Yeats’s Ambivalence

An Analysis of his poems “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats, like many poets through history, was a highly ambivalent Irish poet-playwright. Although he contributed to Irish culture by reviving and constructing Irish identity and tradition through his works, he was quite ambivalent about his own views in these matters. When reading his works closely one finds that there is ambivalence and a hybrid view of colonialism. This essay intends to explore his seemingly impossible categorization as either a colonial or anti-colonial poet through a close reading of his two poems “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”.

Despite being a Protestant with an Anglo-Irish background, Yeats always tried to focus on Irish peasants’ lives and traditions. He even supported Irish independence as a poet and playwright by writing nationalistic dramas and poems in the early years of his career. In other words, he was not only an artist who wanted art for art’s sake, he was also an artist whose works mixed with politics. Some critics have regarded him as an artist whose political views are sympathetic with colonalist attitudes. Others depict him as a nationalist artist whose works were an added incendiary in Ireland’s struggle for independence. There is a third type of critic who has a more comprehensive view by considering all aspects of Yeats’s politics.

This essay explores Yeats’ hybrid view of colonialism reflected in his two poems “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”. The former depicts the Anglo-Irish war which was a confrontation between colonizer and colonized and the latter is about the violent Irish civil war in 1922 depicting the confrontation between extreme and moderate nationalists. Moreover, these particular poems were written in the last years of his career when he was no longer a young, passionate nationalist but had started to question his former beliefs after having seen the outcome of Irish nationalism. Both poems are found in the collection The Tower and describe the conflicts that occurred in Ireland between 1919 and 1923, a very turbulent time in which the Irish Declaration of Independence was written (1919), the Government of Ireland Act was passed (1920), the Anglo-Irish treaty was signed (1921) and the Irish Free State was created (1922) - a time when Ireland went from being a colony to an independent state.

This essay argues that Yeats’s ambivalence is consistently present in and around him, controlling his attitudes towards colonizer and colonized. I am not suggesting that Yeats is either pro-colonizer or anti-colonizer, rather that political problems in society overshadow
Yeats’s ideological beliefs. The essay draws upon Homi Bhabha’s theory of the convoluted relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, something which is clearly reflected in Yeats’s own conflicted views in the matter, particularly in his later works exemplified in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”. After exploring Bhabha’s ideas, I will take a closer look at the poems and examine some binary oppositions that are expressed through several themes, such as art - politics, man of action - man of contemplation, youth - old age and past - present. Yeats’s ambivalence can be illuminated by examining a number of his works and naturally there are other oppositions in these two poems, but I selected these particular oppositions in these two poems because they so clearly illustrate Yeats’s ambivalence. With the use of Bhabha’s theories in relation to these binaries I will demonstrate Yeats’s hybridity and ambivalence in these two poems. These binaries will be the focal point of my analysis and they have not been used in an analysis before.

Theory

In this section I will first take a brief look at Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory in relation to Yeats and then look at the way critics try to categorize Yeats’s writings in relation to colonialism and anti-colonialism.

This essay is based on Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial theory as outlined in The Location of Culture (1994). The central thought in this work is that binary oppositions and ambivalence are key elements when creating culture and this is something that truly resonates with the way Yeats writes. Bhabha sums up his theory in the following way:

To put it succinctly, it turns the dialectical ‘between’ of culture’s disciplinary structure between unconscious and conscious motives, between indigenous categories and conscious rationalizations, between little acts and grand traditions, in James Boon’s words - into something closer to Derrida’s ‘entre’, that sows confusion between opposites and stands between the oppositions at once. The colonial signifier-neither one nor other-is, however, an act of ambivalent signification, literally splitting the difference between the binary oppositions or polarities through which we think cultural difference. It is in the enunciatory act
of splitting that the colonial signifier creates its strategies of differentiation that produce an undecidability between contraries or oppositions (182).

He describes the relationship between colonized and colonizer as dynamic and complicated with a reciprocal impact on each other creating a new form of culture that lies between the two. It also questions both sides simultaneously, thereby creating an ambiguity that defies rigid definitions. According to Bhabha this “between” is very particular and his description perfectly describes the effect that Yeats achieves in the two poems that are the subject of this essay.

Ashcroft et al. (2007) comment on Bhabha’s use of ambivalence by saying that it is “the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized.” (23). Ambivalence comes from the fact that the colonized is never completely opposed to the colonizer. Ashcroft et al. also state that it is a simplification to say that a colonized subject is either “complicit” or “resistant”, when in actuality a “fluctuating relation within the colonial subject” exists between these two extremes (23).

This ambivalence was also present in Yeats’s own life. Yeats had an Anglo-Irish background which was, in the eyes of the catholic Irish majority, associated with Englishness and colonialism. However, some of the leading supporters of the Irish cause like Lady Gregory and Yeats himself had an Anglo-Irish background, so the one does not exclude the other. On the other hand, one cannot discard Yeats’s Anglo-Irish identity although Yeats considered himself Irish. It is thus clear that this cultural ambivalence was omnipresent in both Yeats’s own life as well as in his later writings and that Bhabha’s theory is therefore useful in this context. In the following section I take a look at other critics’ approaches to Yeats’s writing which can be briefly divided into three categories.

Some critics regard Yeats as an artist with colonial inclinations who sympathizes more with the colonizer than the colonized. Stephen Regan, for example, argues that Yeats’s cultural nationalism is rooted in English aestheticism, i.e. that he uses an “English” way of writing when he writes about Ireland, in particular that he adopts the English manner of mythologizing the past (66-67). He also mentions that “The kind of nationalism Yeats espouses in the 1890s is the product of a complex set of allegiances and identities; it emerges from a deep sense of anxiety about the future of his own embattled class” (73). Yeats
considered himself a part of the Anglo-Irish class in Ireland. Although once prosperous, the Anglo-Irish began to decline in influence at this time, leading Yeats to question what kind of ideology and politics Ireland needed.

Like Regan, Spurgeon Thompson regards Yeats as a poet with colonialist attitudes. He points out Yeats’s sympathy for fascism in “On the boiler” and further argues that Yeats had a longing for some kind of old colonial state based on an aristocratic-liberal order and for some kind of racist version of a political and cultural elite (27). On the other hand, there are critics who consider Yeats a nationalist poet. For example, unlike Regan and Thompson, Edward Said in Yeats and Decolonization sees Yeats as an anti-colonial poet. He believes that Yeats played an important role in the cultural nationalism which is a prelude to political nationalism. Part of a late nineteenth-century movement to revitalize Irish culture, Yeats revived and constructed Irish culture by writing about Irish history, legend and myth. The most important goal of the movement was shaping an Irish national identity in order to oppose British imperialism. According to Said “[a] great deal, but by no means all, of the resistance to imperialism was conducted in the name of nationalism” (73-74).

The third group of critics argues that it is not possible to categorize Yeats either as colonial or anti-colonial since it would present an incomplete image of Yeats. Rebecca Weaver, for example, mentions that “[m]any […] see Yeats as a hot-headed anti-colonial, rationalize Yeats’s big house poems and his later fascist-leaning political views, both seeming to spring from what Renato Rosaldo terms ‘imperialist nostalgia.’ Critics arguing for a Yeats with colonial sympathies explain away his early nationalist, anti-colonial fervor and poetry” (302).

