

The Irish Fairies in W. B. Yeats's Early Poems

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I. Introduction

William Butler Yeats is regarded as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, and being so famous a poet, there is no doubt that heaps of books have been written on him, viewing his work from many different angles.

Recent criticism on Yeats has swung to the extreme assertion that the early poems are worthy of serious attention not merely in relation to the whole body of Yeats's poetry but as better than the later poetry. This claim has some support from Yeats himself when, in a letter to Margot Ruddock in 1935, he says: "those early poems in their objective simplicity, their folk life, are greater in kind than my later poetry (which are better poems)" (*Ah, Sweet Dancer* 39).

What this paper attempts to do is to offer a kind of viewpoint of his early poems focusing on supernatural existence of Irish fairies, which is paid less critical attention to, in comparison with his later poetry. As the

paper is focused on Yeats's earlier work, some poems from the period between 1886 and 1900 are analyzed; mostly taken from the first three collections of poems: *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose*(1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

Fairies are a universal phenomenon, known to every country and people of the world. But while in most parts of Europe the belief in fairies vanished with the beginning of the Enlightenment, it continued in more remote parts of our planet, such as Ireland, Scotland, and Iceland. Few regions in Europe have firmer beliefs in fairies and other supernatural creatures than Ireland. Ireland is the country of Fairies. The reason for this is not mere popular superstition, but because in the Gaelic literature which is the inheritance of the Irish race Fairies and Fairyland play an important part (O'Connor 545).

By the time Yeats was twenty-one, two concerns had already emerged as central in his writings (Pethica 129). One was his rejection of late-Victorian scientific rationalism. The other concern was his desire to identify himself specifically as an Irish writer, and to assert the distinctiveness of "Irishness" as a cultural identity. These two concerns would appeal to him on the interest in Irish fairies in Irish folklore and legend. Irish folklore and legend offered Yeats subject matter at least in the first two decades of his career. Yeats would repeatedly urge from around from 1889 that Irish writers "ought to take Irish subjects"(*Letters to the New Island* 31).

Yeats was deeply involved in the fairy-belief, and believed in their reality, like his ancestors had done centuries before. He wanted it to draw inspiration from Ireland's ancient past. Yeats saw ancient Ireland and its sagas as one of the seven great fountains in the gardens of the world's imagination(*Uncollected Prose* 81). Yeats was also seeking to revive Ireland's folklore because it demonstrated something unique about Ireland,

a “special feature of Irish culture that could be used to give Ireland a separate and meaningful identity, at a time when Ireland was again struggling to free itself from British rule” (Purkiss 294).

Although Yeats’s early poems have always been popular with the general reader, on the whole Yeatsian criticism has, understandably, concentrated on the elucidation and evaluation of the more difficult later verse. Many critics, including Harold Bloom, Thomas Parkinson, and James A. Notopoulos, feel that Yeats’s early poems are frivolous and silly, dealing in large part with the supernatural. They propose that Yeats’s writings get better over time, more mature, but in focusing only on the later work, they overlook the pure brilliance of Yeats’s early poems; they overlook how the two worlds, the world that we live in and the world that is beyond our understanding, which Yeats describes are really one world, interconnected, each affecting the other. In his earlier career, Yeats is absorbed in supernatural things to transform the daily world into an ideal one, and his usual self into an ideal one (Miller 68). This paper is to investigate the process for Yeats to overcome and accept the agonies and failures of real world, and his approach to harmonize the two symmetrical worlds of the ideal and the real in his early poems.

