How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

William Butler Yeats’ poetry explores tensions between a series of conflicting binaries: flux and stasis, mortality and immortality, time and eternity, destiny and free will, body and soul, change and stability. His use of imagery represents the antithetical response to change as a process that affects people at both an individual and social level.

The poem “Easter 1916” (1920) is an exploration of change and stability on both an individual and social level. Yeats laments over the changing face of Ireland and expresses regret about the tragic loss of potential. In the first stanza, imagery is used to detail the inane daily commercial occurrences within Dublin as workers leave their places of work “at the close of day” and Yeats recalls how he would “linger a while” and “exchange meaningless words” with the Easter Uprising’s future leaders. Yeats microscopic focus on such small and mundane details such as the “grey” colour of the “eighteenth century houses” emphasises upon the reader that these miniscule moments are of huge significance, for these moments represent a stable Ireland before the Easter Rising and before the bloodshed.

Not only does Yeats express regret over the changing face of Ireland, but he also lists the changes which took place within his contemporaries, the leaders of the Uprising. The last two lines of stanza one symbolise a momentous shift in Ireland with the (later repeated) oxymoron – “All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born”. The paradox between ‘terrible’ and ‘beauty’ – ‘terrifying’ and ‘wonderful’ - emphasises upon the initial puzzlement felt by the Irish (including Yeats) on how to approach the Uprising. Were they to applaud the courageous actions of the Rebels? Or scorn them for the unnecessary and tragic loss of 500
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

innocent lives? “Conflicting perceptions and pertinent doubts are drawn”¹ from the prayer-like assertion and the hyperbolic statement is echoed and extended throughout the poem as it represents Yeats’ own confusion and ambivalence towards the actions of the Rebels.

Easter 1916 can be read as a eulogy for Ireland’s brave revolutionaries. Through the use of imagery, Yeats expresses regret over the changes experienced by the leaders of the Uprising who lost their lives as a result of their dedication to the cause of Irish freedom. He recalls his old friend Constance Markievicz who traded her beauty – “What voice more sweet than hers / When young and beautiful” – for “ignorant good-will” and nights spent arguing “until her voice grew shrill”. Yeats juxtaposes Markievicz’s youthful ‘sweet’ voice with her ‘shrill’ voice to emphasise upon the tragic evolution of his friend. Padraic Pears and Thomas MacDonagh are utilized as symbols of tragically wasted potential for they were literary gifted men who may have mastered poetry’s “winged horse” and used their gifts for the Irish cultural revival. Of all the figures noted in the poem, John MacBride - the man who “had done most bitter wrong” to the woman Yeats adored - has the only transformation for the better. MacBride earns Yeats’ respect as courage and suffering changed him from a “drunken, vainglorious lout” to a man worthy of nobility for “He too has resigned his part / He, too, has been changed in his turn”. All of these figures had underwent considerable individual change and were “transformed utterly” by their Easter sacrifice.

¹ (Drake)
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

Perhaps the most powerful use of imagery within Easter 1916 is Yeats' symbolic use of “stone”. For Yeats, the Easter Uprising is so sudden and unexpected that the Rebels actions are demonstrated as a stone being thrown into war, leaving ripples in its wake – “Hearts with one purpose alone / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream”. The ‘living stream’ is Ireland, and the actions of the Uprising leaders will have societal repercussions (ripples) on the people of Ireland forever. The use of the imagery of the ‘living stream’ juxtaposed with the ‘stoniness’ of the Rebels suggests that their intention is unchanging and intransigent, in contrast to the living flux of the stream. The motif of the stone is used again – “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart” to demonstrate the juxtaposition between the living, moving world and the unchanging stone that symbolizes the hearts of the dead Rebels. The Rebels’ obsession with liberation resulted in their petrification as an unchanging object (a stone) in a world of change and flux (the living stream). In the world of nature, change is a steady but gradual process; it is not the radical transformation (“All changed, changed utterly”) of the patriots. In the natural world animals are constantly moving, splashing and mating – “Hens to moorcocks call”. But the stony “hearts with one purpose alone” (nationalism and independence) have become rigid and inflexible – they are in a perpetual state of stability for they cannot be changed.

“MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse” are effectively canonized in Irish history, as heroes and martyrs. But Yeats does not approve wholeheartedly with

---
2 (Drake)
3 (Holdeman)
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

their actions as he questions—“Was it needless death after all?”. The finality of death is echoed - “What is it but nightfall? / No, no, not night but death” and Yeats mourns what was lost – the potential of the rebels and Old Ireland. Ireland’s social transformation is depicted through color imagery. Prior to the Uprising, Ireland is a ‘motley’ world with ‘grey’ houses. Afterwards these hues are replaced by green, representing the national color of the newly resurrected Ireland, with its unified peoples – “Wherever green is worn / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born”.

“The Wild Swans at Coole” (1917) is Yeats’ personal representation of change and stability through the lens of ageing and the tension between the binaries of immortality and mortality. Set on the lake at Coole, the aging man describes an area he has frequented often for nineteen years – “The nineteenth Autumn has come upon me / Since I first made my count”. Fifty-two at the time, Yeats utilizes imagery to make both the landscape and the speaker reflect aging: the trees are in autumn foliage, the paths are dry, and in contrast to the swans, his heart has ‘grown old’. 

Throughout the entirety of the poem, Yeats juxtaposes balance and stillness, nature and humanity to reflect upon the stability and constancy of nature as opposed to the changes in his human body and soul. On more than one occasion, Yeats utilizes the imagery of moments of transition or ‘in-between times’. He opens with “The trees are in their autumn beauty” to symbolize the balance between life and darkness, death and renewal, preparation and accepting impermanence. The “October twilight” objectifies Yeats’ melancholy feelings and suggests a sense of change and finality.

4 (Bornstein)
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

The line “All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight” is not only Yeats recalling the first time he heard the sound of the swan’s wings, but also a period of his life in decline.

Swans are associated with sanguine, tranquil beauty. They are a symbol of stability, permanence and eternity – “Hearts have not grown old” – as opposed to mortality, death and change – “All’s changed”. Yeats utilizes this imagery and juxtaposition to reiterate the ‘unwearied’ energies of the swans who have the ability to ‘mount’, ‘scatter wheel’, ‘clamor’ and ‘wonder’, with Yeats’ own diminished spirits. The poet personifies the swans with the actions of “Passion or conquest” to further reinforce the swans possession of energy and exuberance. Unlike the swans who are the catalysts for their actions, Yeats feels he has no power over his mortality and the events in his life. Autumn “comes upon” Yeats, he does not actively seek it. While the “nine and fifty swans” paddle “lover by lover”, Yeats repetition of ‘I’ and ‘my’ suggests that he is lamenting over his own perceived loneliness and loss of virility.

The stable and serene scene of the beautiful birds hovering over the water is abruptly destroyed as the swans “suddenly mount” before Yeats is ready, Signifying the futility of Yeats’ attempted resistance in the face of change.

The concluding phrase of the poem “when I awake some day” suggests that the poet may be imagining the swans in the future but may also be imagining them in his own afterlife. The phrase also connotes an awakening from stability and fullness into time and change.

He doesn’t know which men’s eye’s they will delight someday when he wakes up “to find they have flown away”. Since so much has changed already in the speaker’s life, the swans are a symbol of stability for they are always there and seem never to
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

change. And yet, the speaker has a fear that one day they will take off, never to return to the lake at Coole. At that point, everything will change for him and Autumn will turn into Yeats’ eternal winter.

Whilst the poems “Easter 1916” and “The Wild Swans at Coole” differ in form and metre, they both utilize imagery to represent acceptance and resistance in the face of change and stability. In “Easter 1916”, the rebels are canonized as ‘stones’ due to their firm and inflexible ideology, and juxtaposed against the ‘living stream’ of Ireland. The leaders of the Easter Uprising represent stability in the face of change. In “The Wild Swans at Coole”, the swans represent stability due to their constant unwearied energies and exuberance as opposed to Yeats’ own mortality and ageing.

Through the use of imagery, Yeats represents the antithetical response to change as a process that affects people at both an individual and social level.
How does W.B. Yeats use imagery in the exploration of change and stability in his poetry?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

