The Lake Isle of Innisfree

POEM TEXT

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
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.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

SUMMARY

The speaker expresses an intention to get up and go to a small island in Ireland called Innisfree. On the island, the speaker wishes to build a modest cabin out of clay and bundled twigs. The speaker hopes to plant nine rows of beans in a clearing, which will buzz with the sound of honeybees tending to a nearby hive.

The speaker believes that this setting promises peace, which will emerge slowly as the hazy mist of the morning falls to the earth, where crickets chirp. On the island, light flickers beautifully in the middle of the night and glows with a purple hue at midday, while little birds flutter about in the evenings.

The speaker reiterates an intent to get up and go to Innisfree, explaining that all day and all night, the speaker imagines hearing the lake's waves breaking on the island's shore. As the speaker stands on roads or other paved places, that imagined lake sound resonates deep within the speaker's heart.

THEMES

NATURE AND SPIRITUALITY

The poem's speaker fantasizes about building a solitary, peaceful life on Innisfree, an uninhabited island in Ireland. While providing a dreamy, picturesque view of the island, the speaker also emphasizes the incompatibility of its virtues with modern life. In doing so, the speaker suggests that a return to nature offers unique spiritual rewards.

When describing Innisfree, the speaker uses mystical language, praising the natural world as a strong spiritual force. The poem opens with the phrase "I will arise and go," which appears word-for-word twice in the King James Version of the Bible (Yeats, born into a Protestant family, likely used this text for worship). This allusion to the Bible at the poem's very outset establishes that the speaker's concerns—and especially the fixation on Innisfree—are spiritual in nature.

Subtle references to religious tradition continue, such as "the veils of morning"—a metaphor that likens early morning weather, such as fog and dew, to head coverings often worn for religious purposes. Plus, phrases like "purple glow" and "midnight's all a glimmer" build a dreamy, supernatural atmosphere. Moreover, the speaker clearly feels a deep, personal connection to Innisfree, claiming that it calls out "always night and day," relentlessly summoning the speaker. The two share a spiritual kinship, as nature lives within the speaker, who hears it "in the deep heart's core." The speaker believes that heeding its calls will bring "some peace." Thus, the speaker champions nature as a profound divine force that can bring about inner serenity.

At the same time, the speaker emphasizes that communion with nature is the only path to attaining such spiritual rewards. In other words, modern society interferes with the pursuit of peace and truth. The speaker repeats the phrase "I will arise and go" as well as "and go." As such, the speaker expresses a deep, persistent desire to get up and leave the city.

When describing an ideal life on the island, the speaker also notably refers to Innisfree four times as "there." In doing so, the speaker stresses that fulfillment cannot be achieved "here"—that is, in the present, urban setting. In lines 4-5, the speaker implies that spiritual awakenings occur only outside of advanced societies and large communities, and instead when individuals are in tune with nature. In particular, the speaker expresses an intent to "live alone" on Innisfree, right before declaring "I shall have some peace there."

Finally, in the poem's penultimate line, the sound of splashing water entrances the speaker, who "stand[s] on the roadway, or

on the pavements grey." The inversion at the end of this line calls attention to the descriptor "grey," playing up the bleak austerity of city life as a critical barrier to spiritual pursuits.

The speaker thus presents nature as a profound spiritual force that contains essential truths—a wellspring of wisdom that can only be accessed via a total renunciation of modern society. However, the speaker remains embedded within an urban landscape, despite nature calling "always night and day." By revealing the chasm between the speaker's daydream and reality, the poem implicitly questions the attainability of a meaningful connection with nature in modern civilization.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LABOR AND FULFILLMENT

While highlighting the spiritual fulfillment that nature promises, the speaker also points out specific tasks that must be undertaken and exacting circumstances that must be endured to attain this fulfillment. In this way, the speaker champions quiet, meditative labor as the means to realizing the spiritual bounty of the natural world.

The poem's first stanza details the various ways in which the speaker must cultivate the land in order to live in harmony with nature on Innisfree. First, the speaker has to get to Innisfree, which is a task in and of itself. Indeed, the speaker has been stuck in the city for some time, yearning "always night and day" to connect with nature but struggling to break away.

Upon arriving at Innisfree, the speaker would then have to make a clearing or "glade." From there, the speaker would have to build a shelter using crude raw materials—weaving twigs and branches to create a cabin's frame and then packing it with clay. Next, the speaker would move on to cultivate a sustainable source of food, such as "Nine bean-rows." This would entail creating a garden bed, working the soil, sowing seeds, and tending to plants. The speaker thus lays out several prolonged, laborious projects that one must embark on in order to live cooperatively with nature.

To the same end, the speaker contends that one must adapt to a broader set of challenging conditions that goes beyond methodically nurturing the land. The speaker expresses an intent to "live alone" on the island, emphasizing that living in harmony with nature requires solitude. But as the speaker demonstrates, ties to modern society hold back even those most desirous of a profound connection with nature. As such, one must exercise great strength and resolve to break with the conveniences that communities and modern technologies provide.

What's more, complying with all of the above does not result in immediate gratification, as "peace comes dropping slow." The speaker thus advocates for an appreciation of labor for its own sake—not expecting any grand reward for individual accomplishments. In this way, the speaker indicates that one must complete certain tasks and adapt one's outlook in patient pursuit of a larger purpose. It is such meditative contentment with one's labor that will ultimately bring about spiritual fulfillment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,

The speaker opens the poem by expressing a desire to travel to Innisfree—a small, uninhabited island in a lake known as Lough Gill, in County Sligo, Ireland, where Yeats lived as a child.

Yeats once said that he could not remember if he chose the island for its lyrical name or its association with Irish folklore. Both motives have relevant implications. The island's name ends with "free," a fact that is accentuated by its position at the end of the poem's first line. As the reader will soon learn, the speaker seeks freedom from city life—its sights, sounds, crowd, and obligations. The island's association with folklore—and in particular with the Danaan quicken tree, which is said to bear the fruit of faeries—plays into its mystical portrayal within the poem.

To the latter point, the phrase that commences the poem is an allusion to the Bible. "I will arise and go" appears numerous times in several forms throughout the King James Bible—in all likelihood the text that Yeats used for worship, as he was a Protestant. As the phrase crops up in many different contexts, it is difficult to say if it is meant to invoke the Bible in general or a particular verse.

