Candidate 3 evidence

How does W.B Yeats exploit setting and symbolism to allow him to explore the theme of escape and escapism?

Introduction

As Dennis O'Driscoll wrote, W.B. Yeats has 'This marvellous gift for beating the scrap metal of the day-to-day life into a ringing bell.' He has the unique ability to make the ordinary, extraordinary and to help us view life in new ways. His poetry is deeply concerned with the limitations of human existence, be that in the physical body or the world they inhabit. He consistently yearns for the means to transcend these restrictions, which is reflected throughout his works. His exploration of escapism emerges as a complex response to loss, the ageing process, and the pressures of the modern world. Setting and symbolism allow him to explore alternative ways of existence through his imagination where he weaves reality and fantasy to paint the perfect world of his desires.

This is evident in poems such as *The Lake of Isle of Innisfree* and *Down by the Salley Gardens* where natural setting is imbued with symbolic significance to represent both emotional refuge and the desire for the simpler past. In other works, such as *Sailing to Byzantium and News for The Delphic Oracle,* setting is once again symbolic, representing escape from the decay of the physical body. The fear of getting old is replaced by a more intellectual and artistic prize where the common concerns of humans are left behind. His engagement with Irish mythology in poems such as *The Stolen Child* and *The Song of Wandering Aengus* present yet another opportunity to

escape to this ordinary life though these ultimately have their limitations or are completely unattainable.

Yeats uses setting and symbolism to construct fantasy worlds which offer an escape from the trials and tribulations of this mundane world which is why they are still relevant in our own turbulent world.

Chapter One

W.B. Yeats' poetry explores themes of nature, nostalgia, regret and loss. He often uses nature as a device to explore his own emotions. Nature is a source of beauty and peace, a contrast to the chaos and ugliness of urban life. *Down by the Salley Gardens*, and *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* each have a melancholic tone which underlines his longing to escape to a simpler life, or even that of a life he once lived. Both are rooted in the rural Irish landscape, like many of his poems, which Yeats views, not only as a place of physical existence, but also a space for personal reflection. Through these tranquil and natural scenes, Yeats shows how places of nature can hold deep emotional and symbolic meaning.

In *Down by the Salley Gardens*, Yeats uses setting to create a reflective and nostalgic atmosphere which emphasises the speakers regret over his lost love. The poem is set in a quiet and natural landscape and explores the tragedy of timing: the speaker is offered love but foolishly refuses leading to a great regret in later life. The repeated use of the phrase *'young and foolish'* highlights the regret he feels and the pain of missing

an opportunity which may never present itself again. The nostalgic tone paints a picture of perfection, which is the trouble with looking back through the long lens of time.

The rose tinted glasses set the scene in the *'Salley Gardens'* which suggests a sheltered place as he recalls a peaceful part of his youth. His love walks on *'little snow white feet'* forming an ethereal image, like a figure of imagination, while also being real. Through his memory and longing, he has turned this woman into a symbol of purity and in his mind she has become myth-like. She advises Yeats to *'take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree'* once again proving the light-heartedness of the event at the time, as leaves will not force themselves onto their branches. In this way she tells the writer that he is not to force his love, she implies that he should let nature run its course. It is clear that he was full of youthful exuberance and regrets the loss of his zest for life and passion. He longs for that perfect 'Garden of Eden' in a world without his lost love.

The setting then moves from the garden to *'a field by the river'* shifting to open land and running water. With this, his memory of their intimacy increases. The speaker feels a *'snow-white hand'* on his shoulder, implying innocence and youth, and this time she advises him to *'take life easy'*. This now doesn't apply to romance but the way he should move through life. A simile emphasises the patience required to live a contented life: *'As the grass grows on the weirs.'* This again contrasts with his headstrong, impetuous approach which inevitably leads to poor choices and a lifetime of regret. His nostalgia returns him to this romantic spot from his past, where true happiness eluded him.

The second stanza, and conclusion to the poem, ends with the adult consequence to this mistake as he is now *'full of tears'*. The beautiful and tranquil setting of the Salley Gardens and the river is now a place he can no longer return to. The memory is its own punishment. His regret is painful and he mourns the loss as he can never go back. The place which once represented happiness and peace is an unattainable dream. This poem has an emphatic focus on Yeats' desire to return to his youth and with that, escape his life as an older man with the absence of his love. The yearning for his beloved is symbolic of his wish to be back in his younger body brimming with life and passion.

