

Selected Poems



“The greatest poet of our time – certainly the greatest in this language, and so far as I am able to judge, in any language... one of the 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.”

T.S. Eliot

“Yeats is like a mountain range, lying on the horizon. He can’t be emulated; you just walk around under the shade”

Seamus Heaney

“The only poet worthy of serious study.”

Ezra Pound

“Ireland still lives in the shadow of W.B. Yeats. At times, the shadow darkens and changes its shape, but it is never absent, because his search for freedom and soaring autonomy makes him our contemporary.”

Colm Tóibín

Selected Poems

W.B. Yeats

Selected by

J.G. Nichols



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Selected Poems

The Song of the Happy Shepherd

The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy;
Of old the world on dreaming fed;
Grey Truth is now her painted toy;
Yet still she turns her restless head:
But O, sick children of the world,
Of all the many changing things
In dreary dancing past us whirled,
To the cracked tune that Chronos* sings, 10
Words alone are certain good.
Where are now the warring kings,
Word be-mockers? – By the Rood,
Where are now the warring kings?
An idle word is now their glory,
By the stammering schoolboy said,
Reading some entangled story:
The kings of the old time are dead;
The wandering earth herself may be
Only a sudden flaming word, 20
In clanging space a moment heard,
Troubling the endless reverie.
Then nowise worship dusty deeds,
Nor seek, for this is also sooth,
To hunger fiercely after truth,
Lest all thy toiling only breeds
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth
Saving in thine own heart. Seek, then,
No learning from the starry men,
Who follow with the optic glass
The whirling ways of stars that pass – 30
Seek, then, for this is also sooth,
No word of theirs – the cold star-bane
Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,
And dead is all their human truth.

Go gather by the humming sea
 Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,
 And to its lips thy story tell,
 And they thy comforters will be,
 Rewording in melodious guile
 40
 Thy fretful words a little while,
 Till they shall singing fade in ruth
 And die a pearly brotherhood;
 For words alone are certain good:
 Sing, then, for this is also sooth.

I must be gone: there is a grave
 Where daffodil and lily wave,
 And I would please the hapless faun,
 Buried under the sleepy ground,
 With mirthful songs before the dawn.
 50
 His shouting days with mirth were crowned;
 And still I dream he treads the lawn,
 Walking ghostly in the dew,
 Pierced by my glad singing through,
 My songs of old earth's dreamy youth:
 But ah! she dreams not now; dream thou!
 For fair are poppies on the brow:
 Dream, dream, for this is also sooth.

Down by the Salley Gardens

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.

The Meditation of the Old Fisherman

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, 10
Who paced in the eve by the nets on the pebbly shore,
When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart.

Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea

A man came slowly from the setting sun,
To Emer, raddling raiment in her dun,
And said, "I am that swineherd whom you bid
Go watch the road between the wood and tide,
But now I have no need to watch it more."

Then Emer cast the web upon the floor,
And raising arms all raddled with the dye,
Parted her lips with a loud sudden cry.

That swineherd stared upon her face and said,
"No man alive, no man among the dead, 10
Has won the gold his cars of battle bring."

"But if your master comes home triumphing
Why must you blench and shake from foot to crown?"

Thereon he shook the more and cast him down
Upon the web-heaped floor, and cried his word:
"With him is one sweet-throated like a bird."

"You dare me to my face," and thereupon
She smote with raddled fist, and where her son
Herded the cattle came with stumbling feet,
And cried with angry voice, "It is not meet 20
To idle life away, a common herd."

"I have long waited, mother, for that word:
But wherefore now?"

 "There is a man to die;
You have the heaviest arm under the sky."

"Whether under its daylight or its stars
My father stands amid his battle-cars."

“But you have grown to be the taller man.”

“Yet somewhere under starlight or the sun
My father stands.”

“Aged, worn out with wars
On foot, on horseback or in battle-cars.” 30

“I only ask what way my journey lies,
For He who made you bitter made you wise.”

“The Red Branch camp in a great company
Between wood’s rim and the horses of the sea.
Go there, and light a camp-fire at wood’s rim;
But tell your name and lineage to him
Whose blade compels, and wait till they have found
Some feasting man that the same oath has bound.”

Among those feasting men Cuchulain dwelt,
And his young sweetheart close beside him knelt, 40
Stared on the mournful wonder of his eyes,
Even as Spring upon the ancient skies,
And pondered on the glory of his days;
And all around the harp-string told his praise,
And Conchubar, the Red Branch king of kings,
With his own fingers touched the brazen strings.
At last Cuchulain spake, “Some man has made
His evening fire amid the leafy shade.
I have often heard him singing to and fro,
I have often heard the sweet sound of his bow. 50
Seek out what man he is.”

One went and came.
“He bade me let all know he gives his name
At the sword-point, and waits till we have found
Some feasting man that the same oath has bound.”

Cuchulain cried, “I am the only man
Of all this host so bound from childhood on.”

After short fighting in the leafy shade,
He spake to the young man, "Is there no maid
Who loves you, no white arms to wrap you round,
Or do you long for the dim sleepy ground,
That you have come and dared me to my face?" 60

"The dooms of men are in God's hidden place."

"Your head a while seemed like a woman's head
That I loved once."

Again the fighting sped,
But now the war-rage in Cuchulain woke,
And through that new blade's guard the old blade broke,
And pierced him.

"Speak before your breath is done."

"Cuchulain I, mighty Cuchulain's son."

"I put you from your pain. I can no more."

While day its burden on to evening bore, 70
With head bowed on his knees Cuchulain stayed;
Then Conchubar sent that sweet-throated maid,
And she, to win him, his grey hair caressed;
In vain her arms, in vain her soft white breast.
Then Conchubar, the subtlest of all men,
Ranking his Druids round him ten by ten,
Spake thus: "Cuchulain will dwell there and brood
For three days more in dreadful quietude,
And then arise, and raving slay us all.
Chaunt in his ear delusions magical, 80
That he may fight the horses of the sea."
The Druids took them to their mystery,
And chaunted for three days.

Cuchulain stirred,
Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard
The cars of battle and his own name cried;
And fought with the invulnerable tide.

When You Are Old

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;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

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.

10

The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner

Although I shelter from the rain
Under a broken tree,
My chair was nearest to the fire
In every company
That talked of love or politics,
Ere Time transfigured me.

Though lads are making pikes again
For some conspiracy,
And crazy rascals rage their fill
At human tyranny;
My contemplations are of Time
That has transfigured me.

10

There's not a woman turns her face
Upon a broken tree,
And yet the beauties that I loved
Are in my memory;
I spit into the face of Time
That has transfigured me.

He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

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