Critics of both groups who regard Yeats as either colonial or anti-colonial ignore some part of Yeats’s life and work. O’Brien says that:

[t]o speak of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ as if they were completely disparate and distinct identities, hypostasized beyond history, is to be lodged in an essentialist Weltanschauung which denies the hybridity and liminality that certainly should be part of the theorization of the postcolonial (56).

Considering the turbulent times he lived in and the fact that he continuously modified his opinions about colonizer and colonized as the world around him changed it seems like a futile experiment to try to categorize his writings as either colonized or anti-colonized.
In his article “Postcolonial Yeats” Rajeev S. Patke discusses Yeats’s nationalism and hybridity and argues that his legacy has both negative and positive aspects. The negative side of his nationalism is the danger of using “idealized nationalism” (821) as it can lead to nefarious consequences, such as the civil war in which Irish fought Irish after the independence. The positive side is “the creative use to which he put all his own self-divisive ambivalences” (821). Yeats used his ambivalence to explore his own identity while exploring the language itself, particularly by showing that “culture could elide language through symbol, and history through mythology; and how one could use fictions to forge reality” (821). This is especially clear in his poems where he constantly shifts from one side to the other, always questioning his own previous views.

My approach is more in line with the third group of critics who give a more comprehensive picture of Yeats. One can say that as a young playwright Yeats was a nationalist who wrote “Cathleen ni Houlihan”, where blood-sacrifice is associated with the glorification and remembrance of Ireland, while in “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, written in the last years of Yeats’s life, he implies that the deaths of Irish nationalists are no longer glorious.

One final note on terminology: in this essay I use the term anti-colonial instead of postcolonial as far as Yeats is concerned. My approach in this regard is more in line with Stephanie Bachorz. In “Revising Postcolonialism: Irish Literary Criticism, Irish National Identity and the Protestant Poet” Bachorz distinguishes between anti-colonial and postcolonial. In her definition anti-colonial is the “practice of simply reacting against the stereotypes forced upon a country in a colonial situation”, while postcolonial is a “discourse which questions the old hierarchy as well as the system of binary oppositions itself”. In my view Yeats did not deconstruct binaries of present/past and English/Irish as some other writers like James Joyce did. He merely tried to reverse such binary oppositions which is why I chose the term anti-colonial in this context.

Another question of terminology is how to describe the poetic voice in the poems in relationship to Yeats as a person. I have made the assumption that the viewpoints expressed in the poems are close to Yeats’s own views and therefore I have used the words “the poet”, “the speaker” and “Yeats” interchangeably.
**Historical context**

In order to fully understand “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War” it is necessary to have a brief grasp of the historical background and Yeats’ own view of it.

After the general election held in Ireland in 1918 the winning party, the Republican Party Sinn Fein, formed a national assembly in 1919. This was seen as a provocation by the English government and it led to a war called the War of Independence, starting in 1919 and ending in 1921. The war was filled with cruelty and executions. Two groups to remember since they figure in the poem are “Black and Tans” and “Auxiliaries”. They were irregular units in the English forces and they were feared for their reprisals such as burning down entire villages and executions (Meimandi 166). A peace treaty was signed in December 1921 and as a result of this treaty the Irish Free State was created but it only included 26 of 32 Irish counties. The remaining counties formed Northern Ireland, which of course remained within the United Kingdom. The Irish nationalists split into two camps over this treaty. The moderates accepted the treaty while the extremists rejected it. This in its turn led to a cruel civil war between the extremists in the Irish Republican Army and the brand new army of the Irish Free State, and the latter were the victors.

Yeats approved of the creation of the Irish Free State but refused to take sides in the internal conflict. He was evasive when asked which side he supported: “Oh, I support the gunmen - on both sides” (Stanfield 68) and he thought that both sides were equally responsible for the ensuing violence (Meimandi 166-167).

Yeats had a different view of the kind of government he wanted for Ireland and it was based on his support of the Anglo-Irish tradition. The Anglo-Irish came from the Protestant Ascendancy who came to Ireland in different periods between the sixteenth century and the rule of Cromwell to start up plantations. These Protestants were given a stronger position under the Penal Laws (series of laws imposed on the Irish by England) while the Irish Catholics lost many of their civil rights, in particular the right to own land. A land-owning class of Anglo-Irish Protestants developed from this and at the end of the eighteenth century, when Henry Grattan’s Patriot Party was created, they gained full control over the Catholics. They created their own government and won some independence from England. However, this situation was not to last and after an armed rebellion in 1798 when Protestant liberal
elements demanded more reforms the British government had had enough and crushed the rebellion, enforcing the Act of Union in 1810 (in the original Act of Union from in 1800 Ireland was made a part of Great Britain). As a result the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy lost its power and when Yeats was born their power was almost completely gone and instead a growing middle-class of Irish Catholics was coming to the forefront. This change of influence was not to Yeats’ taste and he believed that the Anglo-Irish tradition would provide the powerful political leadership and culture that Ireland needed in order to be stable. He also saw other positive sides of this culture, such as free choice and solitude as well as a free spirit (Meimandi 168). Yeats believed that this aristocratic tradition was the best way to rule Ireland because of the freedom they enjoyed “freedom from economic necessity… freedom from various everyday fears… the whole cumulative burden of small insecurities that created the hesitancy, defensiveness and perpetual embarrassment of the middle class temperament” (Torchiana 44). But Yeats was not blind to the faults of this class and he pointed out their shortcomings and their weak position. Many critics have noted Yeats’ ambivalence in regards to his Anglo-Irish heritage stating that he admired it while being strongly aware of its weaknesses (Torchiana 44). Howes sums up this double-sidedness saying that Yeats “imagined the Anglo-Irish as a noble and worthwhile tradition, one capable of providing Ireland with the cultural continuity, political leadership and artistic integrity that he thought middle-class Catholic Ireland lacked”, but that he also “imagined Anglo-Irishness as a nationality founded on crime, perpetually in crisis and inherently subject to degeneration and decay. Its essence lay in this combination of coherence and crisis” (103). This is clearly visible in the two poems where elements from the Anglo-Irish culture are present, but always presented in an ambiguous way.

**Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen**

In this section I will first briefly give a background to the poem, then take a closer look at the binaries by making a detailed analysis of the most pertinent parts of the poem.

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” has six sections and the longest section is the first one with six eight-lined stanzas. The poem, written in 1921, was originally set in a broader historical context and was called “Thoughts upon the Present State of the World”. Yeats himself said that it was “not philosophical but simple and passionate, a lamentation over lost peace and
hope” (quoted in Meimandi 191). Those were troubled times: the First World War had ended, the Russian Revolution was fomenting and the war between the English and the Irish was raging. Since this essay focuses on Yeats’ conflicting views regarding the political development in Ireland the following analysis will focus on Ireland and not look at the larger context of the poem. Yeats’s change of title suggests that he himself had changed his mind and focused more on Ireland. The poem questions both sides in the conflict, the English and the Irish agenda, and it calls out both extreme nationalism and its antagonist, aggressive colonialism. In Yeats’ view both sides were equally responsible for the violence and he is incapable of completely identifying with either side.

