

# Ethics of Life: W. B. Yeats's Imagination of Being Old in His Early Poetry

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**Abstract:** In many of his early poems as in *Crossways* (1889) and *The Rose* (1893), the young W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), then just in his twenties, devotes himself to an imagined old man's world, where he casts a retrospective look at youth and life. He usually plants the youthful thoughts and deeds in the ending stage of life to observe their consequence and value, and contrasts passion of youth with the weak and weary life of the old to reveal what is eternal and valuable in life. The young Yeats's use of an imagined world of being old for retrospection and re-evaluation of youth reveals his pursuit of ethics of life, which is characteristic of rationalism and idealism. In his system of evaluation, the criterion is "life," and the evaluator is his old/rational "self" while the evaluated is also his "self," but only his young "self," which demonstrates Yeats's endeavor to construct a reason-based and ideal-oriented ethics of life.

**Key words:** W. B. Yeats; early poetry; ethics of life; youth; being old

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**标题：**生命的伦理：论叶芝早期诗歌中的老年想象

**内容提要：**叶芝早期诗歌常常将青春置于人生终端进行观察。他将青春的言行思想置于生命终点，考察其对于世界乃至生命自身的价值；将青春时期的各种美好的景象置于青春销蚀、肉欲与激情退潮之后的老年世界来检省青春及其对人伦的影响和价值。叶芝在青春年少之际自发地想象垂暮之年并站在人生终端对人生进行回望和评价，其中隐含着叶芝对生命伦理价值的追寻，自觉地建立起一个伦理价值自我监测体系，在这一体系中，监测的主体和客体都是“自我”，参照的坐标是“生命”，揭示了青年叶芝浪漫主义的理性主义价值基础。

**关键词：**叶芝；早期诗歌；生命伦理；青春；老年

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In the mid-2010s, the Chinese translation of W. B. Yeats's "When You Are Old" was set to music in China and became a song very popular, especially among the young people. In this poem/song, the touching tone of sadness and the power of reason in self-questioning about life in an old man's tone are very impressive. But the awareness of the fact that Yeats wrote this lyrical poem was written in 1892, when he was just 27, has aroused my academic curiosity in his early poems. This has lent me a perspective into Yeats's early poetry, which has led to a surprising discovery of the fact that he wrote many poems like this, speaking in an old man's tone or writing about being old as a young poet. Then why did he write in this way as a young man? And how shall we understand his romanticism in his early years, especially when he was and is widely believed by scholars to be a romantic poet in his early years? All these questions give clues and inspirations to this paper.

### **The Ending Stage of Life as a Mirror of Youth**

In many of his early poems as in his books of poetry such as *Crossways* (1889) and *The Rose* (1893), young W. B. Yeats, then just in his twenties, wrote about being old and death, and thus presented an imagined world of the ending stage of life.

A good case is the above-mentioned poem "When You Are Old." In this poem, the 27-year-old poet imagined "you," old and sleepy, thinking and reflecting over the past years. The striking contrast in this poem between the present tense for description of the "now" or being in the old age and the past tense for description of the past years presents a seemingly factual record of life.

WHEN you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
 And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
 And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
 Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;  
 [...]  
 And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
 Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
 And paced upon the mountains overhead

And hid his face amid a crowd of stars. (Yeats 14)

In this poem, the poet/speaker, as an old man, remembers his love when he was young. It reveals that Yeats, as a young poet just in his twenties, was interested in writing about the old people.

“When You Are Old” is just one of many poems devoted to or concerned with a world of the old. Another example is the poem entitled “The Meditation of the Old Fisherman,” in which young Yeats reveals the inner world of an old fisherman by speaking in his tone:

YOU waves, though you dance by my feet like children at play,  
 Though you glow and you glance, though you purr and you dart;  
 In the Junes that were warmer than these are, the waves were more gay,  
*When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*  
 The herring are not in the tides as they were of old;  
 My sorrow! for many a creak gave the creel in the-cart  
 That carried the take to Sligo town to be sold,  
*When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.*

And ah, you proud maiden, you are not so fair when his oar  
 Is heard on the water, as they were, the proud and apart,  
 Who paced in the eve by the nets on the pebbly shore,  
*When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.* (Yeats and Finneran 21)

Many other poems such as “The Ballad of Father O’Hart” and “The Ballad of a Foxhunter” are also devoted to the description of old people’s world. In the latter, for example, the old foxhunter is heard to sing his life and is described as “his old eyes cloud with dreams” (Yeats and Finneran, 24).

Young Yeats wrote not only about people who are old, but also about death and the ending phase of life. For example, in the poem “A Dream of Death,” the speaker dreams of the death of a woman, whose age is not mentioned or suggested. Thus being old or the ending phase of life seems to be a source of inspiration or/and a major theme of Yeats’s early poems.