One possible origin is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is the best-known story that contains this phrase word-for-word. The Book of Luke tells of a young man, who asks his father for his inheritance, before squandering it and being forced into indentured servitude. Eventually, he returns home to repent, saying "I will arise and go to my father," who meets him with forgiveness. If this is the story the speaker intends the audience to recall, the direct replacement of "father" with "Innisfree" within the poem suggests that nature is a godly and forgiving force, capable of redeeming a lost soul. In any case, the biblical language establishes that the speaker's imagined life on Innisfree is part of a spiritual journey.

The repetition of "and go," an example of anadiplosis, reiterates the speaker's intention to travel to the island. As such, the

speaker comes across as insistent and determined. At the same time, the repetition underscores that the speaker must leave the present locale—get up and *go*—in order to lead a meaningful life. It also calls attention to "now" and "to Innisfree," linking them, as each phrase appears directly after "and go," and directly before a comma. Thus, the repetition emphasizes the speaker's desire to depart for Innisfree as soon as possible.

This first line establishes many of the formal rules that will govern the rest of the poem. Here is a look at its meter:

I will | arise | and go now, || and go | to In- | nisfree,

This line is in hexameter, meaning it contains six stresses. It is divided in half by a caesura, with three stresses falling before the comma and three stresses falling after it. Furthermore, there is an unstressed syllable on either side of the caesura, and the line ends in a stress, which is followed by an end-stop. Finally, it is comprised of 13 syllables and adheres to a loosely iambic rhythm (da-DUM). Of course, this iambic rhythm is complicated by the unstressed syllable in the third foot, creating a wafting, airy feeling in the middle of the stanza.

The first three lines of each stanza will follow these guidelines, with a just few minor divergences. The rise and fall of the iamb create a chant-like cadence that is punctuated by caesurae and end-stops, which keep it from becoming too singsong. The complexity of the rhythm makes it difficult for readers to put their fingers on what exactly makes the poem so entrancing—its mysteriousness heightening the mystical atmosphere.

LINES 2-4

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

The remainder of the poem's first stanza describes the time-consuming tasks that the speaker must undertake to build a meaningful life on the island. First, the speaker plans to construct a shelter out "of clay and wattles"—a laborious process that requires the most basic raw materials. The speaker would have to weave together branches, twigs, and other plant materials to construct a frame, which would then be packed with a clay mixture. The inversion at the end of line 2 calls attention to "made," which, along with "build," emphasizes the act of constructing the cabin.

A similar inversion places "Nine bean-rows" at the beginning of the following line—one of only two lines in the poem that begins with a stressed syllable. The consonant /n/ sound in this phrase ("Nine bean-rows") draws further notice to the image of this simple garden, which, though small, requires immense care. In particular, the speaker would have to clear a plot, loosen the soil, sow seeds, nurture the plants, and harvest the beans. The speaker also mentions constructing a beehive and clearing a glade. The home that the speaker fantasizes about building on Innisfree is a symbol of the simple life of meditative labor that the speaker longs to lead.

The repetition of "and," an example of polysyndeton, links the various projects that the speaker intends to tackle. The many conjunctions give the appearance of a long, multitudinous list, exaggerating the demanding lifestyle that the speaker presents. Meanwhile, the repetition of "there," an example of epistrophe, makes clear that the speaker must move to the island to attain this desired lifestyle.

The hexameter structure established in the poem's first line is replicated in lines 2 and 3. However, line 4 introduces a new format:

And live | alone | in the bee- | loud glade.

The final line of each stanza roughly follows the model that this line lays out. More specifically, each fourth line contains about nine syllables, four of which are stressed, making it tetrameter. Furthermore, each tetrameter line begins with an unstressed syllable and ends on a stress. Like the hexameter lines, they follow a loosely iambic (da-DUM) meter. Finally, in the middle of each ending line is a prepositional phrase—lines 4 and 12 contain "in the," while "of the" appears in line 8.

By the end of the stanza, the poem's ABAB rhyme scheme emerges. For instance, end rhymes link "made" with "glade," again emphasizing the speaker's hard work. These lines contain additional sonic effects, including assonance and consonance:

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

Consonance repeats /c/, /b/, /n/, /h/, and /l/ sounds, and /a/ and /e/ assonance fills these three lines. Such dense clusters of repeating sounds lend the poem a musicality, which reflects the harmony with nature that the speaker hopes to achieve.

LINES 5-6

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;

The second stanza marks a shift from concrete images to metaphorical language, as the speaker describes what it might be like to find spiritual fulfillment on Innisfree. The speaker recognizes that traveling to Innisfree would not result in immediate inner peace. Instead, the speaker believes that it would come about over time, nature gradually imbuing the speaker with its divine wisdom. The speaker compares this process to morning fog descending upon the island and

blanketing it. In yet another metaphor, the speaker refers to the fog as "the veils of the morning."

The meter of this stanza's opening line is very regularly iambic (da-DUM):

> And I |shall have | some peace there, || for peace | comes drop- | ping slow,

The repeating rises and falls of the speaker's cadence lull the audience into the mystical scene. As with the two hexameter lines that precede it, "there" appears before the caesura in line 5, emphasizing that the speaker must return to nature to reap the spiritual benefits discussed.

However, the line that follows does not adhere to this established pattern:

> Dropping | from the veils | of the morning || to where | the cric- | ket sings;

At 15 syllables, line 5 is the poem's longest. Moreover, it is the first hexameter line not to feature an explicit caesura. However, there is a natural pause where it would typically fall, dividing the line into hemistichs, or half-lines, containing three stresses each. Nevertheless, the caesura's absence makes the line appear exceedingly long. In this way, its structure mirrors the slow descent of peace that it describes.

Further, this is the first line in the poem not to describe the speaker's behavior. Lines 1-5 contain the following active first-person verbs: "arise," "build," "have," "live," and "have," respectively. This line, meanwhile, describes peace "Dropping" and how "the cricket sings," implying that the speaker is passively observing these phenomena. The polysyndeton ("and") that permeates these lines and the subtle form of anaphora in the poem's first two sentences ("I will" in line 1, "And I shall" in line 5) call attention to the similar first-person active verb forms.

Lines 5-6 contain another form of repetition known as anadiplosis, in which the end of one clause becomes the beginning of the next:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils [...]

The result is a sort of chain, in which one image directly informs that which follows. Thus, the lines unfold in a sequence of cause and effect, much like the gradual development of the speaker's spiritual wisdom—the divinity of the natural world revealing itself over time as the speaker patiently attends to various tasks.

