, blame or praise the Gods for their sorrows and pleasures” (243). That the reader learns about African culture is a result, but the fact that Achebe’s readers are overwhelmingly Westerners, and that Achebe knows this, tells us that readers will inevitably approach the text from a mindset that seeks similarities – bridges between the cultural divides that literature up to this point both constructed and enforced – first and foremost. And we can only make sense of these events within our given context. As we have seen, Yeats is that first intentional bridge,
and having been urged to find equivalencies from without and within, the reader will continue to seek parallels between what’s on the page and what she “knows.”

For example, the tenth chapter details a trial in the Igbo justice system that does little if anything to advance the primary storylines. If we approach our reading from the viewpoint of Achebe’s early readers, with the epistemological motivation that makes sense of the incident through immediate comparison, there is actually little difference between Igbo and Western practices; indeed, it is important that Achebe emphasize this early on so we approach the eventual destruction with a more personal connection. When we regard these practices, we aren’t stuck as much by what we learn, but by just how alike our own practices are. Achebe constructs the scene with an emphasis on those elements that are most similar to our own. The trial we view involves a man who beat his wife and wishes to make amends after she has left him. The trial is decided by the Egwugwu, village elders who dress like ancestral spirits. Their authority is asserted by several factors. Firstly, they have titles; they have passed societal strictures designating authority and wisdom. Of course, judges in Western judicial systems are not “ancestral spirits,” but they have attained their own titles in the guise of educational degrees and legal experience. Secondly, their unique dress indicates the ceremony of the event and awes the onlookers; Western judges may don different attire, but their wigs and robes asserts the same ritualistic authority. Thirdly, their authority is asserted by those who seek it through a formal, respectful language; our “your honor” is echoed in their “our father” (90). Lastly, they are men, who in Igbo culture possess ultimate authority. This particular element may seem less analogous to contemporary audiences, but women did not even begin to be admitted into law schools in the U.S. until the late nineteenth
century, and female judges in England didn’t appear until well into the twentieth century. So, at the time the story takes place, there is little difference between constructed male authority in our respective approaches to transacting justice.

The novel also emphasizes similarity rather than difference early on in the way it treats those cultural practices that a Western audience might have more trouble relating to. In an early review of the novel for *African Affairs*, Mackay notes, “There is horror in some of the ritual and the superstition, but somehow they are less fearful when simply and naturally described by a writer” (243). Indeed, it is this narrative simplicity that enables Achebe’s audience to digest a few of the book’s episodes with more ease; details that could disturb a Western reader and/or reinforce a “savage” image of Africa are generally passed over rather quickly, especially in the first section where Achebe is trying to reinforce cross-cultural correlation. For example, early in the novel, when we find out that Okonkwo is “a man of action, a man of war,” we are told that he was the first to bring back a human head from the latest war, that it was his fifth, and that he often drank palm wine from his first head. Yet after these few sentences, this is not mentioned again; though Okonkwo drinks palm wine numerous times throughout the rest of the novel, the human head is not mentioned. Or when Okonkwo finally kills Ikemefuna, Achebe deliberately shifts his narrative technique; the chapter up to that point is largely constructed around a series of small details like Ikemefuna’s song, but once the final action happens, the audience is simply told the act and its reason in a vague fashion: “Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (61).
While Achebe does not, and indeed cannot, leave these details out if he wants to legitimately introduce his western audience to a “real” African culture, he clearly spends less time on those particulars that, if embellished, could emphasize difference over similarity. That is not to say, however, that Achebe doesn’t ever emphasize difference. But the differences that he does focus on, rather than pass over, are those that we might admire. For example, after the verdict is rendered in the trial scene, several village elders discuss the case; one questions why the matter had to be settled by the Egwugwu, to which another replies that the plaintiff is the kind of man who will not listen to anyone else. So we see that in Igbo society people are known to one another, and judgments are made not only with those cross-cultural signs of authority regarded above, but, additionally, with the aid of a communal knowledge that is only possible in a small collective. Stock notes, “The village is held together by a network of relationships, with a common recognition, much stronger than in modern European civilization, that the community is greater than the individual and is the source and means of his self-fulfilment [sic]” (107). Though Achebe moves on to demonstrate the destructive undercurrents in this society, particularly those embodied by Okonkwo’s struggle with masculinity and tradition, he emphasizes the advantages of Umuofia’s insularity first, giving the reader the potential to admire the Igbo in ways that might counterbalance the more unsavory details that are quickly indicated and left behind.

Though Achebe has taken up some of Yeats’s questions concerning linguistic and cultural translation in the second stanza of “The Second Coming,” he, like Yeats, is unable to leave his own notion uncomplicated. As we have seen, it is imperative to his overall project that he conceals the question concerning the efficacy of language broadly,
and English specifically, early on until the reader is familiar and comfortable with Igbo culture. But once the connection between the reader and this unfamiliar climate is established, Achebe can more freely complicate the language question. Indeed language doesn’t really become an overt issue in the novel until the end of the second section. Therefore, we will return to “The Second Coming” before we look further into how Achebe plays out Yeats’s linguistic questions.

After the speaker finds his means of salvation in the idea and articulation of the Second Coming, his image arrives from an unexpected source; we would think that his Judeo-Christian context would compel a vision from Spiritus Sanctus, or the Holy Spirit, not the Spirit of the World. But the speaker does not receive guidance/answers from the Spiritus Sanctus, who is apparently no use because it cannot detect that which is growing in the desert, or is simply absent. Therefore, when we encounter the image, we do so already with ambivalence, for the Second Coming may not have the same spiritual resonance with which Western culture has regarded it. This disconnection is underscored by the image itself. The ambiguous identity of this “rough beast” changes the tone of the second section for the third time; the speaker has moved from hope to ambivalence to a general sense of doom. Taking the image at face value, we confront a “shape” surrounded by death. It comes out of the desert, a location marking both death and an ancient history. The only other signs of life are the “indignant desert birds,” which, we can assume, “reel” in anticipation of the carrion that will be left in the beast’s wake. And it is on its way; “its slow thighs” are creeping towards its destination. That the beast is a sphinx tells us a few things. First is that it approaches in the guise of something familiar. Those who face it will see “the head of a man” before they will see the “lion body,” so
though its arrival may be imminent, its actual power may not initially be obvious. Secondly, because a sphinx and not Christ is the actual manifestation of the Second Coming, the juxtaposition of these different religious systems generates substantial tension. The sense of doom here comes in large part from the melding of Christian vocabulary and pagan iconography; these spiritual systems, considered to be in complete opposition to each other, are forced to confront each other. The second manifestation of Christ no longer offers some simplistically benevolent salvation to those who believe in him; rather, all face the judgment and damnation of the unrighteous.

Where the first act of “The Second Coming” introduced us to its major themes and our narrator, the second leaves us with a major, unresolved problem. This problem, broadly summarized, is an unexpected, virile, disguised, and ultimately unknowable force of destruction. Achebe’s rough beast similarly emerges and seems poised to destroy by the end of Part Two. Though the Christian missionaries are the obvious parallel of Yeats’s beast, they are not its sole embodiment; Achebe imbues characteristics of the beast into both sides of the apparent divide. The first we actually hear about the white men comes a few chapters into the second section of Things. Initially, they are only known to Okonkwo through hearsay; Okonkwo’s friend Obierika visits to give him the cowries received from his yams. It seems a certain village “has been wiped out”; a white man appeared on an iron horse and was killed. Soon more white men came and destroyed the village (138). Achebe returns to Yeats’s language question here, for we see that the major conflict between the white men and the Igbo is their inability to communicate; the man tried to say something before he was killed, but it was unintelligible to them: “He seemed to speak through his nose” (139). Though the
population of white men continues to grow over the course of Okonkwo’s exile, and communication, to some extent, does become possible, there are clearly cultural and linguistic divides that cannot be overcome.

The Igbo themselves are closely aligned with Yeats’s speaker and the human population under threat; indeed, again we see that Achebe is inserting the African experience into Yeats’s overarching (though limited) conception of humanity. Yeats paints a portrait of a humanity that cannot comprehend the beast they are up against. This disconnection with history, or the inability to grasp the signs of the time, are asserted multiple times by elders in the Igbo villages. Yeats’s second section ends with the speaker’s puzzling image of that which will replace the contemporary human order. The second section of Things also ends with an assertion of historical disconnection.

Okonkwo will soon return to his village after his seven-year exile and throws a considerable feast for his mother’s people before his departure. One of the oldest men offers his thanks and a warning:

It is good in these days when the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things in the grand old way…. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. You may ask why I am saying all this. I say it because I fear for the younger generation, for you people…. because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his
fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan. (166-67)

So the crumbling of the clan’s solidarity isn’t solely the byproduct of the missionaries, but also a generational disconnection; the missionaries are not the sole embodiment of Yeats’s “rough beast,” though they may possess many of its traits. Such binaries are not so simple for either Yeats – whose speaker cannot even grasp exactly what awaits humanity besides imagining its image – or Achebe. The participants in “The Second Coming” and Things are subject to forces that they do not have the capabilities to understand. Achebe’s extension of this notion is necessarily more complicated because of the novel’s scope, but fundamentally the same. Achebe is advancing Yeats’s deconstruction of designations like “best” and “worst,” which, we will come to see in the third section, are useless in the context of colonialism and the disintegration of tradition and culture.

In this regard, the missionaries are the obvious scapegoat for the cultural destruction of Umuofia because the indoctrination underlining their “mission” brings more with it than Christian theology. Stock asserts, “behind the church was a force they only dimly knew about – the white government, incomprehensible, uncomprehending, invincible” (109). The Igbo cannot accept one part of the missionaries’ offerings – religion, medicine, language/education, trade, economic order – without accepting them all, which will modify and consequently destroy their culture. The novel, then, is certainly critical of this indoctrination and appropriately portrays its destructive nature, but it also does not overtly romanticize all aspects of Igbo life either; Achebe also shows that “things” are already falling apart, to some extent, within the tribe as well. Brown
writes, “The impending disintegration of the old ways is attributable to an egocentric strain in African heroism as well as to the European’s exclusivism” (30). Okonkwo possesses a rigidity that prohibits any growth and stifles many of his natural impulses, like the display of affection or mercy. We have already noted his fierce struggle with masculinity, but we should also emphasize that the ferocity behind his conviction is directly proportional to his father’s “lack of conviction.” Here, we begin to see that his behavior is the product of a cyclical current.

Act Three: The Beast

“The Second Coming,” at its core, is an embodiment of Yeats’s view of a cyclical history; the third section finally makes this clear. After offering the image of the beast, “darkness drops” on the speaker again and something has changed; whereas before, the reader and the speaker alike are faced with uncertainty, the speaker has finally come to “know” something: “That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle.” Yeats, who believed, at least at that time, that human history could be marked by twenty-century intervals suggests that the dominance of Judeo-Christian belief is at an end, just as the birth of Christ signaled the end of Greco-Roman dominance on social order. Moreover, there is something natural about these cycles. The “rocking cradle” asserts the impending nature of this regime change and that, despite its potential malevolence, the beast within is conscious, alive, and nurtured. Though the cycles within Things are destructive, they are also depicted as natural by its author. Achebe, resuming Yeats’s notion, and narrowing its scope, applies it specifically to those changes that occur generationally. As I noted earlier, Okonkwo’s primary motivation is to not be his father.
To this end, he works to become the strongest man in Umuofia, just as his father was one of the “weakest.” Okonkwo goes to extreme lengths to craft his identity. Recognition of this one antithesis does not necessarily assert a pattern, but Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, becomes a pivotal character and makes the cycle more visible.

Nwoye, like Okonkwo, constructs an identity that is specifically opposed to his father’s. When we first hear of him, Achebe wisely offers his introduction in a way that emphasizes how Nwoye’s identity is specifically encircled by Okonkwo’s rigid severity: “Okonkwo’s first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth” (13-14). Okonkwo is not wise enough to recognize that his own motivations exist as antitheses to what he perceives as his father’s laziness. But we as readers, especially with Yeats as our guide into this text, realize the ultimate efficacy of Okonkwo’s tactic. Indeed, we see that Nwoye possesses many of his grandfather’s traits, specifically his gentle nature and his love of storytelling. Though Achebe never reveals it in this narrative, it would come as no surprise if Okonkwo has more in common with his grandfather than his own father, just as Nwoye resembles Unoka.

The rift between Okonkwo and his Nwoye is ultimately fortified when Ikemefuna is killed. Indeed, the friendship and brotherhood between Nwoye and Ikemefuna may also be a byproduct of sharing Okonkwo’s mistreatment. Early on, Okonkwo berates them for their preparation of yams. It is a seminal moment in the text, for Achebe gives us insight into Okonkwo’s intentions and not just his actions: “Yam stood for manliness,
and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great
man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man” (33). But
Okonkwo constructs his identity through outward expression only, and these insights into
his relevant if misguided intentions are always supplied by the narrator, not Okonkwo
himself, for any semblance of tenderness is immediately squashed. This, in fact, is the
primary motivator for Okonkwo to cut down the boy who had become his surrogate son
(he calls Okonkwo “my father” in his final words) and a brother to Nwoye: “He was
afraid of being thought weak” (61). Nwoye and Ikemefuna, then, are naturally drawn
inward and to each other to explore and relieve their anxieties:

[Ikemefuna] still thought about his mother and his three-year-old sister,
and he had moments of sadness and depression. But he and Nwoye had
become so deeply attached to each other that such moments became less
frequent and less poignant. Ikemefuna had an endless stock of folk
tales…. Nwoye remembered this period very vividly till the end of his life.

(35)

If Okonkwo fundamentally embodies a violently masculine tradition, it is this that is
responsible for Ikemefuna’s death, and, therefore, Nwoye, who was already at odds with
his father’s values, must reject him utterly. Stock asserts:

Only his son Nwoye could not forgive the deed; he had loved Ikemefuna,
and was the kind of youth to whom personal feeling meant more than
public spirit, which was one reason that he was a nonentity in Umuofia.

Such an outrage must have clarified the issue, making him see where he
stood in relation to the ideals of his society and prepared him for articulate revolt when the time came. (108)

But for most of the narrative, Nwoye has no viable means for revolt. Within Umuofia there is little that can offer Nwoye any agency.

Once the missionaries arrive, Nwoye is finally granted a pathway towards rebellion. And it should come as no surprise that he is so vulnerable to their methods: “It is always the failures and misfits who are the first converts, and others like him found in Christianity the strength that springs from the clear statement of their rejected values” (Stock 109). Brown explains further:

Nwoye is repelled by his father’s equation of masculinity with violence and bloodshed. But he displays his own kind of courage when he elects to join the strange religion of the white Christians, for his conversion is partly in response to the shortcomings of his own society…. Okonkwo’s egocentric failure to recognize or respect the humanity of Ikemefuna and Nwoye, is symptomatic of those weaknesses which have made his society vulnerable to the promises of Christianity. The problems of human perception which are dramatized by the colonial functions of language have been repeated, on an internal level, within African society itself. (31)

Like his father, Nowye goes to the furthest possible extreme in order to distance himself from his father’s “virtues,” or lack thereof. Clearly, this colonial encounter has obscured all sense of “virtue”; “best” and “worst” still exist as polarities, but their meanings have been openly reduced to utter subjectivity and consequent indeterminacy.
Near the end of Part Two in *Things*, Achebe, like Yeats, gave a face to the impending threat of cyclical change: Nwoye. While Okonkwo is still in exile, Obierika reports that Nwoye has joined the missionaries. When Obierika confronts Nwoye and asks him about his father, he replies, “I am one of them…. He is not my father” (144). The missionaries soon arrive in Mbanta, and Okonkwo experiences their evangelism through a translator face to face. When they try to explain the concept of a Holy Trinity, Okonkwo is dumbfounded, fundamentally unable to comprehend such a notion: “Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad” (147). Yet, it is this very absence of cultural logic that so captivates Nwoye:

> It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymns about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye’s callow mind was greatly puzzled. (147)

Despite his confusion, the missionaries offer Nwoye the capability of rebellion, for surely he cannot fight his father and succeed on any other front, but they also cater to his confusion and dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between his inward and outward guidance. And this is enough to evoke a fundamental change. When Okonkwo finally confronts Nowye and beats him, Nowye does not say a word; Okonkwo is dead to him.
Though he “[does] not fully understand, he [is] happy to leave his father” (152).

