Visions of Ireland in W. B. Yeats's Early Works

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ABSTRACT

W.B. Yeats was an Irish poet and dramatist, born in Dublin in 1865. This thesis will explore how Yeats´s vision of Ireland changed over time. While his work were greatly influenced by Celticism, his early poetry was more interested in myths and folklore, while his later works were more explicitly political. The first chapter of this thesis deals with Ýeats´s early works in which he creates a utopian Ireland, an imaginary and magical world that was his sanctuary. The second chapter shows Yeats´s transition from a romantic to a modernist poet. The chosen poems show Yeats´s arch of political activity and how, in relation to some earlier works, his later ones show more ambiguity and vagueness.

KEYWORDS: W.B. Yeats, Ireland, Celticism, spirituality, politics, mythology, folklore

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INTRODUCTION

William Butler Yeats was a famous Noble Prize winning poet and dramatist. He was born on June 13, 1865 in Dublin, but passed his early childhood in Sligo. (Ricorso) In 1867, Yeats moved with his family to London because his father wanted to be a painter (Ricorso). After moving to London, Yeats often expressed how much he missed the peacefulness of Sligo.

> I and my sister had spoken together of our longing for Sligo and our hatred of London. (...) I longed for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand. (...) it was our mother (...) who kept alive that love. She would spend hours listening to stories or telling stories of the pilots and fishing-people of Rosses Point, or of her own Sligo girlhood, and it was always assumed between her and us that Sligo was more beautiful than other places. (Yeats, 2010, p.58)

This feeling is explicit in his poems. Yeats incorporates Sligo and its hazy and mystical atmosphere very often in his earlier work. His interest in folklore and myths probably also stems from his mother´s stories. As can be heard in this excerpt from his *Autobiographies*, London stood for everything he despised; the heaviness, the concrete, the lack of spirituality. London, and Dublin, where Yeats lived in 1881 (Ricorso), were modern cities, and formed a negative contrast with Yeats´s fondness for nature, magic and serenity. In Yeats´s mind, Sligo, with its picturesque and hazy landscapes, was the perfect setting for poems based on myths and folklore.

Yeats was heavily influenced by Celtic culture. He used Celticism to create a world of his own that is based on supposed Celtic values such as nobility, spirituality, and bravery. So interested was he in promoting Celtic culture that he, along with Lady Gregory, founded a Celtic Theatre in 1897. (Ricorso)

One person that fuelled Yeats´s passion for mysticism and the occult, but also for nationalism, was Maud Gonne, whom he met in 1889. (Ricorso) Their relationship was turbulent and it had a great impact on Yeats, which can be clearly seen in his works, since he so often incorporated her in his poems. In 1902 (Ricorso), the heavily nationalistic play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, with Maud Gonne in the main role, was performed for the first time. Although Yeats was interested in politics before he met Gonne, she was the one who encouraged his nationalism, thus *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was born.

The arch of Yeats´s political activity will be thoroughly discussed in this thesis, but it is important to note that his extreme nationalism faded over time and he remained politically active. In 1922 (Ricorso), he was appointed to the Irish Senate and, ten years later, in 1933 (Ricorso), Yeats turned to fascism by becoming involved with the Blueshirts.

Yeats was a versatile person and that is visible in his poetry. His work was acknowledged by critics and he was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature in 1923 (Ricorso). Yeats died on January 24, 1939 (Ricorso) but has left an incredible and important legacy for generations to come.

This thesis will, in the first chapter, explore the creation of an ideal Ireland that is, at the same time, both real and fictional. The re-discovery of Celticism in the 19th century helped Yeats in his creation of a noble and spiritual Ireland. In his earlier works, Celtic folklore and myths are omnipresent. I will explore how and why Yeats used myths, Celticism and Irish landscapes to create a utopian world governed by spirituality.

The second chapter of this thesis explores how Yeats intertwined politics and the same Celtic values that he used in his earlier works. The post-World War I Yeats abandons the romanticized Irish landscapes and shifts into a more modernist version of himself. This thesis

will explore the main events that inspired some of Yeats´s most famous poems and how his attitude towards violence changed over time.

