

# WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

RESPONSIBILITIES, AND  
OTHER POEMS

William Butler Yeats  
**Responsibilities, and other poems**

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# Yeats William Butler

## Responsibilities, and other poems

*'In dreams begins responsibility.'*

*Old Play.*

*'How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now  
I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams.'*

*Khoun-fou-tseu.*

## RESPONSIBILITIES

### [INTRODUCTORY RHYMES]

Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain  
Somewhere in ear-shot for the story's end,  
Old Dublin merchant 'free of ten and four'  
Or trading out of Galway into Spain;  
And country scholar, Robert Emmet's friend,  
A hundred-year-old memory to the poor;  
Traders or soldiers who have left me blood  
That has not passed through any huxter's loin,  
Pardon, and you that did not weigh the cost,  
Old Butlers when you took to horse and stood  
Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne  
Till your bad master blenched and all was lost;  
You merchant skipper that leaped overboard  
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay,  
You most of all, silent and fierce old man  
Because you were the spectacle that stirred  
My fancy, and set my boyish lips to say  
'Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun';  
Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,  
Although I have come close on forty-nine  
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,  
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

*January 1914.*

## THE GREY ROCK

*Poets with whom I learned my trade,  
Companions of the Cheshire Cheese,  
Here's an old story I've re-made,  
Imagining 'twould better please  
Your ears than stories now in fashion,  
Though you may think I waste my breath  
Pretending that there can be passion  
That has more life in it than death,  
And though at bottling of your wine  
The bow-legged Goban had no say;  
The moral's yours because it's mine.*

When cups went round at close of day —  
Is not that how good stories run? —  
Somewhere within some hollow hill,  
If books speak truth in Slievenamon,  
But let that be, the gods were still  
And sleepy, having had their meal,  
And smoky torches made a glare  
On painted pillars, on a deal  
Of fiddles and of flutes hung there  
By the ancient holy hands that brought them  
From murmuring Murias, on cups —  
Old Goban hammered them and wrought them,  
And put his pattern round their tops  
To hold the wine they buy of him.  
But from the juice that made them wise  
All those had lifted up the dim  
Imaginations of their eyes,  
For one that was like woman made  
Before their sleepy eyelids ran  
And trembling with her passion said,  
'Come out and dig for a dead man,  
Who's burrowing somewhere in the ground,  
And mock him to his face and then  
Hollo him on with horse and hound,  
For he is the worst of all dead men.'

*We should be dazed and terror struck,  
If we but saw in dreams that room,  
Those wine-drenched eyes, and curse our luck  
That emptied all our days to come.  
I knew a woman none could please,  
Because she dreamed when but a child  
Of men and women made like these;*

*And after, when her blood ran wild,  
Had ravelled her own story out,  
And said, 'In two or in three years  
I need must marry some poor lout,'  
And having said it burst in tears.  
Since, tavern comrades, you have died,  
Maybe your images have stood,  
Mere bone and muscle thrown aside,  
Before that roomful or as good.  
You had to face your ends when young —  
'Twas wine or women, or some curse —  
But never made a poorer song  
That you might have a heavier purse,  
Nor gave loud service to a cause  
That you might have a troop of friends.  
You kept the Muses' sterner laws,  
And unrepenting faced your ends,  
And therefore earned the right — and yet  
Dowson and Johnson most I praise —  
To troop with those the world's forgot,  
And copy their proud steady gaze.*

'The Danish troop was driven out  
Between the dawn and dusk,' she said;  
'Although the event was long in doubt,  
Although the King of Ireland's dead  
And half the kings, before sundown  
All was accomplished.'

'When this day  
Murrough, the King of Ireland's son,  
Foot after foot was giving way,  
He and his best troops back to back  
Had perished there, but the Danes ran,  
Stricken with panic from the attack,  
The shouting of an unseen man;  
And being thankful Murrough found,  
Led by a footsole dipped in blood  
That had made prints upon the ground,  
Where by old thorn trees that man stood;  
And though when he gazed here and there,  
He had but gazed on thorn trees, spoke,  
"Who is the friend that seems but air  
And yet could give so fine a stroke?"  
Thereon a young man met his eye,  
Who said, "Because she held me in  
Her love, and would not have me die,  
Rock-nurtured Aoife took a pin,  
And pushing it into my shirt,

Promised that for a pin's sake,  
No man should see to do me hurt;  
But there it's gone; I will not take  
The fortune that had been my shame  
Seeing, King's son, what wounds you have."  
'Twas roundly spoke, but when night came  
He had betrayed me to his grave,  
For he and the King's son were dead.  
I'd promised him two hundred years,  
And when for all I'd done or said —  
And these immortal eyes shed tears —  
He claimed his country's need was most,  
I'd save his life, yet for the sake  
Of a new friend he has turned a ghost.  
What does he care if my heart break?  
I call for spade and horse and hound  
That we may harry him.' Thereon  
She cast herself upon the ground  
And rent her clothes and made her moan:  
'Why are they faithless when their might  
Is from the holy shades that rove  
The grey rock and the windy light?  
Why should the faithfulest heart most love  
The bitter sweetness of false faces?  
Why must the lasting love what passes,  
Why are the gods by men betrayed!'

