Introduction:

William Butler Yeats is the greatest poet and the link between the nineteenth and the twentieth century in the field of English literature. He is a versatile personality: a lyric poet, a mystic, a mythologist, and a romantic. He is a poet with a political ideology (to a very limited extent); he is a poet with a prophetic vision and occult philosophy; and he is also a poet with experience in experiments in dramaturgy. He was the national poet of the Republic of Ireland. Unlike his contemporaries Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, Yeats was born in Dublin. He was born on 13th June, 1865, at George’s Ville, Sandy mount Avenue, Dublin in South Ireland. But for the longer part of his life he lived in England, and therefore he is both an Irish poet and an English poet.

Here, one is at once reminded of T. S. Eliot who is both an American poet and an English poet. Both Yeats and Eliot were interested in and influenced by Indian Philosophy as well as Hinduism. At one point, Eliot even decided to be converted to Buddhism. Many of his poems show his inclination towards the philosophy to the Bhagavad-Gita and his attempts at justifying the ways of Lord Krishna. Likewise, Yeats was attracted to the occult sciences of India by Mohini Chatterjee and the Indian monk Purohit Swami. However, while Eliot moved from philosophy to poetry, Yeats was sliding away from poetry towards philosophy. Moreover, Eliot started his life with pessimism but achieved a sort of salvation; whereas Yeats began as an optimist but gradually became disillusioned and pessimistic.
Yeats and Hinduism:

Yeats was around 66 in 1931 when his spiritual quest, as a result of his discussion with Mohini Chatterjee some years back, returned to him with extra force. Mohini Chatterjee was a Bengali Brahmin learned in spiritual wisdom, whom Yeats met in England, probably in 1928 or 1929. Chatterjee stimulated him both spiritually and aesthetically and initiated him into mysticism. Later on Yeats’s spiritual quest was intensified by his meeting with the Indian monk Purohit Swami and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Yeats was so much impressed by Mohini Chatterjee that he even recorded his impression of Chatterjee in his poem ‘Mohini Chatterjee’:

That he might set at rest

A boy’s turbulent days

Mohini Chatterjee

Spoke these, or words like these.

The poem was written between 23 January and 9 February, 1929 and it first appeared in ‘A Packet for Ezra Pound’ (1929). Within two years, Yeats met the Indian monk Purohit Swami. The Swami, born in 1882, was a Marathi Brahmin. He had been explaining the spiritual philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita at different places in England. Yeats knew about this from Struge Moore, the poet-laureate, and requested him to arrange for a meeting with the Swami. This meeting took place on 6 June, 1931. Yeats was so much impressed by the spiritual teachings of the Swami that he immediately became interested in the Upanishads and even started translating some of the Upanishads jointly with the
Swami, in 1935. Yeats was interested and acquainted with the Upanishads even before that. His predilection for the spiritual philosophy of the Upanishads can be seen in his poem ‘A Prayer for my Son’ where he says that his son is but an incarnation of God. Yeats’s poems in ‘Supernatural Songs’ and his poem ‘Meru’ and also his play ‘The Herne’ Egg’ are heavily influenced by the spiritual teachings of the Swami. In fact, Yeats himself wrote about The Herne’ Egg that it is suffused with Hindu Philosophy:

“Shri Purohit Swami is with me, and the play is his philosophy in a fable, or mine confirmed by him.”

Yeats found in the presence of the Swami a piece that he pined for but did never find anywhere else. He wrote:

“The very fact that I am going with a man whose mind I touch on only one point, means peace.”

All the same, Yeats was never spiritually converted to Hindu Philosophy, as T. S. Eliot was once on the verge of being converted to Buddhism, for Yeats had his own particular philosophy. And yet in the niche of his heart, there was some love for Indian philosophy and spiritualism which is also evident from some poems such as ‘Anashuya and Vijoya’, ‘The Indian Upon God’, ‘The Indian to His Love’, ‘Mohini Chatterjee’, etc. Yeats also wrote an Introduction to Shri Purohit Swami’s The Holy Mountain (1934) and wrote to Olivia Shakespeare about this book that it was

“One of those rare books that is fundamental.”
Yeats’s interest in the mythology is evident from his poem ‘Meru’ which he wrote about mount Kailas in Tibet. He was very much drawn to the difficult mysteries of Yoga. Actually, Yeats had natural fascination for everything mysterious and difficult.

**New Religion:**

Yeats was certainly a religious person without any interest in religious rituals. Of course, unlike Rabindranath Tagore, Wordsworth and such others, his brand of religion was that of a poet.

“‘I am very religious’, says Yeats in his Autobiographies, ‘... I had made a new religion, of a set of stories, and of personages, and of emotions inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually......I had even created a dogma: Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.

Thus, William Butler Yeats had a multifaceted personality- an odd mixture of generality and specialty and even peculiarity. Yeats was always full of life and always wanted life in its fullness, as it may be seen in his poem ‘A dialogue of Self and Soul’.
"Yeats rejected Nirvana. In the ‘Dialogue’ he chooses rebirth, rather deliverance from birth. Despite all the suffering and ignominy and frustration which human life entails, still he chooses to be born again, to go on with the unending cycle."