Irish poet and playwright among the foremost of 20th c. literature, he was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival from his very early works like *The Death of Cuchulain* (1892). In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his “inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation”, as was the case of Easter 1916.
SECTION SUMMARY

1. W.B. Yeats’s LIFE & WORKS.

2. Yeats & IRISH MYTHOLOGY.

3. The legend of CUCHULAIN.

4. THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN.

5. «EASTER 1916»

6. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.
1. W.B. Yeats’s LIFE & WORKS.
• **1865**: he was born in Dublin but spent his childhood in County Sligo with his grandparents. His father, John Butler Yeats, was a lawyer and a well-known portrait painter.

• **1867**: the family moved to London to aid their father to further his career as an artist.

At first the Yeats children were educated at home: their mother entertained them with stories and Irish folktales, while their father provided an erratic education in geography and chemistry taking his son on natural history explorations of the nearby countryside.
W. B. YEATS

- **1880**: the family returned to Dublin where Yeats met many artists and writers. He started writing poetry.

- **1887**: back in London, his first volume of verse appeared.

- **1889**: fascinated by Irish legends and the occult he published *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*.

In the same year he met **Maud Gonne**, a 23-year-old heiress and ardent Nationalist for whom he developed an obsessive infatuation which lasted through her marriage to (and separation from) John MacBride, an Irish revolutionary executed by British forces for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising.
1896: he met Lady Augusta Gregory, soon not only a dear friend but also his patron; together they founded the Irish Theatre of which he became chief playwright.

His plays often deal with Irish legends or reflect his fascination with mysticism and spiritualism. *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894), *The King’s Threshold* (1904), and *Deirdre* (1907) are among the best known.
W. B. YEATS

- **1909**: he met the American poet **Ezra Pound** (1885-1972) who had travelled to London at least partly to meet the older man, “the only poet worthy of serious study,” in Pound’s words.

- **1910**: his dramatic art took a sharp turn towards a highly poetical, static, and esoteric style. His later plays experimented with masks, dance, and music, and were profoundly influenced by the intense Japanese Noh plays.

- **1916**: at the age of 51 he married 25-year-old **Georgie Hyde-Lees**. Rather surprisingly, their marriage was a success.
1916: he published *Easter 1916* in which he expressed his torn emotions regarding the events of the Irish uprising against British rule on Easter Monday of that year. It was followed by two collections of poems, both entitled *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917 and 1919).

1920: in the aftermath of WWI and the beginning of the Irish War of Independence he wrote *The Second Coming*, considered a major work of modernist poetry.

It is also connected to the 1918–1919 flu pandemic in which his pregnant wife was close to death.
W. B. YEATS

• **1923:** he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and he wrote:

  “I consider that this honor has come to me less as an individual than as a representative of Irish literature. It is part of Europe’s welcome to the Free State.”

• **1928:** he published *The Tower*, his most influential volume of poems.

• **1939:** he wrote his last poem, *The Black Tower*, just a few days before he died at a private clinic in France. His remains were brought back to Ireland in 1948 (at Drumcliff Cemetery).
2. Yeats &
IRISH MYTHOLOGY.
A central figure in the Irish Literary Revival of the late 19th and early 20th c., Yeats helped banish the overbearing idea that the English culture was superior to the Irish one reclaiming some of the ancient Celtic myths and legends.

As Viviane Vasconcellos (of Colorado State University) states in her essay on Yeats and Cuchulain (pr. /ˈkʌlɪn/), “What Yeats ultimately wished to accomplish by using those old legends and myths as themes in his work was to provide his audience with ideas and emotions that would spark a new faith in Ireland, instead of focusing on reviving the history of Ireland as a static movement.” (2005)

There are four cycles, or groups, of connected legends...
THE FOUR CYCLES

1. the Mythological Cycle focused on the activities of the Celtic gods, describing how five races of supernatural beings battled to gain control of Ireland. The chief god was Dagda, whose magic cauldron could bring the dead back to life;

2. the Ulster Cycle recounting the deeds of warriors and heroes, especially Cuchulain, the warrior and champion of Ireland;

3. the Historical Cycle telling of the adventures and battles of legendary Irish kings;

4. the Fenian Cycle which deals with the heroic Finn Mac Cumhail, or Finn Mac Cool, leader of a band of bold warriors, known as the Fianna, engaged in endless hand-to-hand combat.
3. The legend of CUCHULAIN.
One particular legend was present in Yeats’ poetry and drama throughout his career: that of Cuchulain, a hero who had a short, adventurous, and tragic life.

