

CHAPTER 10

IRISH ART AND JACK B. YEATS.

BIOGRAPHY.

Jack Butler Yeats was born in 1871. His father was the portrait painter, John Butler Yeats, and Jack's brother became the poet, William Butler Yeats.

The Yeats family were living in London but most of Jack's schooling until he was about sixteen, took place in Ireland. He lived in Sligo with his grandparents who were millers and both owned and sailed ships. His earliest memories would have been of ships and sailors, of the colourful tales of seafaring men and of their voyages to far off countries and remote islands.

Jack Yeats entered art school in London in 1887. In 1888 his first black and white illustrations were accepted for publication. In 1894 he married Mary Cottenham White. In 1895 he had his first exhibition of watercolours in Dublin. In 1897 he settled in Devonshire. From 1910 he lived permanently in Ireland. Over his lifetime he exhibited in over 60 one-man shows in various countries. Yeats has been described as a master of modern art and an artist of European stature. He survived his wife by ten years and died in Dublin on March 28, 1957.

INFLUENCES ON YEATS.

He would have gone to local cattle and horse fairs, visited travelling circuses and frequented horse races such as those run on the seashore near Sligo. These early memories are reflected over and over again in his work. He later wrote: 'Sligo was my school and the sky above it.'

A major influence was the Irish landscape, especially around Sligo. Because Yeats grew up during the years of the Irish literary revival he was influenced by the legends and tales of ancient Ireland. His painting, *There is no Night* has echoes of Oisín's return from *Tír na nÓg*. But it was the ordinary people of Ireland he had seen at fairs and horse races who were the real heroes of his paintings. He would have no part with the caricatures of Irish people commonly found in English newspapers of the day. In his paintings he identifies with the ordinary people of Ireland and their simple life, people he had seen in his travels from Connemara to Sligo. For him, they were worthy of celebration for their dignity and heroic qualities. They were the underdogs, a conquered people but now free as he himself was free, to take his art to extreme limits.

QUALITIES OF HIS WORK.

His work is full a sense of freedom, of wonder, excitement and adventure. The pictures tell a story, people or horses, usually on a journey, filled with enthusiasm, courage and hope. There is no alienation or despair that we find in the art of the Expressionists. The journey is challenging, the terrain is rough, but courage wins out. Romantic Ireland still lives in the lives of the ordinary people. Yeats could be described as a romantic Expressionist.

His theme is Ireland as a young country facing the challenges of the future with courage and hope.

In summary, Yeats had a marvellous colour sense and a highly developed personal style. His approach was similar to Expressionism but he was optimistic in his outlook.

The West of Ireland landscape with its wild skies and mellow mists was to feature in all his work. While he did paint pure landscapes, his preference was for figures in the landscape.

His first paintings were in watercolour. His early oil paintings tended to be sombre in colour, smooth in texture and descriptive in content. Later his approach changed radically, becoming full of colour and light, his brushwork full of freedom and excitement. In his hands the ordinary and mundane became transfigured by his rich imagination and poetic fantasy.

PHASES OF HIS WORK.

(1) The illustrative phase. During his early period he did a lot of drawings for newspapers.

(2) When he started to paint, drawing and line were more important in his work than colour, in for example *Before the Start, 1915*.

(3) His optimistic phase - he had less emphasis on line and allowed colour to dominate.

(4) His grief phase - when he became more pessimistic towards the end of his life.

In his paintings there is always 'something happening'. His work is characterised by its emphasis on actions, encounters and moments of decision, whether in his isolated and solitary figures - men of the West determined to conquer, jockeys determined to win. His art may be seen in terms of the individual's encounter with the world.

From phase three onwards, colour is more important than line. He had felt that line was hemming him in. Once he broke out of the confines of line he felt strong enough to exercise his freedom with colour. In his late paintings, in *Grief* for example, colour completely dominates.

Even in his drawings he thought in terms of atmosphere - the atmosphere in the dusky background of a fairgreen, or the white morning light breaking through the mist. In such settings he painted his figures in motion - horses clearing a bank, rowers straining in the regatta, the wild eyed traveller suddenly emerging out of the dark night.

PHASE I - ILLUSTRATIVE.

Before the Start. 1919. National Gallery of Ireland.

His drawings, illustrations and watercolours were cool, carefully executed and sombre in mood.