Rhyme, assonance, and consonance contribute to this effect by sonically linking the hemistichs. Internal rhyme subtly links the words "some" and come" in line 5. Meanwhile, consonant /sh/, /p/, /s/ sounds connect the two lines, along with assonant /ee/ sounds, and the combined /ere/ and /ing/ sounds:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;

Moreover, the echoing chorus of sounds feels organic due to its lack of a consistent pattern, imitating the island's chirping crickets and buzzing bees.

LINES 7-8

> *There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,*
> *And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

The speaker spends the second half of the second stanza describing the island's atmosphere at various points throughout the day. At midnight, the day begins in darkness, with flashes of sparkling light. Later, at midday, the sky glows with a purple hue and in the evening, little finches fill the air, flapping their wings.

Within the poem, light can be seen as a symbol of nature's divine wisdom, while the day represents the speaker's spiritual journey. At the outset, the essential truths that the natural world holds are obscured, with glimpses of spiritual enlightenment intermittently peaking through. As the speaker's pilgrimage progresses, nature's divinity bursts forth, showering the speaker with its radiant majesty.

Polysyndeton highlights this progression by emphasizing "noon" and "evening," each of which falls after "and" in successive clauses. Plus, the assonant and consonant /ing/ sounds that pervade the first half of this stanza also appear here, alongside /r/, /n/, /g/, and short /i/ sounds:

> There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings.

The assonant short /i/ also appears in "cricket sings" of line 7, which is a slant rhyme with "linnet's wings." The repeating sounds reflect the stanza's central concern—that is, a gradual progression from one stage of the speaker's spiritual journey to the next.

Appropriately, these lines are as iambic (da-DUM) as the poem gets:

> There mid- | night's all | a glimmer, || and noon | a pur- | ple glow,
> And eve- | ning full | of the lin- | net's wings.

The repeating rises and falls give the speaker's cadence a hypnotic quality that is consistent with the mystical language.

LINES 9-10

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

The poem's third and final stanza sees a reemergence of "I" statements, which were replaced by abstract, descriptive language in the previous stanza. As such, line 9 marks a return to the present moment. In fact, the opening line of the final stanza closely mirrors its counterpart in stanza 1.

Here is the meter of line 1, followed by line 9:

> I will | arise | and go now, || and go | to In- | nisfree,
>
> I will | arise | and go now, || for al- | ways night | and day

This reference back to the very first line as the poem draws to a close provides a sense of resolution, neatly tying the poem together. Additionally, the reader learns that the speaker has yearned to travel to Innisfree for quite some time: the island calls to the speaker "always night and day." Therefore, it becomes clear that the speaker is stuck in the same position as when the poem began. In reality, the Innisfree that has been described is an unattainable idealization that exists only in the speaker's fantasies.

In lines 9-10, the poem inverts its syntax: it places "I hear" at the beginning of line 1, rather than saying the more intuitive, "for I always hear lake water lapping night and day." This means that each line in the final stanza begins with an "I" statement, a form of anaphora that reinforces the speaker's return to the real world. The inversion also places "always night and day" at the end of line 9, which is the poem's sole enjambed line. Consequently, the phrase seems to linger indefinitely, like the speaker's unrequited yearning for Innisfree.

Further, line 9 contains assonant long /i/ and /ay/ sounds:

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day

Assonance places additional stress on the long vowels, drawing the line out to match the stretch of time that the speaker has spent pining for the island.

Line 10, on the other hand, contains consonance, specifically among /l/ and sibilant /s/ sounds:

> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

The gentle repeating sounds soften the mood, and because they are easy to pronounce, the line flows smoothly like the mild waves it describes. Plus, line 10 is one of only two hexameter lines that is not divided by a caesura, which would impede its fluidity. Moreover, there are two sets of internal rhymes within these lines—"go" with "low," and "for" with "shore"—increasing its musicality.

The echoing sounds that permeate these lines in particular and the poem in general mirror the speaker's portrayal of Innisfree as mystical and full of song—crickets chirping, bees buzzing, birds fluttering about, and waves softly lapping on the shore. Fittingly, two stresses land on "low sounds," accentuating their presence.

LINES 11-12

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Line 11 finally reveals the speaker's true location—"the roadway, or on the pavements grey." To put it more simply, a dreary city street. The roadway and pavements represent the negative qualities of urban living—overcrowding, pollution, noise—that keep the speaker from finding spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, the plain pavement is a harsh, drab image in comparison with the gentle splash of lake water. This juxtaposition accentuates the disparity between the speaker's fantasy and reality.

The speaker uses several techniques to call attention to the descriptor "grey," which encapsulates the speaker's dismal attitude towards the urban setting. For starters, as the result of an inversion, rather than saying "the grey pavements" the line ends on "grey," which also receives metrical stress and is further emphasized by an end-stop. Moreover, it contains the assonant long /ay/ sound that appears throughout the stanza:

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day
> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
> While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,

The assonance corresponds with both an internal and end rhyme (both "day" and "roadway"), attracting additional notice. Plus, the repetition of "on the," highlighted by a caesura, links "roadway" and "pavements grey," which both appear after the repeated phrase, calling increased attention to their sonic similarity. Lastly, "roadway" receives two stresses, which has a similar effect.

The poem's final line sees a return to the sort of abstract language employed in the second stanza to detail Innisfree's divine power. Likewise, this line describes the speaker's spiritual connection to Innisfree. The speaker claims to hear the splashing lake water "in the deep heart's core." This metaphor suggests that the speaker feels a profound, innate kinship with the island—or, more accurately, the idealized lifestyle that it

represents.

Here is a look at the sonic effects and unusual meter of the poem's final line:

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Three stresses come one after another at the end of the line, drawing a great deal of attention to the final three words. Consonant /h/ and /r/ sounds slow the reader down:

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Plus, "core" has internal or end rhymes within each line of the last stanza (with "for," "shore," and "or"), amplifying the effect. Meanwhile, the three consecutive unstressed syllables of "it in the" exaggerate the rhythmic force behind "deep heart's core." Three stresses draw out this final phrase, leaving the audience with a strong image of the speaker's unresolved yearning.

SYMBOLS

INNISFREE

Innisfree symbolizes an ideal image of nature. While Innisfree is a real island in Ireland, it represents more than a physical location within the poem. In reality, its terrain is quite uneven, so clearing and planting a glade on the island would be unfeasible, never mind constructing a cabin. Plus, it is mostly covered with trees, undergrowth, and shrubs—not necessarily the sort of fauna that would make the island buzz with the sound of honeybees.

