

A Morning in a City

“If you wake up at a different time, in a different place, could you wake up as a different person?” – Narrator, *Fight Club*



The morning is a blur. Dark figures, more like shadows than full-fledged people, crowd the reddened residential street. A man stands in the middle of the street while a woman with a handbag rushes past him. Alone and busy in the beginnings of daily routines, none have the time to speak with the others. Shrouded in anonymity, these people, the walls and doors of the buildings, the street itself, are indistinguishable. The sun peeks through in the background, yet to break through to the city below.

I first became aware of Jack B. Yeats on a weekend trip to Dublin in October of 2009 while studying abroad in London. I wandered into the Yeats section of Ireland’s National Gallery and was instantly entranced by the painter’s style. Of course, I had already become acquainted with his brother William years earlier in high school, but there was no indication that there might be a more talented artist in the family.

1882: Sligo

He walked about the country roads, studying the country people, attending fairs, sports, circuses and races... he spent his free hours organizing donkey races for the sons of the pilots and sailors and acting as their well-loved leader... "His personality is as fresh as the dew of the morning, yet in that very freshness is a certain vigour which is like the cold morning breeze that clears away sleep and dull dreams. He has the habits of a man who knows his own mind."

- *Jack B. Yeats: A biography* by Hilary Pyle, pg. 15, 21

May 11, 2009: Springfield, MA

10:13 AM by the clock on my cell phone. The dog down the street has begun his shrieking routine. I should be doing something. I already know what awaits me downstairs – a note from my mother telling me things I need to do today. Ten minutes feels like a week. I drift down the stairs still in pajamas and drop again in front of the television for a movie; this will be the high point of my day. For two hours or more, I forget that I'm still here. The couch is new. Nothing changes here but the furniture. I try to make myself comfortable

Accompanied by the gallery attendant, I learned of Jack's life – his progression from a magazine illustrator to the first Irish painter to sell a painting for £1 million. Stifled by school lessons and the restraints of what would sell at a newsstand, yearning for the freedom of paintbrush and palate, it was the evolution of his artistic sensibility that captured my interest, matched my own passions.

1887: London

In the autumn... [he] entered upon the education that his father felt was essential to any young man, at the school that George Moore insisted any young man should be careful to avoid... the final object was described as the training of people of taste. Rigid detailed training and minute examination were conducive to rendering a natural talent sterile. [He] learnt little.

- *Jack B. Yeats: A biography* by Hilary Pyle, pg. 25-26

January 26, 2009: Syracuse, NY

Last night's high has worn off, and I'm up early even though I don't have class until 12:45. Need a cup of tea to keep away the snow, a cold cage trapping me indoors. Didn't leave my apartment this weekend. Give myself an hour or two to keep writing this script, not for a grade, just for myself. What class would want it? I have more ideas in my sleep, more than I can put to paper before they're squashed by the dreariness of PowerPoint lectures. I can't think in constraints. 4-6 pages, 1000 words, ten minutes max. I'll learn the basics; I know I have to. But I just want to write, I just want to make movies, wake up behind a camera, script in hand, actors waiting for me to call. Action! Time for another exam.

Jack's life was split among four cities. He was born in London in 1871, his family in a small home just north of Regent's Park, but he grew up in Sligo, Ireland, a place that would forever influence his work. Though he spent years at art school in London, he was eager to make a home elsewhere. He did so in Devon soon after marrying wife Cottie. In the early 20th century, he

made the final move Dublin, wherein he could live and work with all the inspiration he needed, drawing the individual in themes of loneliness and plight.

1897: Devonshire

...he retreated from London for good... left the comfortable dwelling by the winding river in Surrey and the bustling life of the metropolis, and chose an existence which he could make poetic and strange. He settled with [his wife] in Devonshire... lived with the red earth, the cliff and the sea... The first exhibition was received well... Henceforward the artist's shows were based on the theme 'Life in the West of Ireland', and included his English sketches in a minor role. He exhibited at eighteen-monthly intervals, mainly in London and Dublin... By 1910 he had seventeen exhibitions to his credit.