Before the Start belongs to the illustrative phase in his painting. A group of riders, silhouetted against a pale sky, are poised, ready for the start of a race on the strand. Here the emphasis is on drawing and strong line rather than colour. The colour is muted, dark toned and sombre, the textures smooth. His main concern is with a group of contrasting characters, representing determination, nervousness and aggression, their horses in turn reflecting these different moods in their expressive heads and ears. The tension before the start of the race is expressed by the large area of sky on the one hand and the line of expectant neighbours crowding in on the horsemen, leaving them wondering if they can ever get away.

PHASE 2 - TRADITIONAL.

***The Liffey Swim*. 1923. National Gallery of Ireland.**

In traditional art, line and tone were more important than colour. Once he became aware that line was hemming him in he broke out of its confines and into liberating colour. Line is still important here but does not dominate. There is more freedom and spontaneity in the use of colour and less evidence of planned drawing.

This picture represents the development from his illustrative phase to his later use of free flowing colour. It records the annual swim down the River Liffey through Dublin City and is full of the excitement of the event. Spectators in the foreground crowd the riverside path on Bachelor's Walk, while others view the event from passing trams and from O'Connell Bridge in the middle distance. There is a wide range of types, young and old, and from every social class.

The man in the brown hat to the left of centre may well be the artist himself, represented as a detached observer, while all the others are deeply involved in the event.

The change of style from *Before the Start* is evidenced in the long and broad brushstrokes, in the rich colours and the contrasting highlights, giving the impression of rapid painting. But this is still a transitional work as is apparent from his strong line represented by the tops of the buildings on the right and the other perspective line on the top left. The sharp contrast between the earth and sky also belongs to his earlier phase. This picture is an example of his use of the brush. His later work was done mostly with a palette knife. This picture can be compared with *Before the Start*.

PHASE 3 – OPTIMISTIC – the road pictures.

***The Two Travellers*, 1942. Tate Gallery, London.**

Two men meeting on a road by the sea with a bare mountain and a vast windy sky in the background. The men are sturdy and determined. Bright reds, greens, yellows in the foreground contrasting with greys, blues and browns of the mountain, sea and sky. The road winds on into an infinite distance. The two figures symbolise all who conquer the elements of land, sea and air as they continue on their journey.

***Men of Destiny*. 1946, National Gallery of Ireland.**

The theme of this painting is energy, power and excitement. Yeats had seen men like these, men of destiny on whom the future of Ireland depended. Transfigured by the gold and royal blue of the setting sun, the two fishermen fasten their masted boats as they disembark at Rosses Point. A storm may be looming but the men have the confidence to brave the elements undeterred. There is a light on the horizon. He presents the sky flaming with energy, reflected in the foam of the dark tossing sea. Here is an emotional use of colour to create his idealized vision. Is this a self-portrait? Do the two men represent Ireland. Compare with W. B. Yeats' poem, *The Wild Swans at Coole* – "Passion and Conquest, wander where they will, attend upon them still". Compared with *The Liffey Swim*, note the coherence of earth and sky and the intensity of expression.

***Freedom*. 1947, Private Collection**

For Yeats the horse symbolises freedom, courage, energy, determination, a fighting quality, undaunted by the bruises he may have to bear. The colour of the horse - blood red symbolises life and power. Here, Yeats is expressing the idea of the challenging journey and the determination that people show in life. The brushwork is free and lively -

dabs and strokes suggesting movement, flicked rapidly on the canvas. Line quality – rapid brush strokes in the sky suggesting movement, yellow dabs as sparks from the stones, indicating speed. Visual qualities – strong pure foreground colours – green and yellow contrasting with pale blues of sea and sky.

The Singing Horseman, 1949, National Gallery of Ireland.

This is one of Yeats' most joyous images. A bare-headed youth – transformed into a state of ecstasy - is mounted on a yellow horse, clasping his hands together and singing his heart out to the heavens. The horse is transformed too, turning into gold in a landscape which loses its look of solidity. Man and horse have become one with the landscape as they strike out on the road, full of confidence and optimism. Is this a vision of life which can express the unseen as well as the seen? Is it a statement of his artistic freedom? Is this Yeats himself, with his energy and sheer abandon, as he sets out on his personal journey? Note the horse symbol again, and the freedom and confidence in the handling of paint. Could this be Ireland facing the future in hope?