Instead, Innisfree represents idealized nature, which is inherently unattainable. It embodies a deep spiritual fulfillment that city life cannot offer, causing urban-dwellers to long for a countryside they have never really known. As such, the island promises an alternative way of life for the speaker and others to aspire to. As a romanticized symbol of nature's bounty, Innisfree is a state of mind—a daydream that offers a momentary escape from city life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Innisfree"
- **Line 2:** "there"
- **Line 3:** "there"
- **Line 4:** "glade"
- **Line 5:** "there"
- **Line 7:** "There"

THE CABIN

The cabin that the speaker imagines building symbolizes the simple lifestyle that is required to access nature's wisdom. It is described as "small" and constructed out "of clay and wattles." The cabin's size and materials suggest that a humble way of life is key to achieving spiritual fulfillment. Further, "wattles" result from the meticulous, time-consuming action of weaving twigs, branches, and other brushwood together. By emphasizing the method of the cabin's construction, the speaker indicates that meditative labor is another essential element of this lifestyle.

The other components that comprise the speaker's home support this interpretation. More specifically, the "nine bean-rows" are a very modest, bare-bones garden, but cultivating that garden would take exceptional patience and dedication. Meanwhile, the "hive" would buzz with honeybees methodically collecting and depositing pollen and nectar. Plus, constructing the cabin, garden, and hive requires the speaker to work cooperatively with nature. In this way, the accommodations that the speaker intends to build represent a simple lifestyle—one that prioritizes humility, disciplined labor, and thoughtful engagement with the natural world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "a small cabin," "of clay and wattles made"

LIGHT

Light appears briefly in line 7, where the speaker describes it flickering at midnight and glowing with a purple hue at midday. Light is a longstanding symbol of truth and clarity. Here, it can be interpreted as spiritual enlightenment. Midnight marks the end of one day and the beginning of another—the speaker's transition to a new life on Innisfree. Although the island is initially dark, its wisdom difficult to make out, the speaker sees flashes or "glimmers" of divinity. As the day goes on and the speaker's spiritual journey progresses, nature's essential truths reveal themselves, its metaphysical power shining through. The "purple glow" that the light takes on signals that the island's spiritual force is majestic and, over time, its wisdom becomes more intense and intelligible.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "a glimmer," "a purple glow"

ROADS AND PAVEMENTS

The "roadway" and "pavements grey" symbolize the ugliness and boredom of urban life.

Line 11 reveals that the speaker's longing for Innisfree is

rooted in disillusionment with city life. The last two words of this line are reversed (rather than "grey pavements") to emphasize the descriptor "grey," calling attention to the speaker's blasé, resentful attitude towards the urban environment. The "roadway" and "pavements" are land that has been disfigured for and by humans. Thus, they can be interpreted as the negative qualities of cramped city living and industrialization, which are designed to create a more efficient society but keep its inhabitants from reaching spiritual fulfillment. The speaker contrasts the beauty of Innisfree with this ugly image of modern infrastructure to emphasize the disparity between the speaker's aspirations and reality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "the roadway," "the pavements grey"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem opens with the statement, "I will arise and go," which is an allusion to the Bible. This phrase appears word-for-word twice in the King James Bible, which Yeats likely used for worship, as he was a Protestant. It also crops up in several places in slightly modified forms—for instance, "let us arise and go," and later, "we will arise and go," both in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. As a result, it is unclear if the speaker is invoking a particular story or biblical language more broadly. Regardless, the allusion signals that the speaker is embarking on a spiritual journey

The famous Parable of the Prodigal Son contains the exact phrase in question. Because it is the most familiar biblical story that does so, the following discussion will serve as an example of the meaning that the allusion might bring to certain readings. Jesus shares the parable with his disciples in Chapter 15 of the Book of Luke. As the story goes, there is a man with two sons, the younger of whom has traveled far from home and squandered his inheritance by living an extravagant lifestyle. Eventually, this son runs out of money, at which time a severe famine sweeps the land, leaving him destitute.

After failing to make a living as a lowly swineherd, he vows to return home:

> I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,
> And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

His father meets him with forgiveness and generosity, celebrating his return. When the older son protests, his father explains, "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

By recalling this story, the allusion indicates that disavowing one's worldly possessions and returning to nature is analogous to the prodigal son renewing his devotion to God and returning home. The direct replacement of "father" with "Innisfree" lifts nature up as a godly, healing, and forgiving force.

The allusion reappears at the poem's conclusion, displaying the speaker's determination to find spiritual fulfillment through living a modest life on Innisfree.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I will arise and go"
- **Line 9:** "I will arise and go"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem, working with other sonic effects, such as rhyme, consonance, and repetition to increase the poem's musicality.

Here is a look at each of these techniques in action in the final two lines:

> While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
> I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Assonant long /ee/ sounds appear in "hear" and "deep." Meanwhile, /ay/ sounds appear in "roadway" as well as "pavements grey," which rhyme. Further, "on the" appears before both phrases, calling attention to their sonic similarity. Assonance also contributes to the /or/ sound, which is picked up in the rhyming pair "or" and "core." Such clusters of repeating sounds mimic the beautiful sounds that the speaker imagines saturate the island. For example, the speaker tells of "the bee-loud glade" and "where the cricket sings."

The echoing sounds also contribute to the poem's mystical atmosphere, especially when they accentuate the speaker's incantatory cadence, as short /aw/ and long /ay/ sounds do in line 2:

> And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;

As such, assonance helps lull the reader into the poem's chant-like rhythms.

Moreover, assonant sounds link the words in which they appear, adding depth to the poem's meaning. Here is a look at short /i/ sounds in the second stanza:

> [...] 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.

In these lines, the speaker details various sensory experiences that unfold over the course of a day on Innisfree. Assonant /i/ sounds create continuity, allowing one image to flow organically into the next, much like the passage of time described. Assonance even contributes to a quiet slant rhyme between "cricket" and "linnet." Such dense groupings of repeating sounds slow the reader down, drawing attention to the sensuous imagery.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I," "will," "arise," "go," "go," "Innisfree"
- **Line 2:** "And," "small," "cabin," "build," "clay," "wattles," "made"
- **Line 3:** "Nine," "bean," "rows," "I," "hive," "honey," "bee"
- **Line 4:** "alone," "bee"
- **Line 5:** "And," "shall," "have," "some," "peace," "there," "peace," "comes," "dropping"
- **Line 6:** "Dropping," "morning," "where," "cricket," "sings"
- **Line 7:** "There," "midnight's," "glimmer"
- **Line 8:** "evening," "linnet's," "wings"
- **Line 9:** "I," "arise," "for," "always," "night," "day"
- **Line 10:** "lake," "by," "shore"
- **Line 11:** "While," "I," "roadway," "or," "pavements," "grey"
- **Line 12:** "hear," "it," "in," "deep," "core"

CAESURA

With two exceptions, caesurae appear in each of the poem's hexameter lines, or lines containing six stressed syllables. Each caesura is a comma, which divides its hexameter in half so that three stresses occur before the pause and three occur after. Furthermore, there is always an unstressed syllable on either side of the comma.