1. CREATION OF A UTOPIAN IRELAND

The word Celticism refers both to an ethnic and linguistic aspect. (Leerssen, cited in Brown, 1996). As Leerssen notices, linguistically it refers to a variety of languages spoken in parts of Northwest France and the British Isles. Ethnically, Leerssen continues, the Celtic presence can be traced from the Bronze Age through the tribes of the Gauls, Britons, Belage, Helvetii, Celtiberi and others.

However, what concerns us here is the interest this culture received from the late 18th century (Castle 2001). As Arnold (1898) notes, this fascination with Celtic culture found expression throughout Europe, and influenced many authors including Goethe and Byron. Speaking of the famous faked Celtic translation, *Ossian*, Arnold describes circulation of this version of Celtic culture:

> A famous book, Macpherson´s *Ossian*, carried in the last century this vein like a flood of lava through Europe. (…) But there will still be left in the book a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it, and which has the proud distinction of having brought this soul of the Celtic genius into contact with the genius of the nations of modern Europe. (Arnold, 1898, p. 115-116)

For Arnold (1898) Celticism was primarily of use to the European metropolitan centres by providing them with themes and ideas that were being lost in the Industrial Revolution.

> The Celts, with their vehement reaction against the despotism of fact, with their sensuous nature, their manifold striving, their adverse destiny, their immense calamities, the Celts are the prime authors of this vein of piercing regret and passion – of this Titanism in poetry. (Arnold, 1898, p. 152-153)

The Celt, in this Arnoldian construction, functions primarily to fulfil the spiritual needs of the big metropolitan centres of Europe. It is important to acknowledge this premise to understand

how Yeats and the Celtic Revival, by incorporating the elements of Celticism, wanted to do the opposite thing. They used it to establish their own, independent, Irish identity.

As Castle (2001) notes, the Celtic Revival was a very complex movement that expressed a variety of approaches to the notion of Irish culture. Citing O´Driscoll, he outlines how an imperialist view of Celticism contributed to the goals of the Celtic Revival movement:

> The imposition of an imperialist idea was rejected by the writers of the Celtic Revival (…) that was created as a counter-movement to the materialism of the post-Darwinian age and that the Revivalists did not believe that literature was criticism of life, but that it was a revelation of an invisible world.(Castle, 2001, p.5)

Yeats dedicated one of his essays to the Celtic culture and mentality, emphasizing their views on nature and immortality. For him, the Celts lived in a different, more spiritual world "where anything might flow and change, and become any other thing" (Yeats 1903b, p. 279). It all stems from the different perception of temporality and nature. Yeats emphasised the flow of the Celts, and how this was in conflict with the heavy and concrete modernist world he lived in. In these lines we can recognize Yeats´s anti-modernist spirit that was omnipresent in his early works, such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". There we can see the influence of Romanticism and how the Romantic aspect of nature is closely connected to Celticism.

In his early works, Yeats was clearly more of a romantic poet than a modernist one. He starts the poem by saying "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree" (Yeats, W. B., & Jeffares, A. N., 1947, p.34). He continues the poem by describing how he will build a cabin out of clay and wattles and how there will be a hive for the bees. It brings out the notion, not just of a utopian world, but a desire for simplicity and solitude that derives from the connection with nature. This corresponds very well with Renan´s vision of the Celtic character:

> It has all the failings, and the good qualities, of the solitary man; at once proud and timid, strong in feeling and feeble in action. (…) It asks only one thing, that it should be left to itself. (Renan, Chapter one)

The Celts are described as solitary but spiritual people who cherish simplicity. That is what Yeats desires from his utopian world – to escape the chaotic and dull "pavements grey" to a serene and colourful world of nature. His desire to leave creates a world which is both fictional and real at the same time. Lough Gill, the lake on which he places Innisfree is a real place that he uses as a setting for this invented, magical world. This poem also shows Yeats´s nostalgia for the places he used to visit as a child. In this poem, Yeats combined the nature of the Celtic character with the influence of Romanticism to oppose the heaviness and dullness of the modern world with the song of the crickets, the glimmer, the purple glow and the overall magic and serenity of the romanticised, magical and, above all, fictional world.