**Past – present, youth – old age**

Two powerful themes that permeate the poem are linked to time and history. There is a constant comparison between an idealized past (both an English and an Irish past as well as a classical Greek one) and the present chaos in which all that was promised has gone wrong. Yeats pits the past and the present against each other right from the start of the poem. The poem opens up with a lamentation for the time passed and a desire to go back to a glorious past.

> MANY ingenious lovely things are gone
> That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
> Protected from the circle of the moon
> That pitches common things about. (I, 1-4)

But at the same time one can see the reality of the present time as the first part of the poem also refers to the brutality of the “Black and Tans”, British forces which were sent to Ireland to fight the Irish.

The opposition of past and present continues as the speaker starts the second stanza of the first section with the pronouns “we” criticizing the glorious past, thus clearly including himself in this context and making himself responsible for what happened. “We too had many pretty

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1 Throughout the essay each reference to the two poems consists of a Roman numeral designating the section followed by an Arabic number designating the line number within the section.
toys when young:/ A law indifferent to blame or praise,/To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong/ Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays;” (I, 9-12). The “pretty toys” in this section are ideals such as laws and equalities which they had not been able to attain. This disillusionment continues on the following lines: “Public opinion ripening for so long/ We thought it would outlive all future days./ O what fine thought we had because we thought/ That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.” (I, 13-16). The poet ironically notes that both sides in the conflict believe that the violent and unwanted elements in their ranks had “died out” and that only good thoughts remained, but the error in this is then described in the third stanza. Rob Doggett asserts “public opinion, be it British or Irish, has led to blind faith in historical progress, that which ‘made old wrong/ Melt down’ and the return of that faith leads to a state of profound violence in the present” (76). The poet also criticizes the “public opinion”, partly shaped by artists including himself, which plays an important role in causing bloodshed. The pronoun “we” is used four times in the second stanza which manifests that both sides are treated equally. In other words, the poet does not reveal which side he belongs to. So denunciation is aimed at both sides. If he shows any sympathy or a sense of belonging it is again directed at both sides of the conflict. Equating both sides reflects the uncertainty and ambivalence of Yeats. This is exactly what Bhabha notes in his theory showing a third space, a hybrid space between that “sows confusion between opposites and stands between the oppositions at once.” Yeats challenges the distinction between colonizer and colonized and shows a third space, a hybrid space between colonized and colonizer.

There is a failure to bridge the gap between past and present. One of the reasons for this failure as depicted in the poem is that the idealistic thoughts the poet had in his youth could not be converted into reality. But at the same time the poet also criticizes old ideas and believes that the result obtained in the poet’s old age is more realistic, regardless of the conflict that it generated. He also believes that it shows the failure of the idealism of both sides in the conflict: England who wants to keep the idea that the Victorian age is one of peace and progress and Ireland who is brutally awakened from its dream of a gentle, peaceful Irish people whose beauty would finally be seen if they obtained their dream of independence. Instead both sides are faced with the horrors of war and the challenge of their ideals that must be revised as they are challenged by the brutalities committed in the conflict.

In the poem there is thus a movement from the idealized past, to present realities where much of what was taken for granted before is questioned. There is however one instance in the
poem where time actually reverts. In the second part “the platonic Year/ whirls out new right and wrong, / Whirls in the old instead” (II, 6-8). This is however no break in the pattern, it is just the moment when the poet realizes that youthful idealism is irrevocably replaced by the realities of history in that the pattern of conflicts will forever remain the same and that all idealistic goals will be strongly challenged when they are actually put into practice.

**Man of action – man of contemplation**

It is obvious that the situation turns more serious in the fourth stanza of the first section. One can see the language in these lines is extremely bitter and the speaker describes the horrible scenes of war which leads to confrontation between men of action and men of contemplation. As Stan Smith (1990) says, the “worst rogues and rascals” (I, 16) from the second stanza have not disappeared and they return in this stanza with even greater violence (44).

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare

Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery

Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,

To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;

The night can sweat with terror as before

We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,

And planned to bring the world under a rule,

Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (I, 25-32)

The poet portrays cruelties committed by the men of action on the English side. The description of a murdered mother refers to the killing of Ellen Quinn, an Irish woman who was shot dead with her child in her arms by Black and Tans, the English forces fighting to suppress the Irish struggle for independence. The important point in this stanza is that the pronoun “we” is used again by Yeats.
It is clear that Yeats holds both sides involved in the conflict responsible for the bloodshed. As Rob Doggett notes that

More important the pronoun ‘we’ so rarely used by Yeats, abounds in this section, suggesting no clear demarcation between Irish victim and British aggressor. The two, bound together in their desire to find stability in time and to discover in the past validation for deeds in the present, be they in the service of imperial or national cause, have tragically failed to perceive the violent ends of such desires (78).

The poet blames men of action, both colonized and colonizer, for their actions. The poet seems to criticize men of contemplation as well when he goes further and blames public opinion, “our thoughts” in both the English and Irish societies, for the atrocities and compares them to “weasels fighting in a hole”. He does not show any sympathy with either side in the conflict which indicates Yeats’s uncertainty is present in and around him, controlling his attitudes towards colonizer and colonized, creating a hybrid space between them and, as Bhabha mentions, shaping confusion between opposites and standing between the oppositions at once.

There is a stark contrast between these two ways of approaching life in the poem. Men of action are often portrayed as brutal, but men of contemplation are often portrayed as weak, or unable to make a difference. This opposition is particularly clear in the fourth stanza in the first part of the poem: “We pieced our thoughts into philosophy, / And planned to bring the world under a rule, / Who are but weasels fighting in a hole” (I, 30-32). The men of contemplation are trying to devise a philosophy, in this case for both sides, a way of thinking that would allow them to obtain the society they want; the English one with Ireland included and the Irish one where they were free. But instead of gaining the rule they both aspired for they become men of action engaged in meaningless fighting.

In the last stanza of the first section the speaker questions the outcome of the war which is nothing but destruction. The man “in love” who represents the man of contemplation gives his place to the man of action, the “incendiary or bigot”.

But is there any comfort to be found?

Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say? That country round

None dared admit, if Such a thought were his, (I, 41-44)

When it comes to “incendiary or bigot” the speaker does not specify who is the bigot and who is the incendiary. Usually Black and Tans burned the Irish houses, but the speaker’s generality in this line implies “Incendiary or bigot could be found” on both sides.

It would seem that the poet sees himself as a man of contemplation as there are many parts in which he lauds its advantages but at the same time he is very well aware of the weak position that a man of contemplation has as all beautiful ideas are continually threatened by an “Incendiary or bigot [who] could be found / To burn that stump of the Acropolis, / Or break in bits the famous ivories / or traffic in the grasshoppers and bees.” (I, 45-48).

In spite of this weakness the poet cannot help but remain a man of contemplation, although he is sometimes tempted to become a man of action, although one that seems to shy away from the public eye in spite of his need for it.