II. Fairies in *Crossways*(1889) and *The Rose*(1893)

Yeats describes two worlds throughout his work: the world of mortal creatures and the world of immortal creatures. Thomas L. Byrd Jr notes this in his book *The Early Poems of W. B. Yeats*: “The world of immortal creatures(such as fairies) and the world of mortal creatures are really one and the same” and “[Yeats] is describing a universe in which two worlds

are really one world. Man, through the process of civilization, has lost the capacity to see the ‘other world’” (11). Yeats portrays the world of mortals as the world that a person can see, reach out and touch with their finger tips. It is a world that is free of the magic that Yeats seeks. The other world as described by Yeats through much of his poetry is a world that is free of death and free of the suffering of the mortal world. The other world, conveyed by folklorists, is a world that lies underground with specific centers in natural hills, prehistoric chamber-tombs or rained forts (Bruford147) and also in the *Tir-Nan-Oge*, “country of the young” which is the land of the fairy fold (Conner34). Yeats said “The land of fairy, where nobody gets old and godly and grave, where nobody gets old and crafty and wise, where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.” These are the places that fairies inhabit both in folklore and Yeats’s poems, and though sometimes [fairies are] forced underground, they have always reemerged (Silver 9). These two worlds, according to Yeats, exist on a common ground and are not really separated as much as one might think; for there are ways to see the other world if one knows where to look. However, we are not meant to take the other world lightly, for there are consequences for searching for the other world and trespassing through its lands. For Yeats, this other world holds knowledge that is hidden to us mortals and throughout his life Yeats continued to search for this knowledge.

This personal vision is apparent in “The Stolen Child,” which was written in 1886 and is considered to be one of Yeats’s more notable early poems. The poem is based on Irish legend and concerns fairies beguiling a child to come away with them. The poem tells the story of a child who is tempted by the fairies to go over to the other side, to leave the world of suffering that is our world and join the world of the imaginary. In “The Stolen Child,” Yeats creates a distinct contrast between the urban world

that he originated from, and the imagined other world, the idealistic world of the Irish Peasant.

In the poem, the contemporary urban world, the world of the “machine,” is a cold and cruel one, while the fairy world is with nature:

*Come away, O human child!
To the woods and waters wild
With a faery hand in hand
For the world's more full of weeping than you
can understand. (CP 20)*

Yeats uses “fairy” for a desirable world, the “human child” for reality which is full of troubles and weeping. In this world every life was created and vanished through its birth and death. Yeats describes the paradise as a dimly twinkling world by the colors of “moonlight” or “grey.” The poet hopes to escape from reality, where people “drop their tears,” following the fairies’s voices to the paradise. The poet wants to completely part from his realistic surroundings, passionately looking forward to living in a fairies’s world. Indeed, the world of the fairy is empowering in its distance from the urban world:

WHERE dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water-rats:
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berries
And of reddest stolen cherries. (CP 20)

The fantasy world Yeats creates sharply contrasts with the real world,

representing his dissatisfaction with the real world. Yeats describes the supernatural world he has created, by providing us with information of its qualities and dimensions. In this world, the fairies are said to have hidden their “faery vats, full of berries / And of the reddest stolen cherries.” The idea of fruit being stolen is portrayed here, thus supporting the view that the child has lost his innocence. He has clearly attempted to obtain freedom and retain innocence; however, if this is not possible then an urban lifestyle will substitute.

This otherworld is one of mystery, dance and joy. Yeats describes the dancing of the faeries in the moonlight; he employs the concept of chasing of “the frothy bubbles” suggests a certain degree of freedom. Although, the reality “full of troubles” contrasts this freedom; the island Yeats has created is isolated by water. This frees it from societies’ limits and enables nature on the island to remain wild. Symbolically, the island acts as a guardian angel of the child, protecting his development and preserving his innocence.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
 The dim grey sands with light
 Far off by farthest Rosses
 We foot it all the night,
 Weaving olden dances,
 Mingling hands and mingling glances
 Till the moon has taken flight;
 To and fro we leap
 And chase the frothy bubbles,
 While the world is full of troubles
 And is anxious in its sleep. (CP 20)

The delight and great joy of this fairy world could remain permanent, only “till the moon has taken flight.” And as time passes, such light leaves

for the poet's sorrows of parting. In "To and fro we leap," the poet shows the scene that people in the real world passionately pursue an idealistic world. Such people, however, are doomed to come back to reality which is full of troubles. So the poet longs to live in an imaginative world, even for one minute.