As a child Setanta (this was his original name) possessed extraordinary powers:
- he could swim like a fish at birth;
- he had 7 fingers on each hand, 7 toes on each foot, and 7 pupils in each eye!!

At 12, he accidentally killed the watchdog of the smith Cullan and offered to guard Cullan’s property until another dog could be trained. Thus he changed his name to Cuchulain, which means “hound of Cullan.”
On numerous occasions, he defended Ulster against the rest of Ireland and won numerous contests of bravery and trustworthiness but misfortune often followed him:

- during one of the battles, he was forced to fight his good friend Ferdiad, whom he killed;
- he killed his own son, Connla, learning his identity too late;
- he died as a result of trickery...
The Cuchulain cycle began with Yeats’ 1892 poem “The Death of Cuchulain” and ended in 1939 with the poem “Cuchulain Comforted” passing through drama.

The context surrounding the events in Yeats’ poems and plays are not entirely magical: we see Cuchulain as a man who has flaws, makes mistakes and ultimately dies.

In a sense, he is reduced from hero to mortal, used by the poet as an individual to shed light into the struggles of the Irish people and to communicate larger issues of nation and politics.
SYMBOLOGY: the FATHER...

- The hero’s plight resonates with the struggles the Irish faced in their day-to-day lives: a father unknowingly killing his own son represents
  - the risk of becoming so engrossed by another nation’s interests as to turn blind to the interests of one’s own;
  - the danger of turning against one’s inherent nature.
In battle the handsome, well-spoken, popular Cuchulain would go into a frenzy transforming himself completely:

- his hair stood on end
- one of his eyes bulged out
- the other eye disappeared in his head,
- his legs and feet turned to face backward,
- his muscles swelled,
- a column of blood spurted up from his head...

representing the conflict between the fixed, palpable world of human affairs, limited, tame, rational and the world beyond reason, exuberant, care-free, wild but extremely dangerous.......
4. THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN.
THE WANDERINGS OF OISIN (1889)

- This epic poem is a dialogue between the aged Irish hero Oisin (pr. /ouˈiːn/) and St. Patrick, the man traditionally responsible for converting Ireland to Christianity. Most of the poem is spoken by Oisin, relating his three-hundred year sojourn in the isles of Faeirie.

- As a matter of fact the fairy princess Niamh fell in love with Oisin's poetry and begged him to join her in the immortal islands.

- For a hundred years he lived as one of the Sidhe (pr. /ˈʃiːə/), hunting, dancing, and feasting.
HOW THE STORY DEVELOPS...

- At the end of this time he found a spear washed up on the shore and grew sad, remembering his times with the Fenians, a band of mighty noble warriors.

- Afraid to lose him, Niamh took him away, to another island, where the ancient and abandoned castle of the sea-god Manannan stood.

- Here they found a woman held captive by a demon, whom Oisin battled again and again for a hundred years, until it was finally defeated.
They then went to an island where ancient giants who had grown tired of the world long ago were sleeping until its end, and Niamh and Oisin slept and dreamt with them for a hundred years.

Oisin then succumbed to the temptation to return and visit the lands of mortal men and see his comrades. Niamh lent him her horse warning him that he must not touch the ground, or he would never return.
Back in Ireland, Oisin, still a young man, found his warrior companions dead, and the pagan faith of Ireland displaced by Patrick's Christianity.

He then saw two men struggling to carry a sack full of sand; he bent down to lift it with one hand and hurl it away for them, but his saddle girth broke and he fell to the ground, immediately becoming 300 years old.

After returning from the Otherworld he has a passionate conversation with St. Patrick, telling him all that has happened to him and praising the pagan values he has experienced evidently in contrast with the degenerate weakness of the present generation.
OISIN & ST. PATRICK

- As the Irish oral culture was declining at the end of the century, Yeats recognized the importance of preserving the folk stories he had heard as a boy.

- By making St. Patrick speak with Oisin, an ancient Irish ancestor who was born long before his time, he unites two figures particularly dear to the Irish tradition and at the same time belonging to the two different souls of Ireland, the pagan-Celtic one and the Christian one.

- Oisin may be seen as a symbol of rebirth or reincarnation similarly to St. Patrick to whom Ireland owes its rebirth to Catholicism.
HOUNDS in Celtic mythology

“We rode in sorrow, with strong hounds three, Bran, Sgeolan, and Lomair, On a morning misty and mild and fair...”