Men of action can be seen in the last two lines of the stanza in the second part “Whirls in the old instead;/ All men are dancers and their tread” (II, 8-9). The pleasant scene of the “dancers” will soon turn into dreadful image of “dragon of air” (II, 3). It seems to be inevitable to avoid the “dragon-ridden” days and the “nightmare” mentioned in the first section. In the last two lines of the second section the poet again equates both sides by using “All men are dancers” (II, 9) and holds them responsible for creating “dragon-ridden” (I, 25) days.

In the first stanza of the third section the speaker who is man of contemplation seems to be fed up with the chaotic situation created by men of action and returns to his “solitary soul” (III, 2) and then follows “Some moralist or mythological poet/ Compares the solitary soul to a swan;” (III, 1-2). The swan is associated with solitude as Stan Smith mentions that “Soul and Swan seem to fuse - an effect achieved by the ambiguity of the pronoun ‘it’, which could and in effect does refer to both, making each the mirror of the other” (61). The speaker continues and expresses his satisfaction with his solitude and being a man of contemplation. “I am satisfied with that,” (III, 3).

The next stanza opens up with man of meditation.
A man in his own secret meditation
Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made
In art or politics;
Some Platonist affirms that in the station
Where we should cast off body and trade
The ancient habit sticks, (III, 11-16)

The speaker’s satisfaction with his solitude in the previous stanza is charged with internal tension. The time politically is unstable and therefore the inner world of the poet “Is lost amid the labyrinth” of his art and politics. In the last stanza of the third section the poet expresses his frustration and even his rage that the dream of the people “to mend whatever mischief” (III, 27) has not been fulfilled.

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
To end all things, to end
What my laborious life imagined, even
The half-imagined, the half-written page;
O but we dreamed to mend
Whatever mischief seemed (III, 21-27)

The swan has left for an empty sky, suggesting the man of contemplation’s (the poet’s) frustration. The poet’s satisfaction with his solitude has turned into bitterness and rage. His anger is more obvious when he is going to “end all things” even his “half-written page” poem. Once again the poet uses the pronoun “we” which indicates that his frustration and anger are not only directed at himself but also that they are directed to people on both sides. At first sight “we” refers to Irish nationalists whose dream was to achieve freedom; a dream which
was advocated by young Yeats in different ways, but we will later see in the poem that “we” also refers to the Englishmen.

In the third part, second stanza, he writes that he would like to be forgotten after his death and that all his works be forgotten: “That were a lucky death, / For triumph can but mar our solitude.” (III, 19-20). There is a strong conflict in what he writes. In order for a poet to spread his ideas he needs to become known to the public, but in this poem the poet seems to be afraid of this, or at least to be afraid of what might happen to his work after his death and that he is so afraid of this that he prefers to be forgotten. It comes from his complete disillusionment, as expressed in these lines: “but now / That winds of winter blow / Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed” (III, 28-30). This can naturally also be applied to men of action because they have a dream too, and just like men of contemplation, their goals will be strongly challenged by the winter, i.e. the realities of conflict.

“We” also refers to the English colonizer as the poet continues in the next section:

We, who seven years ago

Talked of honour and of truth,

Shriek with pleasure if we show

The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth. (IV, 1-4)

“We” seems to address the English before the Great War. “Seven years” before 1919 refers to 1912 when the British parliament was debating the Home Rule Bill. That bill was to grant Ireland limited independence with a separate parliament. It never happened due to the outbreak of war and the subsequent Easter Rising in 1916. This stanza also shows the move from idealism, “honour and truth”, to the petty realities of war in that they “shriek with pleasure” whenever violence escalates. The analogy with the weasel, an infamous predator, underlines that the war is inglorious and the fighting dirty.

The poet continues to criticize both sides in the fourth part by showing that the “seven years” have strongly challenged the ideals of both sides and now reduced them to people who “shriek with pleasure” at violence.
The poet’s complete disillusionment continues in the fifth part where he mocks both men of action and men of contemplation: the “great” (V, 1) that only fought for glory and forgot “the leveling wind” (V, 5), the “wise” (V, 6) who never lifted their eyes from their books and ideas and that are now left standing looking at the result of the conflict around them, the “good” (V, 11) who took the situation too lightly and who are now nowhere to be found and finally, in a beautiful way of showing the dangers of trying to stay away from the dichotomy between men of action and men of contemplation. The word “mock” appears repeatedly in the fifth part of the poem. This section has four stanzas and “mock” is used in the first line of each stanza. The mockers, including the poet, mock “the great”, “the wise” and “the good” of both sides who were not able to see the consequences of such a conflict. The speaker in the last stanza mocks even the “mockers” (V, 16) who tried to stay out of the conflict and instead were left with nothing which implies that the poet holds both men of action and men of contemplation on both sides responsible for “that foul storm” (V, 19) of the war. Yeats’s ambivalence is evident in the way he blames both colonizer and colonized, standing himself between oppositions that is called hybrid space by Bhabha.

The concluding part of the poem depicts the violent and chaotic scene of the war created by men of action.

    Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;

    Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded

    On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,

    But wearied running round and round in their courses

    All break and vanish, and evil gathers head: (VI, 1-5)

For the poet there are no heroes in this war as “handsome riders….All break and vanish”. The poet does not mention the nationality of the riders which implies “riders” on both sides.

However, the poem ends on a slightly darker note as men of action are seen carrying out violent acts in the sixth part and persons of contemplation (this time it is not a man, but a woman and a man) turn to futile sacrifices in order to keep their world.
Art – politics

There are some parallels between art and men of contemplation on one side and politics and men of action on the other, but they are also distinct notions on their own.

The opposition of art and politics is evident in the first stanza of the first section.

Amid the ornamental bronze and stone

An ancient image made of olive wood --

And gone are Phidias' famous ivories

And all the golden grasshoppers and bees. (I, 5-8)

By using the ancient Greek artistic ornaments like “ornamental bronze and stone”, “An ancient image made of olive wood” and “Phidias’ famous ivories” one can see the opposition between art and politics. In this troubled situation these precious artifacts are “gone”, swept away by the current conflict. In these lines Yeats might point out the uselessness of art in a time of action as Irishmen are at war with the British to achieve independence.

Politics are only indirectly mentioned in the poem as the poet tends to show its result rather than its ideological background, i.e. “Parliament and king” in the third stanza of the first part. In the third stanza the tone turns less idealistic and perhaps wants to show an important role of politics, namely helping to reach a compromise.

All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,

And a great army but a showy thing;

What matter that no cannon had been turned

Into a ploughshare? Parliament and king

Thought that unless a little powder burned

The trumpeters might burst with trumpeting
And yet it lack all glory; and perchance

The guardsmen's drowsy chargers would not prance. (I, 17-24)

This stanza maintains that both sides are ready for some kind of stand-off, but they have forgotten what history has taught them about conflicts, as seen in the line “all ancient tricks unlearned”. Then comes the indirect biblical quote about cannons and ploughshares in which the poet ironically notes that both sides idealistically want to keep peace and still obtain their goals, but that reality is different and both sides are more ready to fight with cannons than plough fields in peace.