Yeats illustrates his message in the final stanza, by drawing another contrast. He associates imagery of "calves," "kettle" and "mice" with a country home. This is therefore being asserted to denote how modern society has enslaved nature. Yet, herons are wild and free animals, which are found near water (the symbol of freedom) in the poem. Yeats portrays his disappointment with modern society, particularly due to the increased nature of violence in society. The poem concludes with the impression that the child will be offered a better life among the fairies.

Away with us he's going
 The solemn eyed:
 He'll hear no more the lowing
 Of the calves on the warm hill-side
 Or the kettle on the hob
 Sing peace into his breast,
 Or see the brown mice bob
 Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
*For he comes, the human child,
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.*
 (CP 21)

The supernatural aspect of the poem is most evident in the words that are spoken by fairies in tempting the young child to go with them to their world. The words they speak are sweet and very convincing. Many people

would be persuaded by them.

The poet dreams of an idealistic world, escaping from the reality full of weeping. This was one of the major themes that Yeats used repeatedly in his poetry, the idea of fairy land as an escape from the real world to a timeless place, a perfect realm of no feeling or emotion, hence, no pain, and the very human temptation to flee from pain into such an escape. For Yeats, fairy realms were indeed associated with death, but escape to the immortal realms meant not just a physical death, but rather death to the will and the ego.

In "A Faery Song," fairies sing a song over the burial monument of Diarmuid and Grania. They sing that the pair is "old and gay," and ask for them to be given rest away from human life. The fairies say that they are also old and gay, maybe thousands of years old.

Yeats begins the poem with a play on the cliché "old and gay," describing the mythical pair as "old and gay." This demonstrates a nostalgia for the ancient Irish period of heroes and scholars, and, importantly, the lack of a British presence in Ireland. Diarmuid and Grania belong to an ancient Irish tale. Diarmuid was an infantryman in the army called the Fianna, which fought for the ancient hero Finn MacCumhall. Finn wanted to marry Grania, but she ran away with Diarmuid.

When the newly married couple, Diarmuid and Grania, was in their bridal sleep under a Cromlech, the old fairy offers an prayer for everlasting love to them. In reality full of agony and sadness, it is very hard for people to go through such everlasting love and peace. The real world lacks "silence," "love," and "long dew-dropping hours of the night"(CP 43). The fairy world is an idealistic world filled with love, peace and rest for Yeats.

In "The White Birds," the poetic narrator "I" wishes that he and his beloved could escape from their circumstances and be together. This wish is captured in the image of the two of them transformed into white birds

floating on the sea-foam. He asks his beloved not to concentrate on temporal and sorrowful images – the fading meteor, the rose and lily – and reiterates his desire to be apart from the world with her, as white birds together.

One of the feature of Yeats's character is mentioned in connection with his biography. Yeats composed this poem for Maud Gonnet's in 1892 when the pair went for a walk along the cliffs of Howth, a seaside village just south of Dublin. The poem was written the day after Yeats had unsuccessfully proposed to her for the first time. Gonnet recalls that she said that she would rather be a seagull than any other bird. Yeats sent her this poem three days later.

I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan
shore,
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near
us no more; (*CP* 46)

The "Danaan Shore" refers to *Tir-Nan-Oge*, an imaginary land where mortals live as long as fairies. Yeats interpreted Gonnet's wish to become a seagull as a wish for freedom from sorrow and time. He wishes, in vain, that they could escape the political and social circumstances that keep them apart, whether on an isolated island, in a mythic environment, or by becoming white birds.

Transcendence in the art of Yeats's circle was manifested through themes which dwell on the brink of the supernatural. Yeats's early poetry deals with the fairies serving as guides of the souls of these chosen humans and their natural world, humans crossing to the otherworld, with all the joy and sorrow it may bring. As employing Irish fairies in his poetry, Yeats was reaching out beyond the known reality, to find something there, make his art even more transcendental, and at the same time available to

the present, particularly to the Irish nation. But because his ideal world, which is dreamy and eternally beautiful as it may be, is so remote from the real world, it brings an inevitable consequence of the conflicts between the real and the ideal world. Yeats does not blindly fly to the fantasy world in order to escape reality, but he wants a balance between the two worlds or unity of the two worlds.

