

Notes on The Lake Isle of Innisfree by W. B. Yeats:

William Butler Yeats was kind of a messy guy. By which we mean that he grew up with a lot of contradictions in his life.

He was an Irish city boy (living mostly in Dublin, and later London), but he visited his mother's hometown in County Sligo (totally country) every summer.

He received the best, most progressive education but was also drawn to good old fashioned Irish folklore.

He often wrote in traditional English styles, but also understood the Irish's desire for independence, and tried to write poems that reflected that, too.

You get the picture.

There were so many opposing forces pulling him in different directions, and it really shows in his poetry. One poem might be influenced by Greek mythology and another by Irish folklore. One might be about the end of the world, and another might be the quiet end of his career.

He's a hodgepodge poet, and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," published in 1893, is yet another example of his tendency to compare and contrast. It's a country-lovin' poem that actually takes place in a crowded, bustling city. It's all about how the speaker's dreams for the future don't quite reconcile with his present situation. As in, he wants something really bad, but he probably won't have it anytime soon. It's all about the mishmash clash between dreams and reality.

Sure, it probably wasn't too much of a stretch for Yeats to write about a city slicker who longs for the peace of the countryside, considering that as a boy he lived in Dublin and London and visited County Sligo (where the actual island of Innisfree is located) every summer for some much needed rural R and R. But this isn't just a poem about wanting some peace and quiet, and being stuck in the city. It's a whole lot more.

It's about the contradiction we have to live every day. We're stuck in one place, while we long for another. The grass is always, always, always greener on the other side of the fence, and Yeats was no stranger to that idea. His speaker is on the cusp of crossing that fence, but in the poem at least, he never quite gets there. So he lives the dream in his mind, while his body's stuck in the lackluster reality.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

We're gonna get personal and ask you a prying question: where's your happy place? Come on, you know what we're talking about. Where do you go—in your mind, or in reality—when you need to get away from it all? You can tell us. We won't spill.

Cell phones, iPods, video games, car alarms, doors slamming, people talking, laughing, shouting. It's a noisy world out there. Regardless of whether we're city folk or country people, we all need a little peace and quiet sometimes, and it seems it's getting harder and harder to come by.

Yeats wrote this poem in the late nineteenth century, and even then he was feeling crowded by busy city life. The poem is, if anything, even more relevant in today's world. If you've ever dreamed of a place of your own where you could get a little R and R—a tropical island with crystal-clear water and white sand beaches, maybe, or, like Yeats, a cozy cabin in the woods—then you can relate to this poem.

It's all about the wish to turn the volume down a bit and even press pause. And hey, maybe poetry can be that special, quiet spot for you. Maybe Yeats is your new happy place.

The speaker says he's going to go to Innisfree to build a small, simple cabin. He'll have a little bean garden and a honeybee hive. He wants to live alone in peace with nature and the slow pace of country living. Sounds like a plan, buddy.

In the last stanza, the speaker restates that he's leaving and explains it's because every night he hears the water lapping against the shore (of Innisfree). Even though he lives in a more urban place with paved roads, deep down inside he's drawn to the rural sounds of Innisfree. It's all about rustling trees, not bustling buses for this speaker.

Line 1

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree

The speaker states that he's off to Innisfree. Uh, whootywhat?

Innisfree is a small island in a lake called Lough Gill, in Sligo County, Ireland.

Yeats grew up visiting Sligo every year, and taking small trips to Lough Gill.

You know what jumps out here? This speaker sounds pretty resolved. I will arise! And go now! And go to Innisfree!

Line 2

And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;

First, we have to tell you that wattles are rods and stakes mixed with sticks and branches to make walls or fences. They sound hilarious, but they're actually pretty standard fencing fare.

So he's going to build a small cabin and it's going to be pretty simple and rustic, right?

Right away we can tell this isn't your typical dream-vacation fantasy palace. He's not building some villa with an infinity pool.

And once again, we've got some serious determination on our hands. This guy is making plans. Let's see if he keeps 'em.

Lines 3-4

Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

He says he's going to have a small bean garden and a beehive for honeybees. This guy sounds like he's in serious need of retirement.

"Glade" is an open space in a forest, so you can probably picture the bee glade as a clearing in the woods surrounding his tiny cabin with swarms of honeybees.

In line 4 the speaker states that he wants to live alone, surrounded only by the sound of bees and the presence of nature. Why no friends and family to share it?

