

William Butler Yeats - Poems

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Picture yourself walking along the Irish countryside and you see a celebration of men, women and children. You take part in that celebration but at the blink of an eye, or like drifting smoke they disappear (snap your fingers) just like that. You realize that these were not mortal people but fairies. And fairies have magical qualities.

Yeats wrote a poem about such things.

In the poem, the husband (O'Driscoll) finds mourners weeping for his wife when he comes home. Yeats mentions Hart lake which is located southwest of the town of Sligo.

Yeats tells a story about a man who works apparently as a kind of game-keeper driving water-fowl from reed beds (perhaps for wildfowlers to shoot). He falls asleep and has a strange dream about his newly-wed wife. First, he sees a group of dancers, then he is invited to eat bread and drink wine, which have magical qualities. Next, he is invited to play cards with a band of old men, while his bride is stolen from him by a handsome young man. At this, he scatters the cards away and wakes, only to hear, still playing the strange piping music he heard in his dream.

THE HOST OF THE AIR

O'Driscoll drove with a song
The wild duck and the drake
From the tall and the tufted reeds
Of the drear Heart Lake.

And he saw how the reeds grew dark
At the coming of night-tide,
And dreamed of the long dim hair
Of Bridget his bride.

He heard while he sang and dreamed
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.

And he saw young men and young girls
Who danced on a level place,
And Bridget his bride among them,
With a sad and a gay face.

The dancers crowded about him
And many a sweet thing said,
And a young man brought him red wine
And a young girl white bread.

But Bridget drew him by the sleeve
Away from the merry bands,
To old men playing at cards
With a twinkling of ancient hands.

The bread and the wine had a doom,
For these were the host of the air;
He sat and played in a dream
Of her long dim hair.

He played with the merry old men
And thought not of evil chance,
Until one bore Bridget his bride
Away from the merry dance.

He bore her away in his arms,
The handsomest young man there,
And his neck and his breast and his arms
Were drowned in her long dim hair.

O'Driscoll scattered the cards
And out of his dream awoke:
Old men and young men and young girls
Were gone like a drifting smoke;

But he heard high up in the air
A piper piping away,
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.

Written in first person, the poem explains the difficult chores and struggles of an aged, unfortunate woman and her bitter resentment to the young children, whose worries are their personal appearance which pales to the toils of the old woman.

Yeats tells the story of an old and weary peasant woman: She is probably a maid employed by a wealthy household. This would increase the resentment she feels, experiencing jealousy at the carefree lifestyle of the household, especially the children.

The word choice of "must" in the 3rd line suggests that the old mother had no choice, she had to work, had to "scrub, bake and sweep".

THE SONG OF THE OLD MOTHER

I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow
Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep
Till stars are beginning to blink and peep;
And the young lie long and dream in their bed
Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head,
And their days go over in idleness,
And they sigh if the wind but lift a tress:
While I must work because I am old,
And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

In 1889 Yeats met Maud Gonne, an Irish Beauty, ardent and brilliant. From that moment, as he wrote, **"the troubling of my life began."** He fell in love with her, but his love was hopeless. Maud Gonne liked and admired him, but she was not in love with him. Her passion lavished upon Ireland, she was an Irish patriot, a rebel.

This short, love, lyric poem "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" Irish poet W. B. Yeats has expressed his personal feeling for his beloved. *The poet himself is identified as the main character in the poem.*

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.

The subject of this poem is love. Wine, often an important part of sophisticated courtship, is cleverly included in the poem, which makes the poem an appropriate toast to an admired lady. It is often suggested that the lady Yeats had in mind when he wrote the verse was Maud Gonne to whom he had proposed marriage four times and had been turned down on each occasion.

A DRINKING SONG

Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye;
That's all we shall know for truth
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth,
I look at you, and I sigh.