The phrase “parliament and king” in the this stanza refers to the English colonizers before the Great War and it shows that the English had been keeping a sharp eye on the Irish, not letting them “trumpet” their message about freedom too loudly and that “a little powder”, i.e. some bloodshed, was needed in order to put the Irish in their place. The final lines of the stanza are more hesitant and indicate that there might be no such glory in an attack from either side and that the guardsmen, the English, might be too comfortable with the present situation in order to risk starting an open conflict.

Art is more visible, but mostly in the form of ancient masterpieces smashed to pieces in the current conflict. On the other hand, politics have an artistic foundation that tends to crumble in the harsh realities of conflict, while the beauty of art is defenseless in war as men of action smash it without regard while they move towards their goal.

There also a parallel in the poet’s life. In the second stanza of the third part the reader sees: “A man in his own secret meditation / Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made / In art or politics” (III, 11-13). This seems to indicate that the poet does not know where he is any longer, if what he writes is politics or art and that he has become lost between them. This might explain why he wants everything to disappear after his death, maybe as a way of regaining the control that he lost.

This concludes the analysis of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, which portrays the conflict between the English and the Irish and in which Yeats manages to avoid taking sides in the conflict and instead shows the futile violence used by both sides. I will now continue with the poem that is set against the background of the Civil War, the conflict in which Irish fought against Irish.
Meditations in Time of Civil War

This analysis will be similar to that of the previous poem in that I start off with a general introduction, followed by a detailed analysis of some major binary themes.

The poem has seven sections and each section has a title. Except for the first and the last part, the poet uses the possessive adjective “my” in the titles. The second part is titled ‘My House’, and the others in order are: “My Table”, “My Descendants”, “The Road at my Door” and “The Stare’s Nest by my Window”. The first section of the poem is called “Ancestral Houses” and the final section has a long title “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness”. The speaker’s emphasis on using “my” implies the poet’s contemplation and his lack of belonging to the events happening around him because all of the objects that he describes with this pronoun are his private property, for instance “table” and “house”, places to which he retires in order to shut out the world around him.

Past – present, youth – old age

The contrast between past and present is strong in “Nineteen Hundred Nineteen”, but it is more subtle in this poem. The past is most clearly visible in the first part called “Ancestral Houses” where the Anglo-Irish mansions of Yeats’s past are described in ambiguous terms.

After an initial grand description of their beauty, jarring elements like excessive rain are introduced and the houses’ significance becomes further questioned when it is revealed that they have been built by “Bitter and violent men” (I, 19), thus questioning the motifs of this particular class that Yeats believed would be suitable to rule Ireland. Yeats was always interested in using place names as a way of reclaiming it from the English, but towards the end he focuses on the big houses of the aristocracy that originated in England, an aristocracy that he liked to associate himself with as he grew more disillusioned with the Irish masses. This is clearly shown in the fact that the first part of “Meditation” is called “Ancestral Houses”. There is a clear connection to his idea that a certain class is needed in order to rule a country, the very heart of his idea of Anglo-Irishness, but, as previously noted, Yeats had an ambivalent view of this aristocracy and clearly understood its limitations so there is an uncertainty in his statement.
The first stanza of ‘Ancestral Houses’ opens up with “rich man’s flowering lawns” (I, 1) that refers to the wealth and livelihood in an apparently big house which is symbol of Irish past. “SURELY among a rich man’s flowering lawns, / Amid the rustle of his planted hills,/ Life overflows without ambitious pains; / And rains down life until the basin spills, / And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains” (I, 1-5). The poet suggests too much overflow of life and rain until it spills and causes destruction. Moreover, richness is accompanied by freedom as the speaker has freedom of choice: “As though to choose whatever shape it wills/ And never stoop to a mechanical/ Or servile shape, at others’ beck and call.” (I, 6-8). As Meimandi notes the poet seems to suggest in these lines that the Anglo-Irish freedom of choice is used in a “Mechanical Or servile” manner, which are features of present Ireland, to follow “others’ beck and call” and to fight nationalists (172). It seems that many, including the rich Anglo-Irish, blindly follow the cycle of violence and extremism of present. The poet blames both sides in his poems on civil war, criticizing them for creating a chaotic situation in Ireland.

Unlike his previous works where blood-sacrifice is associated with the glorification and remembrance of Ireland, Yeats implies in the first part that violence is not glorious any longer as Rob Dogget notes that “this contrast between past and present, between a past in which violence leads to greatness and a present in which violence yields only further violence, is evident in the opening stanza.” (85)

The poet starts the second stanza by “Mere dreams, mere dreams” (I, 1). The poet’s sureness of Anglo-Irish Aristocratic glamour has turned into uncertainty and “mere dreams”. In this stanza the speaker makes a contrast between an “abounding glittering jet” (I, 12) and a “marvelous empty sea-shell” (I, 13) that could be read as a conflict between the past and present as Meimandi notes that “The fountain image, ‘the abounding glittering jet’ of a seemingly aristocratic glamour, is replaced or is rather threatened by the barren image of a war-torn Ireland represented by ‘some marvelous empty seashell’ (172). There are also other interpretations of these words as Zwerdling asserts the fountain with its eternal vitality, its perpetually self-reserving abundance, mirrors Yeats’s earlier, optimistic hopes for the class. But the sea-shell, though it is precious and beautiful, is empty and dead ... a museum piece ejected by the stream of life and cut off from the source of vitality. This view of the modern aristocracy gradually begins to prevail in Yeats’s later poetry (96-7). In the context of this essay it seems logical to interpret the fountain and the seashell respectively as Ireland's unified past and separated present.
In the third stanza one can see the worsening of the situation. The “sweetness” and “gentleness” are going to be created by “violent bitter men”

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man

Called architect and artist in, that they,

Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone

The sweetness that all longed for night and day,

The gentleness none there had ever known;

But when the master's buried mice can play.

And maybe the great-grandson of that house,

For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse. (I, 17-24)

The contrast of past and present continues in this stanza as well. The “master”, who implies the glorious past, is buried and his descendants are portrayed as mice unable to keep the heritage of past generations.

In the fourth stanza the speaker questions: what if the legacies of the past with the “gardens where the peacock strays” (I, 25) and “our greatness” (I, 32) are destroyed with violence?

In the same way the speaker in the closing stanza argues that violence is devastating his past cultural heritage. It also shows that the Anglo-Irish themselves are happy and at the same time critical of their past and situation as the final lines of this first part are “take our greatness with our bitterness?” (I, 40) However, the poet continues to be ambivalent when he adds a question mark at the end of the line; maybe these men judge themselves too harshly? This gives us a view of the past as something glorious which without a stable foundation is slowly falling apart in the present (shown by the description of grandchildren as mere mice).

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,

And buildings that a haughtier age designed,
The pacing to and fro on polished floors

Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined

With famous portraits of our ancestors;

What if those things the greatest of mankind

Consider most to magnify, or to bless,

But take our greatness with our bitterness? (I, 33-40)

In the closing lines of the stanza the speaker acknowledges the disappearance of an Anglo-Irish noble past. Even if the poet longs for a glorious and noble Anglo-Irish past he also criticizes the present political chaos created by the heirs of that glorious past. Thus one can see that Yeats’s ambivalence creates an internal tension that is reflected in this poem which Smith noted saying that the house does not have to be a symbol of security (65). Instead it could be “the Gothic mansion inhabited by dark forces” that no-one can control. He also writes that the house is a “complex symbol” in Yeats’s poetry as it can be everything from the “great houses of the Anglo-Irish landlord class, like Coole Park or the Gore-Booth’s Lissadell in Co. Sligo” to “the ‘grey/ Eighteenth century houses’ of Dublin in ‘Easter 1916’” (65).