Whereas Okonkwo “glorified in trampling on his private feelings in the name of public virtue,” Nwoye glorifies in the exact opposite (Stock 108). Achebe’s emphasis on Nwoye’s inability to actually comprehend the ideology with which he aligns himself underscores that his acceptance is reactionary, having more to do with rebellion against his father than any meaningful consideration of its doctrine; the full identity of this “rough beast” is still indeterminate.

Though Okonkwo does not recognize that Nwoye’s abandonment of Okonkwo’s values mirrors his own rejection of Unoka’s, Okonkwo soon comes to “know,” just as Yeats’s speaker did, than an inevitably cyclical divide is responsible for his disconnection with his son:

His son’s crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowing around their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days. (153)

Both Okonkwo and Yeats’s speaker face the anxiety of annihilation, and Okonkwo, like the speaker of “the Second Coming,” seeks some answer that can explain this impending change and his own sense of doom: “Okonkwo was popularly called the ‘Roaring Flame.’ As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How then
could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? Perhaps he was
not his son. No! he could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teacher her!”
But, such an excuse is ultimately unsatisfactory. Like Yeats’s speaker, Okonkwo realizes
that the only legitimate explanation extends from a cyclical understanding of history:

Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo’s father.

He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a
flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son?... He
sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighted.
And immediately Okonkwo’s eyes were opened and he saw the whole
matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. (153)

We must remember that Yeats’s speaker doesn’t initially recognize the cyclical nature of
this change; the Second Coming seems to offer him deliverance. Okonkwo’s response
mirrors that of Yeats’s speaker through most of the novel, and into the final section.
Nevertheless, Yeats’s speaker seems to accept the coming change as inevitable – he
“know[s]” of its approach – after receiving his vision. But Okonkwo will not accept this
cyclical transformation, and the sense of doom in the novel is intensified because it
comes from within and without the Igbo: the missionaries are forever changing Igbo
culture, but they are also an outlet for those, like Nwoye, whose needs were failed by
their own culture.

Because this generational divide develops and is the development of proportionate
responses, Okonkwo rejection of the Christian missionaries is only intensified by his
son’s acceptance of them: “Now he is no longer my son or your brother,” he tells his five
other sons, warning them, by threat of death, not to become a “woman” like Nwoye
Conversely, Nwoye’s zealousness is made more fanatical by Okonkwo’s disownment. He even goes so far as to accept a new name: Isaac. Achebe again shows himself to be very conscious of his reader’s Western, Christian vocabulary, for surely the reader, armed with the same Christianized vocabulary as Yeats’s speaker, will remember the Biblical story in which Abraham is instructed by God to kill his son, Isaac, only to be released from this request when he is poised to deal the fatal blow. After taking on his new identity, Nwoye seems no longer to exist; Mr. Brown, the chief English missionary, soon sends Isaac off to a training college for teachers in Umuru.

I have noted how the speaker in “The Second Coming” comes to “know” that there are inevitable cyclical changes and that humanity is on the verge of this transition. But the last few lines move from the assertion of what is known to emphasize the unknown: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” The speaker may understand that change moves in cycles and is impending, but the exact meaning or nature of that change is unknown and, perhaps, unknowable, for he only has the ability to interpret the image of the beast to a point since it exists outside of his historical understanding and vocabulary. With the speaker as its representative, humankind is blind, and the speaker must ask what rough beast is on its way, because he does not know, and perhaps cannot know, for he no longer understands these antiquated symbols. Even the poet, celebrated for his interpretive abilities, cannot explain the meaning of history, but merely realizes that all around him is about to change and, indeed, is changing. Moreover, words like “rough,” “beast,” and “slouches,” emit an ominous tone, which means this transformation is unsettling at best, and dangerous at worst; the nature of the change may be uncertain, but the speaker is worried.
"Things Fall Apart" takes the same turn in its final section. We have seen that Okonkwo also comprehends what is happening with Nwoye (who, for Okonkwo, embodies the change that is Christians’ mission) as a cyclical change, though he is less inclined to resign himself to this truth than Yeats’s speaker is. And, like Yeats’s speaker who must end his poem with a question, Okonkwo has seen the “rough beast” in the form of the white missionaries and Nwoye’s indoctrination, but as we near the end of the novel, he is increasingly unable to comprehend what, exactly, is happening or going to happen; “I cannot understand these things,” he says to Obierika (175). Achebe includes several translational issues that create clashes between the two cultures, but these usually simply result in cultural jokes about pronunciation; Achebe doesn’t really emphasize them, wisely perhaps, since our acceptance of the novel is dependent, to some extent, on our consent to the efficacy of translation. He is more critical of cultural disintegration, and he embodies these anxieties in Okonkwo who feels utterly detached from the changes taking place in his community. “Umuofia, whose unity was its life” becomes increasingly foreign to him (Stock 109).

Here it becomes clear that Achebe is again tooling with Yeats’s schema. While Yeats utilized the framework of Christianity without making any real, direct critique of Christianity, Achebe suggests that Christianity (or at least its missionaries who are bent on spreading its gospel) is a problematic enterprise in and of itself. Christianity could offer redemption in “The Second Coming” because the second coming could be Christ’s, but no such salvation is available in "Things." And, though the converted may notionally be offered this salvation, as we have seen, they are attracted to Christianity by the poetry of the religion, its newness, and the acceptance it offers social outcasts; they do not grasp
that which they accept. Conceptions of “the best” and “the worst” have been shown to be entirely individual and impressionable, and neither does Okonkwo understand what is in his midst. Just as Yeats’s speaker cannot grasp what the beast brings along with it, Okonkwo has no conception of what the Christians bring with them. What sets Okonkwo apart from many of his clansmen, however, is that he “knows” this change is destructive. But Okonkwo cannot grasp the true nature of this beast because he doesn’t possess the cultural understanding to perceive the implications of the threat. The Christians subvert Igbo customs, outlawing cultural practices and instituting their own laws. After hearing about an unjust decision by “the white man’s court” concerning a land dispute, Okonkwo asks his friend if the white men understand their customs. Obierika replies:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says our customs are bad…. The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (176)

This key passage emphasizes several things. Firstly, we encounter Yeats’s terminology for the first time since reading the title and the epigraph. That it exists in conversation is fundamental to uncovering how Achebe utilizes Yeats. We have seen him localize and apply Yeats’s words and ideas, but now we specifically see his African characters employ Yeatsian phraseology in an ostensible translation of their own language. Instead of simply telling his readers, as he did in his later essays, here Achebe shows his readers that not only can English encompass the African experience, but so can English literary
vocabulary; again we see Achebe *inserting* the African experience into the Western literary canon. Moreover, Achebe clearly demonstrates than an African writer can comprehend and wield these expressions as well as anyone.

As if to ensure that his readers won’t overlook this vital gesture, Achebe emphasizes the point just a few pages later: “[Okonkwo] mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart” (183). It’s a curious and loose reiteration, but profoundly illuminating. The original Yeatsian utterance came from Obierika, while this thought belongs to Okonkwo. Here we see that Okonkwo has taken on another person’s linguistic explanation of a phenomenon apparently because the terminology best explains what is happening. We might then apply this to our understanding of Achebe’s relationship to Yeats. Though there are numerous facets to this affiliation, as we’ve observed, here we see Achebe comment indirectly upon his utilization of Yeats’s words: “things fall apart,” despite its vagueness and *because* of its vagueness is the most approximate English summation of what is happening in the village of Umuofia, just as it was the best way for Yeats to express his own apprehensions.

The above passages also demonstrate the burgeoning awareness on part of Okonkwo and others that this beast is far more intelligent in its tactical approach to transforming culture than they once thought. Mr. Brown, though he is seemingly more benign than his successor Mr. Smith, is just as intent on carrying out his mission though the most efficient methods. Indeed, he is able to ingratiate himself successfully because “he trod softly on his faith” (178). But after having a pivotal conversation with Akunna, one of the village’s great men, he reevaluates his approach. The discussion is focused on their separate theologies, but Akunna’s explanations of Chukwu are enveloped in a
precise cultural logic; even the numerous converts don’t really comprehend their new religion, as we’ve seen with Nwoye, but accept it because it meets specific needs prohibited by their own culture. This is the moment Mr. Brown begins to comprehend the most efficient means by which he can assimilate the Igbo:

He came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia…. He said that leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learned to read and write. If Umuofia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them…. Mr. Brown’s arguments began to have an effect. More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts. (181)

Mr. Brown cunningly exploits the fear of future servitude to enable immediate servitude. He amazes them with medicine and the prospect of leadership, but as we’ve seen, they cannot accept just one piece of a collective assimilation. Accepting education necessitates the acceptance of religion, economic, and judicial orders that are inseparable from one another.

Even when those Igbo who were able to avoid assimilation finally decide to rebel, the colonists crush the insurgency before it can really take shape. After one of the converts un masks an Egwugwu, the Egwugwu confront Mr. Smith and offer some surprisingly tolerant terms: “You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you” (190). They proceed to burn down the
church, but no one is harmed. And, Okonkwo experiences a brief period of happiness, because “it was like the good old days again” (192). But in a manner that contrasts the Igbo’s leniency, the District Commissioner deceives the Igbo into incarceration and humiliates them by forcibly shaving their heads and whipping them. Okonkwo is “choked with hate,” though surely his malice isn’t simply a response to his treatment, but also stems from a growing confusion because he does not have the capability to comprehend his captors; their cultural logic is not his, and he cannot effectively fight a beast whose actions he cannot anticipate nor grasp (195). We, as readers, do comprehend Okonkwo’s inability. When he considers “his own revenge” against the District Commissioner and his men, Okonkwo remembers a recent war with the neighboring village Isike (200). He views their victory as an indisputable triumph: “we slaughtered them in that war.” But then we find out the measure of this victory: “We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace.” If the reader didn’t already sense the doom awaiting Okonkwo, she certainly will now. Achebe skillfully evokes a sudden rush of hopelessness in his reader, one not dissimilar from that which comes over Yeats’s speaker. He has applied Yeats’s philosophies to a geographically limited African community; the fate that awaits the whole world in “The Second Coming” is localized, and Okonkwo’s conception of his “world,” and the limitations of his conceptions, are fully revealed here. A war that, according to him, ended in a “slaughter,” claimed a total of fourteen lives in four months. Umuofia’s British colonizers certainly wouldn’t consider a skirmish with so few casualties a “war,” let alone a “slaughter.” Clearly, and profoundly, Okonkwo has absolutely no conception of the violent proclivities his
colonizers possess, and their capability, historically, to “slaughter” in numbers that he cannot fathom.

Like Yeats’s speaker, Okonkwo only comes to fully recognize his fundamental incapability at the end of his story. Brown writes, “Okonkwo’s death projects the tragedy as an apocalypse: the old Africa with all its beauty and power is crumbling under the simultaneous pressures of white imperialism from without, and self-destructive forces from within” (28). Like the falcon, Okonkwo can no longer hear any guiding mechanisms; he is losing his sense of inward identity and outward structures of control. This, however, is where the parallels in the reactions of Yeats’s speaker and Okonkwo to pending historical change ends.

We have seen Yeats’s speaker descend into some kind of despair and grow to recognize his inability to grasp the apocalypse at hand. But he ends his articulations on a question, which may indicate that he is left with something he will continue to ponder; though he remains convinced of the impending change, he is uncertain of how/what will play out. Though both the speaker and Okonkwo are seemingly rendered impotent in the shadow of this beast, Okonkwo cannot terminate his own narrative with a question, but must do so with an action, because he is not granted the apparently advantaged and removed perspective of Yeats’s speaker. Yeats’s speaker regards the beast from afar in a vision, but Okonkwo is forced to continually confront it face-to-face, and his own powerlessness by extension. Indeed, he finally strikes out because of his impotence, which he may partially recognize, but has also been imposed upon him through force and humiliation. Therefore, when he finally asserts his power by cutting down a messenger with his machete, he does so for a few reasons. Most obviously, he aims to coerce a
rebellion among his people that might “root out this evil” (204). But, more importantly, he is striking out against the imposed powerlessness by cycling back to his masculine, violent strength, a fundamental element to his own identity and his conception of Umuofia’s cultural identity. But what happens after the killing stops his project short; none of his clansmen take up his call, but let the other messengers escape, and some can’t even understand his action: “Why did he do it?” they ask each other (205). In an instant, Okonkwo is utterly emptied of any hope or power, and soon after is found dead, having committed suicide by hanging.

We leave behind both Okonwko and Yeats’s narrator on a note of uncertainty. Okonkwo’s response to the situation deviates from Yeats’s speaker’s, but they are both ultimately left powerless at the end of their respective stories, even if Okonkwo does take one last individual action. He chooses, for better or worse, not to wait and watch Umuofia continue to crumble around him, and not to wait for an alien power to exact its own indecipherable brand of justice on him for the killing of the messenger. In many ways, suicide seems a sensible choice given the impending doom that Yeats constructs in “The Second Coming,” for all, it seems, will come to suffering. Critics tend to read Okonkwo’s suicide as the manifestation of complete despair; “cultural and personal disintegration had reached intolerable levels,” writes Merriam (65). But for Okonkwo, suicide also allows him one final sense of control in an environment he could not control because he could not even comprehend what was happening to his people; he chooses certainty over uncertainty and, perhaps for that reason, remains a heroic, if tragic, figure. On the other hand, Yeats’s narrator, we presume, will continue to wait for what he “knows” is coming. At the end of Okonkwo’s story we see that Achebe has once again
applied “The Second Coming” to a specific place and time; both men faced the prospect of annihilation, but Yeats’s narrator will continue to experience the chaos from his advantaged vantage through vision and consideration, for he is lucky enough to do so, while on another continent a man confronted the “rough beast” head on. Both worlds may be on the brink of some radical change, and for the speaker, Christianity’s dominance may be coming to a close, but for Okonkwo, it had just begun.

