

Lake Isle of Innisfree

-William Butler Yeats

William Butler Yeats wrote “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” one of his most famous and widely-anthologized works, in 1888. The poem gets its title from a very small, uninhabited island that sits in Lough Gill, a lake in Yeats’s home county of Sligo, Ireland. The speaker of this [pastoral](#) poem longs to build a simple life on Innisfree, finding peace through communion with nature. However, it becomes clear that ties to city life prevent the speaker from realizing this dream. The young poet’s fixation on questions of spirituality and Irish identity is felt in this poem, which also contains the sort of archaic language that he would later abandon and decry. Following an ABAB [rhyme scheme](#) and loosely [iambic meter](#), the poem’s seemingly neat, concise structure belies its complex networks of rhythm and sound, which are responsible for much of its visceral impact and enduring popularity.

The speaker expresses an intention to get up and go to a small island in Ireland called Innisfree. On the island, the speaker wishes to build a modest cabin out of clay and bundled twigs. The speaker hopes to plant nine rows of beans in a clearing, which will buzz with the sound of honeybees tending to a nearby hive.

The speaker believes that this setting promises peace, which will emerge slowly as the hazy mist of the morning falls to the earth, where crickets chirp. On the island, light flickers beautifully in the middle of the night and glows with a purple hue at midday, while little birds flutter about in the evenings.

The speaker reiterates an intent to get up and go to Innisfree, explaining that all day and all night, the speaker imagines hearing the lake's waves breaking on the island's shore. As the speaker stands on roads or other paved places, that imagined lake sound resonates deep within the speaker's heart.

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” Themes

Nature and Spirituality

The poem's speaker fantasizes about building a solitary, peaceful life on Innisfree, an uninhabited island in Ireland. While providing a dreamy, picturesque view of the island, the speaker also emphasizes the incompatibility of its virtues with modern life. In doing so, the speaker suggests that a return to nature offers unique spiritual rewards.

When describing Innisfree, the speaker uses mystical language, praising the natural world as a strong spiritual force. The poem opens with the phrase “I will arise and go,” which appears word-for-word twice in the King James Version of the Bible (Yeats, born into a Protestant family, likely used this text for worship). This [allusion](#) to the Bible at the poem’s very outset establishes that the speaker’s concerns—and especially the fixation on Innisfree—are spiritual in nature.

Subtle references to religious tradition continue, such as “the veils of morning”—a [metaphor](#) that likens early morning weather, such as fog and dew, to head coverings often worn for religious purposes. Plus, phrases like “purple glow” and “midnight’s all a glimmer” build a dreamy, supernatural atmosphere. Moreover, the speaker clearly feels a deep, personal connection to Innisfree, claiming that it calls out “always night and day,” relentlessly summoning the speaker. The two share a spiritual kinship, as nature lives within the speaker, who hears it “in the deep heart’s core.” The speaker believes that heeding its calls will bring “some peace.” Thus, the speaker champions nature as a profound divine force that can bring about inner serenity.

At the same time, the speaker emphasizes that communion with nature is the only path to attaining such spiritual rewards. In other words, modern society interferes with the pursuit of peace and truth. The speaker repeats the phrase “I will arise and go” as well as “and go.” As such, the speaker expresses a deep, persistent desire to get up and leave the city.

When describing an ideal life on the island, the speaker also notably refers to Innisfree four times as “there.” In doing so, the speaker stresses that fulfillment cannot be achieved “here”—that is, in the present, urban setting. In lines 4-5, the speaker implies that spiritual awakenings occur only outside of advanced societies and large communities, and instead when individuals are in tune with nature. In particular, the speaker expresses an intent to “live alone” on Innisfree, right before declaring “I shall have some peace there.”

Finally, in the poem’s penultimate line, the sound of splashing water entrances the speaker, who “stand[s] on the roadway, or on the pavements grey.” The inversion at the end of this line calls attention to the descriptor “grey,” playing up the bleak austerity of city life as a critical barrier to spiritual pursuits.

The speaker thus presents nature as a profound spiritual force that contains essential truths—a wellspring of wisdom that can only be accessed via a total renunciation of modern society. However, the speaker remains embedded within an urban landscape, despite nature calling

“always night and day.” By revealing the chasm between the speaker’s daydream and reality, the poem implicitly questions the attainability of a meaningful connection with nature in modern civilization.

Labor and Fulfillment

While highlighting the spiritual fulfillment that nature promises, the speaker also points out specific tasks that must be undertaken and exacting circumstances that must be endured to attain this fulfillment. In this way, the speaker champions quiet, meditative labor as the means to realizing the spiritual bounty of the natural world.

The poem’s first stanza details the various ways in which the speaker must cultivate the land in order to live in harmony with nature on Innisfree. First, the speaker has to get to Innisfree, which is a task in and of itself. Indeed, the speaker has been stuck in the city for some time, yearning “always night and day” to connect with nature but struggling to break away.

Upon arriving at Innisfree, the speaker would then have to make a clearing or “glade.” From there, the speaker would have to build a shelter using crude raw materials—weaving twigs and branches to create a cabin’s frame and then packing it with clay. Next, the speaker would move on to cultivate a sustainable source of food, such as “Nine bean-rows.” This would entail creating a garden bed, working the soil, sowing seeds, and tending to plants. The speaker thus lays out several prolonged, laborious projects that one must embark on in order to live cooperatively with nature.

To the same end, the speaker contends that one must adapt to a broader set of challenging conditions that goes beyond methodically nurturing the land. The speaker expresses an intent to “live alone” on the island, emphasizing that living in harmony with nature requires solitude. But as the speaker demonstrates, ties to modern society hold back even those most desirous of a profound connection with nature. As such, one must exercise great strength and resolve to break with the conveniences that communities and modern technologies provide.

What’s more, complying with all of the above does not result in immediate gratification, as “peace comes dropping slow.” The speaker thus advocates for an appreciation of labor for its own sake—not expecting any grand reward for individual accomplishments. In this way, the speaker indicates that one must complete certain tasks and adapt one’s outlook in patient

pursuit of a larger purpose. It is such meditative contentment with one's labor that will ultimately bring about spiritual fulfillment