Here is a look at the meter in lines 1-2, focusing on the caesurae rather than individual feet:

> I will arise and go now, || and go to Innisfree,
> And a small cabin build there, || of clay and wattles made;

By dividing each hexameter into hemistichs, or half-lines, the caesurae add another layer of repetition to the speaker's cadence. Because each hemistich is slightly different, the pattern is difficult to detect. As a result, the poem's complex network of repeating rhythms is mysteriously entrancing, drawing the reader in without becoming overly pronounced or clunky.

In fact, even those two hexameters that do not contain commas are divided into hemistichs by a natural pause. Their conspicuous lack of caesurae calls attention to these lines. Here is line 6:

> Dropping from the veils of the morning || to where the cricket sings;

At 15 syllables, this is the poem's longest line, the absence of a caesura exaggerating its length. To put it another way, the caesurae in the surrounding hexameter lines make line 6 feel exceedingly long. Here, the speaker describes "peace," which "comes dropping slow." As such, the drawn-out appearance of this line mirrors the gradual manner in which nature's wisdom reveals itself to the speaker.

Line 10 is also without a caesura:

> I hear lake water lapping || with low sounds by the shore;

In this line, a comma would have accentuated the natural pause, interrupting its flow. Thus, the lack of caesura allows it to move fluidly like the rippling water it describes.

Additionally, caesurae emphasize repetition in a few different ways. First, they play up epistrophe by highlighting the last word within a clause, as in lines 2-3:

> And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
> Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

Made more prominent by caesurae, the recurrence of "there" drives home the speaker's message that one must leave the city and commune with nature to find spiritual fulfillment.

In other places, caesurae divide a line so that the same word or phrase appears on either side of the comma, calling attention to its repetition. This is particularly effective in instances of anadiplosis, which occurs in lines 5-6:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils...

In this case, the caesura works with an end-stop to create anadiplosis, which suggests a continuous process—an experience that unfolds gradually, step-by-step. Indeed, the speaker gains access to nature's essential truths and the peace they bring "slowly," through patience and meditative labor.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ","

- **Line 2:** “,”
- **Line 3:** “,”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance pervades each line of this poem to various effects. In many instances, it shapes the poem's atmosphere, as in line 10:

> I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

Gentle, euphonic /l/ and /s/ sounds soften the mood, and because they are easy to pronounce, the line flows smoothly. Furthermore, because the sounds echo throughout nearby words (such as "always" and "while" in lines 9 and 11), their consonance creates a sense of harmony. As such, this line demonstrates the "lapping [...] low sounds" that the speaker references.

Elsewhere, consonance links the words in which it appears, creating strings of related images. This effect is particularly prominent in the poem's third stanza, where /ng/ sounds appear frequently, alongside /p/, /n/, and /g/ sounds:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
> 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 /p/ sound in "peace" is picked up in "dropping," which kicks off the chain of /ng/ words. Each of these terms appears twice, on either side of commas, creating anadiplosis. This form of repetition suggests a successive process—one action giving way to the next and so on.

Indeed, this stanza describes Innisfree's environment at different points throughout the day as a metaphor for the speaker's spiritual journey, which unfolds slowly over time. The repeating /ng/ sounds scattered throughout its remaining lines tie each stage of this process together, emphasizing their sequential relationship. Further, consonant /n/ and /g/ sounds accentuate the repeating /ing/ words and provide sonic continuity between line 7 and the rest of the stanza.

Moreover, consonance exaggerates the poem's meter by placing additional emphasis on stressed syllables. For instance, the poem's final line contains repeating /h/ and /r/ sounds:

> I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Here, consonance slows the reader down in two ways—it creates sonic interest and it accentuates metrical stresses, drawing the line out. Consequently, as the poem comes to a close, the reader is left with a lingering image of the intense, unresolved pull towards nature that the speaker experiences.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line of this poem is end-stopped. The resulting prolonged pauses at the end of each line literally punctuate the meter, both regulating and exaggerating its rhythms. For example, here's a look at the meter in lines 2-3:

> And a small | cabin | build there, || of clay | and wat- | tles made;
> Nine | bean-rows will | I have there, || a hive | for the hon- | ey-bee,

While these two lines do not share an identical stress pattern or the same number of syllables, the end-stops work with caesurae to emphasize their rhythmic similarities. More specifically, each line contains six stresses—three before the caesura and three after. Each line ends in a stressed syllable. Therefore, the end-stop that terminates line 3 creates rhythmic continuity with line 2. In fact, all of the poem's hexameter lines share these patterns.

Moreover, all of the lines that comprise this poem end on stressed syllables, which rhyme in an ABAB pattern. As such, by accentuating the rhyming syllables and following them with a drawn-out pause, end-stops make the rhymes more apparent. Furthermore, the liberal end punctuation divides the poem's long sentences into shorter, more digestible clauses and neatly contains them within individual lines. Therefore, the speaker's statements appear short and to the point, projecting confidence and credibility. This effect grounds the reader, and it also keeps the speaker's mystical descriptions and figurative language from becoming excessively abstract.

The poem's sole example of enjambment occurs at the end of line 10:

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day

As a result of the otherwise universal use of end-stops, this line appears to drift off into space. Fittingly, this line describes the speaker's preoccupation with living on Innisfree—an unresolved yearning that has persisted "always night and day," constantly lingering in the back of the speaker's mind, just as line 9 lingers indefinitely on the page.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Innisfree,"
- **Line 2:** "made;"
- **Line 3:** "honey-bee,"
- **Line 4:** "glade."
- **Line 5:** "slow,"
- **Line 6:** "sings;"
- **Line 7:** "glow"
- **Line 8:** "wings."
- **Line 10:** "shore;"
- **Line 11:** "grey,"
- **Line 12:** "core."

METAPHOR

This poem contains four metaphors, which characterize the speaker's spiritual connection to Innisfree.

