

# POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

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## ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats is widely regarded as one of the most influential poets of the 20th century, not only for his lyrical mastery but also for his incisive political and social criticism. His poetry reflects a deep engagement with the political turmoil of his time, particularly Ireland's struggle for independence, the impact of war, the collapse of aristocratic values, and the cultural and moral decline of modern society. This paper explores how Yeats's poetry serves as a critique of these issues, tracing his evolving stance on nationalism, his disillusionment with revolution, and his warnings about the dangers of unchecked modernity. Yeats's early poetry, inspired by the Irish Literary Revival, romanticized Irish nationalism, but over time, he became increasingly skeptical of political movements, as seen in "September 1913" and "Easter, 1916." His later work, such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "The Second Coming," reflects his anxiety about the chaos and destruction wrought by war and revolution. He also mourns the decline of aristocratic leadership, believing that democracy and mass politics foster mediocrity, a theme evident in "Meditations in Time of Civil War." Additionally, Yeats critiques the cultural and spiritual decay of modernity, as illustrated in "Sailing to Byzantium."

Through his poetry, Yeats not only captures the historical and political transformations of his era but also offers timeless reflections on power, leadership, and human civilization. His work remains relevant in contemporary discussions of nationalism, governance, and societal change. Ultimately, Yeats's poetry serves as both a record of his time and a universal meditation on history's cycles of rise and fall, making him one of the most profound political and social critics in literary history.

**Keywords:** Political, Social Criticism, Poetry, W.B. Yeats



## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was an Irish poet, playwright, and nationalist who played a significant role in the literary and political movements of his time. Born in Sandymount, Dublin, Yeats spent much of his childhood in Sligo, which deeply influenced his love for Irish mythology and folklore. He was educated in Dublin and later became a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival, promoting Irish identity through literature. In the 1890s, Yeats was involved with the Celtic Twilight movement, drawing inspiration from Ireland's myths and legends. His early poetry, such as *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), was mystical and romantic. He later became active in Irish politics, supporting the nationalist cause but remaining skeptical of violent revolution. His poetry evolved to reflect his changing views, evident in "Easter, 1916" and "The Second Coming." Yeats was a co-founder of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, promoting Irish drama. His later work, influenced by his belief in historical cycles, became more philosophical and symbolic, as seen in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1928). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923, recognizing his contribution to poetry. In his final years, Yeats served as an Irish Senator and continued to write until his death in 1939. His legacy endures as one of the greatest poets of modern literature, blending nationalism, mysticism, and deep political insight into his works.

## 1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores how Yeats's poetry functions as political and social criticism, focusing on key themes such as nationalism, disillusionment with modernity, critiques of revolution and war, and his reflections on societal decay.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

### 2.1. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CRITICISM IN THE POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

William Butler Yeats, one of the most celebrated poets of the 20th century, was deeply engaged with the political and social transformations of his time. His poetry reflects a keen awareness of Ireland's national identity, the struggle for independence, the impact of modernity, and the broader concerns of civilization's decline. Yeats's work serves as both an artistic and a political statement, intertwining personal vision with historical critique.

### 2.2. NATIONALISM AND IRISH IDENTITY

Yeats's early poetry was deeply influenced by Irish mythology, folklore, and the nationalist movement. As a member of the Irish Literary Revival, he sought to cultivate a distinct Irish cultural identity, resisting British influence through literature. His early works, such as *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), celebrate the mysticism and heroism of Ireland's past. Poems like "To Ireland in the Coming Times" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" present an idealized vision of Ireland, often contrasting it with the encroachments of English colonial rule. However, Yeats's nationalism evolved over time. Initially associated with the romanticized vision of Ireland, he later became disillusioned with the political movements that emerged, especially after the 1916 Easter Rising. His poem "September 1913" illustrates this shift, lamenting the materialism and corruption of contemporary Ireland. The repeated refrain, "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave," mourns the loss of noble ideals in Irish politics. Yeats criticizes the new generation of nationalists, implying that they lack the heroic spirit of past revolutionaries. His ambivalence towards nationalism is further evident in "Easter, 1916", where he wrestles with the consequences of the rebellion. While recognizing the bravery of the rebels, he questions the cost of their sacrifice, writing, "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." The phrase "A terrible beauty is born" encapsulates his conflicted emotions—acknowledging both the nobility and the futility of their martyrdom. Unlike earlier nationalistic poetry, "Easter, 1916" does not glorify revolution but instead presents it as a tragic necessity.