**Things To Come**

As the novel concludes, it becomes clearer how exactly Achebe is making use of Yeats’s schemes by not only extending them, but also modifying them. This is perhaps most apparent in how both authors comment on Christianity’s influence on Western conceptions of history. Both have inverted the Judeo-Christian symbol of the Second Coming to demonstrate that Western (and Christian-dominated) linguistic and cultural codes cannot fully comprehend that which exists outside of its vocabulary. But it would be a mistake to view the poem or the novel as a pointed attack against Christianity. Yeats and Achebe are also both notably ambivalent about this coming change; neither “The Second Coming” nor *Things Fall Apart* easily regard these historical forces as altogether malevolent even if they are destructive and bring with them much suffering and unhappiness. Concerning the perspective of African novelists like Achebe, Cook notes, “writers are not so naïve as to argue that the old system was without its faults; some are clearly critical of aspects of it. They do argue, however, that it represented a way of life that was not as destructive as the chaos which has followed its collapse” (54). Both Yeats and Achebe, despite their uncertainty, do indeed seem to portray that which will
change as less harmful than that which will replace it. Regardless of the varying directions and manifestations of his interest, Yeats was affected by the Marxist-Leninist overthrow of Czar Nicholas in Russia and the rise of Fascism in Europe. “The Second Coming,” then, can be read as an articulation of his fear that totalitarianism will replace the Judeo-Christian forces that, when viewed in this way, were more benevolent than that which could succeed it. If this is the case, the “rough beast” is an authoritarian political body whose destructive tendencies evolve from its willingness to disregard an individual’s freedom in favor of political and religious ideology. And supporters of such movements look to their leaders and chroniclers for the same type of salvation/explanation Christians looked to the Second Coming of Christ. Achebe emphasizes this point in the novel’s final paragraphs, where the District Commissioner considers Okonkwo’s inclusion in his account:

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much though: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* (208-09)

The District Commissioner lacks the simple capacity to recognize the validity of Okonkwo’s story. Achebe, more than Yeats who attempted to encompass all peoples in his vision, focuses on the individual and inserts Okonkwo’s story into Western literary accounts, writing not just a “a reasonable paragraph” but an entire novel. Perhaps Yeats
could only have mustered that paragraph, or a few stanzas because of where he was situated in place and time, but Achebe could do something more. Brown writes, “Achebe’s historical novel has used this same [anthropological] machinery to present the ‘primitive’ as a complex human being who reflects, and is a part of, Africa’s history” (28). Yet Brown is missing part of Achebe’s point here: this complex human being is part of world history.

One fundamental directive of both texts is the same; that which has sustained, at least to some degree, culture for centuries, is coming to an end. But Achebe takes up these Yeatsian themes and structures with one fundamental exception: his rough beast is not going to destroy Christianity’s dominance, but comes in the guise of Western Christianity. This is an enormously complex gesture. He utilizes the common Judeo-Christian symbol, the Second Coming, but modifies its perceived benevolence and depicts it as something unknowable, threatening, and at-odds with human existence in the form of Umuofia. Achebe takes up Yeats’s depiction of the end of Christian dominance, but modifies the perpetrator, not the effect, by demonstrating the coming of Christianity to the Igbo. The most basic interpretation of this gesture is that Achebe is condemning the British colonial project. This is most certainly true, but that is not his only point. Yeats’s canonical poem was concerned with no less than the fate of the “world,” but his privileged Western perspective lent little regard to the likes of Africa. Achebe, then, inserting his people’s literary voice into the canon, also inserts their narrative into the Western conception of history. And Yeats aids him in this endeavor. In “English and the African Writer,” Achebe writes, “A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering” (348). Both Yeats’s status, and his poem “The
Second Coming,” infused Achebe’s offering with a kind of vitality that not only enriched the novel, but offered African literature legitimacy when it most needed it.

Concerning the English language and African writers, Achebe states, “If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue for sighing” (“English” 344). Indeed, “Yeats” could be substituted for “it” in this assertion, just as he could be for much of Achebe’s thoughts concerning the English language; Yeats, like English, is a mechanism that can be wielded to reach an international audience while simultaneously being reformed into something that can still be uniquely African. In many ways, *Things Fall Apart* is a criticism of Yeats and, more specifically, Western conceptions of history and literature that have all but disregarded everyone else. *Things Fall Apart* takes place only thirty or so years before Yeats wrote his poem, and by 1920 the British were only more firmly entrenched in Africa. Achebe wisely complicates the assumption that the historical cycle in which Judeo-Christian belief was the guiding social force is coming to a close; for the Igbo, it has only just begun. Though “The Second Coming” is often included in editions of *Things Fall Apart* as a supplement – as a secondary site that can illuminate the primary subject – *Things Fall Apart* is also a supplement to “The Second Coming.” Westerners may be awaiting forces of subjugation at best and ultimate destruction at worst, but Achebe wants to remind us: *so are Africans* and *so have Africans*. And though these forces came/come in the guise and language of Christianity, culpability rests with the politics that disregard individual freedom; Yeats’s poem cannot encompass all humanity because all humanity cannot be summated, and Achebe demonstrates this by moving Yeatsian philosophy from the universal to the individual. Both works attempt to demonstrate how historical processes affect humankind, but
Achebe localizes “The Second Coming” and goes to great lengths to literalize its application by decoding Yeats’s largely intangible recipe. *Things Fall Apart* actualizes “The Second Coming”; in this way, Achebe not only translates Igbo language/experience/culture into English, but also translates Yeats’s historical formula by concretizing its experience in the unlikeliest of places.

By invoking Yeats in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe prolonged the existence of both his own novel and Yeats’s poem, as each work will be forever connected to its counterpart. In 1995, Lisa Iyer wrote an article entitled “Africa as a Second Class Citizen: When Will Things Finally Fall Apart” that was concerned with attitudes towards Africa that were/are embedded in the American educational system. Iyer never refers to Yeats or Achebe by name in her study. Yet, it is clear that in her title she is referencing Achebe, not Yeats. Of course, by extension, Yeats is also a factor in Iyer’s appropriation, but when we read the title and the article, we are not meant to recall Yeats, we are meant to recall Achebe. Though time will tell if Achebe will or ever could fully assume this mantle of ownership, one of Yeats’s seminal lines in one of his most seminal poems – made seminal in part by Achebe – no longer belongs to solely to Yeats; he now must share ownership with Achebe. If indeed Achebe wishes to modify the English language into “a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings,” one can hardly think of a more cunning and effective approach (“English” 349).
Chapter Four:

Revival Revisited: Deconstructing “Yeats” in *Charming Billy*

**Inherited Stories**

Concerning one of his many tours of the United States, Yeats observed, “the Irish race – our scattered twenty millions – is held together by songs” (qtd. in McDiarmid 163). And, as I noted in the first chapter, many of these “songs” were either constructed or documented by Yeats. In the melancholic, urban-industrial working-class environment inhabited by the majority of the American Irish in the early twentieth century, Yeats, the Irish literary celebrity, provided his subjugated “race” with legitimization, humanity, escape, and hope, all of which fueled a powerful (and also wildly profitable) nostalgia for a country that, as depicted, did not exist. We have seen that Yeats was one of many Irish writers, politicians, and businessman responsible for an idealized Ireland, a utopia of sorts to which the American Irish were particularly susceptible. Yet, the impact was great and enduring. Even as Irish American writers emerged in the wake of the acceptance of Irish literature on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, few writers challenged depictions of an idealized Ireland, even up until the later part of the twentieth century. Therefore, at the end of the twentieth century, when Alice McDermott sought to examine and deconstruct Ireland’s hold on Irish American identity, she set for herself an enormously complicated task, for this utopia had been a deeply-rooted and integral part
of Irish American identity for generations. Moreover, she would have to do so by specifically addressing the legacy of W.B. Yeats in America and determining the point at which one reads “too much” Yeats, for even a century after they were written, his words continued to powerfully impact those who took them as truth.

As we saw in the first chapter, almost a century before Alice McDermott published her novel, W.B. Yeats proved to be very popular among the American Irish on his fundraising tours in America, in no small part because of the nostalgic, sentimental representation of Ireland he espoused and the sense of belonging he offered his audiences. And rather than diminishing with time, this familial sense of Irishness, and the belief that those in America had a stake in what was happening across the ocean, only seemed to flourish as the century wore on. Distance did not keep the American Irish from participating in Irish affairs; while preparing for the Easter Rising in March of 1916, the Clan funded an Irish Race Convention in New York, from which emerged the Friends of Irish Freedom, which was quickly able to recruit over a quarter of a million members (Miller 542). A month later, emotions only escalated; Miller writes, “News of the Easter rebellion and, more crucial, of its leaders’ executions stunned and outraged Irish-America.” Unsurprisingly, Yeats’s eulogy “Easter 1916” would become one of the most popular depictions of the rebellion, perhaps because within the poem he portrays those who participated in the rebellion as both ordinary and heroic, a measure that could effectively rally both support and sentimentalism; the cause provided the means for common people to participate in something great. In the summer of 1919, Eamon de Valera visited the United States to obtain even more money from the American Irish to support the budding Irish Republic:
De Valera traveled throughout the country and spoke before enormous, enthusiastic crowds, but...de Valera became embroiled in bitter disputes...over control of FOIF policy and Irish-American donations....

De Valera cared nothing for American politics and blithely assumed all Irish-Americans should fulfill their obligations to the Irish republic without hesitation. (Miller 543)

Yet this assumption, careless it may be, largely proved to be true. By the end of the Anglo-Irish war in 1921, the American Irish had donated $5 million in relief funds and bought more than $5.5 million in Irish Republic bond certificates. De Valera, nonetheless, would express disappointment over these numbers. Clearly, there was often little real concern among those Irish who solicited funds from the American Irish for their struggles in America. Nevertheless, these numbers demonstrate that the identities of many American Irish remained firmly entrenched in hopes across the ocean, which meant that they often overlooked the immediate, tangible problems in their midst.

The timing of these fundraising tours and the burgeoning profitable marketing of Irishness as some diasporic brotherhood to the Irish in America came at the perfect time for a few reasons. First, the American Irish remained ethnically Irish in the eyes of many Americans, which only fed their passion to identify with a notion of Ireland as their homeland; they saw themselves as Irish victims abroad. Devoy and O’Donovan Rossa assert that Irish Americans, aided by their geographic disconnection, merely became wrapped up in shallow, sentimentalized depictions of Ireland for “selfish reasons”; they were offered a community and given a reason to praise Irishness at a time in which they were popularly depicted as inferior beasts (Miller 544, 646). Miller writes, “working-
class emigrants’ experiences in urban-industrial America both facilitated nationalist organization and heightened extant hatred of England and devotion of Irish independence” (550). Secondly, many of these American Irish were either first or second-generation emigrants at the apex of the Anglo-Irish conflict: “the Irish and Irish-American nationalists were lucky that the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish war occurred just before the well of Irish-American memories, duty and guilt ran dry – just before the old Irish worldview became in America nothing more than a shell of largely meaningless clichés” (Miller 555). The exact moment at which inherited memory becomes cliché, however, is difficult to detect.

By the mid 1920s, Irish emigration had tapered off. But the result was that “The golden summer of Irish-American tourism was about to begin” (Miller 555). Culturally, Irish America saw their roots in a rural culture that embraced its pre-Christian, pre-colonial mythic past, and this was only exacerbated when their homeland seemed more in reach than ever, and, moreover, Ireland, to some extent, now belonged to the Irish again. They had been singing songs for generations that “dramatized the emigrants’ own sorrow for leaving and…their unhappiness in North America” (Miller 563). Irish American literature was not exempt from similar impulses. The work of Irish American writers like Edwin O’Conner, J.F. Powers, and Elizabeth Cullinan in the early to mid twentieth century continued to evoke nostalgia for an irretrievable homeland; “they reflected a very special and, at times, biased view” writes Conners (7). In the late 60s and 70s, James T. Farrell, Betty Smith, Mary Deasy, and Roger Dooley began challenging certain stereotypes: “that Irish families in nineteenth-century America were no larger than native-born families, that family structures did not disintegrate in urban
settings, and that Irish women played important economic and familial roles, similar to those of black women, in holding families together” (Conners 7). But these were relatively minor challenges to popular conceptions of the American Irish. Conners asserts, “the fiction of the second and third generations…re-created stereotypes in a way that the immigrant press had for the first generation.”

It wasn’t until 1979 that Conners examined this phenomenon and appealed to Irish American writers for a new kind of literature:

Historians…must be chary of writers whose artistic perceptions have clouded historical realities…. It is time that Irish-American writers of fiction recognize the anachronisms in the literature, time that their literature represents ‘what was’ and ‘what is.’ That is not to say that Irish-American novelists have failed as novelists…. But it is to say that Irish-American writers have propped up tired stereotypes for too long and that they have steadfastly refused to confront the cultural issues that have shaped their fiction. (9)

The most scathing and profound of the works that took up Conners’s call would appear nearly twenty years later. In Charming Billy, Alice McDermott sought no less than to shatter the empty and destructive nostalgic impulses that plagued Irish Americans for a century. And she would do so by wisely embodying this phenomenon in W.B. Yeats, a poet whose marketed words and identity offers her title character a deceptive and detrimental dream. Much was at stake in this project; concerning challenges to the canon, Shelton writes, “Conventional assumptions are challenged and new meanings are uncovered as the moorings which keep the ‘canons’ attached to fixed positions are
loosened. But, the project of deconstructing recognized icons can also be viewed as a condition of self discovery for the postcolonial subject” (139). To deconstruct American Irishness, one must necessarily deconstruct Yeats’s hold on its collective psyche.

Fundamentally, *Charming Billy* is a novel about appropriated stories – how and why we tell the stories we tell, how and why those stories change, how and why we choose the stories we do to represent ourselves and others. This preoccupation with the mutability of story is evident even before the novel begins. Burl Ives recorded a minor hit in the fifties titled “Billy Boy,” which references a “Charming Billy,” a song he claimed had its origins in Ireland and England. When asked by an interviewer, “Did the song contribute to your novel?” McDermott replied, “Oh, definitely” (Reilly 566). Like Achebe, McDermott’s title doesn’t just name the work for the purposes of categorization or simple aesthetics; she is telling us how to approach this story and utilizing the feelings we already bring with us to the text given our knowledge of “Charming Billy.” The story is told in the voices of two men talking back and forth; the lyrics tell the story of a man named Billy hunting for a wife:

Oh, where have you been,
Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Oh, where have you been,
Charming Billy?
I have been to see a wife,
She’s the idol of my life.
She’s a young thing,
And cannot leave her mother. (Ives)
From there, the man questioning Billy asks him various questions concerning whether or not this “young thing” possess the prerequisites for marriage. Though Billy thinks she does, we find out that, though his beloved can apparently bake a cherry pie, he may be blinded by his own passion; she has bad eyesight, sings songs incorrectly, and cannot milk a cow very well, amongst other shortcomings. Nevertheless, Billy does not seem to view these inabilities negatively, though the audience is clearly in on the joke. Indeed, this song is fairly comic with a relatively upbeat tempo, but there is also a thread of sadness and loss in the unrequited nature of this love and Billy’s inability to comprehend or accept the truth. Billy abides by an illusion despite knowing (and articulating) the truth about this girl: that they are ill-suited for each other even if the marriage was a possibility. In this way, the Billy of the song and the Billy of the novel suffer from the same love-struck delusion. Furthermore, every stanza the singer repeats a variation of the lines, “she’s a young thing, / and cannot leave her mother,” emphasizing their importance. This isn’t really developed any further in the song, but we see here that this girl is characterized by two distinct qualities: she possesses youth and is homebound, unable to depart from her family. As we will see, Billy’s Eva in the novel retains the very same qualities. Moreover, Yeats characterized Ireland as a mother figure in works like Cathleen ni Houlihan, so when we find out that Eva is living in Ireland, she was indeed unable to leave her “mother.”

When we enter the novel, then, we do so with four contexts: first, with the notion that appropriated songs will play a major role. Second, with an awareness for the Celtic flavoring. Third, with a curiosity concerning who Billy is and what apparently makes him so charming and, perhaps, naive. And, lastly, with an eye out for unrequited love.
This is a novel about how we define ourselves by those things with which we associate ourselves, and Billy’s association with Yeats affects him until the very end of his life. And though McDermott will be particularly critical of Irish romanticism and its destructive legacy, her relationship to the construction of stories is more complicated, for narratives have the power to both liberate and imprison people. Ultimately, she will also demonstrate the frequent impossibility of determining the difference between the actual, the imagined, and the believed.