In stanza 2, the speaker discusses what it might be like to find peace on the island, stating that "peace comes dropping slow, / dropping from the veils of the morning." The metaphor "veils of the morning" compares fog, dew, or mist to a veil—that is, cloth intended to cover the face. This paints an image of some sort of hazy substance obscuring the Island in the early hours of the day. The speaker continues, "to where the cricket sings." Crickets nest within grasses or under logs, rocks, and similar materials. Thus, the speaker indicates that the morning haze gradually permeates the air, ultimately reaching the earth. Therefore, "the veils of the morning" are in all likelihood clouds of water—fog, mist, and the like—which condense and settle on vegetation.

In that same line, the speaker suggests that "peace comes dropping slow," a metaphor that compares peace to morning fog that descends over Innisfree, blanketing the island. This can be taken to mean that the speaker finds clarity and inner peace slowly over time. In other words, the island does not offer immediate fulfillment, but slowly imbues the speaker with its insights.

The poem's final lines describe the lake that houses Innisfree as it splashes against the shore, which the speaker claims to "hear" twice. First, the speaker says, "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." Since the speaker isn't actually at Innisfree, but in the city (in fact, Yeats wrote the poem while living in London), this line has to be taken figuratively. The speaker longs for Innisfree so much that it's *like* the speaker can hear its "lake water lapping."

Next, the speaker says, "I hear it in the deep heart's core." Taking each of these last three terms separately, "core" refers to the central, most important part of something, while "heart" suggests an impassioned emotional connection, and "deep" indicates intensity and profundity. All in all, this metaphor suggests that Innisfree calls out to the speaker's very being. Thus, "the deep heart's core" signifies the speaker's powerful, deep-rooted connectedness to nature.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "peace comes dropping slow"
- **Line 6:** "the veils of the morning"
- **Line 10:** "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;"
- **Line 12:** "I hear it in the deep heart's core"

REPETITION

This poem contains a great deal of repetition, which takes several forms. For example, anadiplosis appears in the very first line:

> I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,

The repetition of "and go" displays the speaker's determination to leave where the speaker is now, to go to Innisfree. It also links "now" and "Innisfree" and calls further attention to these terms, which already receive emphasis due to the caesura and end-stop that follow them, respectively. As a result, the reader is immediately aware of the speaker's fixation on traveling to this particular island as soon as possible.

Similarly, the speaker repeats "there" in reference to Innisfree four times in the first several lines, although it is not grammatically necessary. It is aways repeated at the ends of phrases, making it an instance of epistrophe. In doing so, the speaker underscores that traveling to the island is crucial to achieving the peaceful lifestyle described.

Moreover, the speaker uses strong, active first-person verbs throughout the poem, such as "I will," "I have," and "I shall." As a result, many lines and phrases begin with "I," an example of anaphora—stressing the speaker's single-minded focus on building a life on Innisfreee.

Diacope then appears in the second stanza:

> And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes
> dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the

cricket sings;

In these lines, the speaker envisions achieving peace, which would reveal itself slowly over time. The repetition mirrors this trajectory by laying out the gradual transition from one phrase to the next.

The speaker states, "I will arise and go now" twice, opening both the first and third stanza with this phrase, which alludes to the Bible. As such, this refrain highlights the spiritual nature of the speaker's intended journey. By recalling the poem's first line, its appearance at the beginning of the final stanza might seem to offer a sense of resolution. However, it becomes clear that the speaker's position at the poem's outset and conclusion are the same—stuck in an urban environment and longing for a simpler life. Therefore, the repetition of "I will arise and go now" actually points to the speaker's *inability* to resolve the pull towards nature with ties to modern society.

Finally, the conjunction "and" appears ten times within the poem's 12 lines—an example of polysyndeton. On a practical level, polysyndeton provides structure and allows the speaker to control the meter by inserting unstressed syllables as needed. Stylistically, the overabundance of conjunctions results in complex, stanza-long sentences, which contribute to the dreamlike atmosphere. Indeed, the clauses pile up, as if visions of an ideal life on Innisfree crowd the speaker's mind. Furthermore, polysyndeton calls attention to the detailed consideration that the speaker has given this intended journey. For example, the speaker hasn't just imagined "morning" on the island, but also "midnight [...] and noon [...] and evening."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I will arise and go now," "and go"
- **Line 2:** "And," "there," "and"
- **Line 3:** "I have," "there"
- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And," "I," "have," "peace," "there," "peace," "dropping"
- **Line 6:** "Dropping"
- **Line 7:** "There," "and"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "I will arise and go now," "and"
- **Line 10:** "I hear"
- **Line 11:** "on the," "on the"
- **Line 12:** "I hear"

VOCABULARY

I will arise and go (Line 1, Line 9) - This statement, which essentially expresses an intention to get up and go somewhere, appears several times in the King James Version of the Bible—the text Yeats likely used for worship, as he was a Protestant. The phrase appears word-for-word in 2 Samuel 3:21 as well as Luke 15:18 and shows up in modified forms elsewhere. The precise implications of this allusion are explored in the Poetic Devices section, but in general, it signals that the island offers spiritual rewards.

Arise (Line 1) - A formal way of saying "get up."

Innisfree (Line 1) - A very small, uninhabited island that sits in the middle of Lough Gill—a lake in County Sligo, Ireland, which Yeats considered his childhood home.

Wattles (Line 2) - Wooden stakes interwoven with branches, twigs, stalks, and similar plant material, used as a foundational building structure.

Bean-Rows (Line 3) - Bean plants sowed in rows within a garden.

Bee-Loud (Line 4) - Buzzing loudly with the sound of bees.

Glade (Line 4) - A clearing or open grassy space within a forested area.

Shall (Line 5) - An expression of an intended or expected future action, basically a formal way of saying "will."

Dropping (Line 5, Line 6) - Figuratively descending upon the island, blanketing it. The speaker communicates an expectation to find peace over time, as it gradually pervades the atmosphere of the newly-cultivated island—much like fog.

Veils (Line 6) - Materials that cover or obscure. Here, the speaker refers to fog, which blankets the island in the mornings. This term is often used to describe head coverings, particularly those worn for religious reasons. As such, the speaker's word choice plays up the island's spiritual power.

Linnet (Line 8) - A small bird in the finch family.

Lapping (Line 10) - Gently but repeatedly breaking against something—in this case, the island's shore—usually producing a soft splashing sound.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem does not follow a traditional, established verse form, but its structure is nevertheless straightforward. It consists of three four-line stanzas, or quatrains. Each stanza is comprised of one long sentence, divided in half by a semicolon at the end of its second line.