For the Road. 1951, National Gallery of Ireland

The horse hears its master's call and gallops towards him on a road through a dark forest. A figure silhouetted at a distant tunnel of light, beckons, drawing the horse out of the dark and into the light. The darkened wood is enlivened by touches of red and yellow.

The horse, flecked out in different tones of blue with a painting knife, exudes a magical, almost translucent quality, as if an apparition. The excitement of the horse on being called to undertake its journey symbolises Yeats' positive attitude to life, which he saw as a progression towards a goal with a sympathetic companion. Does the painting symbolise a sudden flash of vision? Is the horse a symbol for the artist himself? Are we in this picture? What is our destiny? Compare this picture with *Men of Destiny*.

For the Road seems to be a metaphor for the uncertainty and confusion of our journey through the darkness of life into the new light of peace and freedom that we can barely glimpse.

Note the freedom of the paintwork, especially in the horse, conveying the notion of excitement, life, energy and speed.

PHASE 4 - GRIEF.

Many Ferries. 1948, National Gallery of Ireland.

Many Ferries recalls a tour undertaken by Yeats and J.M. Synge through the poverty stricken areas of the West of Ireland in June 1905. Synge reported on what they had seen and the conditions of life there in a series of articles illustrated with drawings by Yeats. The view that Yeats recalls in this picture was to be seen from the top of Dinish Island, at the end of a string of islands in the Gorumna group off the south coast of Connemara. The larger islands had been joined to the mainland by a series of causeways, but Dinish was still reached by ferry from Furnace. Yeats did two pen-and-ink portraits of the ferryman who afterwards took the two travellers up to the highest point of the island and showed them the fine view of the whole group of islands and the Atlantic beyond, with a few fishing boats in the distance.

In the painting, the ferryman in his broad brimmed caubeen, looks down at the string of islands, painted richly in green and yellow, stretching out to the roughly brushed

yellow sky over the Atlantic. The ferryman, looking sad and old, possibly a self portrait of the artist reflecting on his past, now looks into an infinite future at all the bridges still to be crossed, that is if he will ever cross them or get to his Hy Brazil, isle of the blest. A sense of mystery is evoked in the misty atmosphere.

There is no Night. 1949, private collection, on loan to the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin.

The title of the painting suggests that the artist was inspired by the New Testament *Book of Revelation*, some verses of which he may have read at his wife's funeral two years previously – 'And there shall be no night there. And I saw heaven opened and behold a white horse' (Revelation 19, v 11). In no sense was Yeats merely illustrating the words from Scripture. The figure in the painting, the horse and landscape are entirely imaginary. Here, a lone traveller (Yeats himself?), awakening at daybreak on a lonely moor to see a ghostly horse galloping towards him under a still dark sky. The ghostly figure seems unable to continue the journey, but the faithful horse returns to the rescue - the seemingly infinite power of the horse contrasted with the powerless, broken man. The night will be no more - suggesting a note of hope. Is he looking forward to a resurrection? The warm earthy colours of the landscape and the symbolic brightening of the sky seem to suggest that the traveller is arriving in some promised land (*Tír na nÓg?*). Because Yeats was influenced by Irish legends, the painting could be partly a recollection of the story of Oisín. After Oisín returned from *Tír na n-Óg* he fell from his horse and lay on the ground, a broken old man, waiting to be rescued by the sound of a Christian bell. Is the horse a symbol of the undying soul or the salvific symbol of God? It is a painting with many layers of meaning.

In his application of paint, Yeats often squeezed colours out of tubes, used thumb marks and frequently used his palette knife to make gestural strokes.

There is no Night is a very large painting and does not reproduce very well.

On through the Silent Lands, 1951, Ulster Museum, Belfast.

What and where are the silent lands? Does 'silent' here suggest solitude or melancholia? Is this a depiction of loneliness? A solitary man, a lonely bent figure looks down on all the bridges yet to be crossed. The distance yet to be covered seems infinite, the prospect daunting. Or has he reached the final bridge, signalling his passage from this life to a land of silence? This time there is no horse figure to come to his rescue. The dominant colour is blue, the colour of grief. Blue also denotes distance and infinity. This painting faithfully depicts the atmospheric of the West of Ireland landscape.

The Plank Road. 1955, Private Collection.