What also deserves our academic attention is that young Yeats did not only write about old people, but also cast his eyes on nature. Many of his poems are devoted to writing about natural scenes that indicate being old or dead. Just as the title of his poem “The Falling of the Leaves” suggests, this poem uses natural

images such as the yellow leaves of the rowan and the yellow wild-strawberry leaves, indicating the passing of time and loss of life that used to be prosperous.

AUTUMN is over the long leaves that love us,  
 And over the mice in the barley sheaves;  
 Yellow the leaves of the rowan above us,  
 And yellow the wet wild-strawberry leaves.

The hour of the waning of love has beset us,  
 And weary and worn are our sad souls now;  
 Let us part, ere the season of passion forget us,  
 With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow. (Yeats and Finneran 11)

In general, by writing about people or natural objects that are old or dead, Yeats demonstrated a strong interest in the ending stage of life. However, Yeats never focused just on this ending stage of life. Instead, he used this stage as a mirror to observe or reflect over the youthhood. In his poems, the poet usually cast a retrospective look at youth and life from the ending point of life. For example, in “The Meditation of the Old Fisherman,” the speaker—the old fisherman—is always making a comparison between what he experiences as an old man and how he lived as a young man. The refrain of “*When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart*” (Yeats and Finneran 21) in each stanza foreground the contrast. Even in “The Falling of the Leaves,” which is mostly involved in natural scenes, the poem demonstrates a contrast between the time when love prospers and the waning love in autumn.

From the previous discussion, we can find that the imagined world of being old or of a world narrated at the ending stage of life forms a typical feature of young Yeats's early poems. Then what is the intention of young Yeats's imagination of this world of being old? This is a question that deserves further research.

### **Pursuit for Ethics of Life**

It is quite obvious that Young Yeats gave a retrospective look at youth from the imagined ending stage of life in his poetry, which reveals his pursuit of ethics of life.

Among many things, young Yeats reflected mostly over love, particularly over physical love and spiritual love. The ending stage of life, which is typical of physical weakness and impotency, is used as a mirror to rethink the issues like

youthful carnal desire. The previously-mentioned poem “When You Are Old” presents a perspective from the old into what he experienced or pursued in his youthhood, which suggests the poet/speaker’s concerned about the consequence of his youthful mind or behavior.

This and other poems reflect a major theme of Yeats’s early poems, that is, the value of youthful carnal desire for life. An example is “Down by the Sally Garden,” published in 1889.

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;  
 She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.  
 She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;  
 But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,  
 And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand.  
 She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;  
 But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears. (Yeats 5)

This is a poem based on an Irish folk song. The speaker is an older man looking back on his young and “foolish” self. The refrain at the end of each stanza evokes the sadness of a man looking back on the love he has lost because he could not match his ambition with his lover’s view of life. This poem presents the speaker’s two attitudes, taken respectively when he was young and when he is old, toward his youthful choice not to take love easy, which forms a sharp contrast.

But I, being young and foolish,/with her would not agree. (Stanza 1)  
 But I was young and foolish,/and now am full of tears. (Stanza 2)

Here, “full of tears” is of great ambiguity and indicates great uncertainty in his attitude towards physical desire as proposed by his love when he was young, thus open to different possibilities. Maybe the old speaker regrets his not following his passion by taking love easy as proposed by his love when he was young; maybe the old speaker is touched by his sticking to reason by refusing to “take love easy” when he was young; or maybe he feels sorry for not being able to keep both physical joy and reason-oriented ethical value at the same time. The ambiguous feeling and attitude as indicated in “full of tears” forms a riddle about ethics of life, and reflects young Yeats’s question and consideration about the real value of life.

This poem seems to suggest young Yeats's getting rid of his youthful perplexity as indicated in the title of his first book of poetry—*Crossways*, and his growing into maturity and reason.

From these and other poems by young Yeats, we can find that he tended to set himself in the imagined ending stage of life to explore the meaning and value of youth and even life to the world and society. The ending stage of life that is characteristic of physical impotence and weakness serves as a perfect mirror to youth and life.

By casting an eye from the imagined ending phase of life onto youth, Yeats attempted to seek for the answer to the question—Which matters, carnal love or spiritual love? In his 1889 poem “Ephemera” (Yeats 1-2), for example, a dialog in a deadly autumn between a man and a woman, both of whom are obviously physically weak, presents a reflection over the passion in the youthhood. The woman laments upon the waning love when physical passion and power is almost gone as suggested by “Your eyes [...] are bowed in sorrow under pendulous lids.” The man shares her idea, believing that “Passion has often worn out our wandering hearts” (2), but has transcended this idea. When seeing the “dead leaves / Gathered in silence” by the woman, he says, “Ah, do not mourn, [...] That we are tired, for other loves await us.” For his, “Our souls / are love, and a continual farewell” (Yeats 2). In the mouth of the old man who has experienced a passionate love, Yeats reveals his understanding about love: the lasting and continual love is just in soul. It is obviously a rational view of love or of body and soul. This foreshadows the theme of his 1892 poem, “When You Are Old.” This poem presents an old man's reflection over love of the youthhood, and the awareness that what survives the physical being is soul love. This poem once again reveals Yeats's emphasis on rationality in his view of love. What deserves more attention is that the “you” in this poem is a generalized “you,” which can be any person. When the speaker in this poem is giving advice to the listener “you” and leading the “you” to the awareness of the eternity of soul love, he is actually persuading and encouraging all readers to accept this view. This foregrounds Yeats's emphasis on rationality and spirituality in love, or in some sense, in life. Considering the poet who was then just in his twenties, his emphasis on rationality and spirituality deserves further academic attention, especially in rethinking of his widely acclaimed role as a romantic poet in his early years.