Assembling Billy

_Charming Billy_ opens at the title character’s wake in a restaurant in the Bronx in the early 1980s. We, as readers, start to piece together the circumstances through snapshots of conversation and observations. Indeed, time will be fluid, and we will pass in and out of Billy’s story as its participants assemble it for themselves and for one another. The unnamed narrator, we soon find out, is the adult daughter of Dennis, Billy’s best friend and cousin, and she has her own memories of Billy, but a different, and perhaps more legitimate, vantage point than the others for a few reasons. First, she has been living in Seattle, being one of the few to “escape” the deeply-rooted, insular New York Irish-American community; Rand Richards Cooper writes, “this is the life of ethnic and religious community—loud, close-knit, restrictive. And it is a life McDermott’s [narrator] [has] left behind” (11). She is, therefore, able to attain the perspective of an outsider while still being admitted into ongoing communal practices; she can “stand looking back through the one-way window of assimilation at the lives of [her] parents and grandparents lived” (Cooper 11). Second, because there is less at stake for her
personally in uncovering Billy’s story, at least at first, she has little reason to alter or adapt it as other participants in his narrative might. She is, therefore, perhaps the most reliable conduit into it. In a novel that continually engages with the notion of reliability, we have more reason to trust her than anyone else even though, paradoxically, we actually find out very little about her and are never even given her name.

The fact that the narrator remains nameless only emphasizes that she is living a “post-Irish life,” and that this story is only about her insofar as she, unlike her relatives and in spite of them, will attempt to uncover the reality of Billy’s story despite the many secrets and motivations that underlie the stories told at his wake (Cooper 12). Her motivations for doing so are never overtly spelled out, but it is clear that she is cognizant of certain problems that affect her former community. Sally Barr Ebest credits this ability to the narrator’s feminist perspective that was blossoming at the end of the century in Irish American narrators:

[F]emale protagonists [are] coming of age despite, and often in defiance of, traditional expectations regarding a woman’s “role.” They decry sexism, alcoholism, violence, and abuse. They promote independence yet reiterate the importance of motherhood. They emphasize the strength that comes from family, friends, and community…. They strip away the anachronistic dichotomies that have long stereotyped women and confused men. (71)

We will see that the narrator does indeed embody many of these characteristics, yet she remains somewhat spectral, and appropriately so; Charming Billy is not a story about her, but requires a particularly mindful and adept vantage point unaffected by Yeatsian
nostalgia that enables her to comprehend a society plagued by destructive generational transmissions and thereby de-romanticize the past.

The first section of the novel sets up numerous threads that will weave in and out of the narrative. Between comments on soda bread and caraway seeds or the waiters’ agreeable service, we uncover a remarkable amount of information simply by “listening.” “God wasn’t he funny?” asks an attendee. “Everyone loved him,” remarks another (5). We find out that Billy was “a great letter writer,” “a great salesman,” “he was good with children,” a veteran of the Second World War, that he had “a handsome face” and striking blue eyes (6-11). We are also given the manner, however loosely, in which he died: “Billy had drunk himself to death. He had, at some point, ripped apart, plowed through, as alcoholics tend to do, the great, deep, tightly woven fabric of affection that was some part of the emotional life, the life of love, of everyone in the room” (4). The narrator’s assertion is a curious one; it isn’t entirely clear what it means to have “ripped apart” or “plowed through” this life of love and emotions, maybe because it isn’t yet entirely clear to her. And we soon find out that Billy was a man almost exclusively governed by love and emotions, and that these are inextricably bound to his alcoholism. Though Billy is survived by his wife, Maeve, those who wish to tell Billy’s story cannot rightly begin without mentioning “the Irish girl,” Eva (5). We hear the basic gist of the story: newly back from the war, Billy met an Irish girl on Long Island who was working with her sister as a nursemaid for a wealthy family from Park Avenue. She returned home at the end of the summer, but Billy gave her a ring and five hundred dollars so that she and her family could emigrate. She died not long after from pneumonia. “That was a sad thing, wasn’t it? That was a blow to him,” remarks someone (5). Yet we won’t fully
know the whole truth surrounding the situation until the novel concludes. McDermott skillfully arouses a sense of mystery surrounding all of Billy’s circumstances: the entire story is elliptically contained in the opening chapter, yet we lack details that will bring it to life in the rest of the novel. We watch, listen, learn and imagine the story along with our narrator. Indeed, Billy’s story can only be learned in this way. The community requires the knowledge of each participant to piece together chronologies and circumstances that can be agreed upon, even though some may not be offering all that they know.

While drinking plentifully at the wake, the irony of which is lost on many, Billy’s friends offer readers a general outline of his alcoholism. They seem to agree that he was prone to drink a lot, but that it didn’t become serious enough to give anyone pause for some time. “So when did it become a problem?” asks cousin Rosemary (14). It seems that Billy was in Alcoholics Anonymous both in the sixties and early seventies. But we soon find out that he experienced a pivotal change in 1975; Billy took a trip (his first apparently) to Ireland, taking a pledge to forever abstain from alcohol. But when he returned, his alcoholism grew steadily out of control until it killed him eight or so years later. They guess about the true meaning of the trip, and one of them speculates that Billy’s real motive for going to Ireland was to visit Eva’s hometown, but it is just speculation because no one, apparently, knows for sure.

Only the narrator seems to realize the irony of drinking in a pub to celebrate, reconstruct, and reminisce over the life of an alcoholic who drank himself to death, and if others do as well, none say so. It becomes increasingly apparent that Irishness is both fundamental to their identity, but also based on cultural practices with questionable
merits. The cultural practice of this Irish wake is largely constructed around three elements: drinking, telling stories about Billy, and doing those two things in a place that looks like what they think an Irish pub would look like. “Ireland” plays such a profound role in how they understand themselves and one another, yet few if any of them have even been there. O’Connell writes, “McDermott’s ironic point [is that] without the Guinness, the peat fire and the Synge-song dialogue, these Irish-Americans from Queens are a long way from Tipperary or any other Irish county” (265). Already, we see along with the narrator the façade collapsing, even though Billy’s family and friends cannot or simply will not.

As the conversation on Eva continues it becomes clear that for Billy and his community, Eva remains young, Irish, and desired by them all; she is the embodiment of their Irish romanticism, even though the whole affair happened many years ago and few of them even met her. Moreover, she will always be juxtaposed with Maeve, who, of course, could never measure up to such an idealized fantasy; “What human being could have been the ‘Eva’ of Billy’s dreams?” McDermott said in an interview (Reilly 572). Eva has so impacted Billy’s community that her story continued to circulate despite Billy; once Billy married Maeve, “you never heard him mention that girl again,” yet she was never forgotten (16). Though all participating in the conversation are quick to comment on Maeve’s good qualities, just as they do for Billy, there is a definite sense that at least some of them view her as a kind of consolation prize, since things did not pan out with Eva. They make a point to assert Maeve’s “courage” over any “beauty,” the narrator notices: “her courage, or her beauty, however they chose to refer to it, became something new—which made something new, in turn, of what they might say about
Billy’s life. Because if she was beautiful, then the story of his life, or the story they would begin to re-create for him this afternoon, would have to take another turn” (3).

Maeve exists as an alternative to Eva, who, if only because she was Irish and Billy was so captivated by her, holds an esteemed place in their collective memory despite the fact that few if any of them had even met her. This is a crucial facet to their collective narrative of Billy’s life. Maeve, we soon find out, was the daughter of an alcoholic who simply moved (by their implied estimation) from taking care of one alcoholic to taking care of another; there is something startlingly real and prosaic about her life. Eva, on the other hand, captivates them in a way not dissimilar to how she held Billy’s affections. She mesmerized Billy, and the romanticism of the whole affair is not lost on them; indeed, they buy into it as well. Eva has attained a kind of immortality by dying prematurely, and remains a kind of Irish goddess in their memories. Moreover, she remained so desired by both Billy and his community because she is someone whom they can never have. Their romanticization of her and of Billy’s romance with her enables a kind of access to their own sense of Irishness, however false it may be, and we will come to see that Yeats’s poetry promises them the same kind of access. Their memories of Eva are tied heavily to her Irishness and beauty. Her thick brogue, one notes, was particularly charming. “She was very pretty,” remembers Kate (17). For Rosemary, Eva’s attractiveness, and Billy’s by extension, were a direct product of their combined persona: “They were good-looking together, Eva and Billy. A handsome pair. Better looking together than singly, somehow” (17-18). They refer to Eva throughout the conversation as “the poor girl,” which the narrator recognizes as “a reminder to us all that she had died young.” Among these Irish Americans, Maeve never could have measured up.
Their names, though their meanings are never directly discussed in the text, also offer a commentary on each woman’s Irishness, while also calling into question the gap between perception and reality. “Maeve” recalls the Celtic goddess, an Irish fairy queen who enchants all mortals whom she encounters. Her name, from which the word “mead” is also a derivative, asserts the power of intoxication. Maeve does indeed, at least to some degree, capture the attention of Billy, and later Dennis who marries her after Billy’s death, but there isn’t any indication that either relationship moves beyond simple affections; they are amicable, obligatory relationships – Maeve takes care of Billy, Dennis takes care of Maeve – and little more. The irony of “intoxication” should not be lost on the reader here either, for Billy’s life is defined by his intoxication – not only by alcohol, but also by Yeats – which allows him to “get by,” as it were, in his unsatisfactory life; Maeve on the other hand, is also defined by intoxication, but only in the sense that she is doomed not to intoxicate, but to take care of men who are intoxicated by substance and memory. In contrast, Eva is a derivative of Eve, the “first woman,” who according to Judeo-Christian tradition instigated “original sin” both by being tempted and by offering temptation. She is indeed Billy’s “first woman,” and the memory and loss of her does compel Billy’s sin, the one that ultimately kills him. Both women, then, inhabit certain characteristics associated with their respective names, but they also very much do not. If we were to name the characters based on the characteristics granted to them by the community at Billy’s wake, we might actually swap the names to better fit each character. Here, it is clear that McDermott is already deconstructing the romanticism attached to such names and thereby beginning to call attention to the function of labels and associations; sometimes they effectively encompass that which they mean to, but
sometimes they do not. In the latter case, the resultant misdirection can become as indispensable to the permanent narrative as any actual reality.

As all these threads of conversation develop, they tend to get steered back in a general direction that asserts Billy’s charm and goodness above all else; in an interview, McDermott asserts, “They needed to find what was worthwhile and what was good and noble in a life that seems anything but good and noble…. So if they can make a story out of his life, they will be able to validate what they felt for him” (qtd. in Reilly 570-71).

An awareness of this practice seems to be lost on all there except the narrator, who is more of a watcher than a participant in Billy’s communal narrative, at least at this point. Though the conversation must touch on the issues mentioned above – Billy’s unrequited love, his alcoholism, his complicated relationship with Maeve – because they are fundamental to Billy’s story, the storytellers demonstrate an awareness for the form in which Billy’s story is being constructed. They are celebrating Billy’s life first and foremost. Though they are determining his narrative, they are doing so within a specific structure, one which tends towards excuse and embellishment rather than reality. The job falls, then, on the narrator who, after the first section ends, armed with a schematic of Billy’s life and some of her own memories, begins “deciphering a long-running and still unfolding story” (Steinfels 102). And she has good reason to, because at the conclusion of the first section, her father shares a secret with her, which now only the two of them will share.

The last thread of conversation during the wake concerns the need to explain Billy’s alcoholism. Several people argue about genetic predispositions to alcoholism, an explanation for Billy’s “problem” that doesn’t seem to fully satisfy the narrator. Cooper
writes, “those who dismiss Billy’s suffering as the ‘genetic disease’ of alcoholism…come off as pinched and zealous proponents of our era’s mistaken urge to collapse tragedy into mere pathology: a reductively pragmatic approach” (10). Others tried to assert that Billy’s alcoholism was a direct product of losing Eva. That answer was also controversial; Rosemary tried to dissolve the romanticism of such a notion: “come on, name me anything that’s going to stay with you that strongly for thirty years” (McDermott 23). The reality, then, is unclear: “the reader may ponder whether Billy suffers from a genetic predisposition for alcohol or an inherited inability to deal with life’s disappointments” (Kennedy 494). Regardless, they move on to toast Billy, apparently agreeing to disagree, but the conversation stays in the mind of the narrator: “This was Irish hyperbole, of course. This was the Irish penchant for pursuing any mention of death, any metaphor, any threat, the way a seal goes after a tossed mackerel…. This was just talk” (McDermott 26). After telling her father all of this in the car, he suddenly lets her in on a profound secret: “Well, here’s the saddest part,’ he would finally say, finally, wearily, as if he were speaking of an old annoyance that time had nearly trivialized, but not quite: ‘here’s the most pathetic part of all. Eva never died. It was a lie. Just between the two of us, Eva lived’” (24). The narrator is now armed with legitimate motivation; having already seen the illusions by which her people live, she confronts a profound lie upon which everyone constructed a false reality. The direction is now set, and as the narrator will uncover Billy’s story piece by piece, the rest of the novel will illuminate how narratives can both free and imprison those who abide by them.
Billy’s Yeats

The seminal moments in Billy’s life are tied to poetry, and more specifically, the poetry of W.B. Yeats. For Billy, Yeats’s words are irrevocably tied to romanticized, embellished memories, and this becomes increasingly obvious as the novel progresses. But we will see that this is also a very specific “Yeats”: the early, Celtic Twilight Yeats, the Yeats who longed for a mythic Ireland and grieved the loss of love. The later Yeats who was interested in historical cycles and spiritual mediums is of little use to Billy, or the American Irish, for that matter; indeed, there is the sense that Billy knows nothing of that Yeats. There is strong correlation between the three poems utilized in this novel; for Billy, Yeats is the poet of nostalgia, of lost love and fantasy, and his poems inhabit Billy’s memory with a profound intensity and are fixed to his destructive impulses. Each poem is evoked as a response to unattainable love, an attempt to find the appropriate course of action. In “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” the speaker will simply divest himself of such emotions by living a monastic life; solitude and necessity will remedy his grief. In “Down by the Salley Gardens,” the speaker can only grieve for having been “young and foolish” and disregarding his lover’s advice; sorrow is the only appropriate response. And in “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love,” the speaker finds a surrogate and hopes that he can redirect his feelings and thereby resolve them, but he finds that his replacement has come to recognize his objective and leaves. Billy cycles in and out of all three responses, seeking escape, obtaining replacement, and embracing loss. Yet, underlying all of Billy’s motives and choices is that Yeatsian Romanticism he abuses to construct and nourish his fantasy in the first place. These poems teach him how to think
about his circumstances and thereby become an emotional site that he can continually revisit to commemorate his loss.