Almost every line is also end-stopped, and the period that concludes each stanza neatly divides the poem into three parts. In the first stanza, the speaker imagines building a meaningful life on the island; in the second, the speaker envisions what it might be like to experience its divine energy; and in the third, in the present moment, the speaker remains trapped in a state of longing and urban drudgery.

Furthermore, each stanza contains three longer lines, followed by one shorter line. The longer lines are all divided in half, usually by a caesura, but in some cases by a natural pause, as in lines 6 and 10. In general, the resulting hemistichs, or half-lines, reinforce the poem's meter and call attention to words that fall immediately before the pauses. For example, "there" appears before the caesurae in lines 2, 3, and 5, emphasizing the speaker's need to travel out of the city and into the natural world to find fulfillment.

Similarly, end-stops accentuate the poem's rhythm and highlight end words, in turn exaggerating the speaker's use of rhyme. In fact, all lines but one—line 9—are end-stopped. Line 9 describes the incessant pull that the speaker feels towards Innisfree. As a result of the enjambment that follows, "for always night and day" lingers in space indefinitely, much like the speaker's longstanding, unresolved yearning.

METER

The poem's meter varies slightly from line to line and does not adhere to an established verse form. Instead, it follows its own intricate set of rules. Due to the poem's popularity and metrical complexity, scholars have debated its precise pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. This analysis reconstructs the poem's meter using recordings of Yeats's readings.

For starters, the first three lines of each stanza are written in hexameter, containing six stressed syllables, while the final lines are written in tetrameter, containing four stressed syllables. For example, here is a look at lines 3-4:

> Nine bean- rows will I have there, || a hive for the
> hon-ey-bee,
> And live a-lone in the bee-loud glade.

Furthermore, each hexameter line is divided in half, usually by a caesura in the form of a comma, though natural pauses divide lines 6 and 10. Each half-line, or hemistich, contains three stresses. The first hemistich of each hexameter line *ends* in an unstressed syllable, while each second hemistich *begins* with an unstressed syllable. In other words, an unstressed syllable surrounds the pause on either side. Plus, every line ends in a stress, while most lines begin with an unstressed syllable.

Line 2 also contains all of these characteristics:

> And a small ca-bin build there, || of clay and wat-tles
> made;

The hexameter lines usually contain 13 syllables, though line 3 contains 14 and line 6 contains 15. Similarly, the first two tetrameter lines contain 9 syllables, while the final tetrameter line contains 8.

Finally, the meter follows a loosely iambic rhythm (da-DUM). However, as the examples above show, this is extremely variable, and the poem often falls into trochaic (DUM-da), anapestic (da-da-DUM), and dactylic (DUM-da-da) rhythms as well. As such, the rhythm rises, falls, and pauses over and over again. Within this structure, the poem's complexity and lack of uniformity make its patterns difficult to detect. As a result, the speaker's cadence is mysteriously incantatory—as if casting a spell over readers, it lulls them into the speaker's daydream. Its enchanting rhythm has made the poem a popular choice for musical adaptations.

Yeats himself has noted the importance of meter to this poem, famously exaggerating its rhythm during readings. He explained why during a recording session with the BBC:

> I am going to read my poems with great emphasis upon their rhythm, and that may seem strange if you are not used to it. I remember the great English poet, William Morris, coming in a rage out of some lecture hall where somebody had recited a passage out of his *Sigurd the Volsung*, 'It gave me a devil of a lot of trouble', said Morris, 'to get that thing into verse'. It gave me a devil of a lot of trouble to get into verse the poems that I am going to read, and that is why I will *not* read them as if they were prose.

In fact, the meter of "Innisfree" closely mirrors that of Morris's epic, which also features hexameters comprised of two hemistichs containing three stresses each. Further, both works strictly follow a regular pattern of stresses per hemistich and line, but are not overly concerned with where those stresses fall.

RHYME SCHEME

In contrast to its meter, this poem's rhyme scheme is very straightforward:

> ABAB CDCD EFEF

Each line ends on a stressed syllable and all but one is end-stopped, accentuating the rhymes.

Additionally, the poem contains several internal rhymes, such as "for" and "or," which highlight the end rhyme between "shore" and "core" in the final stanza. Additionally, "go" rhymes with "low" in the same stanza; "there" in line 5 rhymes with "where" in line 6, and "some" and "comes" rhyme in line 5. Relatedly, the poem also employs a slant rhyme with the phrases "cricket sings" and "linnet's wings" in the same stanza.

In general, rhyme works with meter and other sonic effects such as assonance and consonance to increase the poem's musicality. It also deepens the poem's meaning by calling attention to keywords and linking distinct images and ideas. For instance, here's a look at lines 9 and 11:

> I will arise and go now, for always night and day

> While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,

The end rhyme between "day" and "grey" is picked up in "roadway" as well as the slant rhyme "always" and the assonant long /ay/ in "pavements."

The repeating sounds throughout this stanza call attention to the end rhyme. Furthermore, the inversion at the end of line 11 places additional emphasis on the descriptor "grey," which highlights the speaker's dreary attitude towards city life. As such, by directly linking "day" and "grey," rhyme suggests that the speaker's yearning for nature stems from a dissatisfaction with the present urban setting. The resulting chorus of repeating sounds is akin to the speaker's observations of nature, such as "the bee-loud glade," "the cricket sings," and "lake water lapping with low sounds."

SPEAKER

The poem does not reveal any specific biographical information about the speaker. The reader gathers that the speaker lives in an urban environment and pines to leave it behind, in favor of a simpler life on Innisfree.

Indeed, the poem is essentially a reverie, the speaker imagining what it would be like to find fulfillment through building a life on the island. As such, the speaker comes across as starry-eyed and idealistic. But in addition to being highly romantic, the speaker's tone is insistent, twice stating "I will arise and go" in addition to "I have" and "I shall." In this way, the speaker seems determined to make this dream a reality, though there are signs to the contrary, as the speaker has had these aspirations for some time but hasn't gotten any closer to realizing them.

Yeats wrote this poem when he was 23, living in London and missing Ireland. The speaker is often interpreted as a young Yeats, and the poet himself has suggested that this is the case on several occasions. Here is a passage from his memoir *Four Years*:

> I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem "Innisfree," my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music.

However, this description is something of a distortion, as the poem began as prose—part of *John Sherman*, Yeats's only published novella and a volume he later disavowed. The story's eponymous character is the poem's original speaker—a young man about 30 or so, who moves to London but longs for his hometown in the west of Ireland.

