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The Magic of Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”

Kabbalism, Numerology, and Tarot Cards

Genevieve Pettijohn

William Butler Yeats published his poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” in December of 1890, an important year in Yeats’ life due to his increased association with occult societies in London. In “Innisfree,” Yeats’ narrator asserts his desire to leave the “pavement gray” of his current locale and dwell on the mysterious island of Innisfree, with only bees, crickets, and linnets for company. Critics of the poem have highlighted several important aspects of “Innisfree,” including the spiritual journey undertaken by Yeats (Hunter); the island as an escape from sexuality (Merritt); and the island as a place of wisdom or foolishness, depending on varying historical perspectives on beans (Normandin). To these critics, it seems that the island is a place of refuge from a dangerous outside world—supposedly London specifically, although Merritt might broaden this interpretation to include all sexual encounters. While these critics acknowledge that the island is a place of escape, citing what Yeats himself has said about the Irish island Sligo, they fall short of recognizing the full implications of Yeats’ fascination with the occult. His involvement with the theosophical Society and later the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn has been observed by several critics; some of his later works are even interpreted with these

considerations in mind. However, the teachings and philosophy of these societies, as well as Yeats' interest in mysticism and his understanding of occult symbolism, have not fully been incorporated in an interpretation of "Innisfree." I assert that the symbols which Yeats includes on the island—specifically the nine bean-rows—are meant to be examined in the light of the Kabbalism, numerology, and tarot cards to which these societies looked for inspiration in their occult practices. Through his inclusion of these symbols, Yeats is demonstrating mastery over the Golden Dawn's basic tenants, a mastery which he perhaps hoped would help him advance in rank in the society and further his studies of magic.

Although many critics interpret Yeats' later poetic endeavors through the lens of his involvement in the occult, mysticism and the occult were surely on the forefront of Yeats' mind during the publication of "Innisfree." Yeats' interest in occultism expanded after an 1886 visit to Dublin by Mohini Mohun Chatterji, Bengali member of the Theosophical Society manipulated by Madame Helena Blavatsky to come to London as an authoritative "oriental" (Owen 60; Sasson 78–80). Chatterji's influence extended far beyond Chatterji's week-long visit to London (Harper 3). Already co-founder and president of the Dublin Hermetic Society, Yeats sought for a more rapid progression of his perceived innate abilities (Brown 34; Leavitt 131). Yeats' honorary poem to Chatterji later in life suggests to Ken Monteith, author of *Yeats and Theosophy*, that Yeats counted Chatterji as "the source of his theosophical interests" (21). Indeed, Chatterji's arrival, coupled with Yeats' increasing dissatisfaction with his own group's "vaguely progressive self-improvement," appears to have spurred Yeats' ambition to join Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in 1887 (Brown 34; Owen 60). Even this society, however, did not satiate Yeats' affinity for occult practices, and so Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890, the same year he published "Innisfree" (Owen 60). The Golden Dawn was a society meant to "[follow] through the interest in ritual magic and study prescribed by Esoteric Theosophists," another Hermetic group to which Yeats had previously belonged (Foster 103). According to Pat Zalewski in *The Magic Tarot of the Golden Dawn*, the Golden Dawn was founded in England in 1888 and became an "immensely influential magical group [which] concentrated its teachings on applying the Tarot to the Kabbalah," or the literature of Othodox Judaism and Hebrew texts mingled with eastern texts (Zalewski 8; Farley 98–99).

The tarot cards and the Kabbalah no doubt played important roles in Yeats' poetic compositions, not only because of his intrinsic interest in them but also due to his deeper desire to practice advanced magical arts. He had left the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky because her mystic experiments "did not satisfy his restless spirit of inquiry" (Harper 7). Increasingly attracted to "practical magic," Yeats joined the Society of the Golden Dawn in March 1890 (Owen 60). According to Ellic Howe, a British occult writer, "Yeats's membership of the Order . . . had a notable influence upon his imaginative and poetical development" (xxii). Indeed, Yeats wrote in a letter that "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write" (*Autobiographies*, qtd. in Wade 70). Clearly, the influence of the occult began to permeate his life and his writing. "Innisfree," though one of his earlier works, is not excluded from this influence.