Before looking at Billy’s specific evocations of Yeats, it is worth noting briefly that Yeats’s role in Billy’s life would not have been enforced solely by Billy’s Irish roots and his Irish American community, though they would certainly have been a primary factor that bred an affinity for Yeats; we will see that Billy’s friends and family also know of Yeats, though not perhaps to the same degree as Billy. Notably, Yeats would also have been taught to Billy. Since Billy and Dennis fought in the Second World War, and Billy brought along his volume of Yeats to the pride of his community, they would have attended school in the New York public school system in the mid to late 1930s. A contemporary document first produced by the New York City Board of Education in 1934 does indeed demonstrate that Yeats was a set part of the English literature curriculum for grades eight and nine (New York). This particular course of study was reprinted several times from at least 1934 until 1947, and in this span of time, the same two poems – “The Fiddler of Dooney” and “The Ballad of Father Gilligan” – were taught in English classes in grades eight and nine respectively; these are the classes that would have been inhabited by Billy, Dennis, and all children attending school at the time. Moreover, even though the novel does not provide any specifics concerning their education, the average level of education for males in the late 1930s and 40s was between eighth and ninth grade, so, for many students, Irish and non-Irish alike, Yeats may have been one of their last experiences with poetry (U.S. Bureau).

Both “The Fiddler of Dooney” and “The Ballad of Father Gilligan” are exemplary of the majority of Yeats’s poetry in the 1890s: they are concerned with Irish people and
geography and they contain simple meter and rhyme schemes. Moreover, they are not without their charm. “The Fiddler” tells the tale of a man who finds not only joy but salvation by playing his fiddler for others who dance. “The Ballad” tells the story of a weary village priest whom God provides with a moment of rest. Though they are not, perhaps, among Yeats’s more recognized poems now, they are key early works if only because they embody the Irish romanticism that plagues Billy throughout his life.

Clearly they would have made an impression on Billy, as he sticks exclusively to Yeats’s early work, which affects him profoundly. Both poems paint a portrait of a very particular Ireland – one with small, tight-knit rural communities, where people can enjoy the simple pleasures of music, celebration and dance, or, in Father Gilligan’s case, a moment of much-needed and welcomed peace. Yeats emphasizes Irishness in “The Fiddler” particularly by naming Sligo’s geography again and again, beyond the title and the first line that place us in Dooney; the fiddler tells us, “My cousin is priest in Kilvarnet, / My brother in Moharabuiee,” emphasizing both place and family. Such places would seem vastly different from the surroundings of New York’s urban Irish. And these are the places that inhabit Billy’s mind. Yeats belongs to Billy and his Irish American community because Yeats is Irish, but we see here that Yeats’s Irish poems were staples of the classroom in the 1930s and 40s, and therefore justified Irish intellect, if they also distilled Irishness into a rather narrow and inaccessible categorization.

When Billy first evokes Yeats, it becomes clear that, even as an older man, he still buys into the Ireland depicted in poems like “The Fiddler of Dooney.” Yeats is first evoked by Billy when the narrator recollects a visit she made with Billy and her father to East Hampton, where Billy and Dennis spent a summer long ago – that summer Billy met
Eva. As they drive him around and look at the houses, Billy says, “Well, it’s still beautiful…. Nothing’s changed” (59). A spell seems to come over him:

“Just us,” my father said, but Billy had begun to recite slowly, softly, like a man humming a tune to himself, letting the words get caught in the breeze from the window. “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree…” It was a matter of some pride to my father, to Billy’s friends and family in general, that he had carried a volume of Yeats with him all through the war. Not that my father, or most of his family, read the poems themselves; more that Billy’s interest absolved them from any interest of their own. When my generation of cousins began to come back from college with copies of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti and Sylvia Plath, our parents could sniff, “Oh, poetry, sure. Billy Lynch loves that Irish poet, Yeats (or Yeets)”—with a proud nonchalance that seemed to hint that the poet was a friend of a friend. “And I shall have some peace there,” Billy said. (59-60)

This is Billy’s first trip back to Long Island since that fateful summer, and it remains a magical place to him. And in order to express an inexpressible nostalgia and loss, Billy quotes Yeats, as if all his feelings are, and can be, contained therein. To some extent, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” offers Billy both a parallel for his experience, for it is a poem about escape into simplicity, a feeling Billy attaches to that one summer and this place. It also provides him with a means to recollect his experiences; the invocation of Yeats itself brings on feelings of nostalgia. Yet, as we will see, his invocation of Yeats
is, in many ways, a misreading of Yeats, and begins to reveal what, exactly, the Irish poet’s words provide Billy.

McDermott reveals many complicated things about her characters and Yeats in this passage. First is that, though we will come to understand it with more depth later, Billy is profoundly attached to this specific piece of geography, even though he only spent one summer there after the war. Being there again compels an emotional response that cannot be expressed literally. When Billy begins his recitation, it seems that the words are necessary at that moment; only this expression can provide some kind of explanation or catharsis. When Dennis notes that they have grown older but this place has stayed the same, Billy’s poem seems to collapse that gap in time, at least in his mind. And, as the narrator observes (“to himself”), Billy’s recitation is for Billy first and foremost; Yeats comes, it seems, when Billy turns inward and accesses his memories.

Secondly, this passage greatly illuminates this Irish-American community’s relationship to Yeats; the narrator reveals just how empty this affiliation actually is. We have seen how Yeats legitimized the American Irish as an artistically competent people and McDermott demonstrates how this plays out specifically in this community. Billy brings pride to his community simply by taking along a volume of Yeats (probably one of those pocket-sized volumes discussed in the second chapter) to Germany. Yet it is their affiliation to Yeats, with Billy as their intermediary, that legitimizes them, not the actual poetry or the meaning contained with it. To them, “Yeats” exists only as a name, and a mispronounced one at that, with which they can associate themselves simply on the grounds of ethnicity. Here again we see that Yeats offers them a unique form of capital. He is both a great poet – if only because he is recognizable – and an Irish poet. Dropping
his name in any “literary conversation” allows them to be participants and also excuses them from having to say any more. Billy’s actual relationship with Yeats’s poetry isn’t entirely clear at this point, though he is separate from his peers in that he actually knows Yeats’s poetry, at least to some extent. And this means, for his peers, that they don’t have to know it. Billy is esteemed for “knowing” Yeats; it is clear that Billy is something of a novelty in this respect, and that the majority of the community knows practically nothing about Yeats or his poetry – they even mispronounce his name – despite their inclination to claim him for the purposes of self-interest. The narrator alone seems to recognize the reality of the situation as usual: “although Billy looked the part he was no poet or scholar” (66). But she is only able to recognize this because she has escaped her insular Irish American community, and has apparently received some perspective from having read non-Irish poetry that was radically different from Yeats’s work.

It should come as no surprise that Billy chooses “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” above Yeats’s other poem at this moment. It remains one of Yeats’s most anthologized poems, and really is a representative poem of Yeats’s early career. It is preoccupied with themes that can be found in much of his early work, but also stands apart; Yeats himself saw it as “the first poem with his own music and rhythm about it” (Kiberd 120). It will become more clear later in the novel how exactly this particular poem serves a parallel of sorts, at least in Billy’s mind, for his experiences on Long Island, but even at this point, it tells us much about his perspective and state of mind, and offers a schematic for approaching Billy’s memories.

Despite its craft, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” remains one of the most accessible of Yeats’s “great” poems. Ellmann notes as much: “‘The Poet of Shadows’ developed
too quickly to allow his readers to catch up with him, and not as few refused to embark when he set sail from the Lake Isle of Innisfree for the less contagious pleasures of an austere Byzantium” (1). Billy is one of these readers, as is his community by extension; we will see that Billy focuses exclusively on this Yeats. The poem, written in 1888, first appeared in *The Rose* in 1893, a collection preoccupied almost entirely with Irish myth, folklore, and geography. Interestingly, when Yeats wrote the poem, he was not only inspired by something “Irish,” but also by something wholly “American.” Yeats wrote, “My father had read to me some passage of *Walden*, and I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree… I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclinations of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom” (Albright 436). Yeats never would conquer bodily desires and inclinations, nor would he escape to Innisfree. Nevertheless, Innisfree is a real island in Lough Gill, and its name means “heather island” in Irish; this small bit of land is wholly identified by its nature and private geography. And that it is completely “natural” is the very reason, presumably, the speaker of the poem wishes to escape to it.

The poem begins with a resolution: “I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree” (6). The speaker has drawn up a rather Thoreauvian plan for what he will do when he arrives: build a cabin, plant beans, and tend to a beehive. And he will live alone, for solitude, he presumes, will bring him tranquility. His intended actions are each, notably, essential to life and stripped of any unnecessary distraction. Indeed, the speaker is escaping from modernity to instead, to borrow the phrase, “live deliberately.” He seeks “peace” above all else, it seems, something he is unable to attain in his present state. Yet, “peace comes dropping / slow” and is only the product of a *natural* life: “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.” The final stanza reiterates the conviction, as the island seems to be drawing him to it, just as the solid rhyme scheme and rhythm draws the reader along through the poem; he hears the water against the shores though he is removed from it. When we encounter our first image of modernity after only envisioning the natural world – “the roadway…the pavements gray” – it is genuinely jarring. Yet below this artificial world, on some deeper level, the narrator is listening to “the deep heart’s core,” which continues to exist in spite of that which has been built on it. The poem emphasizes that one can escape modernity and live a deliberate life; and, crucially, with Yeats’s poem as a model, one can do so in a rural paradise, an Ireland that in reality was vanishing, even for Yeats.

Though we don’t yet know all of Billy’s story, we know enough to already note certain parallels and discrepancies between his experience and the tale told in the poem. It is somewhat apparent why this particular poem comes up at this specific time on their trip to Long Island and what it may offer him. Billy did escape to an island (Long Island) in his youth; indeed, he was around the same age as Yeats when the latter wrote “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” And Long Island was some kind of utopia for Billy, just as Innisfree was for Yeats’s speaker. We know that he met Eva on the beach there and, after leaving Long Island, presumably never saw her again. Ellmann notes that Yeats was so attracted to an existence on Innisfree because he meant to escape his feelings for Maude Gonne, a woman he loved but could not be with (83). For Billy, however, his escape to the island is one into not away from love; the island does not offer him peace because he can be alone, but it did offer him an essential, deliberate life in the
romanticized image of Eva, whom Billy, still all these years later, associates with a life that could have been and should have been. Moreover, even though Billy has now returned to his Innisfree, likely for the last time, the fact that he has not returned since that fateful summer initially reverses the notion in Yeats’s poem; he had to escape from the island because it is so thoroughly imbued with painful longing. Now, however, with the passage of time, there is some pleasure in this reminiscence; the nostalgia seems to comfort Billy, to still provide a kind of escape, despite the pain. One major difference between Billy and Yeats’s narrator is that Billy is now looking back, having once gone to his “Innisfree” and having now returned, while Yeats’s speaker has decided that he will go. Still, this disconnection seems to be lost on Billy, which should come as no surprise, given that both Billy and his Irish American community at large have demonstrated a knack for creating or guiding interpretations to suit any given situation. But, more likely, Billy is simply reading the poem simplistically; Long Island is an oasis of memory, longing, and hope. Long Island also is modern and rural, which also seems at odds with Yeats’s vision in “Innisfree.” But we must also keep in mind that Billy had just returned from war when he spent his summer on Long Island. Having been surrounded by such devastating mechanisms of the industrial world, a few months of leisure on Long Island would have seemed profound in its simplicity. And, with Eva serving as a direct connection to Ireland, a homeland that the American Irish falsely believed was some pre-modern utopia, Billy could not have come closer to attaining that essential life. The actual house where they stayed has a similar effect on the narrator who, having spent parts of her summers there, calls it “a wild place by the sea, a hiatus…diminishing and
“diminishing” (61). Still, as this episode concludes, Billy’s relationship to these images and to Yeats aren’t altogether clear to either the reader or to the narrator.

The next time we encounter Yeats in the text comes when we finally observe Billy’s first meeting with Eva. The narrator constructs the story from what her father tells her, but also from having listened to Billy over the years. Alcohol, like the words of Yeats, also bridge the divide in time and space between Billy’s life now and that one summer: “He spoke quietly, one hand in his pocket and the other around his glass, his glass more often than not pressed to his heart” (67). The story is a simple one. While swimming and walking the beach, Dennis and Billy encounter two young women who are tending to six children. Upon discussing the weather, the men are immediately drawn to their accents: “And there it was” notes the narrator (67). They inquire into the women’s birthplace; Billy is “at the ready with the information that his own father was from Cork and mother Donegal,” wanting first and foremost to prove his Irishness (73). The possibility of this Irish connection captivates him. They are from County Wicklow. Mary has been working for some time taking care of the six children for a wealthy family, but after the sixth child came, she arranged for her sister Eva to help for the summer, though Eva will be returning to Ireland in the fall. While Dennis and Mary talk, Billy moves towards Eva, who is taking care of the youngest child in the shade of an umbrella. She looks Irish to Billy, with her dark red hair, eyes the color of mahogany, and rueful smile over crooked teeth. The child has been crying, and Billy, void of any self-consciousness, asks to take the baby and does so. Billy holds the child against his heart (where he would later hold his glasses of whiskey), and he quiets immediately, much to Eva’s surprise and admiration. They spend the rest of the day together, and Billy
is forever changed. However, though Billy will never be able to separate the two, it isn’t really Eva he wants, but the possibilities she represents:

That afternoon he fell in love with rest of his life…. The days ahead when he would come to the beach here and the child he held, the children who ran to them, wet and trembling, would be theirs and when the flesh of her arms and her throat and her sweet breasts would be as familiar to him as his own. It was there, that life, that future. It has been there all along. He simply hadn’t known in until now, or had the capacity to imagine just a month ago that something like this might be his. That this golden future, this Eden, had been part of the same life he’d been living all along.

Wasn’t that something? He hadn’t known until now that it was there. (76-77)

Two things are essential to Billy’s mirage. First is Eva’s Irishness; Billy is rather beside himself when he first hears her accent and immediately wishes to assert his own connection to their homeland. But her connection is more immediate and tangible, and somehow makes him feel closer to those perceived roots across the Atlantic Ocean. Second is his capacity to envisage such a life in the first place. He embodies a kind of Yeatsian Romanticism and will, like the hero of Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” be forever beholden to “a glimmering girl,” whom he actually knows little about and would be incapable of inhabiting such a role anyway.

If Billy’s charm began to show itself when he calmed the child, it is further concretized soon after. The boys meet with Mary and Eva one evening after the children are supposed to be in bed. One of them, Sally, defiantly refuses to sleep. But Billy
recites Yeats’s “Down by the Salley Gardens” to her in “a light brogue,” and leads her with Eva to bed (79). Sally “smile[s] up at him, recognizing the poem he had recited to her before, on the beach.” It is clear that, though this is the first time the poem has been referred to directly in the text, it is one of Billy’s “go-to” poems. He is able to calm and charm others through its recitation. And it allows him to embody a decidedly Irish persona; he dons the accent and the gestures of an Irishman. By implication, reciting the poem makes Billy more Irish and brings him, at least in his own mind, closer to the life he dreams of. Moreover, key to the successful recitation of the poem is that it is recognizable to the Irish. In this regard, Billy proves to be wise, for this poem, in ways unlike any of Yeats’s other poems, was embedded in the Irish and Irish American cultural memory.

Yeats wrote “Down By the Salley Gardens” the same year he wrote “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” and it was published in his first poetry collection (after The Wanderings of Oisin). It is not unlike much of Yeats’s poetry at the time. The story, like “Innisfree” is simple: the speaker once met his love amidst lush Irish geography as a young man and she encouraged him to take life and love “easy.” To do so would mean he must model his life after that of nature – “as the leaves grow on the tree” or “as the grass grows on the weirs” – and move slowly, and develop genuinely. She suggests that he let life/love grow naturally and live with less intensity. But, as a young man, the speaker would not listen. Now, later, having gained some perspective with the passage of time, he realizes that his inability to follow her advice is responsible for his present sorrow (“and now am full of tears”). The specific nature of this sorrow isn’t detailed, but
we might assume, given the focus of the poem (and, indeed, the focus of much of the poetry Yeats wrote at that time) that “the Lover mourns for the Loss of Love.”