The poet’s internal tension created by his ambivalence can be described by Bhabha’s “between” culture. It is a new form of culture that describes the relationship between colonized and colonizer as dynamic and complicated with a reciprocal impact on each other.

The past/present conflict continues in the second part. The poet starts the second section of the poem “My house” with a description of his own tower.

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,

A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,

An acre of stony ground,

Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,

Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable, (II, 1-5)
The contrast between a stable past and the unstable present can be seen here as the rose destroyed in flower in present time. If Yeats is describing his surroundings then the word “ancient” might suggest Yeats’s Anglo-Irish background as Meimandi notes the rose is a symbol that Yeats started using in the 1890s to refer to Ireland and one he continued to use throughout his works. In his earlier works the symbol is used in a positive way, but not so in this poem (177). The repetitive use of “old” followed by the word “innumerable” in the fifth line implies that Yeats is criticizing the glorious past as well. Rob Doggett also comments on this use, saying that the words “indicate a fundamental need to question that tradition in which violent death has led to a sterile cycle of further violence” (86). He also thinks “the barren landscape of ‘stony ground’ littered with thorns a fitting metaphor for Ireland in the grip of Civil War and nationalist fervor” (86).

It is obvious that past is not as glorious as Yeats imagined and it could not be a reliable foundation for current Ireland which is in civil war. Thus one can see Yeats’s ambivalence, his double attitude toward past and present, and at the same time his attachment to both of them. He is proud of his past but feels guilty that his past is the source of bloodshed in the present.

In the third part of the poem, “My table”, the poet uses “Sato’s gift, a changeless sword” (III, 2) which lies beside “pen and paper” (III, 3). The instrument of war and objects of art are on the same table. The presence of sword and pen on the same table, as the poet says: “may moralise / my days out of their aimlessness” (III, 4-5). The sword symbolizes the past when violence was praised to achieve glorification and the pen perhaps is a symbol of wisdom for the present time which can solve the current problems as Rob Doggett asserts, “At once an art object and an instrument of war, the sword represents an Eastern past identical to previously envisioned Anglo-Irish past in which greatness is born from violence and bitterness” (87). The above-mentioned line of the poem seems to indicate the poet’s tendency to act, but he is uncertain about which side he belongs to as he is criticizing the nationalists on both sides. This indicates Yeats’s internal tension and his marginalization as an artist who played an important role in Irish cultural nationalism. The poet continues to describe the sword:

    A marvellous accomplishment,
    In painting or in pottery, went
From father unto son

And through the centuries ran

And seemed unchanging like the sword.

Soul's beauty being most adored,

Men and their business took

Me soul's unchanging look;

For the most rich inheritor,

Knowing that none could pass Heaven's door,

That loved inferior art, (III, 17-27)

The sword, marvelous accomplishment and a symbol of the past, goes from father to son. The speaker wishes the continuation of this tradition, but the poet’s dream does not come true. The speaker suggests that the sword keeps the soul together. The sword, the product of great craftsmanship, also symbolizes a long Irish tradition and this is a tradition that cultural nationalists like Yeats wanted to revive in order to keep the Irish people unified. The sword which used to be a symbol of greatness has now become the cause of the present war.

The poet in the fourth part of the poem “My descendants” is concerned about the next generation. Yeats is probably talking about his two children, a daughter and son.

Having inherited a vigorous mind

From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams

And leave a woman and a man behind

As vigorous of mind, and yet it seems

Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind, (IV, 1-8)
The poet has “inherited a vigorous mind” from the previous generations and hopes to pass it to the next generation, but it is now only a dream and the speaker is discouraged to fulfill his dreams due to the chaotic situation created by both sides involved in the conflict. Both sides, Republican and Free State supporters, have different dreams about the future of Ireland. The poet, on the other hand, seems to be isolated and impartial in this conflict. He is opposed to the killing; the deaths of Irish are no longer glorious. This can be seen in lines such as “But the torn petals strew the garden plot; And there's but common greenness after that” (IV, 7-8). The “torn petals” are the martyrs of Ireland (a rose is usually used as a symbol for martyrdom in Yeats’s works) and their lives have been sacrificed in the war, but instead of achieving a glorious victory all that is left afterwards is “common greenness”; no more beauty, no improvement, only Ireland’s own green landscape. The fact that violence does not bring any victory is in contrast to what young Yeats wrote before in his earlier works such as the play “Cathleen ni Houlihan” where an old woman who is the personification of Ireland becomes young and beautiful when a protagonist in the play sacrifices his life for her. Cullingford states that the main theme in the poem is that the poet seems to see the brutality caused by the nationalist idealism that he supported as a youth (771). Thus these lines of the poem reveal Yeats’s ambivalence and his lack of sympathy for both of the conflicting sides and show that he was unable to identify himself with either side.

Man of action – man of contemplation

In this poem the man of contemplation is personalized in the poet and the man of action is most strikingly described as a soldier. At first glance it would seem that there is a penchant for the man of contemplation as he does not use violence, but a closer reading of the text shows that both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages.

The man of contemplation is introduced in the second part where his retreat, the Tower, is described. The retreat abounds with natural phenomena and a calm, peaceful interior fit for great thoughts, but reality awaits outside its walls as “A man-at-arms / Gathered a score of horse and spent his days / In this tumultuous spot” (II, 21-23). The word “stilted” in the following line could also refer to the poet’s contemplation “The sound of the rain or sound/ Of every wind that blows;/ The stilted water-hen/ Crossing Stream again/ Scared by the
splashing of a dozen cows;” (II, 6-10). The solitary, contemplating artist does not take part in the violent actions and he is disturbed by the “splashing of a dozen cows”.

I have already mentioned the sword and the pen in the third part. At a first glance they can be seen as symbols for the man of action respectively the man of contemplation, however, as previously stated the sword is not used for action in the text. It seems more to be an object of contemplation, an artistic reminder of a great past that needs to be recreated.

In the fifth section, “The Road at my Door”, the war has come to the poet’s door. In this section the speaker talks about what is going on around him. The man of action meets the man of contemplation as an “affable Irregular,/ a heavily-built Falstaffian man,/ Comes cracking jokes of civil war/ As tough to die by gunshot were/ The finest play under the sun” (V, 1-5) comes to the poet’s door. This is no glorious soldier, but a jester-like man who seems to laugh at danger, not out of some pursuit of glory, but from an inability to understand what it really is. His joking shows that he does not take his actions seriously and that his motives for fighting are far from the high-flung ideals of nationalism. The man of contemplation thus has the higher moral ground, but once again there is a questioning of such a conclusion as the poet does not offer any wise words, only some mundane remark on “the foul weather, hail and rain,/ A pear-tree broken by the storm” (V, 9-10) showing that his contemplation is no nobler than the soldier’s fighting and this is further underlined by the following part of the poem where the poet continues to admire the wildlife while trying to “silence the envy in my thought” (V, 13). The poet thus feels drawn towards the man of action as his own life choice seems to leave him with no more than “the cold snows of a dream” (V, 15).