Since Yeats' curiosity was not satisfied with Blavatsky's society, his pursuit of the mystic continued in the Golden Dawn. Evidence suggests that Yeats had interest in gaining access to the Second Order of the Golden Dawn, or *Roseae Rubis et Aureae Curcis*, an inner circle in which more advanced magic would be practiced. Ten years after "Innisfree," he wrote a pamphlet entitled, *Is the Order of the R.R. et A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?*, indicating his concern for the purity of inner circle (Howe 100). This Second Order was highly selective. While those in the First Order "had to . . . know the Hebrew alphabet, understand the basic significance and attributions of the [Kabbalistic] Tree of Life, and be familiar with the symbolic import of divinatory systems like the tarot," those in the Second Order indulged more fully in magic (Owen 59). Yeats demonstrated early proficiency in action and in writing. "Innisfree" is one indication of this proficiency.

Critic Mario D'Avanzo argues that the Kabbalah was extremely important to Yeats as he wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Besides referring to the literature of Orthodox Judaism and Hebrew and eastern texts, the Kabbalah also expressed "the nature of God and his divine emanations which were represented diagrammatically as the Tree of Life" (Farley 98–99). Asserting that Yeats studied the Kabbalah during the composition of "Innisfree," D'Avanzo notes the parallels of the poem between the Biblical Song of Solomon. A "[Kabbalistic] interpretation" of the Song of Solomon in conjunction with "Innisfree" implies that "the interaction of the speaker and the lake isle . . . conforms fully to

the [Kabbalistic] concept of the individual's achievement of order and mystical unity with . . . the earthly presence of God" (16). Yeats exemplifies this "mystical unity" in his ability to "hear lake water lapping," though he stands on a road far removed from the island. Perhaps even his ability to hear the water "in the deep earth's core" is evidence of mystic power and unity with God's earthly presence. Here we can already see elements of the occult seeping into Yeats' writing as he includes Kabbalistic instances of unity with God in his poem.

Yeats demonstrated through "Innisfree" not only his understanding of the Kabbalah but also of numerology and tarot cards. One element of "Innisfree" that is particularly fascinating is the "nine bean-rows." One interpretation of the bean-rows is put forward by Shawn Normandin. He examines the relationship that Yeats had with the Theosophical Society between 1887 and 1890, especially Yeats' connection to Madame Blavatsky, who "drew much of her wisdom from ancient philosophers," especially Pythagoras (25–26). Normandin highlights the potential duality of the meaning of beans in Yeats' poem: "To go to Innisfree and plant 'bean-rows' may, from a Thoreauvian perspective, reap austere wisdom, or it may, from a Pythagorean perspective, amount to the betrayal of wisdom. . . . The simple word *bean* condenses the struggle of a poet caught between London and Sligo [the asserted inspiration for Innisfree]" (27). Normandin's interpretation is instructive in that it incorporates the historical fact that Yeats was a member of the Theosophical Society and most likely read Blavatsky's Pythagoras-saturated writings. However, Normandin does not go so far as to examine the occult interpretations of the number of bean rows—nine. In their book about the Golden Dawn, Chris and Pat Zalewski explain the Kabbalistic theology behind certain numbers and concepts in the occult. According to this theology, there are three stages of Light—the potential co-creator of the universe along with Sound—which become increasingly more solid (Zalewski 43). The third stage, Ain Soph Aur or Limitless Light, is made up of nine Hebrew letters. Zalewski and Zalewski explain that the nine Hebrew letters "constitute the unmanifested steps or spheres . . . so that at the number nine we cannot progress further without returning to unity" (16). Nine, it appears, is an important number for both the Kabbalah and the tarot deck.

Other meanings to the number nine exist in occult numerology. According to Sepharial, author of *The Kabala of Numbers: A Handbook*

of *Interpretation*, nine symbolizes mystery. It signifies “a new birth,” “premonition,” and perhaps most interestingly “going forth” (28), which echoes Yeats’ sentiment to “arise and go” to Innisfree. Nine is also linked to “Cupid, just as Erato, from desiring its opposite for a partner” (Westcott 37). This last interpretation of the number nine would suggest that even though Yeats is potentially fleeing to the island to escape his affections—Merritt’s proposed interpretation—he is still a slave to his affections, as he will be a slave to the nine bean-rows. Again, however, this interpretation is an incomplete picture without the introduction of tarot cards.