Notably, “Down by the Salley Gardens” has seldom been regarded by critics. For this reason, it’s unusual that the poem, given its long life, hasn’t garnered more discussion. Its meter and poetics may do little to compel comment, but the subject matter is a relatively stable summation of Yeats’s preoccupations throughout his life: Irish geography, loss, the melancholic and sobering perspective offered by age, etc. Nevertheless, Ellmann’s seminal biography doesn’t even mention the poem, even though one can still find many plaques and postcards in Ireland’s countless gift shops that bear its words against sprawling portraits of Ireland’s rural landscapes; indeed, Yeats is often appropriated for Irish trinkets by this poem and “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Perhaps this is why it tends to be avoided in academic circles. It is a very simplistic poem with the texture of a folk song. Indeed, its life was extended, and Yeats thereby made more apparent, because it was put to a common tune. When Yeats wrote the poem, originally titled “An Old Song Re-sung,” he was attempting to reconstruct a song he once heard an old peasant woman sing, though he could only imperfectly remember a few lines. The poem soon took on a life of its own when the Free State Army put the words to a familiar tune, transforming the poem into a song. In 1935, Yeats wrote, “The Free State Army march to a tune called ‘down by the Salley Garden’ without knowing that the march was first published with words of mine, words that are now folklore…I want to make another attempt to unite literature and music” (Albright 424). With the help of the song, Yeats’s poem did indeed become “folklore,” even if the poem is only a rough approximation that bears questionable authenticity. By all accounts, the song/poem was genuinely
incorporated into the Irish psyche. Joyce remembered singing it as a young man at a school concert and later even wrote out the poem in a postcard to Nora Barnacle (Albright 424). Moreover, it is still apparent in accounts of twentieth century Ireland even if it has been appropriated by the Irish tourism industry; for example, the rural community in Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* makes much use of it and treats it with genuine affection.

We see that when Billy uses the poem to charm his audience, he is also asserting his belonging among Eva’s community. Still, somewhat like his recalling of “Innisfree,” Billy’s use of “Down By the Salley Gardens” is rudimentary in that there is a definite discrepancy between the poem’s content and the situation in which it is used. He is using it as a kind of pleasant lullaby that can charm both Sally and Eva. And he is successful. But the poem’s story is not pleasant, though this is seemingly lost on everyone; it is about loss and sorrow. Yet, as we see in the examples above, the poem and song were actually employed in manners that were disassociated from the meaning of its content. Of course, its use is not dissimilar from many “children’s songs” like “London Bridges” or “Ring Around the Rosy” whose meanings or origins are often at odds with their applications. Nevertheless, though Billy’s use of “Down By the Salley Gardens” may be authentic insofar as it is culturally appropriate in that instance, McDermott is calling attention here and in the previous example to the divide between a poem’s accurate meaning (what’s actually there in the text) and its value (the life it takes on when culturally embedded in a collective memory). Though ignorance of this divide may be innocent, and, in this case, there is surely nothing malicious about the poem’s employment, we do see the roots of a kind of counterfeit authenticity. Moreover, though the poem’s subject matter is one of
sorrow, it is certainly imbued with that characteristic Yeatsian Romanticism. For Billy, to be “authentically” Irish, one may simply be doomed to experience the loss of love.

This very thread of inquiry is again taken up and advanced the third time we encounter Yeats in the text. The narrator has learned much about Billy by probing her own memory and those of Billy’s friends and family, particularly Dennis. Yet, she also has to fill in the gaps herself, to construct scenes based on what she knows that can flesh out situations and relationships that are sometimes indefinite. She has grown to understand much about Billy’s fatal romanticism and his propensity to let empty, emotive interpretations of Yeats guide his memory and state of mind. Therefore, when nearing the end of the novel, she has to construct a crucial scene that can fill in Billy’s story, but she cannot do so without incorporating Yeats, for, though it cannot be proven that the circumstance played out in this specific manner, it is inconceivable that Billy wouldn’t bring his Yeats with him. She will base her construction of the following scene on fact. Later it becomes clear why she incorporates “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love”: she remembers a moment towards the end of Billy’s life when she saw him writing a letter to Maeve, addressing it to “Beautiful friend,” an expression taken from the poem (232). In an interview McDermott notes, “Billy was in the worst throes of his maudlin romanticism at that point. He never should have been allowed to read Yeats. Certainly what he meant by ‘friend’ was not the friendship extended to him by everyone around him, everyone who made his life possible, in both the good and bad ways” (qtd. in Reilly 567). Indeed, when Billy writes “beautiful friend,” he does so within a very specific, if skewed, Yeatsian context, one that has taught him how to approach his circumstances.
Armed with this memory, the narrator imagines the moment in which Billy finally resigned himself to a life with Maeve. By this time, Eva had presumably been dead for a few years; Dennis had talked with Mary and reported the news to Billy. Meanwhile, he had met Maeve in the store where he was a shoe salesman. “I don’t know what Billy thought of her at that point, but she sure thought he was something,” Billy’s cousin tells the narrator (179). She moves on to envisage the scene:

Touching his own glass to hers in the bar where the crowd, just like the other couples at the tea dance that afternoon, was growing younger than them both. Time was passing. The christenings were beginning to outnumber the weddings among his family and his friends, the children born since the war, the nieces and nephews and cousins once removed becoming toddlers now, schoolchildren, startling him with their weight, their language, their blossoming lives. He touched her glass and sipped his whiskey and felt the watery veil cover his eyes. What could he have thought of Maeve, after the Irish girl, after that other future, the brightest of them, had shattered in his hand. Here was safety, here was compensation, here was yet another life, the one that had been waiting for him all along, even while he’d been busy imagining his life with Eva. “Pale brows, still hands and dim hair”—he would have found the lines in Yeats. “I had a beautiful friend / And dreamed that the old despair / Would end in love in the end—” (179-80)

The narrator’s rendering of this moment may or may not be accurate, but two things are clear concerning Yeats’s employment here. First is that Billy had so interwoven Yeats
into his life that he can seldom be remembered, or even constructed, without Yeats also making an appearance. Secondly, the narrator, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrates her own awareness of Yeats and, in particular, his early poetry. Though she has gone off to college and feels that reading Ferlinghetti and Plath has brought her some perspective, Yeats is still very much a part of her literary and ethnic identity. When she saw the two words “beautiful friend,” she too recognized them.

The narrator aptly employs the first few lines of “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love” in the same way she saw Billy employ Yeats numerous times. The poem certainly could be applied to that situation, and Billy, from what we know of him, would have done so. The poem’s speaker regards his “beautiful friend” and is hoping that he can turn some longstanding anguish into love at last, apparently by way of this friend. There is, therefore, a strong parallel to Billy’s relationship with Maeve at this point. The “long despair” would clearly be his loss of Eva. Billy also views Maeve as an attractive, if rather generic partner, which lines up with the common physical description of this “beautiful friend.” Yet, we stop mid-thought. Again, McDermott emphasizes the loose nature of the Yeats connection. The significance of the appropriation for Billy isn’t that there is necessarily a strong correlation between the poem and his own situation, but that there is enough of a correlation to provide him a reason to recall Yeats, for Yeats not only offers Billy a means to win others over as we saw in the second example, but also a means to find some kind of comfort, as we saw with his first recitation. Still, though we are left without resolution, it is appropriate, at this point in Billy and Maeve’s relationship, that the narrator ends on hope rather than resolve, for Billy is trying to compensate for the life he couldn’t attain, and he is attempting to capture some
compensatory existence, hoping that it can lead to some satisfaction; at this point he doesn’t know that it will not, if only because ultimately he won’t let it.

After imagining the scene between Billy and Maeve in the bar, the narrator begins to construct their subsequent history, weaving a tapestry out of a conversation with her father and Dan Lynch. She imagines the relatively congruent transition Maeve would have made from taking care of her alcoholic father to doing the same for Billy. She moves then, back into Billy’s head:

You would be hard-pressed to tell, watching Billy at the head of the table, before his little family, talking and talking, making them laugh, the disappointment that lingered at his heart’s core, disappointment and disbelief, disbelief that the faith he had sworn to an unrealized future should be so simply, so easily betrayed. “she looked into my heart one day / And saw your image was there / She has gone weeping away.” (184)

Having inhabited this life for some time, and realizing that it cannot compensate for his perceived loss – and indeed it never could, for that life is pure Yeatsian fantasy – Billy’s hope is resolved, but only by his acceptance and his consequent tendency to escape his immediate life by slipping into memories exacerbated by Yeats and alcohol. This is the moment, imagined by the narrator, when Billy resigns himself to resignation, and his true descent into alcohol-fueled fantasy begins. And it is also a pivotal moment because we see that Billy is misreading Yeats again, for these lines are about the woman’s loss; she is the one left to mourn the loss of her love. Yet, characteristically, Billy applies the poem to his own plight.
The narrator’s specific use of “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love” demonstrates not only her understanding of how her community functions, but also that she has obtained a real grasp of Billy’s consciousness. The poem comes from Yeats’s third collection in 1899; *The Wind Among The Reeds* contains many of Yeats’s most remembered Celtic Twilight-era poems (“Into the Twilight,” “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” “The Cap and Bells,” etc.). Judging by Billy’s other recitations, it is a collection he would have known. “The Lover Mourns” can be read autobiographically. At the time, Yeats was, as he would for the majority of his life, attempting to dispel his feelings for Maude Gonne. Yet he had been in a relationship with Olivia Shakespear for some time. Yeats remembered:

Maude Gonne wrote to me…would I come dine? I dined with her and my trouble increased…at last one morning instead of reading much love poetry, as my way was to bring the right mood round, I wrote letters. My friend [Olivia Shakespear] found my mood did not answer hers and burst into tears. “There is someone else in your heart,” she said. (Albright 460-61)

Though Billy and the narrator know nothing of these specifics, they still perceive a parallel in the poem’s content to Billy’s situation. Though Billy may think he did his best to accept a substitute life, “Eva” is so imprinted on his existence that it is obvious to all others (those at the wake can hardly avoid discussing her repeatedly) and there is consequently no room for Maeve who, as Billy’s friends remark, knew about Eva and, like Billy, resigns herself to play runner up behind Billy’s fantasy.
The narrator’s implementation of Yeats’s poem over these four pages is significant: she imagines the life of Billy and Maeve’s relationship from beginning to end within the poem, commencing on the first lines of the “The Lover mourns” and concluding on its final lines. Their actual relationship, it seems, only lasts a short time. The narrator imagines first Billy’s hope in an alternate life just as the speaker in Yeats’s poem does. But then the poem and Billy’s resolve conclude. Though Billy will remain married to Maeve until his death, it takes little time for him to realize that this substitute life will not satisfy him; he will abide it, to be sure, but it cannot replace his perceived loss. At that point, Billy’s life and the life of his relationship with Maeve is in fact over. He is merely killing time, committing a protracted but deliberate suicide, medicating his disappointment with the drunkenness offered by alcohol and Yeats, remedies that enable to him to withdraw inwardly.

“The Truth”

Yeats’s poetry arouses Billy’s imagination, but another fantasy also constructs the myth that governs Billy’s life. Dennis is the only person to know what actually happened when Billy went to Ireland. He is also, up to that point, the only one in Billy’s immediate circle to know the truth about Eva; Mary explained to him not long after Eva returned to Ireland that she took Billy’s money and married her childhood sweetheart. Dennis, however, chose to tell Billy that Eva had contracted pneumonia and died soon after. The goal, apparently, was not only that Billy escape the pain of rejection, but also that he attain some kind of closure so that he wouldn’t live his life hoping that some kind of reconnection with Eva was still possible. The effect, clearly, was adverse; because any
reconnection with Eva was impossible, that summer, those moments, took on a life of their own couched in an overblown Yeatsian nostalgia, and Billy wallowed in their memory.

The effect of Dennis’s lie is only exacerbated by their community. We have seen that they had a tendency to live vicariously through Billy’s actions, particularly his knowledge of Yeats. But they also inhabited the fantasy of that reconnection with their homeland, and perpetuated the romanticism of Billy’s story by telling and retelling it. Perhaps this was a manifestation of the Irish American’s purgatorial identity. Concerning this trend in Irish American identity formation, Kennedy writes, “these Irish-Americans [are] caught like so many children of immigrants between the old and new world” (494). Being “Irish” is fundamental to their communal identity, but the Ireland behind that Irishness is nonexistent, and their geographical removal and the stories of their parents and grandparents, distorted by nostalgia and time, encourage the tendency to embellish. They each suffer from a susceptibility to illusion even though it may not destroy most others in Billy’s clan as openly as it does Billy. Valerie Miner asserts, “The Lynches’ large, supportive, entertaining family is at the same time a suffocating culture of psychological denial and divine retribution. Some of the Lynches turn to whisky, some to holy water, but few find redemption or even temporal happiness” (31). It becomes clear that recognition of this denial is motivating the narrator’s journey; she has watched family members descend into their dreams and, as she sees it, this community is not fulfilled by its susceptibility to faith and fantasy, but as exemplified by Billy, is often destroyed by it. And by remaining so close-knit, so insular, they only encourage one
another’s destructive tendencies. Uncovering the “reality” of Billy’s life, insofar as that is possible, may uncover the reality of the plague affecting the entire community.

As we have seen, the first section of Charming Billy offers a rough schematic of Billy’s life, but the narrator’s three-day odyssey fills in the gaps. Though we find out, along with the narrator, that Eva’s death was a lie that Dennis concocted out of love for Billy, and that Billy’s alcoholism spiraled out of control after a trip to Ireland in 1975, “what actually happened” is still unclear. The significance of the trip is twofold: Billy, and his Irish American community by extension, get to experience the utopia they have dreamed of (and was dreamed up for them), though the experience will be a highly crafted one; the brief trip is planned by Billy’s priest and is likely “touristy” and geared towards the “American cousins.” Secondly, it is meant to be a crucial moment, one in which Billy will, despite his past failings, truly give up drinking. Indeed, there can be no more imperative moment in Billy’s life, for he is not only reconnecting with his perceived roots, but is also coming closer to Eva symbolically and by proximity.

Billy takes his pledge in Ireland, seemingly with a sincere determination to finally abstain. During one afternoon, when he is alone, he decides to visit Clonmel, Eva’s hometown. Yet, off the track of tourist destinations, it strikes him as being quite different from how he had imagined it over the last thirty years: “He passed what looked like a Kentucky Fried Chicken shop…. There was a shabby sense of change, of the modern, all about the place, that had little to do with the backward, quiet little city she had once described for him. He sensed that her ghost would have been as much a stranger here as he was” (215). Already, Billy’s fantasy is beginning to break down. Yet, as we see here, “Eva” is still somehow able to transcend the truth that is now confronting Billy head on.
Modernity is to blame for destroying what he imagined as the picturesque Irish town, just as it was, at least for a time, the scapegoat for Yeats in poems like “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.”