The Irregular in the first line refers to forces of the Irish Republican Army who were opposed to the Anglo-Irish treaty supported by the Free State. Yeats depicts a typical irregular soldier as a pleasant and friendly person who does not care about the war and jokes about it as if “to die” in the war is no more than playing a role in a play. Rob Doggett sees this as an ironic reference to the British theatrical tradition, showing “a Republican ideological project built upon nationalist dramatic representation of the noble, self-sacrifice Irish warrior” (88). The theatrical reference is further enforced with the mention of Shakespeare’s Falstaff, a comic antihero, but “the tone falls somewhat short of outright condemnation, expressing rather a curious mixture of tragedy and farce” (88).
Thus, the “play” in the last line of the stanza implies that the Civil War created by men of action is funny and at the same time tragic. Being a man of contemplation himself the poet encounters a Free State fighter in “national uniform” (V, 7) in the second stanza. The speaker has a conversation with the soldier and complains about the “foul weather” (V, 9) which could imply the poet’s sense of belonging to the Free State, but the speaker takes refuge in his tower and does not take part in the Civil War.

I count those feathered balls of soot

The moor-hen guides upon the stream.

To silence the envy in my thought;

And turn towards my chamber, caught

In the cold snows of a dream. (V, 11-15)

The speaker returns to his room after meeting these men and he is envious of them, envious because they are men of action and he is a man of contemplation. Once again one can see that Yeats uses the binary of action/ contemplation in this poem. Unlike the contemplative Yeats the soldiers are truly men of action and therefore real nationalists. In the other words, the poet is caught in Bhabha’s “between culture” and is unable to take sides in the conflict.

This line of thought continues in the sixth part where the poet has locked himself in the Tower in order to try to figure out what he really thinks while violent reality passes outside his window as the troops march by, leaving a dead soldier behind. However, in spite of his disdain for the violence outside he cannot be calm in his own world either as it is the poet’s “fantasies” (VI, 16) that have created this situation. He expresses his fear that the result of war is nothing but destruction. That is the reason why his house has turned into a sanctuary for him which indicates that the speaker does not take part in the war.

We are closed in, and the key is turned

On our uncertainty; somewhere

A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no cleat fact to be discerned:

Come build in the empty house of the stare. (VI, 6-10)

The poet’s lack of participation in the conflict can even be seen in the next stanza when he uses the pronoun “they”.

A barricade of stone or of wood;

Some fourteen days of civil war;

Last night they trundled down the road

That dead young soldier in his blood:

Come build in the empty house of the stare. (VI, 11-15)

“They” probably refers to fighting nationalists, but we do not know to which side they belong, the Republican or the Free State side. It is unknown to which side the dead soldier belongs. Although Yeats does not participate in the war he shoulders the responsibilities of this devastating war by using the pronoun “we” in the next stanza.

We had fed the heart on fantasies,

The heart's grown brutal from the fare;

More Substance in our enmities

Than in our love; O honey-bees,

Come build in the empty house of the stare. (VI, 16-20)

By using the pronoun “we” the poet includes himself and simultaneously blames both men of action and men of contemplation for the brutalities and devastation caused by the current war.

The last part of the poem has a long title “I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness” and in it the poet climbs to the top of his tower and leans upon the tower’s broken wall. The broken suggests the poet’s broken and split support for his Anglo-Irish roots. The poet shows that contemplation is muddied by “white
glimmering fragments of the mist” (VII, 6), implying that he is unable to think clearly and sees things that do not exist, as described in the following two stanzas. At one point he mentally joins the “rage-hungry troop” (VII, 11) and almost cries for vengeance.

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,

A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,

Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon

That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,

A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind

And those white glimmering fragments of the mist sweep by.

Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;

Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye. (VII, 1-8)

From the top he regards the landscape. Everything “seems unchangeable”. But he sees some monstrous men of action there. They are screaming for revenge upon the murderers of Jacques Molay.

'Vengeance upon the murderers,' the cry goes up,

'Vengeance for Jacques Molay.' In cloud-pale rags, or in lace,

The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,

Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,

Plunges towards nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide

For the embrace of nothing; and I, my wits astray

Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried

For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay. (VII, 9-16)
The use of Jacques Molay can be a metaphor for the current situation in Ireland. He was a Master of Knights Templar who was burned to death in 1314 after he was accused of heresy but in this poem the focus is not on him, instead it is on “The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,” who claimed to avenge him (Meimandi 185). The crowd “plunges for the embrace of nothing”, a line that shows the futility of their action. By using “my wits astray” the speaker suggests that he is tempted not to be a man of contemplation and to join the men of action for “Vengeance upon the murderers”. The poet is thus himself tempted to join the mob but manages to restrain himself. However, the fact that he is tempted shows that the poet is ambivalent and cannot decide if he wants to remain an impassive observer or for once take action.

Unlike the second stanza which contains horrible scenes, the atmosphere of the third stanza is calm. In the third stanza the poet uses images and words such as “ladies” with “musing eyes” (VII, 19), “sweetness” (VII, 24) etc. As the speaker starts the fourth stanza the beautiful images change and

Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place

To brazen hawks. Nor self-delighting reverie,

Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone,

Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,/

The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon.” (VII, 28-32)

Once again the speaker in the last stanza presents the theme of the man of action pitted against the man of contemplation.

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair

Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth

In something that all others understand or share;

But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth

A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,

The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,

Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (VII, 33-40)

As mentioned earlier the poet was eager to be a man of action. He is now pondering that if he had chosen to participate in the national conflicts he would have gained the support of his nationalist friends and set his conscience at ease, but that would have made him suffer more. For this reason he tries to return to his reading which is “the abstract joy” and perhaps not real joy. This can also reflect the poet’s internal tension and his ambivalence as Meimandi asserts about the last two lines of the stanza that the “inherent irony of ‘suffice’ should make us wary of the sufficiency of ‘half-read wisdom’ which the poet resorts to as an alternative to the world of action” (188) another sign of Yeats’s ambivalence.

In the final stanza the poet has also taken his decision to remain a man of contemplation as he turns away and shuts the door but not without regret as he thinks that he might have proved his worth “In something that all others understand or share” (VII, 35). Here the poet seems to refer to action such as taking part, or at least taking sides, in the conflict but he decides that such an action would have made him “pine the more” (VII, 38). Instead he turns to “The half-read wisdom of daemonic images, / Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy”. (VII, 39-40). Contemplation thus wins although it is not by any means a glorious route as it is driven by “daemonic images”, i.e. things disconnected from reality and that these are dreams fit for the young and the old, not someone at the height of his powers. We thus see that neither the man of action nor the man of contemplation is the preferred route for the poet as both of them have traits that lead to dubious results showing that all actions can have undesirable consequences. These consequences are perhaps the main explanation of the poet’s ambivalence and the reason why he remains in “between”.

**Art – politics**

Once again there is a strong connection between art and politics and at the same time they seem to be antagonistic.