But thereon every god stood up  
With a slow smile and without sound,  
And stretching forth his arm and cup  
To where she moaned upon the ground,  
Suddenly drenched her to the skin;  
And she with Goban's wine adrip,  
No more remembering what had been,  
Stared at the gods with laughing lip.

*I have kept my faith, though faith was tried,  
To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot,  
And the world's altered since you died,  
And I am in no good repute  
With the loud host before the sea,  
That think sword strokes were better meant  
Than lover's music – let that be,  
So that the wandering foot's content.*

## THE TWO KINGS

King Eochaid came at sundown to a wood  
Westward of Tara. Hurrying to his queen  
He had out-riden his war-wasted men  
That with empounded cattle trod the mire;  
And where beech trees had mixed a pale green light  
With the ground-ivy's blue, he saw a stag  
Whiter than curds, its eyes the tint of the sea.  
Because it stood upon his path and seemed  
More hands in height than any stag in the world  
He sat with tightened rein and loosened mouth  
Upon his trembling horse, then drove the spur;  
But the stag stooped and ran at him, and passed,  
Rending the horse's flank. King Eochaid reeled  
Then drew his sword to hold its levelled point  
Against the stag. When horn and steel were met  
The horn resounded as though it had been silver,  
A sweet, miraculous, terrifying sound.  
Horn locked in sword, they tugged and struggled there  
As though a stag and unicorn were met  
In Africa on Mountain of the Moon,  
Until at last the double horns, drawn backward,  
Butted below the single and so pierced  
The entrails of the horse. Dropping his sword  
King Eochaid seized the horns in his strong hands  
And stared into the sea-green eye, and so  
Hither and thither to and fro they trod  
Till all the place was beaten into mire.  
The strong thigh and the agile thigh were met,  
The hands that gathered up the might of the world,  
And hoof and horn that had sucked in their speed  
Amid the elaborate wilderness of the air.  
Through bush they plunged and over ivied root,  
And where the stone struck fire, while in the leaves  
A squirrel whinnied and a bird screamed out;  
But when at last he forced those sinewy flanks  
Against a beech bole, he threw down the beast  
And knelt above it with drawn knife. On the instant  
It vanished like a shadow, and a cry  
So mournful that it seemed the cry of one  
Who had lost some unimaginable treasure  
Wandered between the blue and the green leaf  
And climbed into the air, crumbling away,  
Till all had seemed a shadow or a vision  
But for the trodden mire, the pool of blood,  
The disembowelled horse.

King Eochaid ran,  
Toward peopled Tara, nor stood to draw his breath  
Until he came before the painted wall,  
The posts of polished yew, circled with bronze,  
Of the great door; but though the hanging lamps  
Showed their faint light through the unshuttered windows,  
Nor door, nor mouth, nor slipper made a noise,  
Nor on the ancient beaten paths, that wound  
From well-side or from plough-land, was there noise;  
And there had been no sound of living thing  
Before him or behind, but that far-off  
On the horizon edge bellowed the herds.  
Knowing that silence brings no good to kings,  
And mocks returning victory, he passed  
Between the pillars with a beating heart  
And saw where in the midst of the great hall  
Pale-faced, alone upon a bench, Edain  
Sat upright with a sword before her feet.  
Her hands on either side had gripped the bench,  
Her eyes were cold and steady, her lips tight.  
Some passion had made her stone. Hearing a foot  
She started and then knew whose foot it was;  
But when he thought to take her in his arms  
She motioned him afar, and rose and spoke:  
'I have sent among the fields or to the woods  
The fighting men and servants of this house,  
For I would have your judgment upon one  
Who is self-accused. If she be innocent  
She would not look in any known man's face  
Till judgment has been given, and if guilty,  
Will never look again on known man's face.'  
And at these words he paled, as she had paled,  
Knowing that he should find upon her lips  
The meaning of that monstrous day.