## 3. DISILLUSIONMENT WITH MODERNITY

Yeats's poetry also critiques modernity, especially the cultural and spiritual decline he perceived in contemporary society. Influenced by his belief in cyclical history, as outlined in his work *A Vision* (1925), Yeats saw civilization as moving through phases of growth and decay. This pessimistic worldview is vividly expressed in "The Second Coming", where he portrays a world descending into chaos. The lines "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" and "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" suggest a disordered society, where traditional values are collapsing, and demagogues are rising. Yeats's critique of modernity extends beyond political instability to cultural decay. In "Sailing to Byzantium", he contrasts the vitality of the past with the lifelessness of the present. The opening line, "That is no country for old men", signals his dissatisfaction with a society obsessed with materialism and physical pleasures. The poem's yearning for Byzantium, an ancient symbol of artistic and spiritual transcendence, reflects Yeats's desire for a world that values wisdom and permanence over fleeting pleasures. His rejection of modernity is further emphasized through the imagery of the aged speaker transforming into a golden, mechanical bird—an artificial yet eternal form of art that outlives the decay of the natural world.

## 4. CRITIQUE OF REVOLUTION AND WAR

Though Yeats admired certain nationalist ideals, he was skeptical of the revolutionary violence that characterized Ireland's struggle for independence. His critique is evident in "The Stare's Nest by My Window", from *Meditations in Time of Civil War*. The poem reflects his disillusionment with the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), as he watches the destruction unfolding around him. The speaker's plea, "O honey-bees, come build in the empty house of the stare", symbolizes a longing for peace and reconstruction amidst chaos. Unlike earlier revolutionary poetry, this work presents violence as destructive rather than heroic. Similarly, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" critiques the naive optimism of the past, reflecting on how ideals often lead to bloodshed. The poem laments:

"We, who seven years ago  
Talked of honour and of truth,  
Shriek with pleasure if we show  
The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth."

This shift from idealism to cynicism underscores Yeats's frustration with how revolutions betray their own principles. His reference to "what rough beast, its hour come round at last" in "The Second Coming" also serves as a warning against the monstrous consequences of unchecked revolutionary zeal.

While Yeats disapproved of war and destruction, he did not wholly reject the necessity of struggle. In "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", he presents a deeply personal meditation on war through the perspective of an Irish pilot fighting in World War I. The airman, aware of his inevitable death, finds no purpose in the war, stating:

"Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love."

This detachment from nationalist fervor reflects Yeats's view that war often serves the interests of politicians rather than the people who fight in it. The pilot's existential reflection, "A lonely impulse of delight", suggests that personal honor and individual destiny are more meaningful than political conflicts.

### Reflections on Societal Decay

Yeats's later poetry increasingly focused on the decline of civilization, warning of an impending apocalypse. His belief in the cyclical nature of history led him to see contemporary events as part of a broader pattern of destruction and renewal. "Leda and the Swan", for instance, reinterprets the Greek myth of Zeus's rape of Leda as an allegory for historical change. The poem suggests that acts of violence, whether divine or political, shape the course of civilization. The closing question, "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?", implies that history is driven by violent forces beyond human control.

Yeats's "The Tower" continues this theme, presenting an aging poet reflecting on the decay of both his own body and the world around him. The poem's speaker longs for the energy of youth but is resigned to the inevitable decline of all things. This sense of weariness pervades much of Yeats's later work, where he envisions the collapse of the old order and the uncertain birth of something new.

Even in his final poems, Yeats remains deeply critical of society. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" serves as a reflection on his own poetic legacy, suggesting that even art is ultimately built on personal and historical failure. The poem concludes with the striking admission:

"Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

Here, Yeats acknowledges the imperfections of human ambition and the inevitable decay of all grand visions, whether political or artistic.

### Nationalism and Its Disillusionment

Yeats's early work was infused with Irish nationalism, celebrating the myths, folklore, and heroic past of Ireland. His role in the Irish Literary Revival was part of a broader effort to foster a distinct Irish identity separate from British rule. Poems like "To Ireland in the Coming Times" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" reflect his romantic vision of Ireland as a mystical and culturally rich nation. However, this romantic nationalism later evolved into a more critical perspective. By

the time he wrote "September 1913", Yeats had become disillusioned with the materialism and corruption he saw in contemporary Irish politics. He contrasts the self-serving attitudes of modern politicians with the noble sacrifice of past revolutionaries, lamenting:

"What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence."