Billy stops at a gas station to ask for direction, sure that the “real” Clonmel is simply around some corner, and is rightly sized up by the mechanic as “[a]n American cousin.” He advises Billy to ask directions of his wife in the tea shop attached to the station. Billy enters and again encounters the same feeling he experienced when entering Clonmel: “there was something hasty and false about the place” (217). He asks a woman at the counter to speak with the mechanic’s wife. “Let me just get Eva for you,” she says. Initially, he merely considers it a sign, for Billy’s romanticism has predisposed him to look for signs in symbols, particularly when he is forced to confront reality:

He thought it was, by some strange convergence of fact and fate, a sign of sorts, from her—no nothing so elaborate as her face in glass, her actual voice in his ear as he slept, the kinds of signs he had imagined and hoped for so desperately in those first few months and years after her death, but a sign nonetheless…. To hear on this day of all days, in this place, her name called out. It was a sign that said, You were right to come here, I am with you still. (218)

Though it takes him a moment to recognize her with “thirty years of distorted memory to cross,” he knows it is Eva, and she recognizes him as well. Indeed, Billy has taken on a kind of legendary status in Eva’s circle in ways not dissimilar from Eva’s role in Billy’s. Bessie, the other woman, knows who he is instantly when she hears his name and regards the mutual recognition. She fills Billy in when Eva has to attend to some quick business:
“She’s got a guilty conscience, you know. She’s carried it for years…. About the money, we all know the story, the money you sent her to come back to the States. She swore any number of times she was sending it all back to you, but then there’d be another fuel crisis or Tom would get laid up or one of the children. And then she made up her mind to have this shop” (119). Yet Billy and Bessie are coming at the shock of the moment from two different directions: Billy does not tell her that had borrowed the money and taken an extra job to pay it back because he cares nothing for the money (“She’s welcome to it,” he says); he is simply overwhelmed by the truth that confronts him in the presence of Eva, now a woman of sixty.

Billy’s hand trembles as he talks with Bessie. The actual cause of this initial sign of unraveling is not entirely clear; he could need a drink, or he could be overwhelmed by the truth. Either way, Billy clearly wants or needs to return to his fantasy. When he is finally alone with Eva, they simply make small talk and fill each other in on their lives. She remained in Clonmel where she had four children and two grandchildren. Having obtained an immortal, angelic existence in Billy’s mind, Billy cannot help but be shocked by the mediocrity of Eva’s actual life: “It wasn’t only her being alive that took some getting used to, it was that she had lived, it was how she had lived” (221). At that moment, as she apologizes for taking his money and never sending any word, Billy’s resolve is entirely diminished: “He knew he’d stop at the first place he came to once he left here, get himself something to quench this thirst” (222). Eva even suspected Dennis’s lie, given Billy’s letters to her family, and Billy begins to recognize just how profound the impact of that small piece of information had been: “It was all part of a story now, and as story, it was nothing any of them had truly lived.” He also finally
acknowledges the rather juvenile romanticism of the whole affair, and, notably, he vocalizes it: “Like something out of *Romeo and Juliet*, hey?” (222). Yet the final piece of Eva’s deconstruction comes when Billy asks about Mary. Eva and Mary, it seems, have been bitterly estranged since that summer thirty years before. According to Eva, Mary blamed her for ruining Mary’s relationship with Dennis; Dennis apparently felt obligated to break things off with Mary when he heard about Eva’s betrayal because it would be impossible to offer Billy the lie of her death without doing so. Eva’s entire demeanor changes when she explains the situation to Billy: “Something came into her face then, something that had not been there before, during those days they had spent on Long Island, anger and determination and disgust, an old bitterness—something the span of years had taught her” (223). At that point she has been completely divested of the persona constructed around her and embellished over the course of thirty years. Their conversation ends soon after, and Billy leaves to find himself a drink.

Characteristic of Billy’s affability, he bears no malice towards Dennis when he tells him about his visit with Eva. When describing the rift between Mary and Eva, Billy characteristically can only explain it through someone else’s words: “What was it the poet said? More substance in our enmities than in our love” (225). But Dennis, finally, after all this time, begins to realize the full gravity of the lies Billy held on to, both those in his poetry and those Dennis himself provided: “‘You’ve been done more harm than good by your poetry,’ he said.” He apologizes, but at that moment, something comes over Billy: “Billy sat erect, bleary-eyed, incurable. And yet still there lingered—was my father only imaging it?—that old longing to admire in Billy’s eyes, Billy’s own persistent love.” Billy, though he now knows the truth, apparently cannot or will not give up on his
old fantasy: “Quite a story to tell,” he says (225). Later, regarding “Billy’s idea of heaven,” the narrator comments: “the idea itself sufficient alone” (240). Having nourished it for so long, it has taken up an ineffaceable role in Billy’s identity. And he will continue to escape into the idea, that story, his poetry, despite his knowledge of its false reality, over the next eight years as he drinks himself to death. Yeats will continue to provide a conduit, a key that provides access that fantasy.

As Billy descends deeper into his imagination before his death, Dennis only becomes more aware of the damage Billy’s false reality inflicted. In the days following Billy’s death, when friends and family are celebrating Billy’s life and constructing his myth, the atmosphere is relatively jovial and conflicts tend to be avoided. Yet, at the height of this “celebration,” Dennis cannot help but finally speak the truth. Dan notes that Maeve and Billy never had children, even though “Billy loved children” (193). Dennis becomes visibly annoyed: “It might have been his reluctance to consider the possibility that the lie he’d told Billy all those years ago was not merely the cause of thirty years of pointless grief but the very thing that had made Billy’s life with Maeve possible, and fruitless.” He finally speaks up: “He had some strange thoughts about the world, Danny, you know he did. About the way the world should be. You wouldn’t have tolerated it in most other people. You would have said, “Oh come now.”” But Dan won’t place the blame solely on Billy:

“Maeve made the same mistake we all did, Dan. She not only put up with him, she hoped he was right, in all his strange notions. She hoped the world would somehow turn out to be just the way he believed it to be. She hoped somehow that he’d turn out to be right in the end, with all his
hanging on to the past. All his loyalty to the dead. Even if it meant she’d have not life of her own.” (194)

Only Dennis seems to recognize that the weight of the problem falls on all of them for being infected by Billy’s dream, and especially himself for instigating it, though all else remain unaware of “the truth” regarding Eva:

“Billy didn’t need someone to pour him his drinks, he needed someone to tell him that living isn’t poetry. It isn’t prayer. To tell him and convince him. And none of us could do it, Danny, because every one of us thought that as long as Billy believed it was, as long as he kept himself believing it, then maybe it could still be true”…. In the silence that followed, I fully expected him to say, *It was a lie*. It was a lie and Billy knew it. (194)

Now only he and his daughter know the truth regarding Billy’s story, and even in this heated moment, he cannot fully break the spell that still enchants Billy’s circle despite the fact that doing so contradicts his previous words.

“Poetry,” when Dennis uses the term above, has come to mean much more than its immediate, literal definition. Yeats’s poetry certainly fall under its umbrella, but for Dennis, and for Billy, “poetry” has come to embody the nostalgic escapism, the life willingly lived in emotionally-laden memories and fantasies that plagued Billy. This begins to become obvious early on in the novel, but is most clearly articulated when Billy first kisses Eva in Long Island:

Kissing her was like inhaling the essence of some vague but powerful alcohol. He recalled his poetry…. [There was] something that could not be distilled from its parts; that was the dark flavor of desire, but a desire
for something he couldn’t give a word to—for happiness, sure, for sense, for children—for life itself to be as sweet as certain words could make them. (84)

There are three inseparable parts to Billy’s aphrodisiac; Eva, poetry, and alcohol are the indivisible elements that construct his fantasy, and we can assume that this is Yeats’s poetry, given that over the course of the novel, we only encounter Billy quoting Yeats. And when Eva “dies,” Billy is still able to conjure up that nostalgic feeling by escaping into the other two-thirds of the equation. It should come as not surprise, then, that when Billy learns the truth about Eva, but either cannot or refuses to give up on that fundamental part of her identity, he descends even further into that which is left to him; because her memory is so joined with the poetry of W.B. Yeats and the effects of alcohol, their sound and taste enable Billy to believe in the image. Therefore, when Dennis comes to his conviction that Billy “needed someone to tell him that living isn’t poetry,” the meaning extends beyond Billy’s empty recitations to include the entire scheme upon which Billy wasted a life.

**Too Much Yeats**

We have seen the fundamental role Yeats played in Irish American consciousness over the course of the twentieth century, but the potential, tangible impact of accepting that early Yeats, marketed to susceptible Irish Americans, has never been so thoroughly examined as it is in *Charming Billy*. Nor has the unchecked malleability of Yeats’s verses been so illuminated. McDermott is likely so able to comprehend these issues
because they continue to manifest themselves in her own consciousness as both a writer and an Irish American. In an interview, she noted:

I guess I am like Billy in that I read too much Yeats. There’s wonderful line from Yeats that I was very aware of when I was writing *Charming Billy*…. Yeats’s line is “under every dancer, a dead man in his grave.”

As humans, we celebrate life, and we need to, but still we know that under each of us is that dead man in his grave…. We often pretend there is no death so we can enjoy the dance, but we can hold them both in our mind at the same time, and we must. (Reilly 575)

This stance mirrors the narrator’s in *Charming Billy*; indeed, there are many similarities between McDermott and the nameless narrator. The novel indicts the life lived in fancy, in alcohol and Yeats and embellished memory, that has apparently plagued so many Irish Americans. Cooper writes, “McDermott frames Billy’s life stories in ironies, stinting neither the cost nor the complexity of his romanticism. First there are the ravages of alcohol and its punishing toll on the body: the downside of poetry is literally, morbidity” (10). Though the narrator is aware of the power and necessity of story/poetry, she must balance death and the dance to ensure that each has significance. Billy’s problem was that he spent his life escaping into the dance to avoid any acceptance of death. He chose to live an unbalanced life, descending into his dreams of the past to escape the reality of the present, and thereby spiraled out of control.

It is odd, given McDermott’s point and her portrait of how one can abuse Yeats, that she can apparently best describe an objective compelling the novel by quoting Yeats. She characterizes the Yeats Compulsion negatively; she and Billy have not read “too
little” or “just enough” of Yeats, but have read “too much.” By implication, the result of reading “too much Yeats” is that his lines can compel the reader’s imagination but, by proxy, also restrict it, because her ideas will be enveloped within a very specific framework. However, though McDermott doesn’t openly express it here, Yeats’s framework is a most malleable one as we have seen. Because of that, the Yeats Compulsion also means that one can utilize Yeats’s words in a selective manner, as we see in Billy’s recitations. One also wonders if McDermott herself grasps the irony of choosing “A Drunken Man’s Praise of Sobriety,” from which she plucked those two lines. When she employs the lines above, she does so in a way that asserts them as a kind of truth; she agrees with the expression “under every dancer / a dead man in his grave” insofar as she can characterize her own philosophy within its idiom. However, though she is critical of how Billy chose to live his life, the speaker of the poem, who provides her with this cute edict, could very well have been Billy.

We know from the title of the poem that the speaker is drunk, even though he isn’t necessarily aware of it. Indeed, he associates the state of drunkenness with death: “A drunkard is a dead man / And all dead men are drunk.” Dancing, he believes, will keep him sober (alive), “Although [he] drink[s] [his] fill.” The dance, the fantasy, keeps him moving, but he is also static. He moves in a circle, but he never goes anywhere, content to dance the same moves in the same place to experience the same predictable comfort. The expression McDermott apparently finds much truth in is a response to the speaker’s dancing partner: “No ups and downs, my Pretty.” He must maintain a fixed and rotating equilibrium, and disturbing that by moving up and down, by moving towards something, disrupts the dance and pulls him from his purpose; he offers no consideration
to the partner, whose desire to dance in a particular way is disregarded. The dance keeps
the speaker alive but in place, moving him neither towards revelation (up), or the grave
(down). Sobriety, for the speaker, clearly means the maintenance of a state of drunken
dancing, of an intoxicated escape inward, and never outward. And as he goes on,
directing his dance partner, his vision of her moves from reality (“my pretty punk” –
meaning she is either a prostitute or an inexperienced youngster) to myth (“A mermaid,
ot a punk”); the sustained dance enables the illusion.

The poem clearly parallels Billy’s story, though McDermott appropriates the
drunk man’s observation in a way that alleviates it of most of its nuance and depth. She
employs Yeats conversationally in ways not unlike her characters, despite the fact that
she is critical of that impulse. I don’t note this to criticize her, for having explicitly stated
that she has read “too much Yeats,” she understands the impulse and clearly has
something to say about it in Charming Billy. Yet she still uses Yeats’s words, and in a
manner that plucks a short poetic phrase from a larger work, and thereby disassociates the
actual purpose it served its author and the comprehensive unit, and is able to apply it to a
situation simply because she knows the line and can make a connection; Billy did the
very same. Yet, that is one of the bizarre, if common, phenomena regarding Yeats’s
appropriations, as we have seen throughout this study. If one simply wanted to secure
concise poetic phrases that can be applied to varied circumstances, one would have to
look no further than Yeats’s wide and varied body of work. But the consequence of
doing so carries with it a rather agreeable alternate effect; the appropriator is also granted
the cultural and literal validation of “Yeats.”
Despite her targeted attack against a very specific type of drunkenness, McDermott, as we see above, also displays much ambivalence. The narrator struggles, particularly towards the end of the novel, with the actual reality of uncovering truth in any narrative. She accepts her father’s own notion concerning Billy’s destructive fantasy – that his inability to accept reality defeated him – but sees the impulse affecting much of her community in ways that are not obvious to others. She reflects, for example, on the final months of her mother’s life, when her father focused on crafting the narrative of his and her mother’s story to create something satisfactory, and can’t help but find a parallel in Billy’s poetry:

[Dennis was] utterly unable, he said, to convince himself that the attention he had given her in that last year, the closeness they had felt, the assurance they had achieved something exclusive, something redemptive in the endurance of their love, had been any more than another well-intentioned deception, another construction, as unbelievable, when you came right down to it, as the spontaneity of a love song in some Broadway musical, the supposedly heartfelt supplication of a well-rehearsed hymn, the bearing any one of Billy’s poems about life and death and love and misery had on the actual way any of us lived from day to day. (211)

Notably, these poems, Yeats’s poems, are understood as belonging to Billy; he recites them and brings them into the lives of others, and they are his insofar as others imagine them to be. The narrative, then, is established despite its unreality. And when this generation passes on, so will the story it constructed about itself. Though the narrator has
been chipping away at the illusions that enclose the reality of Billy’s life, the ultimate significance of doing so begins to leave her with feelings of uncertainty.

When the narrator finally wraps up Billy’s story, she does so with a kind of bitter acceptance of the situation: the community – characterized as Irish American and Catholic – that she left behind, and will be leaving again shortly, is perhaps incapable of comprehending how they deceive themselves. She ends the narrative with Dennis and Maeve’s wedding, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have provided a rather traditional, maybe even happy, ending. But the narrator is too jaded by her community’s glaring tendency to accept illusion:

They were married in March of 1991, my father and Maeve. At the little church in East Hampton, Most Holy Trinity now, no longer St. Philomena’s – the poor woman having been tossed out of the canon of saints in the mid-sixties because some doubt had arisen about whether or not she had actually lived. As if, in that wide-ranging anthology of stories that was the lives of the saints – that was, as well, my father’s faith and Billy’s and some part of my own – what was actual as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed, made, when you got right down to it, any difference at all. (243)

This is a difficult passage to interpret definitively, and appropriately so, since the narrator’s very struggle here is with the (im)possibility of definitive interpretation. O’Connell reads the ending rather simplistically: “McDermott’s narrator, like McDermott herself, seeks to make her Irish-American story sensible, believable, giving ‘that much credit’ to her own kind” (265). Certainly this is true to some extent, the narrator is
trying to construct a narrative, but it’s also a narrative that seeks to be realistic about certain destructive tendencies. And there is a sense of resignation and frustration in these final words that he doesn’t account for. Cooper interprets this final gesture as if the narrator is simply throwing her hands up, not necessarily in acceptance but in exasperation: “[she] bids farewell both to Billy and to his entire way of life” (12).

