

“Lake Isle of Innisfree”

In W.B. Yeats’ poem, “Lake Isle of Innisfree”, Yeats alludes to a collective Irish consciousness that longs for a pre-colonial, pre-industrial, and therefore more peaceful life. He creates dreamy, idealistic imagery of a rural life alone on the shores of Lough Gill, in County Sligo. This poetic image of the isolated isle of Innisfree is said to have been inspired when

This paper argues that the idealistic imagery of a life alone on a lake isle is directly connected to the shared cultural heritage of the Irish people that was taken away due to British rule. In other words, this poem is symbolic of a lost ability for the Irish people to have a life of self-sufficiency through an agricultural connection with the land. A seemingly simple beautiful ode to nature is under the surface a darker commentary on historical oppression and inability for the Irish people to have even a simple life on their own without their land being taken away or built upon by British colonists and industrialists.

In the poem, the image of a peaceful countryside abode is beautifully clear. Yeats primarily does this through his descriptions of sound– crickets singing, bees buzzing and linnet’s wings. The use of sound creates an immersive experience while reading the poem– the reader not only imagines the countryside itself, but also the sound of the insects in the forest, the bees buzzing outside the cabin window, the lake waves lapping on the shore.

In such a short poem, Yeats has to economize and balance his word choice and specificity. One thing he chooses to go into detail on is the cabin itself. He says he will build it himself, of clay and wattles, traditional materials used in the pre-industrial period. This imagery is reminiscent of the neolithic period of the great Irish sagas, and purposefully so. It references a shared Irish past that is long gone. This is where the poem alludes to a shared Irish past that is no

longer accessible, and cabins like this are replaced now with industrial, modern inventions like the roadways and pavements he mentions later in the poem.

This aestheticized version of Irish life is purposely idealistic. Yeats creates a mirage like image of a lifestyle that feels familiar and peaceful, but beyond the everyday. This dreamy quality is created through mystical images such as “midnight’s veil” and more specifically in the second stanza, through words like “glimmer” and “glow”. These words invoke the quality of ephemerality, light that comes and goes, fades and flickers. In other words, his dream of a peaceful life is evasive, and “comes dropping slow”.

This description of peace as “dropping slow” is interesting in its own right. It calls back the previous imagery of the honey bees and the bee hive, of newly made honey dropping into jars. Tying the idea of peace to the landscape and externalities of the cabin is seemingly incongruous. However, it indicates a connection between the specificities of the lifestyle and the peace itself— the agricultural, self-sufficient way of life is revealed to be what really causes the peace. This connection of peace and happiness to an older way of life is central to the message of the poem. This becomes especially apparent through the final line: “I hear it in the deep heart’s core”. This line solidifies the idea of a shared cultural memory invoked in this poem. Yeats' use of “the heart” instead of “my heart” indicates that this dream is shared by a greater collective than himself.

Yeats' repeated claim that he will “arise and go” indicates that this dream of a cabin by the lake is unrealized, and very different from his real lifestyle of “roadway[s]” and “pavements gray”. The final stanzas that reference the roadway and the pavement are in stark contrast to the natural imagery of the earlier parts of the poem. It mimics the way one snaps back from a dream into reality. Like a loud car speeding past someone lost in their own fantasy world, Yeats snaps

us back into the post-colonial reality with this contrast of gray, bleak imagery of an urban, industrial landscape. This snap back into reality is what distinguishes this poem from an ode to the Irish countryside and adds the layer of post-colonial disillusionment with reality.