Yeats (1903b) notices the Celt´s different approach in worshipping nature by saying that "they seemed the gods or the godlike beasts, and felt their souls overtopping the moon" (Yeats, 1903b, p.279). The Celts were more in touch with their spirituality and were more connected to the nature. As Yeats puts it

> They had imaginative passions because they did not live within our own strait limits, and were nearer to ancient chaos, every man´s desire, and had immortal models about them. (Yeats, 1903b, p. 279-280)

Although they are depicted as people who are closer to spiritual clarity, both Yeats (1903b) and Renan (Chapter one) emphasise the omnipresence of lament in the Celtic literature. Yeats provides a distinction in conception of the world between the Celts and the "modern peoples" by describing how

> melancholy which made all ancient peoples delight in tales that end in death and parting, as modern peoples delight in tales that end in marriage bells; and made all ancient peoples, who like the old Irish had a nature more lyrical than dramatic, delight in wild and beautiful lamentations. (Yeats, 1903b, p. 285)

A poem that illustrates such lamentations is "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman". The Meditation of the Old Fisherman", written in 1886, is a poem that "is founded upon some things a fisherman said to me when out fishing in Sligo Bay" (Yeats, *Poems*, 1895, cited in Jeffares, 1968, p. 15). It is a poem that talks about time and temporality and Yeats uses the sea as the main motif of the poem. In the first stanza of the poem, we learn that the poet is longing for his past - "The Junes that were warmer than these are, the waves were more gay". He uses the sea to spiritually travel back in time to a period of his life which was more innocent and happier for him. He repeats the line "When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart" to emphasize how time has changed him and how he does not feel the innocence that he felt as a young man. It can be connected to the poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" in which he receives a warning to take love and life easy, but he does not follow the advice.

The poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" appeared first in *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* where Yeats explained that it was his attempt to reconstruct an old song he had heard a peasant woman singing (Jeffares, 1968). The "snow-white feet" and the "snow-white hand" suggest the innocence that is often attributed to young people and young love. This poem is not only about love, but about temporality and growing up. Yeats puts in contrast the slow, spiritual world of nature that links it to Celtic culture with the haste and materialism of the modern world. There are several elements from nature that are connected to temporality. In the first stanza, the lover tells the man to "take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree". In the last stanza, she asks him to "take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs". Again, the grass growing on the weirs has the same effect as the growing leaves as it signifies the

transition of the time. The river is also mentioned in the poem which can, along with the grass and the leaves, signify the concept of the flow and temporality. As Yeats (1903b) noticed in his essay, the Celts see everything flowing and changing. The river symbolizes the flow of time and the change that it brings. The lover gave the man advice on how to live his life and wanted that advice to be the only constant in the continuously changing world. Yeats again uses the imagery of nature as a metaphor to show how connected it is to the notion of time. This probably stems from the Celtic admiration of nature which Yeats, by quoting Renan´s work *The Poetry of the Celtic Races*, discussed in his essay by saying

> The Celtic race had a realistic naturalism, a love of nature for herself, a vivid feeling for her magic, commingled with the melancholy a man knows when he is face to face with her, (…) communing with him about his origin and destiny. (Yeats, 1903b, p.270)

In the end of the poem, the reader gets the sense that the man understood what he has been doing wrong, but now, as he is older, he cannot turn back time and change the past. If he could, he would gain back the spirituality and calmness he lost and would listen to her advice, not disregard it and let his passion and stubbornness get in the way.

"The Rose of the World" is a poem that, although it seems as if it talks only about love, carries a deeper meaning. The poem was written for Maud Gonne (Jeffares, 1968), but it is also a reflection on temporality and change. The first line of the poem, "who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream", reveals that the poet is thinking about the swift course of time. He wants to keep that beauty eternal and he tries to do that by comparing Maud to Helen of Troy or Deirdre, the daughter of King Conchobar´s storyteller, who was prophesized to bring great suffering upon Ulster (Jeffares, 1968). He compares Gonne to two women who caused great chaos in the world. This fact is important to notice, but will be thoroughly discussed

later in this thesis. Yeats wanted to make her beauty eternal, resistant to the passing of time. She and her beauty existed before the archangels, it existed since the time God started creating the world who is again subdued to her, because the world is just a "grassy road before her wandering feet". By writing this poem, Yeats eternalised her beauty by making it resistant to the continuous flow of the time.