- *Jack B. Yeats: A biography* by Hilary Pyle, pg. 41, 47

July 16, 2009: Los Angeles

The alarm goes off on my cell phone, "Surfin' Bird" by the Trashmen starting to blare from the tiny mechanism. I reach over and silence it; my sister is still sleeping on the air mattress across the room. I'm already up and writing, couldn't sleep as I worked over the next few scenes in my head. Need to shower and get to the office, but I can't pull myself away from the work. I'm in the zone. A welcome breeze flows into the room, the shutters clang against the metal screen. I breathe in the sun-drenched trees and pavement of my Culver City block, no allergies here. Looking forward to hearing from the writer whose script I covered. Mr. Paulson liked my suggestions, said he could find me a job on set if it went into production. OK, 8:30, gotta get ready.

Each place that Jack lived in imprinted upon him a different set of meanings and values. The circuses of Sligo gave him a youth founded in the peculiar, the unusual. London provided him with the dull but necessary education for a hopeful artist. Devon lent him the stability of wife and home, where he could begin to make his hobby a lucrative profession. Dublin broadened his mind and daily renewed his passion for his art. I wonder how he found himself in these places. Did he awake with the same affability, the same desire and hunger for future success, or did he allow the place to change his personality, to alter his behavior and play a different tune in whatever key he could find?

1920: Dublin

At this time, and from now the sketches in his few notebooks are interspersed with subjective scribbled concepts either in 'dream,' or 'half-memory,' grim faces... "I believe that the painter always begins by expressing himself with line – that is, by the most obvious means; then he becomes aware that line, once so necessary, is in fact hemming him in, and as soon as he feels strong enough, he breaks out of its confines." The artist had become confident. He had liberated himself as he relaxed into a thoroughly equable medium.

- *Jack B. Yeats: A biography* by Hilary Pyle, pg. 118-119, 127

November 16, 2009: London

The alarm goes off again at 7:20. I kick the thin sheet and blanket off my legs. The pillow is covered in hair; I'm balding. It's already raining. The water splats on the clay landing outside the window; so much for coziness. I grab my towel and make my way down the hall to the bathroom, faltering in the dark. I close the door behind me and let the shower run until the water's hot. Orange light – green light, beep – orange light. The lift isn't there yet. Take the stairs. The train arrives. Hop on. Find a spot. Open a book. Finally awake, the morning is gone.

I am Jack's same mind, descended through decades to reach me through a single painting on a visit to Dublin that almost never happened. "A Morning in a City" feels different to everyone because everyone feels differently. When daylight finds me in Springfield, or Syracuse, or London, or LA, it's never the same warmth. The light that breaks through the window and filters through the shades brings with it the personal history of the city, the experiences that I've had in it, and the future I seek.

1937: Dublin

Jack awoke with a start, as he usually did, uncertain of when his eyes actually opened and took in the world around him. He felt the warmth of Cottie still asleep next to him, heard the shouts of early-rising shipmen shouting their daily goodbyes to wives and sons, and slid his legs out from under the sheets and onto the floor.

As if driven by some instinctual emotion, pondering the inseparability of dream and memory, Jack held his brush to the canvas and painted. First with hard lines – the edges of the sidewalk and the street and the tops of the buildings pulling towards the center – then with free and loose brushstrokes as he filled in the deep reds, purples, blues, browns, and touches of yellow here and there, having captured the light of the sun.

He painted not from observation of life as it happened, but from half-memory, glimpses of past experience added with the brief moments of ambiguity between waking and consciousness, when one can sense a world about, one that is still dark and vague, its features unclear and common and only partially formed.

The city is nowhere and everywhere, its inhabitants faceless and nameless, its possibilities as endless as the street leading to the horizon. Daylight fills in the cracks, working its hands around the mind, shaping the city into a thing called "home," if only temporarily. The city belongs to us. We belong to the city.