III. Fairies in *The Wind Among the Reeds*(1899)

Yeats connects one world with the other world by describing the real world that we see, a place that the reader can go and visit, and the world that is beyond our own comprehension, the world of fairies. The fairies are influencing the mortal world and taking both things and people from it, freeing them from their mortal bodies and mortal worries in the poem. Yeats's skill as a poet moves us from one world to the next, making the world that we cannot see more real to us as readers.

"The Hosting of the Sidhe" which can be found in *The Wind Among the Reeds* also deals with the idea of the other world affecting our world by influencing human beings to step over to the other side.

Fairies exist all over the world. In Ireland they are the 'Sidhe' (pronounced shee), a name they have retained from the ancient days. Sidhe literally means "a mound" or "a thrust," and since the Danaan people were associated with mounds, barrows and tumuli, they became known as the People of the Sidhe. Their association with the wind came from a belief in Danaan presence in a whirlwind, "sidhe gaoithe," literally, a "thrust of wind." They journey in whirling winds, the winds that were called the dance of the daughters of Herodias in the Middle Ages, Herodias doubtless taking the place of some old goddess. When the country people see the

leaves whirling on the road they bless themselves, because they believe the Sidhe to be passing by. They are almost always said to wear no covering upon their heads, and to let their hair stream out; and the great among them, for they have great and simple, go much on horseback. If anyone becomes too much interested in them, and sees them over much, he loses all interest in ordinary things.

All the Sidhe were associated with many supernatural abilities. Believed to live side by side with the human world, both beneficial and harmful interactions would take place. Fairies were feared to be interested in stealing people, especially babies of new mothers, and if someone took ill, they could be accused of being a “changeling,” left by the Sidhe in place of the original healthy individual. The dreaded “Slua Sidhe” of fairies was an evening cavalcade, doing some mischief or harm. Fairies, however, were also welcomed when they helped the poor, did chores, left money for people or endowed them with great talent, so they weren’t always considered devilish.

The Sidhe, the Danaan race, or fairies, whichever you prefer, all represented the world of the unconscious, the imagination, the timeless, and the perfect in Yeats's early poems and prose. They made an ideal symbolic contrast to the changing human world of ego, will, time, and emotion, and gave Yeats a mighty framework for expression of his ideas in his writing.

“The Hosting of the Sidhe,” begins with the place of Knocknarea, which is “a famous mountain near Sligo, notable for its flat top on which there is a great cairn”(Conner 102). It is a place where “Queen Maeve, a legendary queen in ancient Ireland, is buried”(Conner 115). Yeats then begins to talk about the daughter of the king of the Country of the Young, Niamh, and a legendary Irish hero (Conner 123).

THE host is riding from Knocknarea
And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare;
Caoilte tossing his burning hair
And Niamh calling Away, come away:
Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a-gleam,
Our arms are waving, our lips are apart ; (CP 61)

This poem, which reflects the poet's desire for a spiritual world, implies that the poet's self and mind are too weak and yet immature to accept harshness of reality. So he searches for a comfort in a utopia.

In the poem, the fairies never feel agony or sadness. They lament over men's loss of their golden time. And they express their sorrowful feelings through the nature's sounds like bird's weeping, and like the crying from branches and reeds. The poet hopes that fairies will take him to an everlasting world, in the illusion of listening "Away, come away" in alluring voices from them.

The host of fairies who are running through day and night tell men to forget the worldly desires, coming away to their ideal world. Caoilte and Niamh living in daytime go back and forth between the human and fairies' world as tempting man to their fantastic world. And the poet wants to make this world full of freedom. He hopes for the vital state, where "hair is unbound" and "eyes are a gleam," would reflect the poet's longing for his youth full of desire for a paradise.