In the same way, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* also presents a rich natural setting to mirror Yeats' desire for escape. The poem's central claim is that Innisfree itself is not only a physical destination, but a state of mental refuge for the speaker to escape from the struggles and hardships in modern life. He repeatedly vows that he *'will arise and go now'*, almost appearing as a decisive choice, to this apparently modest place: *'a small cabin', 'clay and wattles made', 'nine bean rows'* and a *'hive for the honey-bee'*. This highlights Yeats' wish to move from the modern world, to simplicity without lavish expenses or luxury, just self-sufficiency.

Yeats yearns for the peace of the Isle as a place of peace and comfort, something he rarely gets to appreciate as *'peace comes dropping slow'*. Here we see peace becoming a physical entity as it glazes the *'veils of the morning'* and *'where the cricket sings'* highlighting that peace is found in this natural beauty, not in the complexities of the modern life. This place he desires has a gentle existence where even the *'midnight's all a glimmer'* and *'noon a purple glow'* showing that this is nature as a softening filter

to the hardships of life. Midnight is often seen as daunting due to the dark, though he emphasises that in Innisfree it should not be feared as it is beautiful and tranquil.

The desire to *'live alone in the bee-loud glade,'* where the chaos of the city is replaced by the sounds of nature, suggests a safe haven from human demands and man made noises. This setting asks nothing from Yeats as the bees and linnet birds are all self-sufficient and content. Yeats simply wants to escape modernity and find peace in a quiet in nature.

The poem sees a telling shift in the final stanza. Stark reality reveals that Yeats stands *'on the roadway, or on the pavements grey'*. Until this point, the future tense has been used suggesting that Innisfree is an idyllic destination but here we see a complete shift. In the melancholic streets, he can still hear the *'lake water lapping'* proposing the idea that the Isle is in his soul. This clarifies that Innisfree is an inner necessity, like the water that unceasingly flows. In this it is clear that Yeats uses his imagination as a means for escape as he cannot do so physically.

Within these two poems, natural setting is used to convey the desire for a different time, whether that is the regret of letting a past love go, or the yearning to move from the modern world to a simpler time. In each, the natural setting is a backdrop to explore the escape from his current existence.

Chapter Two

Another issue that Yeats has grappled with in life and in writing is the contrast between mortal and physical existence, and the possibilities of immortality and spiritual existence. Yeats always viewed death and old age not only as a biological end, but as a spiritual challenge. This view is expressed in many of his works. In *'Under Ben Bulben'* he writes, **"*Cast a cold eye On life, on death. Horseman, pass by!*"** It's a fitting epitaph for a poet who finally learned to accept the inevitability of death. In life he became obsessed with the notion of death, in his early works using it to undermine his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. To soothe his pain of rejection he emphasised her beauty as finite and a punishment for rejecting his 'pilgrim soul.' In his later works, we get a sense of fear as death grows closer bringing the tortures of the unknown.

In *'Sailing to Byzantium'*, Yeats is seen to reject the order of life and death and dreams of immortality. He grapples with the difficulties that stem from old age and failing body. He identifies that Ireland is a place he wishes to escape to as it holds *'The young in one another's arms'*. Ireland is not for the older generations, it is cyclical, where youth is desirable. He adds that *'whatever is begotten, born and dies'* showing clearly that in this world, everything is born, reproduces, and dies. As a result, death becomes unimportant and simply a natural result of living. Therefore, life can be fulfilled in more than just physical existence, but through the soul. He argues that an old man is nothing but a *'tattered coat upon a stick'* displaying the notion that the aging reduces the body to fragility.

To escape this, Yeats wishes to travel to Byzantium, a holy city which represents eternal art and intellect, a place where human creativity transcends decay representing art, which is eternal and will not age, reproduce or die. Yeats presents the idea of the *"Sages standing in Gods holy fire"* as symbols of divine wisdom and purification which he must appease in order to transcend into the eternal artistic world in his sequel poem *'Byzantium'*. He does not want to come to the city to become young again, he yearns for immortality and relief from his terminal existence. This view is once again symbolic through the use of gold within the art, a precious metal unable to be tarnished, once again representative of immortal existence through art: *'As in the gold mosaic of a wall'*. Yeats begs the holy saints of the city to take him away from his physical existence and claims that as soon as he is at one with the art of the city, he will never return to his mortal and tiring body when he states *'Once out of nature, I shall never take by bodily form from any natural thing.'* This ultimately indicates that he will become one with art, and offers his immortality through the poem.