- Hounds often feature in Celtic legends: the ones mentioned above belonged to Oisin’s father and were once human.

- Celtic hounds were well respected by royalty and warriors:
  - in Irish mythology the most famous hound is the blacksmith Culann’s giant and ferocious hound killed (with his own bare hands) by the Celtic hero Cúchulainn, as we have seen;
  - in Welsh mythology a pack of supernatural hounds is led by Gwyn ap Nudd, the ruler of the Underworld who escorted the souls of the dead there.
5. «EASTER 1916»
EASTER 1916 (1916)

- Having Anglo-Irish origins, Yeats felt as much Irish as British. Thus when the Easter Rising took place with the aim of ending British rule in Ireland he had torn emotions about it...

- Easter 1916 is the poem he wrote to celebrate the uprising, organised on 24th April 1916 by a group of nationalist rebels who saw the opportunity to strike against the British Empire while England was engaged in the First World War. An Irish Republic was proclaimed but the insurrection was repressed by the British Army and the rebels were executed.

- The poem was written in the summer of 1916 when the events were still fresh in the Yeats’s memory.
SYMBOLISM

- The poem is made up of 4 stanzas: the first and the third stanzas are divided into 16 lines, whereas the second and the fourth stanzas have 24 lines.

- There’s a numerical symbology behind Yeats’s choice:
  - the number of the stanzas refers to the 4th month of the year, April, when the uprising took place;
  - the 16 lines represent both the year 1916 and the 16 men who were executed after the Rising;
  - finally, the 24 lines represent the day of the rebellion. (see the article Brexit and the Irish Question, by C. El Hana & F. Loprete, 22nd April 2019).
I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
That woman’s days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?

This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,

So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
The poem opens up with Yeats remembering the rebels returning from work as he walks on the streets in Dublin. Before the Rising they were just ordinary people, with whom he made superficial talks, saying “polite, meaningless words” and even making fun of them at the “club”. This proves that these rebels were not taken seriously by most people, at least at first, until something changed, as Yeats says.

In the second stanza, in fact, the poet starts making serious considerations about them: he describes the rebels as people who had led to the birth of a “terrible beauty”.
Easter Rising: stanza 3

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a **stone**
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road.
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
**Minute by minute they change**;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
**Minute by minute they live**:
The **stone's in the midst of all**.
Easter Rising: stanza 4

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven’s part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.
In the **third stanza** the author talks about these people who have just one purpose and whose hearts have turned to stone. Because of their determination and persistence they have troubled the living stream of everybody’s life.

The **stone** is a **metaphor** for their ideal and it becomes a **hurdle for everyone**, not only for nature. It’s like a stone in the stream that impedes the flowing water.

In the **final stanza** Yeats is wondering whether this sacrifice of the martyrs was necessary and enough. He then starts seeing that **the rebels’ death has brought about a change to the feelings of many Irish people who were initially against the insurrection.** Their sacrifice has made everyone more aware of the issue at stake.
Four specific figures involved in the struggle are mentioned:

- the “woman” referred to at the beginning of the second stanza is the Countess Markievicz, whose “voice grew shrill” the louder and more vocal she became in her espousal for the revolutionary cause;

- the “man [who] had kept a school...” is Patrick Pearse, a teacher and a barrister, while his ‘other helper and friend’ is Thomas MacDonagh, a poet and playwright;

- the last figure is John MacBride, the estranged husband of Maud Gonne, Yeats’s muse. The poet loathed him for his mistreatment of his wife, as the second stanza explains. The personal and the political are thus combined.
The poet evidently had mixed and ambivalent feelings and attitudes towards the revolutionaries and Irish Nationalism and managed to balance critique of the rebellion and its political extremism with admiration for the rebels’ dedication and bravery.

The famous refrain

“*A terrible beauty is born*”,

means that the Easter Rising was terrible because of the violence and the executions of many people but it undoubtedly gave birth to something beautiful:

*the wish for a Free State.*
6. CONCLUSIONS & LEGACY.
W.B. Yeats is called the “National poet of Ireland”: he was shaped by the Irish-Celtic tradition and his poetry is rooted mostly in the Irish tradition but the genre of English poetry of modern times invariably begins with his contribution.

Ireland is undeniably different from England not only in its economy, religion and tradition but also in its essential response to the life around. It is a land haunted by spirits, shadows and memories but it was this spirit-world which enabled Yeats to burst on Europe with a new imagery, a new mythology and new legends. As T.S. Eliot said, he was

“one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them”.

“one of those few whose history is the history of their own time, who are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them”.