One of the concerns Yeats explored in his fairy icon is one of tension between the spirit world and ours. Because the Sidhe world existed side by side with the human world, both sides needed each other. The immaterial world needed the material one, and vice versa, but couldn't

become one; day and night, moon and sun, silver and gold: all were related, but distinctly different from each other. The tension between the two worlds reverberates in "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland," in which the dreamer of the poem can find no comfort in this life when his thoughts are constantly turned to the other.

The man in the poem is invited to contemplate fairyland, but he repeatedly fails to do so. He cannot listen to the songs of the fish, the worms, the grass, who could tell him of fairyland. Fairyland, in this poem, might be thought of as a place of universals and absolutes, where truths are unqualified by human context. The man never gives up his petty loves and hates, and so cannot attain eternity even in his death.

Why should those lovers that no lovers miss
 Dream, until God burn Nature with a kiss?
 The man has found no comfort in the grave. (*CP* 50)

The naturalistic imagery in the poem, as well as the specific place names that Yeats assigns to where the man wanders, stems from his experience as a youth in Sligo. Sligo is a county in westernmost Ireland, a place that Yeats said affected his poetry more than anywhere else in the world (Ellmann 24). The images of fish, worms and other natural creatures also resonate with Yeats's expressed aim in "The Rose upon the Rood of Time" that he wishes to notice the lowly things in the world, not just the searing bright things. Indeed, in this poem, it is the lowly, overlooked creatures who contain a spark of divinity. They are the key to eternal contemplation. The man, like many of us, remains deaf to them.

The poem is similar to "Who goes with Fergus?" in that the poet implicitly urges Irish men and women to return to nature. Indeed, fairyland evokes very strongly the spirit of the druids, who felt that all natural things contain the divine. Yeats asks that his countrymen reflect upon the

land that they purport to love and defend in their political battles. He also suggests that the ultimate value in life is to be found in such contemplation, not in the temporary concerns of politics.

The interaction between the two worlds may produce artistic creation, but this interaction is at a great cost. Discontent with this world haunted him after his life was deeply influenced by the world of imagination.

The balance of attraction and tension of one world with the other is seen in “The Wanderings of Oisín.” “The Wanderings of Oisín” is an epic narrative of the title hero travelling with his fairy wife Niamb through the Otherworld or the Land of the Young: the Island of Livin, the island of Victories and the Island of Forgetfulness. The three islands they experienced for three hundred years also represent vain gaiety, vain battle and vain repose. This poem of quest reveals a predominantly antithetical thematic structure: Oisín and Patrick, Pagan and Christian, warrior and saint, this world and the next, the past and the present, mortals and Immortals. The poem also dramatizes tensions that were to preoccupy Yeats for the rest of his life: dreams and responsibilities, youth and age, innocence and knowledge, sensuousness and asceticism, the infinitude of desire and its constantly changing objects.

Yeats’s identification with the warrior–poet, Oisín, chosen by the lovely fairy creature Niamh, coincided with his own desire to leave his celibate isolation. Niamh convinced Oisín to go with her to the Land of the Young, where they visited for one hundred years, each: the Island of Dancing, the Island of Victories, and the Island of Forgetfulness. The poem shows how the escape to the unconscious or spirit side does not satisfy, for all these different forms of the escape did not content Oisín. As Niamh told him, “None know” (CP 431) where an “island of content” (CP 431) may lie, but it does not exist in *Tír-Nán-Óige*. Longing to return to his mortal companions, the Fenians, causes him to go again to the earthly realms,