Since Yeats was very interested in symbols and what they represent, it is important to mention that the rose can also symbolize Ireland, as it is the Irish national flower (Billigheimer, 2002). As Billigheimer (2002) notes, Yeats identified both Gonne and Ireland with the same flower, hinting that "tragic history [is] engendered by surpassing beauty" (p.278). The connection between Helen and Gonne will be clarified in detail later in this thesis, but, for this poem, it is important to note that Yeats believed Gonne had the same destructive and dangerous beauty as Helen. If Gonne is Helen, then Ireland is Troy destructed because of one´s woman beauty.

"The Fiddler of Dooney" first appeared in *The Bookman* in 1892 (Jeffares, 1968). In this poem, Yeats writes about death and the importance that tradition has before, but also after, death. He mentions many places in Ireland and, unlike in many other poems, he does not attribute them any magical or mystical characteristics, but names them purely here for the purposes of glorifying tradition itself. The fiddler compares the folk that dance to his song to a wave of sea. Again, we see the motif of water used here to describe the movement, the commotion and harmony he caused in the people. He repeats that line at the end of the poem, suggesting that even though time passes and death may come, people will still enjoy the song and it will still cause great emotions, as strong as the waves of the sea. The fiddler also describes what happens when he dies, when he meets St. Peter. Even though his brother and cousin were priests, reading from "the books of prayers" and in direct service to God, the fiddler, who reads from "the book of songs bought at the Sligo fair", and represents tradition,

will be the first one to be called through the gate. The reason why the fiddler will be the first one to enter Heaven, stems from the affection the Celts had towards music and poetry. Arnold (1898) also emphasizes how much the Celts loved both music and poetry saying that they have shown "splendid genius" (Arnold, 1898, p. 79) in creating it. Tradition and art, especially music and poetry, were an integral part of the Celtic values. Yeats, as it will be discussed in the analysis of the poem "September 1913", also believed that art is essential because it enriches our lives and strengthens our connection to the spiritual realm. That is why the fiddler, as the embodiment of the art, will be the one who will pass first through the gates of St. Peter.

In this poem, Yeats uses the motif of death from the Celtic literature to emphasise how tradition and ancient customs will always be of a great importance. Yeats´s early poetry is often intertwined with the mystical and magical, which might indicate show the connection with Celticism. He combines the spiritual with the real world by using existing places in Ireland as the setting for the magical events in his poems. They are the link between the real and the magical world because they are a part of nature and, as it is noticeable in many of Yeats´s poems, nature serves as a portal between the two realms. In the same way that the fiddler brings the tradition to the people through song and joy, Yeats brings the myths and the magic to the people through his poetry. Both in "Down by the Salley Gardens" and in "The Fiddler of Dooney", Yeats underlines the necessity for spiritual guidance and the importance that culture and tradition brings to an individual. Tradition can cause greater shift in a person than religion and that is why the fiddler will be called before the priests to Heaven.

> "Truth," he [Yeats] would persistently announce, "is the dramatically appropriate utterance of the highest men"; and the poets´ "mythologies, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth". (Allt, 1952, p.626)

The “truth”, according to Yeats, was to be found in the tradition and customs of the people. The sense of community and happiness it brought to them was more important to Yeats than religion; that is why the people are happy when the fiddler plays and why they will be happy once they find him in Heaven.

The importance that spirituality and the transcendental are best described in Yeats´s poem “The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland”. In the line “His mind ran all on money cares and fears”, Yeats describes a man who is so focused on his earthly possessions that he cannot hear the creatures speaking to him. In the first stanza a man encounters fish that talked about Druids.

> But when a man poured fish into a pile,
>
> It seemed they raised their little silver heads,
>
> And sang how day a Druid twilight sheds
>
> Upon a dim, green, well-beloved isle,
>
> Where people love beside star-laden seas;

The fish try to shift the man´s consciousness from his earthly possessions to a more spiritual world. They talk about the Druids who were an integral part of Celtic culture and who are connected to the occult and mysticism. The fish and other creatures that speak to the man are seen as messengers of the “other world” that are trying to reconnect the man with his spirituality. They would appear when he was worried about something – “His heart hung all upon a silken dress”, “His mind ran all on money and cars and fears”, “He mused upon his mockers” and tried to communicate with him, offering him a glimpse of another world. Being too preoccupied with himself and his earthly troubles, the man never fully embraced his spirituality. This is confirmed in the last line of the poem, “The man has found no comfort in

the grave", saying that if we ignore the spiritual aspect we may never find comfort and never fully experience life.