The exact origin of tarot cards is not known. Some speculate that the cards were introduced by Crusaders or gypsies (“Tarot”). According to Helen Farley, author of *A Cultural History of the Tarot*, Tarot cards first appeared in northern Italy in the early fifteenth century (18). From there, tarot cards gained popularity in France and then onward to England during the Victorian period (121). Yeats would have been familiar with tarot cards, for he had a pack of them among his “treasured possessions” in London (Raine 5). Furthermore, Farley writes: “Originally members [of the Golden Dawn] were required to make a copy of the tarot deck. . . . Initiates were to use the cards for both meditation and divination” (136). Golden Dawn members used these cards for meditation and divination (Zalewski 3, 27). An understanding of these tarot cards, as mentioned earlier, was required for advancement into the Second Order of the Golden Dawn.

Tarot cards hold significant implications for the nine bean-rows of “Innisfree” on two levels: overtly, through an understanding of the purpose of the cards; and covertly, through an application of the numerology associated with the cards. First, the physical bean plant could be synonymous to the Tree of Life which the tarot cards are meant to pictorially represent (Raine 15). The image of the Tree of Life may connect to trees “sacred to Celtic gods” which Yeats attempted to incorporate as an element of the Celtic Renaissance in his poetry (Hunter 71). However, deeper examination of the cards and their numerical significance yields a richer implication for the bean-rows. In the tarot deck, nine is the number of the Hermit, a tarot card figure, “. . . someone who has forsaken all and gone towards a spiritual path” (Zalewski 168). He is also “an outcast, whether self-imposed or not, seeking solace through the act of self-discipline of the senses and communion with his maker through his particular belief structure” (122). Yeats, who desires to “live alone” in a “small cabin . . . of clay and wattles made,” appears to become the Hermit (Yeats).

The number of bean-rows and the inherent image of the Hermit may be a prompt for us to understand Yeats' motivation to live alone on Innisfree: to end one cycle and begin a new one, another meaning of the number nine (Zalewski 121). Indeed, his initiation into the Golden Dawn commenced at the end of his involvement with Blavatsky, who, in Yeats' mind, wanted to limit his magical experiences. The Hermit is also a Magus or Magician, one of Yeats' aspirations when he joined the Golden Dawn and which he eventually achieved, as confirmed by his Rose Cross (Owen 140; Raine 59). After his initiation, Yeats remarked that his studies with the Golden Dawn "... [convinced] me that images well up before the mind's eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory" (*Autobiographies*, qtd. in Howe 69). This observation seems to echo the lapping of the lake water which Yeats hears "in the deep heart's core."

Yeats further showcased his magical abilities in "Innisfree" by describing the sights and sounds on the island itself. Several personal accounts confirm that Yeats had special powers transcending the natural realm. Maud Gonne, the object of Yeats' unrequited love, asserted in her Memoirs that Yeats was able to call upon spirits to communicate symbolic images to her; during one such session, she cried, "I see a figure holding out its hand with a skull in it," and the two knew they were spiritually compatible (qtd. in Leavitt 134). Indeed, soon after joining the Golden Dawn, Yeats bragged that "he could make 'the visible world completely vanish and another world summoned by the symbol would take its place'" (128). "Innisfree" could be, in one way, an expression of this power. Sean Pyor argues that the "slow and sonorous incantation and liturgical echoes . . . cast a magic spell," which ends up being more of a "chant rather than any physical arrival" (99). A variety of sounds are expressed in the poem, such as the "bee-loud glade," "lake water lapping," the singing cricket, and "the linnet's wings" (Yeats). These sounds could serve as a further expression of Yeats' mystical prowess—his ability to not only make the visible world vanish around himself, but also to take his listeners with him.

We may turn to studies of modernity for an explanation as to why Yeats and others in fin-de-siècle Europe and the United States were fascinated by the occult. The industrial revolution vastly increased travel and global communication (Farley 123). At the same time, urbanization created feelings of alienation; race, gender, and social classes and

boundaries were beginning to be reconfigured (Friedman 474). Because of these new emerging modernities, writers such as Yeats turned to mysticism for answers to “fundamental but nonetheless profound questions about the meaning of life and the spiritual dimensions of the universe” (Owen 5). Indeed, middle class fin-de-siècle Britons were drawn to occultism for its exclusivity and unification with “people like us” (Owen 5). In essence, Yeats’ involvement with the occult, beginning with the Theosophical Society, “made Yeats a somebody” in an era of uncertain identity (Monteith 218). It is interesting to note here that Yeats’ feeling of inclusion stemmed from his apparent attempt at isolation on “Innisfree.” But I assert that the symbols of the Hermit, the number nine, and the overall unification with nature are less representative of Yeats’ desire for physical isolation and more an expression of his mystical prowess, thus appending himself to the highest order of the Golden Dawn. This does not mean that Yeats did not intend the poem to have isolationist overtones. Indeed, writers such as Ezra Pound (who, notably, also used tarot cards in his play *Sweeny Agonistes*) felt isolated by their genius in the world of modernity. Perhaps Yeats experienced a similar feeling of isolated genius during his years in the Theosophical Society when he was denied free experimentation with magic. At any rate, returning to a surface-level interpretation of “Innisfree” leads one to conclude that the island is an escape from various forms of repression.

