

Keira Kelly - 2023 Kevin J. Duffy Memorial Scholarship Essay Contest

William Butler Yeats had always been interested in art, an interest that would eventually lead him to be the first Irishman to win one of the most coveted awards in the world. Yeats was born in England-controlled Ireland, and despite spending a large part of his childhood in London, considered himself to be very connected to his Irish roots, basing a large number of his works off of Irish legends. He first started out as a poet, but his love of theater eventually brought him to write plays, and in 1904 he and his friend Lady Augusta Gregory founded the Abbey Theatre. They worked to write plays to revive Irish art, and in 1923, Yeats was awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature for his work, and used his acceptance speech to pay tribute to the movement and the other Irish artists who were also a part of it. In it, he discusses the history of the movement and how it has persevered through hardships in many places.

Yeats believed that the most important quality in an artist was the ability to persevere past adversity. Throughout his speech, Yeats describes the hardships he and his friends faced while trying to spread and expand Irish works; he describes the small audiences and pushback from the public and even the government at times. Yet despite all of this, they continued to push on, regardless of what people said about them. Yeats clearly values this persistence and courage, as it is a large part of what brought him the fame and influence that earned him the Nobel. He also believed in using art to spread themes and knowledge, as he used his writings to teach more people about Irish culture, “[bringing] the imagination and speech of the country... to the people of the town” (Yeats). He feels that art can (and should) be used to connect people to their roots and to each other, uniting them under one culture, which would only make art stronger.

The power of Irish art largely grew because of the nationalistic feelings that it stirred up in people. The resurgence of Irish art came about at a time when Ireland was uneasy with British

rule and was starting to want to become their own country, a sentiment that was only fueled by the nationalist feelings that were evoked by Irish art. However, Yeats also takes care to highlight specific people that helped him, especially Lady Gregory. Yeats speaks about Lady Gregory's contributions and sacrifices for their cause, highlighting the influence that she had on the movement. He shows his appreciation for her contribution to the movement by discussing her works and the responses they brought about, reminding listeners that it is not just people as a whole that have art power, it's also the individuals who create that art and work to help it grow.

However, Yeats also acknowledges that as much as nationalism helped Irish art grow, it also became an obstacle to its success. He demonstrates how the political situation has often defined the Irish Dramatic Movement, explaining how modern Irish literature began when Charles Parnell, an Irish nationalist and member of Parliament, died and left behind a dissatisfied country. Yeats further explains how the Anglo-Irish War (also known as the Irish War of Independence) became the focus of the country until their cultural unity and collective national identity were torn apart by the Irish Civil War. He also discusses the obstacles faced by the movement on a smaller scale; many of their plays were very unpopular when first created, as either the general public had some sort of problem with a detail of the work, or the government found part of it a little too critical of the government and promptly shut it down. Despite all this, the movement eventually flourished.

Yeats closes out his speech with a message to Ireland and her people. He tells them that he hopes and believes that Ireland can move on from the tragedies and consequences of war and regrow and eventually thrive, and that Irish art will continue to grow and thrive along with it.

Sources:

- <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/lecture/> (from the prompt)
- <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1923/yeats/facts/>
- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-butler-yeats>