By writing about the old or looking back at youth at the ending stage of life, Young Yeats also explored the issue about the value of life. His early poems demonstrate his pursuit of a meaningful life, and how to make life rich and

meaningful is a major theme of his poetry in his emerging period. For him, nature and nation are two of the most important elements.

Nature is the wonderland of young Yeats and also a spiritual shelter and a place of refuge. As a young man, he expressed his wish of escaping into nature, where he found a sense of belonging. As a young poet in his twenties, he wrote the famous poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," well known for its theme of pursuing of life in nature or escaping to nature. In this poem, the poet/speaker was eager to flee to nature for peace of mind, as he said "I shall have some peace there" (Yeats 13), and freedom of spirit, where he would enjoy the life in a small cabin made of "clay and wattles," with "Nine bean-rows," "a hive for the honeybee," and "in the bee-loud glade" (Yeats 12). What is meaningful is that young Yeats did not write this as a young man, but spoke of this as a man who had suffered and experienced a lot, as suggested in "for peace comes dropping slow, / Dropping from the veils of the mourning to where the cricket sing" (Yeats 13). Here "mourning" is used as a pun for both "morning" and "lamenting over sufferings and pains." Thus Yeats wrote about his aspiration for nature from a perspective beyond his age, which demonstrates his view on the role of nature for life: nature is a cure to the physical sufferings and the home of the free spirit.

For young Yeats, nature is not only home of his spirit but of his nation. In his early poems, nature is part of Ireland and her history. In "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (Yeats 18-19), for example, young Yeats associated Irish history of the "written page" with the image of nature as symbolized in the "red-rose-bordered hem" (18). In some sense, his aspiration for nature is a journey back to his nation. In this poem, Yeats again spoke beyond his age and from the perspective of a man who was close to the ending phase of life: "While still I may, I write for you / the love I lived, the dream I knew. / From our birthday, until we die, / Is but the winking of an eye" (Yeats 19). The perspective of the speaking in this poem helps the young poet to make his idea more reasonable and justified with an individual's personal experience as its basis, and thus the poet/speaker's devotion to his nation and nature is foregrounded.

In some sense, it is secure to say that young Yeats, in and through his poems, expressed his ethics of life, including his view of love or body/soul based on reason, and his value of life by engaging himself with nation and nature, thus forming an ethical world based on the unity of human, nature and nation. In some sense, it receives echoes from Yeats's later poems, which feature the major themes, as Rosenthal summarized, "of life and death, love and hate, man's condition, and history and meanings" (Rothenthal xv).

### The Ethical Monitoring System of Life

Young Yeats's use of an imagined world of being old for retrospection and reevaluation of the life of youth reveals his pursuit of ethics of life. By writing about being old or dead as a young poet in his twenties, Yeats tried to transcend the limit of his age and life experience so as to reevaluate the ethic meaning of youth and to explore the ethical significance of youthful choices and behaviors. By referring to the old age or death, Yeats tried to transcend his youthful confusion and perplexity and gave him a reasonable explanation or judgment about the behavior, ideas and choices of youth so as to guide him in the direct way. Distance in time makes it easier for Yeats to see his young self clearly.

It is to say, by using the ending stage of life as the mirror of youth, Yeats developed an ethical monitoring system of life. In his system, the criterion is "value," and the monitor is his old/rational "self" while the monitored is also his "self," but only his young "self." At the core of this system is "value" as the criterion, which is involved in three major fields—body/soul or love, nature, and nation. In terms of body/soul or love, the value lies in spirituality, which leads to eternity; in terms of nature, the value lies in freedom; in terms of nation, the value lies in engagement. In this sense, we can see that young Yeats's view of value seems to be deeply rooted in the idea of universality and transcendence over personality, in terms of both time and space. The value of an individual, for young Yeats, is not achieved without the involvement with nature and nation, or without extension in the dimension of time. So Yeats's ethical view is exclusive of egotism and pragmatism, and is of striking idealist flavor.

This monitoring system serves as a guide of leading young Yeats in the "right" way. This reflects Yeats's endeavor to construct a reason- and ideal-based romantic ethics of life, which is of a mixture of rationalism and idealism. In some sense, it also foreshadows Yeats's view of life and world in the following years, as exemplified in "Sailing to Byzantine."

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