

CIRCUS ANIMAL'S DESERTION

W B YEATS

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- ▶ In his 1940 memorial lecture in Dublin, T. S. Eliot pronounced Yeats "one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them."
- ▶ Modern readers have increasingly agreed, and some now view Yeats even more than Eliot as the greatest modern poet in English language.
- ▶ The poet divided his early years among Dublin, London, and the port of Sligo in western Ireland.
- ▶ Sligo furnished many of the familiar places in his poetry, it includes the mountain Ben Bulbin and the lake isle of Innisfree.
- ▶ Important influences on his early adulthood included his father, the writer and artist William Morris, the nationalist leader John O'Leary, and the occultist Madame Blavatsky.
- ▶ In 1889 he met the beautiful actress and Irish nationalist Maud Gonne; his long and frustrated love for her (she refused to marry him) would inspire some of his best work.
- ▶ Often and mistakenly viewed as merely a dreamy Celtic twilight, Yeats's work in the 1890s involved a complex attempt to unite his poetic, nationalist, and occult interests in line with his desire to "hammer [his] thoughts into unity."
- ▶ By the turn of the century, Yeats was immersed in the work with the Irish dramatic movement that would culminate in the founding of the Abbey Theatre in 1904 as a national theater for Ireland. Partly as a result of his theatrical experience, his poetry after 1900 began a complex "movement downwards upon life" fully evident in the 'Responsibilities' volume of 1914.
- ▶ After that he published the extraordinary series of great volumes, all written after age 50, that continued until the end of his career. Widely read in various literary and philosophic traditions, Yeats owed his greatest debt to romantic poetry and once described himself, along with his coworkers John Synge and Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory, as a "last romantic."

- ▶ Political events such as the Easter Rising and the Irish civil war found their way into his poetry, as did personal ones such as marriage to the Englishwoman Georgiana "Georgie" Hyde-Lees in 1917, the birth of his children, and his sometime home in the Norman tower at Ballylee.
- ▶ So, too, did his increasing status as a public man, which included both the Nobel Prize in 1923 and a term as senator of the Irish Free State (1922--28).
- ▶ The most original poet of his age, he was also in ways the most traditional, and certainly the most substantial.
- ▶ His varied literary output included not only poems and plays but an array of prose forms such as essays, philosophy, fiction, reviews, speeches, and editions of folk and literary material.

CIRCUS ANIMAL'S DESERTION

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,

I sought it daily for six weeks or so.

Maybe at last being but a broken man

I must be satisfied with my heart, although

Winter and summer till old age began

My circus animals were all on show,


Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,

Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
'The Countess Cathleen' was the name I gave it,
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.



And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

OVERVIEW

- ▶ "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is a poem by William Butler Yeats published in 'Last Poems' in 1939. {the main theme of the collection: that our civilization is coming to an end, but it does not matter - in fact we should 'Rejoice!'}
 - ▶ While the original composition date of the poem is unknown, it was probably written between November 1937 and September 1938.
 - ▶ In the preface, Yeats suggests that he intended the poem to combine his personal views and impressions with the customs and beliefs of Christian Ireland.
 - ▶ The poem was the last work published in Yeats's final collection, with "Politics" following as an envoi.
 - ▶ {Envoi or envoy in poetry is used to describe:
 - ▶ a short stanza at the end of a poem such as ballad, used either to address an imagined or actual person or to comment on the preceding body of the poem.
 - ▶ a dedicatory poem about sending the book out to readers, a postscript.
 - ▶ any poem of farewell, including a farewell to life.}

- ▶ “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” is one of the last poems Yeats completed before his death in 1939, finds him looking back over his poetic career, reinterpreting his past work and his motivations for writing it, and searching for the truths that remain when all the vanities and illusions of life have been stripped away by the decay of age and the corruptions of time.
- ▶ In the poem, the poet uses the desertion of circus animals as an analogy to describe his failure to find inspiration for poetic creation as he seeks for new inspiration.
- ▶ As the poet starts to think back on his former inspirations, he pulls the reader along with him on a journey that takes them through Irish legends and Irish political activists, from Oisín to the Countess Cathleen to Cúchulainn. They’re all great stories, but at the end of the day, they just don’t seem to inspire our speaker anymore. Now that he comes to think of it, pretty much everything he’s ever written actually takes root in the dirty, messy, sloppy contents of the human heart. Even though he’s dressed those contents up in fancy myths and pretty rhymes, at the end of the day they’re still just the base emotions of human life.
- ▶ Well, he’s starting over. He’s facing all the dirt and mess head-on. No more myths. No more illusions. In other words, he’s moving past the Modern and into the Postmodern. It’s a whole new world – and he’s about to write the poetry to prove it.
- ▶ Critics have detected aspects of both Modernism and Postmodern literature in the poem.
- ▶ The poem consists of 3 parts, the first and the last with 8 lines each and the second containing 3 stanzas of 8 lines.
- ▶ The poem’s opening lines suggest that the poet is searching for a theme, but in the process, he finds the “masterful images” of his earlier works.
- ▶ The reflection upon previous poetic creations appears again as the second part begins and the poet voices his frustration by stating “What can I but enumerate old themes.”
- ▶ The final lines of the poem conclude that the poet must “lie down where all the ladders start,” which leads Michael O’Neil to suggest that the use of the word “start” indicates a new beginning taking place as the poem ends.
- ▶ The “foul rag and bone shop of the heart,” O’Neil contends, is the paper upon which the poem is written, and he argues that Yeats gives “grandeur” to the gutter items of the poem, as the reimagining of “old kettles, old bottles, a broken can” as well as the “rag and bone shop of the heart,” become “as masterful a set of images as any Yeats has created.”

SUMMARY

- ▶ The speaker describes searching in vain for a poetic theme: he says that he had tried to find one for “six weeks or so,” but had been unable to do so.
- ▶ He thinks that perhaps, now that he is “but a broken man,” he will have to be satisfied with writing about his heart, although for his entire life (“Winter and summer till old age began”) he had played with elaborate, showy poetic themes that paraded like “circus animals”: “Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot, / Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.”
- ▶ What can he do, he wonders, but list his old themes in the absence of a new one?
- ▶ He remembers writing of a “sea-rider” named Oisín, who traveled through “three enchanted islands”; but the speaker says that as he wrote about Oisín, he was secretly “starved for the bosom of his fairy bride.”
- ▶ He remembers writing a play called “The Countess Cathleen,” about a “pity-crazed” woman who gave her soul away; but the speaker says that the dream inspired by a woman who was forced to destroy her own soul “had all my thought and love.”
- ▶ He remembers writing of the hero Cúchulainn’s battle with the sea while the Fool and the Blind Man “stole the bread”; but even then, he was enchanted by the dream—the idea of “Character isolated by a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory.” He says that he loved the “players and painted stage,” and not the things they symbolized.

- ▶ The speaker says that those images were masterful because they were complete. He says that they grew in pure mind, and asks out of what they began. He answers his own question: they issued from “Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can, / Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut / Who keeps the till.” Now that his “ladder” is gone, the speaker says, he must lie down “where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”