desiring a departure from what Yeats later calls “vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose”(CP 391), for nothing of the world of the spirit, the unemotional, timeless realm of imagination and aspiration, can completely satisfy the human soul; his warrior nature craves again the human action and power that are meaningful for him, and so seeks his former fighting companions who operate in the realm of experience and will. An accident forces him to stay in that human realm, but he’s no longer satisfied with it, either, for time, another human element, has affected and changed it. Niamh is attracted to Oisín because of his poetry, yet when he arrives in *Tír-Nán-Óige*, the fairies can’t stand to listen to his songs that are so full of humane motion. Neither can he bear to stay forever in Niamh’s world, but craves his own again, in spite of his love for her. Frank Kinahan writes, “Celtic fairies are much like common men and women. Often fairy-seers meet with them on the road, and join in their dance, and listen to their music, and do not know what people they are till the whole company melts away into shadow and night”(53). Too much commerce with the fairy world can drive one to become a fool, here exemplified by always seeking the twilight manifestation of something that can not exist in the light of day. One example of these diverse worlds mixing successfully is perhaps in Cúchulainn, the offspring of both a supernatural and a mortal being. He was certainly a man of great accomplishment, so perhaps Yeats saw some hope for the occasional profitable linking of the two worlds.

Many subjects and images begun in this poem are repeated throughout his later works. a movement into a kind of paradise or fabulous region, thoughts on age and death and cyclical way of life, imagination transcending time and this world, as well as the use of bird and tree imagery are all seen in the epic. Also, the repeated appearance of spirits in each beginning of the journey every one hundred years is reminding us of

the various inner desires of human beings such as everlasting youth and triumph over hardships of life. These phantoms reappear and play similar roles in Yeats's later poems and dramas.

IV. Conclusion

Yeats's mystical beliefs, combined with his patriotic ideas, make him a man who represents a continuum in the telling of folklore; a man who is aware of both the poetic and political importance of folklore and convinced of the truth of the stories.

If he had not believed in the reality of the fairies, he would have either treated them in an academic way, or as simple poetic stories, but Yeats represents a traditional story-teller who knows about the poetry and truth of his story. To Yeats, fairyland was Nature and the realm of the imagination.

Fairyland is a paradoxical world. Nothing that is true there is true on earth. It is a place between Heaven and Earth, a sojourning place for the soul, guarded by fairies. The faeries are doing more than just existing within his early poetry, because they are influencing the mortal world and taking both things and people from it, freeing them from their mortal bodies and mortal worries as "The Stolen Child." Yeats represents his desire for living with immortal existence in the ideal world with no change, aging, death, troubles, and weeping. And such desire forms a basis of his thought in the later poems.

Throughout his early poems, focusing on the fairies within Ireland itself, Yeats clearly shows two worlds within his poems. In doing this, Yeats is seeking for a belief that artistic accomplishment such as poetry, is certainly an evidence of one world influencing the other with a successful

outcome. Beauty, also, could be a reflection of the influence of the supernatural upon this world. And what Yeats is trying to accomplish throughout his early poems is to let the world see Ireland and have them understand Ireland's culture.

Yeats explores the longstanding connection between the people of Ireland and the inhabitants of the land of Fairy. Yeats, who had profound mystic and visionary beliefs, writes with conviction of the reality of Fairies, both in his own experience, and in the everyday life of the Irish.

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Abstract

The Irish Fairies in W. B. Yeats's Early Poems

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The purpose of this paper is to offer a viewpoint of the early poems of William Butler Yeats, focusing on the Irish fairies. W. B. Yeats was enthralled with Celtic mythology and the world of fairy. Much of Yeats's early poetry and writing alludes to the Celtic otherworld, idealistic world and it adds a wonderful depth and richness to much of his work. Included are "The Stolen Child," "A Faey Song," "The Hosting of the Sidhe," and "The Wanderings of Oisín."

Yeats tried to provide the individual ideals or visions for the Irish by incorporating the elements of Celtic mythology and Irish folklore in his poetry.

Yeats's early poems by fairies depict the conflict between the real and the ideal world. Yeats attempts to transcend the troubles of the real world by leaving for the ideal world that is represented by an eternal fairyland beyond time and space. But because of his ideal world, which is dreamy and eternally beautiful as it may be, and is so remote from the real world, he cannot attain the harmony between the real and ideal world. He does not blindly fly to the fantasy world in order to escape reality, but he wants a balance between the two.

Key Words: Yeats, early poems, fairy, ideal world, harmony

예이츠, 초기 시, 요정, 이상 세계, 조화

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