In the first part of the poem we see the beautiful ancestral houses, created by “architect and artist” (I, 18) in order to “rear in stone/ The sweetness that all longed for night and day” (I,
19-20). In the poem artists are able to transcend reality and model it the way they want it to be seen. That is their power but there is a jarring note in the fact that these beautiful pieces of art are commissioned by “Bitter and violent men” (I, 19), thus showing that they are just a façade, something built to display a reality that does not exist.

The poem is set in the Civil War when Irish fought against Irish and the beautiful, idealistic nationalist ideas that promised so much have degenerated into a murderous conflict pitching individuals against themselves. Artists created the image of the Ireland they wanted to create but the reality became something different, showing that both approaches in a conflict have their downsides. This futility is also reflected in the first part of the poem where the statue of Juno beautifully displays her gifts to the world in the great garden of the Ancestral House, but all the world does is react with “violence” as the final line in the fourth stanza so brutally declares, underlining the fragility of art in the face of conflict.

In the third part, called My Table, the poet presents another analogy showing the dichotomy between art and politics: namely the sword and the pen placed next to each other. Their symbolic meaning is of course quite obvious. The pen is a symbol of the ideas that create nationalism and the sword is used to materialize the ideas. Yet characteristic of Yeats these symbols generate ambiguity. The pen seems to have but one aim, to “moralise/ My days out of their aimlessness” (III, 4-5), i.e. to give meaning to the days of the poet so that he leaves something behind. However, what he leaves behind is something moral and thus something that can be used for political purposes and, as the conflict shows, this is not necessarily a peaceful undertaking. The sword, is even more ambiguous as it is clearly a weapon to use in the conflict (even if a sword might have been somewhat old-fashioned at the time of writing), but at the same time this is a sword with a great history, at least “five hundred years” and a closer look at how it is described shows no signs of it having been used in a conflict. Instead it has waited and should be seen more as a symbol of great craftsmanship and artistry as in “when and where ‘twas forged/ A marvelous accomplishment,/ In painting and in pottery, went from father unto son” (III, 16-19). Another interpretation of the sword is that it is forged by art, namely by the poet himself who constructed a cultural nationalism that has now become a weapon ready to be used in a real conflict. We thus see that art can be just as violent as politics and that the symbols of politics are based on an artistic interpretation of reality.

A quick reading of the poem seems to suggest a longing for the colonial Anglo-Irish tradition and a critique of the militant Irish nationalism as opposed to a more aristocratic approach to a
conflict as Doggett states that the voice in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” seems to adhere to two different traditions: the nationalist and the Anglo-Irish, not an easy combination. It could be seen as a way of wishing to bring back an idealized colonial past where there was harmony between the Protestants and the Catholics that they ruled over. The poem could also be seen as a criticism of Irish nationalism (165, note 35). But a closer reading shows that Yeats is not as clear in his alliances and that he has conflicted feelings about both approaches in the conflict. Opposed binaries permeate the poem: past and present, man of action and man of contemplation, art and politics which reflect Yeats’s ambivalence. Another argument that supports this ambivalence is that Yeats himself could never make a public statement completely supporting one side or the other and this is why it is important to read the poem with an open mind and not with the intention to prove the poet’s support for one side or the other. This is also supported by the fact that the poem deals with questions about nationalism and identity. Yeats’s position in this third space outside of the conflict is typical for the hesitant position of an anti-colonial individual. To sum it up one can say that “Meditations in Time of the Civil War” moves between an idealization of the Anglo-Irish past and its deeds, the advantages of a nationalist tradition and the fact that it is these two traditions that have resulted in the horrific conflict.

**Conclusion**

The analyses of both poems show that Yeats was ambivalent to both the English colonizers and the Irish colonized and that he was unable to take sides. This seems to be reflected in his personal life too as seen in one of his letters written in 1921 where he tries to decide where to raise his family, fearing “Ireland where they would inherit bitterness” and “England where, being Irish by tradition, and by family and fame, [the children] would be in an unnatural condition of mind and grow, as so many Irishmen who live here do, sour and argumentative” (quoted in Meimandi 201). In both poems, but particularly in “Nineteen Hundred Nineteen”, Yeats challenges the distinction between colonizer and colonized and shows a third space, a hybrid space between them, just as Bhabha notes in his theory. He writes that there is a between that “sows confusion between opposites and stands between the oppositions at once.” (182). This is true for all the oppositions that I have investigated: Youth - Old age – Past – Present, Art – Politics and Man of action – Man of contemplation. In every case there are negative and positive aspects to both sides of the oppositions, but the final conclusion seems to be that Yeats prefers neither rather than saying that both are good. This is a very negative
way of seeing the world around him and might be a reflection of his bitterness as the world has not turned out the way he wanted it to. The lofty, generous nationalistic ideals and ideas of his youth have gone away and he stands in the wake of two major conflicts; one between the English and the Irish and one between his own fellow countrymen. Sadly he sees only violence and that independence did not result in the state that he dreamed of.

Finally it is his ability to describe this bitterness in such an intriguing and engaging way and to challenge the traditional, simplistic view of oppressor and oppressed, as well as both sides in the Civil War, that gives his poems power, energy and a sense of mystery that attracts the reader.

In this essay I have examined Yeats’s ambivalence regarding the conflicts between English and Irish as well as the Civil War in Ireland as expressed in the two poems “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”.

I have argued that it is impossible to categorize him as a colonial or an anti-colonial poet and the results of the analysis support this, particularly when it comes to some thematic binary oppositions that are found in the two poems: youth – old age, past – present, art – politics and man of action – man of contemplation.

Yeats also battled with his own attitudes as he was a fervent nationalist in his youth and played a major part in creating the very ideology that resulted in two violent conflicts. As an older man he questioned the nationalism that he had supported and the ambivalence in the analyzed poems shows that he continued to be conflicted in his views and that his position could best described as the “third space” suggested by Bhabha, i.e. he was unable to support either side in the conflict. This is further underlined by the fact that Yeats was unable to take a public position in the conflicts. Yeats’s position in this third space outside of the conflict is typical for the hesitant position of an anti-colonial individual.

Bhabha’s third space is also present in the binaries that I examined in the poems. When it comes to the binary youth – old age, past – present, both poems are perfectly balanced in that neither side is given a preference. Youth is idealistic and this idealism only leads to violence but on the other hand old age does not lead to wisdom as the poet in the poems instead hides from reality, unable to take sides in the conflicts. The same goes for the past and the present. The past is idealized and at the same time it has its weaknesses that lead to the conflicts in the
present, a present that is unable to handle the past and therefore reverts to violence. Likewise, art and politics are strongly intermingled, something clearly visible in the description of the pen and sword in “Meditation”. Neither has the answer to the conflict and they only contribute to the violence. The same ambivalence is found in man of action – man of contemplation. Both are equally weak and strong, even though there might be a certain advantage in being a man of contemplation in “Meditations”, but the price is high as such a man is seen as a coward, even by himself. In conclusion, Yeats has very skillfully kept a balance between the binaries in the poems, almost never preferring one over the other. Indeed in most cases both sides are described negatively, which may be a reflection of his own disillusionment.
Works Cited


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