The precarious nature of this man's journey is suggested in the title of the painting. No longer the dashing figure, he plods along on his solitary way through the world, the uncertain bog terrain, the sky forming an infinite backdrop, blue the dominant colour, the fog and blue mist suggesting infinity and the never-ending journey. Compare with *Freedom*.

***Grief*. 1951, National Gallery of Ireland.**

Here is a typically Irish town – two rows of houses facing each other; and between them pours a crowd of angry fighting men, sketched in various tones of indigo, which is broken only by the green of a figure in the left foreground who may be fleeing from the soldiers.

Their leader, on a white horse, framed between the houses, gestures aggressively. He and his horse's head occupy a position just above the centre of the painting.

In the foreground, an old man with white hair and face crouches dazed, looking at the blood dropping into his hands. A mother puts her arm around a small child and inclines her head towards him. The child has yellow hair and because of the space allowed to him, he tends to dominate the painting. His hands and the lower part of his body are red with blood

The bare courtyard on the right is contrasted with the colourful landscape on the left confronting the agitated soldiers and their silhouetted guns.

Yeats is now totally liberated from line, to the extent that this could be described as a semi-abstract painting. Colour is all, exploding all over the canvas. The whole story is told through colour, blue the colour of grief, red the colour of violence, black the colour of death. Blood red colours contrasting with blue. He uses broken line to suggest a world broken by war. The knight on horseback, trampling the innocent. What is the significance of his use of red in this picture? The nearest Yeats came to a truly expressionist painting.

For discussion purposes, this painting could be compared with Picasso's *Guernica* – in what ways are they alike but at the same time, different?

In 1947 his wife died, his sister in 1949; he was getting old, coping with the emotions of sadness, loneliness and despair. He was also affected by the horrors of war. *Grief* may have been his response to these horrors.

Jack B. Yeats, *My Beautiful, My Beautiful*. 1953, Private Collection.

One of the last paintings, painted at 84 years of age. The horse for him symbolises loyalty, intelligence, freedom and life. Is the old man saying good bye to his faithful horse? He and the horse are now almost one. Painted in yellow, the colour of life and energy, the horse stands erect, powerful and confident, now elevated to a plane greater than the man. Does the horse represent all that the man would like to be? The man, painted in blue, the colour of grief, is weak, bowed and broken. Yet there is a silent understanding between them. Has the man found ultimate peace, having now reached the light - or enlightenment? Does the horse represent to him all that is beautiful and noble in life, all of which he must soon leave behind him? Yeats was obsessed by the horse symbol which he saw as something almost eternal or divine, in contrast to man's mortality. His brother, W.B. Yeats, in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, also saw the swans as free, powerful, beautiful and almost eternal.

Note the harmony and coherence of the picture surface compared with *Before the Start* - the harmony of colours and texture, the masterly application of paint, brilliant colour and atmosphere. A world beautiful and sad, a world he must soon leave.

As a final word on Yeats, like all great art, his paintings challenge us to look at the world and ourselves in a new way. His work could be described as revelatory, in his ability to

peer beyond the surfaces of ordinary everyday things and by some miracle or other, to show them as transfigured in a way that excites our sense of wonder.

DISCUSSING PAINTINGS BY JACK. B. YEATS.

In any discussion of the art of Jack B. Yeats with children, most of the questions will arise out of the information supplied in the above analysis of his work. In a general way the following points may be borne in mind. It will also be helpful to compare examples of his earlier with his later work. The aim is to stimulate a response from the children without giving them all the information initially. (See Chapter 12 'Looking and Responding').

1. What is the dominant colour in the painting? What do you think was the artist's intention in using this colour? Do the colours symbolise any feelings? Compare his use of colour in his earlier with his later work.
2. What is the significance of the textures created by his loose, rapid brushwork? Compare textures from his earlier with his later work.
3. What makes his earlier paintings less exciting than his later work?
4. What is the significance in the painting being dark toned or bright toned?
5. Yeats uses galloping horses in many of his paintings. What do you think the horse symbolises for Yeats?
4. Is he an optimist or a pessimist on the evidence of a particular painting?
5. Would it be true to say that every painting of Yeats is a self-portrait?
6. Compare his 'loose messy' style with that of a more traditional painting
7. Do many of his paintings have something to do with journeys? What is the evidence for this in a particular work?