Perhaps the consequence of these final words lies somewhere between these two interpretations. The exaggerated idiom of the final lines (“as if” and “any difference at all”), suggests sarcasm; the church name was changed because of doubt, yet ironically her father’s religious faith and Billy’s romanticism contain gaping holes of logic and reality. The narrator’s own beliefs are included in the list too – “some part of my own” – yet hers are characterized differently than those of her father and Billy. Only “some part” of her ethnic/familial/communal identity is connected to that malleable anthology of stories. She has, and is again as Cooper notes, leaving this place and way of life behind; perspective has offered her the ability to distinguish reality to an extent beyond her insular Irish American society. Her ostensible point, given the tone of mockery, is that realization of the existence of the actual, the imagined, the believed, though these elements are inextricably tied to one another, often mistaken for one another, and sometimes indecipherable from one another, does make a difference. Billy’s problem was that he collapsed them all into one. St. Philomena serves as a parallel to Eva in this passage, once a saint de-canonized because she may not have existed after all; Billy and his community imagined a saint-like Eva, pure and removed, but Dennis and the narrator know better, and by telling the story, the narrator de-canonizes Eva, and deflates the fantasy.
We are left then at the close of the novel with the same feeling McDermott expressed above in the interview: a realization of the power of story, but also its limitations, and the potential damage that comes from not recognizing the latter. When story becomes the dance that distracts one from reality, one cannot accept it when one is inevitably and finally forced to face it, as we saw with Billy. McDermott wishes not to simply assess the indeterminacy of narrative but to call attention to it, so that one can balance death and the dance. However, though she advocates this balance, she delineates few specific confines for the successful maintenance of this equilibrium. In other words, one wonders the precise moment at which one moves from simply reading Yeats to reading “too much Yeats.” If anything, Billy actually had an incredibly narrow conception of Yeats’s poetry, sticking to a handful of similar poems, for all he apparently read of those. Billy clearly would have known little of Yeats’s *Vision* and his many occultist pursuits. His Yeats was frozen in time, like his Eva; his Yeats was the Yeats of the 1890s, the Yeats that lauded a rural, utopian Ireland. Regardless, McDermott’s narrative technique and approach to storytelling emphasize the conviction she expressed above. Steinfels notes, “even the most minor of McDermott’s characters seem to have a life that extends beyond the pages of her stories” (100). Her characters are so rich with story and nuance that we cannot help but recognize our own inability to fully grasp their stories within these few hundred pages. Much like Yeats, McDermott wants to provide her reader with questions, not answers. She therefore cannot prescribe what constitutes “too much Yeats,” – even though, for her, that state exists – because doing so would require an omniscient and impossible kind of knowledge. What she can do, however, is
demonstrate the consequence of the Yeats Compulsion in the life of Billy Lynch to exemplify a problem that continues to plague her community.

Though McDermott is sympathetic to her people and their history, she is critical of the Irish American capacity to maintain their naiveté amidst the confrontation of startling realities. Her characters actually know little of Ireland or the Irish exodus their ancestors made, but are unwilling to detach themselves from their romanticized portrayals. O’Connell writes:

> For all that, they see themselves as Irish; the idealized idea of Ireland as an inviolate isle beyond the sea pervades their consciousnesses and shapes their identities. Ireland’s four green fields became a compensatory visionary landscape, a lost Eden, for Irish-Americans who forgot the trials of starvation and political repression which their ancestors escaped, for Irish-Americans who refused to believe reports of the hardships and isolation Ireland continued to endure during and after World War II. The romantic dream of Ireland illustrates the latent idealism and vulnerable sentimentality among Irish-Americans but also reveals their susceptibility to denial and deceit. (265)

McDermott’s point is that Irish America’s remarkable capacity for faith is equaled by its capacity to be deceived. The former quality facilitated and developed out of building a life in America and sustained Irish America for a time, but it was also manipulated, to the detriment of many, from within and without the community.

In an essay on Catholicism, McDermott writes, “Fiction made the chaos bearable, fiction transformed the absurdity of our brief lives by giving context and purpose and
significance to every gesture, every desire, every detail ("Confessions" 14). In *Charming Billy’s* she asserts fiction’s value as well, but also wants to call attention to her people’s unwillingness to admit reality into their consciousness even as they watch their fantasies destroy one another. And though she may work from certain Irish stereotypes, she also frees Billy or Dennis from them by uncovering the complexity underlying individual and communal decisions. Steinfels asks, “Is Dennis responsible for the trajectory of Billy’s life and his premature death? Or is Dennis the man who saves Billy from oblivion by allowing others to elaborate a story of unrequited love that canonizes Billy even in life?” (98). McDermott asks the same questions of her reader and avoids offering any easy answer because such answers are nonexistent. Instead, she informs her reader.

O’Connell calls the novel “an achieved fictional realization and revision of Irish-American myths, an informing parable of destructive and redemptive elements in Irish-American life” (O’Connell 264). McDermott cannot determine the precise point at which one reads “too much Yeats,” because all cases are individual and contingent on numerous forces. But she can assert the existence of such a state by showing us how it contributes to the demise of a man predisposed to believe in poetry.
Conclusion:

The Widening Gyre

Tattooed Yeats

In the final year of working on this study I reconnected with an old college roommate who had recently accepted a job at a bank in town. We met every week or so for dinner and some blithe talk. On one occasion, we found ourselves on the topic of tattoos. I told him that I’d always wanted one, but that I could never commit to it because my mind changes so often and I would probably either come to disparage whatever ideology it espoused, or simply think it was ugly after some time. Either way, I would be cursed to look at it until the end of my life.

“That’s why you have to pick something that you can like even if your mind changes,” he said.

He proceeded to tell me about a mutual friend of ours who I had lost contact with years ago.

“He said the same thing as you, about being stuck with something you may not like down the road. That’s why he’s getting a tattoo of the phrase ‘the center cannot hold,’ because it can kind of mean anything, just in case he changes his mind.”

Of course my ears perked up when I heard Yeats’s line.

“You think that can mean anything?” I asked.
“Well, it can at least mean enough things that you could change your mind and still find something you like in it.”

Truth be told, this friend of mine isn’t someone who people would think of as “well read,” but he also occasionally surprised me with his knowledge on certain topics. So when he said Yeats’s line, I was confused about whether or not, first, I had told him that I was writing a dissertation on Yeats (I didn’t think I had) and, second, if he even knew that the words belonged (or at least used to belong) to Yeats. Concerning the first issue, he didn’t know, or didn’t remember. About the second, he didn’t either, but he recognized the phrase and knew that “someone famous” had written it. When I said the line was from a Yeats poem, he seemed to think the tattoo was even better, the phrase even wiser or more legitimate.

“Yeats? Cool.” He drew the name out, they way people do when they know the name but don’t necessarily know how it is pronounced, the way literature students do after having thought it rhymes with “Keats.”

I asked if he remembered reading Yeats in high school or college.

“Not specifically, but we probably did or were supposed to,” he said. Then he surprised me: “Didn’t he know Indiana Jones?”

“I don’t think so.” I didn’t really understand the question.

Turns out, Yeats did know Indiana Jones

Yeats on Television: Part II

As luck would have it, Henry Jones Jr. met William Butler Yeats in April, 1916, just a few days before the Easter Rising. With The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles,
which ran on television from 1992-1993, Creator and Executive Producer George Lucas apparently positioned the young Mr. Jones alongside “great” historical figures of the early twentieth century every week: he crossed the paths of Pablo Picasso, Winston Churchill, Sigmund Freud, Louis Armstrong, Pancho Villa, and many others. Indeed, it seems that this program functioned at least as much as a light, adulterated history lesson for young people as it did an adventure series. And, at least in the mind of Lucas, Yeats was important enough to warrant an illuminating, if brief, meeting with Jones.

Surprisingly, Irish actor Shane Connaughton’s portrayal of Yeats is effective, particularly for an early-90s television program, and as written Yeats’s words and temperament are not unlike how newspaper writers, biographers and critics have depicted them over the last century: he is proud, passionate, and also slightly bizarre due to his mystical nature. Jones meets him while in the company of Sean O’Casey, the Irish dramatist, at the Abbey Theater, where Yeats is directing a rehearsal of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. O’Casey explains to Jones the symbolism of “the four green fields” as they watch. After admonishing the actors’ lack of imagination, he meets with O’Casey and Jones. Yeats has read one of O’Casey’s plays, and though he praises the younger man’s “characterization,” he does not think the play is right for the national theater because it is “too realistic” (“Ireland”). Nevertheless, he expresses interest in seeing O’Casey’s future work. Yeats then asks both young men what they thought of his play and they are quick to offer evasive praise. He explains *Cathleen’s* origin: “It came to me in a dream, you know. A dream almost as distinct as a vision. As if from an invisible world.” Jones comes to an understanding that “symbolism” matters most to Yeats, and, shortly thereafter, he and O’Casey leave.
Though the program’s portrayal of Yeats, unlike its rendering of the Easter Rising, is, at its core, appropriate, what strikes me most after viewing it is how brief Yeats’s appearance is in relation to how apparently affected my friend was by seeing this episode of television twenty years before. Though it would be impossible to fully parcel out why this remained memorable to him, this example does illustrate the complex web of Yeats material that continues to allocate Yeats a role in our cultural consciousness. Despite the fact that Yeats remains a very minor part of the Indiana Jones mythos, relegated not to the big budget productions, but to a short performance in a children’s television program, he is a part of it nonetheless. We have seen throughout this study how Yeats provided his appropriators and commentators with credibility. And, as I have noted, as writers like Auden or Achebe place their names alongside his, not only do they enjoy the benefits of his popularity, but, especially as time goes on, Yeats enjoys the benefit of their popularity. Certainly Indiana Jones has been an extraordinarily popular cultural phenomenon over the last thirty years, and continues to be so; the recent release of his big-screen adventures in high-definition blu-ray is a bestseller at this very moment. As Indiana Jones is thrust back in the spotlight yet again, so too, even in the most minor form, is Yeats. Moreover, as we have seen, Yeats isn’t just a part of the Indiana Jones mythos; programs like Twin Peaks, Seinfeld, and The Sopranos, as well as Indiana Jones have dedicated, passionate fan bases that maintain websites and organize conventions: these kinds of fans often do care about those minor incidences – the kind where Indiana Jones met William Butler Yeats. Yeats is dispersed within that meticulous network; he is, as Auden rightly put it “scattered among a hundred cities,” though, now, these are thousands of cities. And, if my friend’s comment on the nature of Yeats’s lines is any
indication, not only are Yeats’s words “modified in the guts of the living,” they are easily modified. Certainly this, this act of snatching small morsels of Yeats’s striking phraseology and employing them in situations that have little, if any, relation to the meaning of the poems from which they have been plucked, has played no small role in enabling his long posthumous existence, for these words can still be attributed to “Yeats,” and the appropriator – the novelist and the tattooed alike – enjoys the poet’s legacy of legitimization while also maintaining Yeats’s visibility.

**Turning and Turning**

As strangely advantageous as the exchange with my old roommate was, I had grown in the past few years to be unsurprised by such encounters with Yeats; I’ve had conversations in which I have been advised to “tread softly” (“tread softly for you tread on my dreams,” writes in Yeats’s “Aedh and the Cloths of Heaven”) and have been interrupted with the words “and yet and yet” (a line in “Men Improve With the Years”). Certainly these phrases could be common enough to have nothing to do with Yeats, but I’m not so sure. In the latter case especially, it would be hard to attribute something that trivial to Yeats, but the individual said it twice, and with a cadence that indicated that the phrase would only be complete when “and yet” was repeated; either his phrasing was the evolution of Yeatsian phrasing, or I, like McDermott and her doomed Billy, have read too much Yeats – perhaps Yeats has also taught me how to listen. I tend to think it’s more the former than the latter, because this project began when I only kind of knew Yeats, but was astounded by, despite what I perceived was a lack of knowledge about Yeats, the number of Yeats appropriations that I encountered randomly in references that spanned
time, culture, genre, and medium. A few years ago on Halloween I cracked open a childhood copy of Ray Bradbury’s *Something Wicked This Way Comes* to find a Yeats epigraph: “Man is in love, and loves what vanishes.” On a visit to a relative, I opened a pulp mystery novel she was reading and encountered an epigraph that was the final stanza of “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” When I was given Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* as a Christmas present I found Yeats’s “The Man and the Echo” reprinted in the final pages. And last week, while listening to a syndicated jazz program on public radio, the announcer asserted that “things fall apart,” and explained that the role of jazz is to put them back together. Yeats simply keeps showing up.

It is plausible that my old roommate and many others recognize phrases like “the center cannot hold,” not necessarily because they read the poem – though it is likely if not entirely probable, that one who completes secondary and college education *does* encounter the poem – but because “The Second Coming,” like many of Yeats’s poems, has taken on a life of its own by way of its appropriations. Its words have been used to title crimes and romance novels, medical and alternate history thrillers, Batman comic books, and Star Trek novels; history books on the Battle of the Bulge, the political struggles in North Ireland, the 1960 presidential election, and Hurricane Katrina; memoirs on schizophrenia and life in North Dakota; and an album by the hip-hop group The Roots. Its lines appear in the libretto for Benjamin Britten’s opera *The Turn of the Screw*, Alan Moore’s graphic novel *V for Vendetta*, Stephen King’s *The Stand*, and are also featured in Oliver Stone’s film *Nixon*. These are just a handful of examples from a single poem. Yeats’s gyre is ever-widening.
Ellmann attributes Yeats’s greatness to the fact that “He keeps asking the same questions over and over until they have become profound” (298). Perhaps his vibrant posthumous life is not only a product of articulating these questions well, but because he continued to articulate questions rather than answers. If his sustained presence is any indication, people continue to struggle with identifying the “rough beast…slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem,” just as his narrator did. Yeats himself may have donned many masks, but his poems have themselves become masks, offering his appropriators a means of identification. For Irish Americans in the early twentieth century, he offered humanity and hope in the face of Anglo-American prejudice; he provided Auden with a site to explore his own anxieties about the place of the poet and the role of poetry in the Modern world; he legitimized Achebe’s African narrative while also supplying him with a template and the resources to interact and critique Western conceptions of history; and, for McDermott, his early poetry embodied the dream of an idealized Ireland that plagued many Irish Americans throughout the century. By way of these references and all others mentioned above, one will effortlessly encounter Yeats in one form or another with or without recognizing him. But because recognition – because having the answer to the question or the response to the call – often derives pleasure, distinguishing Yeats only makes us more interested in Yeats. And, as we have seen, one doesn’t have to read much Yeats in order to identify his presence. With the help of his appropriators, he has transcended time and space; he remains visible, even while those who wear the Yeats mask continue do so for different reasons.
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Acknowledgements

This dissertation was funded in part by the Francis Mayhew Rippy Graduate Scholarship, and the Voss English Research Award.

I would like to thank Dr. Deborah Mix and Dr. Patrick Collier for their incredible investment of time and energy, for the precise direction, and for the encouragement.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Melissa Adams-Campbell for the fine-tuning, and for monitoring my overuse of “thusly.”

Thanks also to Professor Ronald Hicks for taking the time to see this project through.

And, finally, many thanks to Becki Myers and her colleagues at the Herron Art Library who fielded my many bizarre questions and were always able to find me the answers I needed.