Then she:  
'You brought me where your brother Ardan sat  
Always in his one seat, and bid me care him  
Through that strange illness that had fixed him there,  
And should he die to heap his burial mound  
And carve his name in Ogham.' Eochaid said,  
'He lives?' 'He lives and is a healthy man.'  
'While I have him and you it matters little  
What man you have lost, what evil you have found.'  
'I bid them make his bed under this roof  
And carried him his food with my own hands,  
And so the weeks passed by. But when I said  
"What is this trouble?" he would answer nothing,

Though always at my words his trouble grew;  
And I but asked the more, till he cried out,  
Weary of many questions: "There are things  
That make the heart akin to the dumb stone."  
Then I replied: "Although you hide a secret,  
Hopeless and dear, or terrible to think on,  
Speak it, that I may send through the wide world  
For medicine." Thereon he cried aloud:  
"Day after day you question me, and I,  
Because there is such a storm amid my thoughts  
I shall be carried in the gust, command,  
Forbid, beseech and waste my breath." Then I,  
"Although the thing that you have hid were evil,  
The speaking of it could be no great wrong,  
And evil must it be, if done 'twere worse  
Than mound and stone that keep all virtue in,  
And loosen on us dreams that waste our life,  
Shadows and shows that can but turn the brain."  
But finding him still silent I stooped down  
And whispering that none but he should hear,  
Said: "If a woman has put this on you,  
My men, whether it please her or displease,  
And though they have to cross the Loughlan waters  
And take her in the middle of armed men,  
Shall make her look upon her handiwork,  
That she may quench the rick she has fired; and though  
She may have worn silk clothes, or worn a crown,  
She'll not be proud, knowing within her heart  
That our sufficient portion of the world  
Is that we give, although it be brief giving,  
Happiness to children and to men."  
Then he, driven by his thought beyond his thought,  
And speaking what he would not though he would,  
Sighed: "You, even you yourself, could work the cure!"  
And at those words I rose and I went out  
And for nine days he had food from other hands,  
And for nine days my mind went whirling round  
The one disastrous zodiac, muttering  
That the immedicable mound's beyond  
Our questioning, beyond our pity even.  
But when nine days had gone I stood again  
Before his chair and bending down my head  
Told him, that when Orion rose, and all  
The women of his household were asleep,  
To go – for hope would give his limbs the power —  
To an old empty woodman's house that's hidden  
Close to a clump of beech trees in the wood  
Westward of Tara, there to await a friend  
That could, as he had told her, work his cure

And would be no harsh friend.

When night had deepened,  
I groped my way through boughs, and over roots,  
Till oak and hazel ceased and beech began,  
And found the house, a sputtering torch within,  
And stretched out sleeping on a pile of skins  
Ardan, and though I called to him and tried  
To shake him out of sleep, I could not rouse him.  
I waited till the night was on the turn,  
Then fearing that some labourer, on his way  
To plough or pasture-land, might see me there,  
Went out.

Among the ivy-covered rocks,  
As on the blue light of a sword, a man  
Who had unnatural majesty, and eyes  
Like the eyes of some great kite scouring the woods,  
Stood on my path. Trembling from head to foot  
I gazed at him like grouse upon a kite;  
But with a voice that had unnatural music,  
"A weary wooing and a long," he said,  
"Speaking of love through other lips and looking  
Under the eyelids of another, for it was my craft  
That put a passion in the sleeper there,  
And when I had got my will and drawn you here,  
Where I may speak to you alone, my craft  
Sucked up the passion out of him again  
And left mere sleep. He'll wake when the sun wakes,  
Push out his vigorous limbs and rub his eyes,  
And wonder what has ailed him these twelve months."  
I cowered back upon the wall in terror,  
But that sweet-sounding voice ran on: "Woman,  
I was your husband when you rode the air,  
Danced in the whirling foam and in the dust,  
In days you have not kept in memory,  
Being betrayed into a cradle, and I come  
That I may claim you as my wife again."  
I was no longer terrified, his voice  
Had half awakened some old memory,  
Yet answered him: "I am King Eochaid's wife  
And with him have found every happiness  
Women can find." With a most masterful voice,  
That made the body seem as it were a string  
Under a bow, he cried: "What happiness  
Can lovers have that know their happiness  
Must end at the dumb stone? But where we build  
Our sudden palaces in the still air  
Pleasure itself can bring no weariness,

Nor can time waste the cheek, nor is there foot  
That has grown weary of the whirling dance,  
Nor an unlaughing mouth, but mine that mourns,  
Among those mouths that sing their sweethearts' praise,  
Your empty bed." "How should I love," I answered,  
"Were it not that when the dawn has lit my bed  
And shown my husband sleeping there, I have sighed,  
'Your strength and nobleness will pass away.'  
Or how should love be worth its pains were it not  
That when he has fallen asleep within my arms,  
Being wearied out, I love in man the child?  
What can they know of love that do not know  
She builds her nest upon a narrow ledge  
Above a windy precipice?" Then he:  
"Seeing that when you come to the death-bed  
You must return, whether you would or no,  
This human life blotted from memory,  
Why must I live some thirty, forty years,  
Alone with all this useless happiness?"  
Thereon he seized me in his arms, but I  
Thrust him away with both my hands and cried,  
"Never will I believe there is any change  
Can blot out of my memory this life  
Sweetened by death, but if I could believe  
That were a double hunger in my lips  
For what is doubly brief."