By using the beliefs from the Celtic tradition that are connected to the transcendental and spiritual, Yeats wanted to emphasise how one´s consciousness can be shifted. He wanted to show that there is another possible way to look at the world around us, but we are the ones who need to embrace it. In the same way as in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", Yeats shows us how peace and serenity are linked to nature. By appreciating and respecting it, we are able to acquire that spiritual shift that the material world cannot provide. Yeats stays in touch with his spirituality by creating utopian spaces that are always set in Ireland. It is not the realistic Ireland, but his own sanctuary and he wants people to recognize it. His Ireland is transcendental and magical, connected to the spiritual realm. He hoped that he could, as the fiddler in "The Fiddler of Dooney", convey that message to the people and affect their lives. He wrote poems that glorified Irish history, landscapes and he especially put a focus on Irish myths about fairies and kings.

The poem "The Stolen Child" is based on the Irish myths regarding fairies and it is set in real places in Ireland. Yeats himself said that he "should never go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own and I think that I shall hold to that conviction to the end." (Yeats, cited in Jeffares, 1968, p. 13).

One of the places mentioned in the poem is Rosses. That is a place where fairies are said to be found and, if someone falls asleep there, it is said that the fairies might take their soul (Jeffares, 1968). In Irish mythology, fairies are very small and live in societies. (Keightley, 1850) Even though the fairies steal children

> They are in general kind to those for whom they have contracted a liking and often render them essential service in time of need. […] The popular belief in Ireland also

> is, that the Fairies are a portion of the fallen angels, who, being less guilty than the rest, were not driven to hell, but were suffered to dwell on earth. (Keightley, 1850, p.364).

The fairies are not all good nor bad, so it is unclear whether the child is being abducted by the fairies or they want to help him and make him leave the world that is "more full of weeping than you can understand". Another interpretation may be that the child died and that it was taken by the fairies to the "other world", i.e. his death. The child does not simply die, but is transported into another world where his soul lives on. The necessity for an afterlife where our spirit continues to exist may be connected to Celticism as Renan explains it:

> This race desires the infinite, it thirsts for it, and pursues it at all costs, beyond the tomb, beyond hell itself. (…) The invincible need for illusion. (Renan, Chapter one)

The desire for the infinite surpasses life and death. Both death and the imaginary afterlife are present in the Celtic literature and, with that being said, we can see the connection between Celticism and Yeats more clearly. The child did not just die, it travelled to another world; it expresses the need for, as Renan stated, an illusion.

Yeats again uses the metaphor of water in the invitation to the child to "come away" to them. The water serves as a portal to a different world, but, as we are unsure whether or not the fairies have good intentions or bad, it is hard to say if the water is something that represents danger for the child or not; however, the "drowsy waters", "wave of moonlight" and pools that can "bathe a star" do not give a threatening impression.

Another possible interpretation is that it is easier for children to get in contact with fairies and the "other world" because they are innocent and more spiritual than adults. If we remember the poem "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland", we notice that, even though nature tried to communicate with the man, he could not hear it and acknowledge it. In this poem, the child is

in direct contact with the fairies and he is leaving the world and everything he knows behind, both the bad and the good things. The magic of the nature called and the child followed. This may mean that children are more spiritual than adults because of their purity and innocence. It is easier for them to get in touch with the magical world because it is easier for them to believe in it. As the person ages, he/she loses the simplicity and purity he/she had as a child. Adults ignore and are unable to see the magic that children believe in, they lose touch with spirituality. This does not mean that one should believe in magic to be spiritual, it means that we should not completely lose the gullibility and fascination with the simple things we relished in as children.

A supernatural invitation to leave this world and come to another is also present in the poem "The Hosting of the Sidhe" written in 1893 (Jeffares, 1968). In the beginning, this mentions places in Ireland that exist and that are connected to the Irish mythology by being sites where some mystical creatures reside. When Yeats talks about the deities in this poem, he presents them in two ways – both as threatening and inviting. Caolite, the swiftest runner of all (Jeffares, 1968), in particular seems threatening "tossing his burning hair". The extremely beautiful Niamh, who sent Oisin away for three hundred years (Jeffares, 1968), is calling to "come away" and "empty [one's] heart of its mortal dream". Niamh, like the fairies in "The Stolen Child", calls on people to leave the mortal world and join the deities in another dimension. While she is calling them, it seems as she is trying to tell them how the other world is better by saying:

> The winds awaken. The leaves whirl round,
>
> Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
>
> Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are a-gleam,
>
> Our arms are waving, our lips are apart;

It seems that the ones who belong to the other world are freer, with their unbound hair and waving arms. As the procession is going "the winds awaken, the leaves whirl round" meaning that the deities are connected to nature and that they are linked in an inexplicable way. Yeats also explained the connection:

> Sidhe is also Gaelic for wind, and certainly the Sidhe have much to do with the wind. They journey in whirling winds. […] When the country people see the leaves whirling on the road they bless themselves, because they believe the Sidhe to be passing by. ("National Observer", 7 Oct. 1893, cited in Jeffares, 1968, p. 48-49)

It is interesting how nature responds to the deities passing by. It awakens and it mimics their freedom. Their spiritual energy causes a positive commotion; it sets nature free and it brings out its energy. The connection between nature and the deities is strong and it creates an awe-inspiring energy that leaves the spectator amazed, making it almost impossible to suppress the urge to join them and the spiritual aura they emit.

"The Madness of King Goll" is a poem in which there are no creatures or deities that call us to join them in the other world, but it is a poem that emphasizes the need for spirituality. While the king was ruling "the fields grew fatter day by day" and he "drove the tumult and war away". King Goll drove the "northern cold", i.e, the Fomoroh away. Yeats explained who they were:

> The gods of night and death and cold. The Fomoroh were misshapen and had now the heads of goats and bulls, and now but one leg, and one arm that came out of the middle of their breasts. (…) The giants and the leprechauns are expressly mentioned as of the Fomoroh. (Yeats, *Poems*, 1895, cited in Jeffares, 1968, p.12)

His rule was peaceful and prosperous and he was loved and respected because he was a good ruler. Nothing was wrong until a herdsman came and asked for the king´s help. The king had

to use force to bring justice, but as he was shouting and slaying the men around him "a whirling and a wandering fire" grew inside of him. When he realized the violence that was happening around him he broke his weapon and ran away. The violence was too much for him to handle and he needed to discover another way of dealing with the world around him, so he sought shelter in the woods. As he ran off to the woods, leaving his kingdom and everything else behind, he got acquainted with the animals who were not afraid of him anymore. When he left all his earthly possessions he instantly created a bond with nature. He found an old tympan and sang songs about mythological characters. The king, who was celebrated and admired, left all behind because he needed a connection with the spiritual realm. Even though he had everything imaginably possible while he was a king, at least in a material sense, it was not enough for him to keep his sanity. The rejection of materialism for the purpose of pursuing the spiritual is strongly connected to Celticism.

> "The Celtic race […] has worn itself out in taking dreams for realities, and in pursuing its splendid visions. The essential element in the Celt's poetic life is the adventure - that is to say, the pursuit of the unknown, an endless quest after an object ever flying from desire. […] This race desires the infinite, it thirsts for it, and pursues it at all costs, beyond the tomb, beyond hell itself." (Renan, Chapter one)

Material possessions are no substitute for one´s need for spiritual growth. As Renan noted, the Celts desire the "infinite" and the "unknown". As we have seen in "The Stolen Child", Yeats incorporated that this idea in other poems. Here, in "The Madness of King Goll", the title is obviously somewhat misleading, as the king's madness is anything but mad. The world in which he lived before could not offer him enough. To keep his sanity he had to escape somewhere he could spiritually renew himself.

Violence was the breaking point at which the king realised things had to change. This poem shows how violence can have an extremely negative impact on someone. Spirituality and peace are the key to prosperity and serenity. “The Madness of King Goll” offers us a glimpse into Yeats´s attitude towards violence which will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

2. INTERTWINING POLITICS AND CELTICISM

In his later works, Yeats began to be more directly political. O´Brian notices that Yeats was always interested in politics, but emphasizes that Yeats became more actively involved in it when he "entered politics under the influence of John O´Leary, the Fenian convict and exile, who returned to Ireland in 1884" (O´Brian, Jeffares, A. N., & Cross, K. G. W., 1967, p. 212). His drive towards politics was not only fuelled by his personal opinion, but also by Maud Gonne. She visited Yeats and his father for the first time on 30 January 1889 in Blenheim Road in Bedford Park. (Gonne, M. 1994) Yeats and Gonne shared a connection from the very beginning. She was his friend, inspiration and supported him in promoting Irish culture. Maud Gonne was also the one who introduced him to a more "active" way of pursuing the dream of Irish independence.