Yeats explores life and death with a different approach *'News for the Delphic Oracle'* as the cyclical nature of life – birth, reproduction, and death – is presented. The poem focuses on the afterlife through mythical figures. A sense of desolation in established with legendary figures such as Pythagoras and Plotinus being described as *'sighing like the rest'*. These icons of wisdom and inquiry being presented as *'sighing'* highlights the sadness and longing that Yeats conveys. The phrases *"Silver dew"* and *"Golden codgers"* evokes the idea of a faded glory, wisdom and beauty. This establishes the theme of mortality and decay. The wisdom and beauty of the past has been lost.

Stanza two sees a complete tonal shift as the *'innocents'* are said to *'relive their death'* whilst riding on the backs of dolphins. This offers a paradoxical effect as it contrasts joy and suffering. This stanza aims to deal with rebirth and purification through suffering, even as their *'Wounds open again',* the *'ecstatic waters'* seem to mock their suffering with laughter. The dolphins act as a symbol of both destruction and rebirth which move through *'ancestral patterns'* that evoke something ancient and instinctual. Life and death are naturally part of a repeating cycle. All this hints to the notion that death carries the possibility of peace, redemption and a release from pain, much like the themes of *'Sailing to Byzantium'.*

The final stanza explores a more graphic and violent scene of pagan sexuality. The sea, which has already functioned as a space of both suffering and ecstasy: *'Great waters sighed for love',* now feels like a site of individual suffering. The boundaries which exist between life and death dissolve as death is no longer an end. Suffering transforms into harmony, love and ritual. This highlights cyclical life and rebirth, so destruction and renewal may become inseparable parts of a common movement.

The poem begins with disillusionment, moves to brutal yet ecstatic renewal, and concludes with chaotic visions of pagan sensual experience creating ambiguity as we question the nature of suffering and enduring power of the natural world. We can draw comparisons to that of the questioning of existence in *'Sailing to Byzantium'* which explores cyclical life and physical existence.

Chapter Three

In his childhood, Yeats spent a time in County Sligo - a place rich in folklore and culture and a central part of his stories and landscape of where he referred to as the *'country of his heart'*. This is key to his initial writings, published in the collection of *'The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems'*. This included *'The Stolen Child'*, where its natural settings come from his love for Sligo. In this, he explores Irish and Celtic folklore which, along with setting, explores themes of escapism and desire to move to a simpler place or time. John Carey writes that the great Irishman's "*whole life as a poet was an attempt to escape from reality into a world of art, myth and magic*". The themes of *'The Stolen Child'* link closely to that of *'The Song of Wandering Aengus'* published 10 years after his initial collection, in his anthology; *'The Wind Among the Reeds'*.

'The Stolen Child' is the call of the faeries as they lure the children, and indeed the reader, to their secluded and beautiful *'leafy island'* and away from the world that is *'more full of weeping than you can understand'*. Here Yeats, through the perspective of the faeries, establishes the impression that human society is corrupt and that innocent children should be rescued. The temptation of the island as a haven is evident in the alluring tranquility and natural essence of the faery world: *'Where the wave of moonlight glosses the dim grey sands with light'* The *'dim grey sands'* are symbolic of the dullness of the faery world although it is transformed when glossed over by the beautifying moon. Yeats uses euphonies to make the faery land sound pleasing. This allows it to sound lyrical and alluring from the first reading as repetition lends a

hypnotic quality, 'Come away, o human child to the waters!' It has a musical rhythm and the reader is seduced to follow the faeries to their mystical land.

The idea of the moonlight *'glossing'* the sands, and in turn, the world, reveals its beautifying abilities captivating the child, as well as the reader as we can relate to the desire for a perfect world. The faery land is able to revitalise the ordinary creating the seductive promise to escape to an alternative land where even the bleak environment becomes enchanting. Yeats' desire for escape is clear as a scene of childlike dancing is presented, highlighting the carefree, mystical mood, while the human society is *'full of troubles and anxious is in its sleep.'* The stark contrast between the two places is striking as the physical world faces hardships and anxieties.

Although the faery world seems idyllic, it is in the final stanza that we can appreciate the ominousness of the island and the menace of the faeries as the *'stolen'* child will never be able to return home. The narrative switches to a saddening description of what the human child will miss. *'He'll hear no more the lowing of the calves on the warm hillside, or the kettle on the hob sing peace into his breast.'* The switch from *'you'* in the beginning of the poem to *'he'* in the end highlights the loss of the child to the mystical land making him appear more distant as he is brought deeper into the sinister world. The true dark and disturbing nature of the faeries is evident.

By the homely description of the physical world, Yeats introduces the idea that while there are issues within society: political, the structure of society and human nature, the child belongs at home. The *'lowing of the calves'* and the *'kettle on the hob'* may appear as simple, everyday sounds, however Yeats presents their familiarity as soothing and

peaceful creating a sense of security. While the mystical land may be able to simulate a happy place, it is his real home, with an environment of domesticity that is the authentic comfort.