Another Poundism, “make it new,” is relevant not only in my discussion of the occult symbolism of “Innisfree,” but also fin-de-siècle Britain’s cultural appropriation of non-European religious symbols. As previously mentioned, the Kabbalah, numerology, and tarot cards are of ancient origin. Yet they made their appearance at the close of the nineteenth century, though at least in the case of tarot cards with new “esoteric meaning” (Farley 2–3). This new incorporation of ancient artifacts and symbols would support Peter Kalliney’s idea that “European imperialism was as much about jealousy of other European powers as it was about dispossessing or civilizing non-European peoples” (39). As Farley notes, though the history of tarot cards is as much mysterious as the cards themselves, they have strong ties to Italy and France. Kalliney’s picture of a jealous and covetous European power such as England appears to be accurate here. Perhaps, on the surface, the assessment that the dispossession and civilization of non-European nations was of equal

importance to the European jealousy of these nations seems untrue. One does see dispossession, for all three mystical systems—the Kabbalah, the tarot cards, and numerology—have extra-European influence if not origin. But the lack of society expressed in Yeats’ “Innisfree” would appear to indicate a conscious return to primitivism and therefore a desire to decivilize. However, upon further examination, there is some semblance of society on Innisfree: the “small cabin;” the orderliness of “nine bean-rows;” the “hive for the honeybee,” one of the most industrious insects (Yeats). So Innisfree is not so decivilized as it may appear. Furthermore, there is something sweeping and ever-present in the doctrines of Theosophy that undermines the concept of complete decivilization. Composed of symbols relevant to multiple religions—including Christianity, Judaism, Ancient Egyptian, and Hinduism—the motto of the society purports that “There is No Religion Higher Than Truth” (“Emblem or the Seal”). Indeed, the Kabbalistic unity between God and man which D’Avanzo argues for adds to the concept of Kalliney’s civilization of non-European peoples—perhaps as an expression of the unity between a higher nation and a lower. Through cultural appropriation, European modernity salvaged the emblems of various religions and combined them under one flag of “truth.” Yeats not only ascribed to this modernity, but he climbed an elitist social ladder constructed of appropriated cultural artifacts “made new.”

Yeats’ fascination with the occult at the turn of the century was indicative of a larger cultural trend of that era. Paralleled in Great Britain, this trend towards occultism took root in the United States before blossoming anew in fin-de-siècle Europe. Blavatsky, after establishing her Theosophical Society in London, inspired Yeats and countless others who were invested in mysticism. But what was their inspiration? According to Sam Watters of *The Los Angeles Times*, what inspired Yeats then—and what inspires others today—is the desire to reach Utopia. Watters describes how Blavatsky’s endeavors began in 1897 “as industrial America rose and avarice trounced charity.” He goes on to explain the society contained a “healing blend” of various occult practices, which he asserts were “dedicated to charitable works and brotherly love.” Twenty-five years after founding Societies in the United States and London, Watters writes, Blavatsky’s initial concept solidified in a “unified force for human good” in a sect in the southern Indian town of Adyar. One of the sect leaders, Albert P. Warrington, attempted to recreate Adyar in Southern

California in a colony called Krotona. As a sort of continental Innisfree, Krotana embodies the ideals Yeats and other occult devotees hoped to achieve through their studies of magic.

Yeats had his own Adyar or Krotana—his own Utopia—in Innisfree, a secluded place to become the Hermit, gain wisdom, and practice magic uninhibited by societal restrictions or expectations. Here, Yeats could continue to explore magic while living as a wise but powerful Hermit-Magician in unity with nature, seeking greater knowledge in accordance with the mantra, “There is No Religion Higher Than Truth.” Yeats attempted to reach Utopia on Innisfree, for “I shall have some peace there.” This peace, in an earlier draft of “Innisfree” came “from the dawn above” (Owen 79). That Yeats truly achieved peace through his association with Theosophic Societies and overall study of the occult is debatable. However, it seems that, to at least some degree, the poet reached his personal Utopia in the Second Order of the Golden Dawn.

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