And now the shape,  
My hands were pressed to, vanished suddenly.  
I staggered, but a beech tree stayed my fall,  
And clinging to it I could hear the cocks  
Crow upon Tara.'

King Eochaid bowed his head  
And thanked her for her kindness to his brother,  
For that she promised, and for that refused.

Thereon the bellowing of the empounded herds  
Rose round the walls, and through the bronze-ringed door  
Jostled and shouted those war-wasted men,  
And in the midst King Eochaid's brother stood.  
He'd heard that din on the horizon's edge  
And ridden towards it, being ignorant.

## TO A WEALTHY MAN WHO PROMISED A SECOND SUBSCRIPTION TO THE DUBLIN MUNICIPAL GALLERY IF IT WERE PROVED THE PEOPLE WANTED PICTURES

You gave but will not give again  
Until enough of Paudeen's pence  
By Biddy's halfpennies have lain  
To be 'some sort of evidence,'  
Before you'll put your guineas down,  
That things it were a pride to give  
Are what the blind and ignorant town  
Imagines best to make it thrive.  
What cared Duke Ercole, that bid  
His mummers to the market place,  
What th' onion-sellers thought or did  
So that his Plautus set the pace  
For the Italian comedies?  
And Guidobaldo, when he made  
That grammar school of courtesies  
Where wit and beauty learned their trade  
Upon Urbino's windy hill,  
Had sent no runners to and fro  
That he might learn the shepherds' will.  
And when they drove out Cosimo,  
Indifferent how the rancour ran,  
He gave the hours they had set free  
To Michelozzo's latest plan  
For the San Marco Library,  
Whence turbulent Italy should draw  
Delight in Art whose end is peace,  
In logic and in natural law  
By sucking at the dugs of Greece.

Your open hand but shows our loss,  
For he knew better how to live.  
Let Paudeens play at pitch and toss,  
Look up in the sun's eye and give  
What the exultant heart calls good  
That some new day may breed the best  
Because you gave, not what they would  
But the right twigs for an eagle's nest!

*December 1912.*

## SEPTEMBER 1913

What need you, being come to sense,  
But fumble in a greasy till  
And add the halfpence to the pence  
And prayer to shivering prayer, until  
You have dried the marrow from the bone;  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind  
The names that stilled your childish play,  
They have gone about the world like wind,  
But little time had they to pray  
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,  
And what, God help us, could they save:  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread  
The grey wing upon every tide;  
For this that all that blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
All that delirium of the brave;  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,  
And call those exiles as they were,  
In all their loneliness and pain  
You'd cry 'some woman's yellow hair  
Has maddened every mother's son':  
They weighed so lightly what they gave,  
But let them be, they're dead and gone,  
They're with O'Leary in the grave.

## TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO NOTHING

Now all the truth is out,  
Be secret and take defeat  
From any brazen throat,  
For how can you compete,  
Being honour bred, with one  
Who, were it proved he lies,  
Were neither shamed in his own  
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?  
Bred to a harder thing  
Than Triumph, turn away  
And like a laughing string  
Whereon mad fingers play  
Amid a place of stone,  
Be secret and exult,  
Because of all things known  
That is most difficult.

## PAUDEEN

Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite  
Of our old Paudeen in his shop, I stumbled blind  
Among the stones and thorn trees, under morning light;  
Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind  
A curlew answered; and suddenly thereupon I thought  
That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,  
There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,  
A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry.

## TO A SHADE

If you have revisited the town, thin Shade,  
Whether to look upon your monument  
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)  
Or happier thoughted when the day is spent  
To drink of that salt breath out of the sea  
When grey gulls flit about instead of men,  
And the gaunt houses put on majesty:  
Let these content you and be gone again;  
For they are at their old tricks yet.

A man  
Of your own passionate serving kind who had brought  
In his full hands what, had they only known,  
Had given their children's children loftier thought,  
Sweeter emotion, working in their veins  
Like gentle blood, has been driven from the place,  
And insult heaped upon him for his pains  
And for his open-handedness, disgrace;  
An old foul mouth that slandered you had set  
The pack upon him.

Go, unquiet wanderer,  
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet  
About your head till the dust stops your ear,  
The time for you to taste of that salt breath  
And listen at the corners has not come;  
You had enough of sorrow before death —  
Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.

*September 29th, 1914.*

## WHEN HELEN LIVED

We have cried in our despair  
That men desert,  
For some trivial affair  
Or noisy, insolent sport,  
Beauty that we have won  
From bitterest hours;  
Yet we, had we walked within  
Those topless towers  
Where Helen walked with her boy,  
Had given but as the rest  
Of the men and women of Troy,  
A word and a jest.

**THE ATTACK ON 'THE PLAYBOY  
OF THE WESTERN WORLD,' 1907**

Once, when midnight smote the air,

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