Still, in its final form, which is quite different from the original, the poem reveals very little about its speaker, so it's prudent to refrain from ascribing any definite age, gender, or other identifiers to the speaker.

SETTING

Given Yeats's biography and the passage in his novella *John Sherman* from which this poem originates, it would be fair to interpret the setting as late-19th-century London. However, in the poem itself, the speaker simply states, "I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey." Thus, the setting could reasonably be any city, likely one relatively close to Innisfree, which is in western Ireland. Further, although the rapid urbanization of the late 19th century undoubtedly informs the poem, there is no indication of when exactly in history it takes place.

The speaker's physical environment is not revealed until the final lines. Instead, the majority of the poem takes place within a dreamlike reverie—an idealization based on memory, imagination, and lore that the speaker hopes to experience, but that isn't truly attainable.

Yeats himself described local lore surrounding Innisfree—particularly its association with the Danaan quicken tree. As the story goes, the Danaan quicken tree bears the fruit of the faeries and is guarded by a beast. A young woman implored her lover to kill the beast and bring her the fruit, which he did. However, he tasted it and perished as he reached the shore due to its magnificent power. The young lady, overcome with grief, ate the fruit and died beside him.

Though the poem does not directly reference the tale, the island's supposed mystical powers are consistent with the spiritual language that the speaker uses to describe Innisfree. Moreover, the speaker's longing for the island could be interpreted as a desire for a return to Irish cultural tradition.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although Yeats has obscured its origin, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" began as a passage from an early draft of his only published novella, *John Sherman*. The story's titular character struggles to transition from a relaxed life in the lush, beautiful Irish countryside to the meanness of London. Like Sherman, the poem's speaker longs for western Ireland and a simpler lifestyle in harmony with the natural world.

Yeats is known for being highly critical of his early work and

downplayed the novella. He often revised poems and other works after their initial publication (he even rewrote letters after sending them!). However, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is unique in that he hardly fussed with it, adding only a comma after its appearance in The National Observer in 1890, two years after it was written. This deviation from his usual treatment of early poems speaks to the obsessive care Yeats took when composing "Innisfree," which went through several drafts and follows very intricate metrical patterns. Yeats cited this poem as "my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music" and performed it at readings often.

Throughout his life and writings, Yeats displayed a voracious fixation on all things spiritual, including religion, the occult, and paranormal phenomena. While his later work was far more modernist in nature, Yeats's early poems were shaped by Romantics like William Blake ("London") and Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Love's Philosophy"). As a teenager, Yeats read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which gives an account of Thoreau's two-year spiritual and intellectual journey while living alone in a cabin on Walden Pond in Massachusetts.

Thoreau was a leading practitioner of transcendentalism, an offshoot of Romanticism. This philosophical and social movement was centered around the belief that divinity runs throughout humankind and the natural world, which are therefore inherently good. As a young man, Yeats wanted to follow in Thoreau's path, living in solitude and harmony with nature. He named *Walden* as this poem's chief influence. One chapter in Walden is titled "The Bean-Field," which resonates with the "Nine bean-rows" in the third line of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

While Yeats identified as an Irish Nationalist (see Historical Context below), he was less concerned with political revolution than questions of cultural identity. He turned to local folklore and mythology, which greatly informed his early writings, publishing the compilation *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in the same year that he wrote "Innisfree." He has been credited as a leading figure of the Celtic Revival.

The popularity and reach of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" cannot be overstated. It is probably Yeats's best-known poem, which is significant as he is by and large considered one of the most important literary figures of the twentieth century. The poem's incantatory rhythms have spawned many musical adaptations, such as Judy Collins's "Innisfree." In addition to countless songs, the poem has inspired films, novels, and even an eco-friendly South Korean makeup brand, whose concept centers around Jeju Island. Of course, numerous poets have riffed on "Innisfree"—see Ezra Pound's "The Lake Isle" for one example.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the UK and beyond, the Second Industrial Revolution brought on a slew of new technologies in the late 19th and early 20th century. In particular, major advancements in manufacturing expanded industry, and as railways and telegraph lines became more plentiful and accessible, people flocked to urban areas in hopes of finding work. The urbanization that followed resulted in overcrowding and poor living conditions for the working class.

The Yeats family was struggling financially in the late 1880s, when the poet was in his early 20s. He moved with his family back to London, where they had lived intermittently when he was a boy. Like his mother, Yeats detested living in London. Such sentiment was growing amongst city dwellers, leading to an increased idealism about the countryside and natural world more broadly. The transcendentalist movement, which Yeats identified with as a young man, contended that industrialism was a barrier to inner peace and knowledge. Instead, there was an enduring wisdom that only communion with nature could provide. Yeats cited his yearning for Sligo, his home county in western Ireland, as the source of inspiration for "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Earlier in life, Yeats was educated in London schools, where he experienced anti-Irish sentiment. Around this time, the Home Rule Party was formed with the goal to create an Irish Parliament that could legislate separately from Britain's main Parliament. Other Irish political leaders advocated full independence from Britain—its proponents were called Irish Nationalists. Furthermore, the Land League was formed to give Irish peasants the leverage to negotiate fair prices with their landlords. Violence erupted as a result of the peasant's boycotts, leading to the Land War. Yeats's role in the Celtic Revival emerges from this political context.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Yeats reads "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" — Listen to a recording of Yeats reading the poem, exaggerating its rhythm. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLlcvQg9i6c&feature=emb_title)
- David Holdeman on Yeats — A short clip of a Yeats scholar explaining his take on the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPI8o6RvmQs)
- Profile of William Butler Yeats — A detailed overview of Yeats's life and work from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats)
- Can Humans Control the Natural World? — A module on urbanization, industrialization, and humans' relationship to nature in the 19th century, including a discussion of contemporary literature. (https://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/eu/mod01_nature/context.html)
- Online Exhibition: The Life and Works of William Butler

Yeats — A digital version of a wide-ranging exhibition on Yeats at The National Library of Ireland, which houses the world's largest collection of his manuscripts. (http://www.nli.ie/yeats/)

- A Brief History of the Irish Nationalist Movement — A summary of Irish Nationalism and related movements and conflicts in the late 19th century. (https://uwpress.wisc.edu/blog/?p=2159)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- An Irish Airman Foresees his Death
- Easter, 1916
- Leda and the Swan
- Sailing to Byzantium
- The Second Coming
- The Wild Swans at Coole
- When You Are Old

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