Here, he criticizes the greed and pragmatism of the new Irish bourgeoisie, who, in his view, had abandoned the high ideals of Irish nationalism. His ambivalence deepened after the Easter Rising of 1916. In "Easter, 1916", he wrestles with the tension between admiration and doubt, ultimately acknowledging the tragic beauty of the rebels' sacrifice:

"A terrible beauty is born."

The phrase captures his conflicting emotions—while he recognizes the heroism of the revolutionaries, he also questions whether their deaths were in vain. This theme of nationalist disillusionment recurs in his later work, as he becomes increasingly skeptical of the political leaders who emerged after independence.

#### The Critique of Revolution and Political Violence

While Yeats supported the idea of Irish independence, he was deeply critical of the violence and extremism that accompanied it. This skepticism is evident in "The Stare's Nest by My Window", written during the Irish Civil War. Watching the destruction around him, he longs for peace and reconstruction:

"O honey-bees, come build in the empty house of the stare!"

This plea for renewal contrasts sharply with the chaos of the war, emphasizing the poet's preference for creation over destruction.

Similarly, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" reflects Yeats's disillusionment with the aftermath of the Irish struggle for independence. He mourns the loss of the old ideals that once guided revolutionary movements, expressing despair over the brutal realities of war:

"All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong."

Here, he portrays humanity as caught in a violent, chaotic cycle, where noble aspirations quickly descend into barbarism. His growing fear that revolutions often devour their own ideals suggests a deep skepticism toward violent political movements.

## 5. THE COLLAPSE OF ARISTOCRATIC ORDER

Yeats was not only a nationalist but also an aristocrat by temperament. He mourned the decline of the old Anglo-Irish aristocracy, which he saw as the custodians of culture and refinement. This theme is central to "The Tower", where the poet reflects on the decay of both personal and societal values. The aging speaker, isolated in his tower, represents Yeats's own sense of detachment from the changing world. His nostalgia for the aristocracy is also evident in "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation", where he laments the decline of the great houses of Ireland. He views the rising democratic and populist movements as lacking the wisdom and grandeur of the old ruling class. For Yeats, the loss of aristocratic values leads to a coarsening of society, a theme that recurs throughout his later poetry.

#### Fear of Modernity and Cultural Decline

Yeats's poetry often critiques modernity, which he saw as leading to cultural and spiritual decay. This fear is perhaps most famously expressed in "The Second Coming", where he describes a world in which traditional values have collapsed:

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

These lines capture his anxiety about the disintegration of social and moral order in the wake of World War I and the rise of radical ideologies. The poem's closing image of a monstrous "rough beast" slouching towards Bethlehem suggests an ominous future, where civilization itself is under threat.

Similarly, in "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats expresses his dissatisfaction with the materialism of modern society. The opening line, "That is no country for old men," signals his rejection of a world that values youth and pleasure over wisdom

and spiritual transcendence. He longs for a realm like Byzantium, where art and intellect endure beyond the decay of the body.

## 6. LEADERSHIP AND THE ROLE OF THE POET

Another important aspect of Yeats's political criticism is his exploration of leadership and governance. He believed that a nation needed strong, visionary leaders rather than mere politicians. In "The Leaders of the Crowd", he criticizes the fickleness of the masses and the mediocrity of their leaders:

"They must to keep their certainty accuse  
All that are different of a base intent."

Yeats's distrust of populism and mass democracy reflects his belief that true leadership comes from individuals of exceptional vision rather than from the will of the majority. His poem "Meditations in Time of Civil War" further explores this idea, contrasting the chaos of the present with the stability of past leadership. Yeats saw himself as a poet-prophet, someone who could offer guidance through art rather than direct political engagement. This belief in the poet's role as a visionary also appears in "The Circus Animals' Desertion", where Yeats reflects on the limitations of art in the face of political and social decline. By the end of his life, he had come to accept that poetry could not directly change the world, but it could bear witness to its transformation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

W.B. Yeats's poetry offers a profound critique of the political and social forces that shaped his time. His early nationalist idealism gave way to a more complex and often skeptical view of revolution, war, and political leadership. He mourned the decline of aristocratic values, feared the rise of modern materialism, and expressed deep concerns about the fate of civilization. His belief in historical cycles led him to view contemporary events as part of a broader pattern of rise and fall. Ultimately, his poetry serves as both a record of Ireland's transformation and a timeless meditation on power, history, and human nature. Through his work, Yeats not only engaged with the immediate political struggles of his era but also offered insights that remain relevant today. His warnings about the dangers of blind revolution, the perils of weak leadership, and the consequences of cultural decline continue to resonate, making him one of the most politically and socially astute poets of modern literature.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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