Yep, these lines create a rhyme scheme for the first stanza, when you combine them with the first two lines: ABAB. Innisfree rhymes with honeybee, and made rhymes with glade.

Line 5

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,

Ah, so here's the motivation for wanting to build a little cabin in the middle of nowhere with not a soul nearby: peace! This guy just wants some P and Q.

The second part of the line, "peace comes dropping slow" is interesting, huh? So far, it looks like the speaker equates a slow, simple pace of life with peacefulness.

But why is peace "dropping"? What's that all about?

If the speaker is so serious about getting some peace in his life, we might assume that he isn't feeling too peaceful where he is now.

Maybe he's feeling trapped, restless, and way too busy. Either way, he thinks that Innisfree is his ticket to happiness—a break from all the hubbub.

Line 6

Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;

In the previous line we learned that "peace comes dropping slow." Here we're getting a hint (figuratively, or imaginatively) of where it comes from.

What are these "veils of the morning"? Maybe it's a metaphor for the fog of early morning, or the mist. This is a watery place, after all. Or maybe even the dew on the morning grass. These could all seem like veils that are lifted once the sun rises.

And what about "to where the cricket sings"? If we trace this a few lines back, Yeats is saying, peace falls slowly from the veils of morning and spreads to where the cricket sings.

Where's that? Hidden nooks in the woods, among grass and flowers.

He's talking nature big-time here. So far, peace equals nature in a serious way.

It also seems like peace isn't something he can create or have control over. It comes to him from nature; he can't make it happen in the city. So he's gotta go where the peace is—and that's Innisfree.

Lines 7-8

There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

"There" refers to Innisfree and this cabin this dude imagines or plans to build.
Apparently, in Innisfree, midnight is shimmering and beautiful and midday is a purple glow—this is starting to sound a little fairy-tale gorgeous, isn't it?

A linnet is a kind of bird that's like a finch. In other words, it's pretty small.

Saying that the evening is full of linnet's wings makes us think not only of one bird, but also of all of them in flight. Now that's an image.

The imagery is getting almost dreamlike—purple, hazy, full of birds in flight.

Lines 9-10

I will arise and go now, for always night and day

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

Just in case we weren't sure, the speaker is all: Guys? I'm really going. I'm going to Innisfree.
And don't you forget it.

In a way, it's almost as if he snaps out of his daydream with fresh resolve and determination.

That daydream he was describing—the plans he has to build his cabin—was so real it was almost as if he were already there.

But he's not. Still, wherever he is, he can hear the lapping of the water on Innisfree in his mind or something.

Of course because he's not really hearing the water, we should think of this auditory image as a metaphor for his strong desire to head to Innisfree, ASAP.

We think it's safe to say that he imagines the sounds because he's so absorbed in his desire to get to this ideal place.

And "for always night and day" lets us know that he's pretty haunted by the place—obsessed even. No wonder he's so determined.

Line 11

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,

Ah, now we get it. Here's hard evidence that the speaker is not in a rural place, but one with paved roads. In other words, he couldn't be further away from idyllic, rural Innisfree.

The fact that he can hear the waters of Innisfree while he's standing on cold, hard pavement is a testament to just how much he loves that place.

Plus, check out that sneaky little internal rhyme here. Roadway rhymes with grey, but they don't both come at the end of the line (hence calling it "internal rhyme"). It's the kind of thing you don't notice unless you're reading the poem aloud.

Read this guy aloud. You won't regret it. We promise.

Line 12

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Bingo. It's confirmed. The lapping water the speaker hears is imaginary.

While we suspected that Innisfree is, at this point, mostly a figment of this dude's imagination, his reference to the "deep heart's core" shows us just how important Innisfree is to him. It's not just something he's thought about once or twice, but something that he desires deep down inside. He doesn't just hear the water in his mind; he hears it in his heart. There's an emotional connection there, don't you think?

And of course the heart can't actually hear, so we might think of the "deep heart's core" as a metaphor for the part of the speaker that feels and dreams deeply.

The end of this poem is pretty sad. Think of the movement of the poem. The speaker sets up this ideal place where he feels completely at peace. We kind of get that he's fantasizing, but we don't realize how sad it is until the ending, when we find out he's standing in a place so completely different from his dream.

Instead of getting the sense that he's close to reaching Innisfree, the poem ends with a picture of him standing on a paved road pining over a place he might never get to.