Yeats' hope for a better state of existence, not only in the mythical world, but to the comforts of his childhood in Sligo is likely inspired by the political situation in the UK and Ireland when it was written, in 1886. The proposal for an Irish Home Split Rule Bill, was defeated in the House of Commons by the Liberal Unionist and the Conservative Party. It aimed to grant Ireland limited self-governance however the defeat was followed by a number of sectarian riots in Belfast. Yeats felt a great connection to his Irish roots. He yearned to return to the simplicity of his childhood away from the corruption of society and politics.

Yeats' craving to escape from the physical world is also explored in *'The Song of Wandering Aengus'* The inspiration comes from the mythological Irish god Aengus and his unrequited love for Irish patriot, Maud Gonne (founding member of the Sinn Fein Party).

The setting is established immediately: *'I went out to the hazel wood because a fire was in my head'*. Aengus leaves the normality and safety of his home and sets out through a *'hazel wood'*. In Celtic belief, hazel trees were held as sacred and associated with wisdom and omens. Aengus, a young man, is seemingly restless and seeking adventure and so sets out to catch a fish. The mysticism grows in the first stanza as the *'moth-like stars were flickering out'* creating a scene of beauty and a feeling of surreal perfection as the typically dull 'moths' are compared to 'stars'. Yeats' desire to escape to this

attractive land could be argued as he may use Aengus as a body to reflect his own wishes.

Upon satisfying his urge for adventure, he catches a fish and lays it on the ground, only for the *'silver trout'* to transform into a *'glimmering girl'*. The word *'glimmering'* perfectly depicts the transition of a silver fish into an equally shimmering girl. Her beauty is only enhanced by the *'apple blossom in her hair'*. She calls his name but before he was able to catch her, she *'faded through the brightening air'*. This helps to build the theme of escape as the faery girl not only represents his desire for love, but also his hope to reach a mystical land. Yeats' uses otherworldly beings to represent a perfect existence which Aengus, and possibly Yeats himself seeks.

In the final stanza, Aengus has become *'old with wandering'* as he has searched for the faery girl for so long that he is now unable to escape due to his infatuation. He truly believes that he will find her and he *will 'kiss her lips and take her hands'*. Yeats states this as a fact emphasising his eternal and unwavering hope for love and escape from the physical world. He believes that they will be able to find happiness through the *'glimmering girl'* and will finally be at one with the beauty of the world. This is emphasised in the final lines: *'And pluck till time and times are done, the silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun.'* The imagery paints this imaginary existence as perfection and in natural beauty.

The structure is in quatrains. The first half of each stanza is representative of the physical world, yet the second leans into mysticism and mythology. Showing Yeats yearning to move from the boring normality of everyday life into a more exciting and

enticing mythological existence. This is also apparent from Aengus' inability to reach the faery girl, symbolising the unattainability of the dream. The unreachable, alluring girl represents the unattainable goal of a united Ireland, although it may be unachievable through policy, the nationalism is strong within the artistry that Yeats has created. Just like Aengus, Yeats himself wants to achieve something difficult and will continue to hope for this for eternity.

The two poems are vital in Yeats' exploration of another physical existence and his desire for escape. While *'The Stolen Child'* looks upon the kidnapping of the boy from the viewpoint of the faeries, revealing the sinister reality that the child will never return home. In *'Song of Wandering Aengus,'* Aengus will experience the same fate, never to return home, however he is so infatuated by the beautiful faery girl that such fate becomes desirable.

Conclusion

As a result of setting and symbolism Yeats brought his desire for escape to life transforming 'the scrap metal of the day-to-day life into a ringing bell' and moving beyond the limitations of physical existence, time, and modern society. Emotional, spiritual and imaginative escape is successfully conveyed. Natural landscapes are explored in *The Lake of Innisfree* and *Down by the Salley Gardens* embodying a longing for simplicity, peace and lost youth. Escapism is rooted in nostalgia. In contrast, Sailing to Byzantium, News for the Delphic Oracle, The Stolen Child and Song of Wandering Aengus are artistic and mythological highlighting longing and discontent. They have their limitations by highlighting the unattainable nature of perfection and escape.

Ultimately, Yeats suggests that while the impulse to escape is deeply rooted in the human condition, escape can actually be achieved through poetry and art which can overcome the constraints of time, ageing and mortality. Yeats views human experience and mortality as a challenge and presents his ideas as an inevitable part human existence making us feel less alone in our own secret anxieties.

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