> Maud Gonne brought into Willie Yeats´s life "an overpowering tumult". He realised they were seeking different ends: she thought only the means could justify the end. She spoke to him of her desire for power; he spoke to her of his spiritual philosophy. (Jeffares and MacBride-White, 1994, p.18).

The two of them had different views on how Irish independence should be achieved but, over time, Yeats adopted, to some extent, her revolutionary ideals. He soon fell in love with her and she became the centre of some of his works, such as "No Second Troy". By the time he wrote this poem, around 1908, he had proposed to Maud more than once (Jeffares, 1968). They were both interested in Irish mysticism, but their political views were not as close as they used to be (Jeffares and MacBride-White, 1994). The poem "No Second Troy" is a mixture of Yeats´s emotions for Maud as well as the resentment he feels for the violence she promoted. Yeats expresses his disappointment because Maud did not love him back. He does that by asking himself the rhetorical question "Why should I blame her that she filled my

days with misery?". He continues by talking about how she influenced the political situation in Ireland. He accused her of having "taught to ignorant men most violent ways" and that she had "hurled the little streets upon the great". Yeats saw Maud as a noble persona and believed she should have taught the people a different way, not a violent one. The little and the great streets, according to Hone, refer to the "little semi-literary and semi-political clubs and societies out of which the Sinn Fein movement grew" (Hone J., cited in Jeffares. 1968, p. 103). Yeats continues the poem by asking "had they but courage equal to desire?" This might refer to Yeats´s views on the political situation, especially on the rise of the Catholic middle class.

> Men who had risen above the traditions of the countryman, without learning those of cultivated life, or even educating themselves and who because of their poverty, their ignorance, their superstitious piety, are much subject to all kinds of fear. (Yeats. W., *Critical Essays,* 1943, cited in Jeffares, A. N., & Cross, K. G. W., 1967, p.223)

Yeats thought that the uneducated people were easily manipulated by the Catholic Church and clergy. As O´Brien noted, this was a Protestant response to the rising Catholic middle-class, a class Yeats was not fond of, and that "the violence of his recoil [towards the Catholic middle-class] did much to determine the political direction of his later years". (O´Brien, cited in Jeffares, A.N., & Cross, K.G.W., 1967, p.223)

Yeats continues by asking himself if there was something that could change Maud, something that could have made her more peaceful, calmer. He concludes by saying that she could not have been any other way than she is. This poem shows the ambivalence of Yeats´s feelings, he blames her for all the wrong she did to him and the violence she stirred, but, at the same time, he accepts her for who she is, knowing she could not have been anything but what she was. In the final line Yeats asks the last rhetorical question "Was there another Troy for her

to burn?". He compares Maud to Helen, not only because of her infamous beauty, but also because of the chaos she caused. He identifies Maud´s destructive behaviour towards the poet, and her "most destructive ways", with the destruction of Troy. He does that to demonstrate how much devastation she could cause, but also to elevate her and emphasize the impact she had, especially on him. Yeats also elevates the situation in Ireland to the same mythic proportions. If Maud is Helen, Ireland is Troy in ruins, stressing how it was ravaged by the political situation.

In the poem "Red Hanrahan´s Song about Ireland", Yeats again intertwines Maud and the political state in Ireland. It is a poem written for Maud and it was her favourite poem because it captures the core of the revolutionary spirit that she wholeheartedly supported (Jeffares, 1968). The poem starts with grim and sullen pictures that depict the state and the morale of Ireland and the Irish –"the old brown thorn-trees" and "the bitter black wind", which evoke violence and darkness. The poem talks about the Irish spirit that lives through it all and mentions Cathleen ni Houlihan as the personification of the unbent Irish spirit. Yeats wrote a play of the same name in which none other than Maud Gonne portrayed the old/young lady, Cathleen. It was no surprise that he chose Maud to play the embodiment of the Irish spirit (Jeffares. 1968) since, for him, probably even because of his obsession with her, Maud indeed was the personification of the rebellious Irish spirit that longs for independence. The character of Cathleen is intended in the poem, as in the play, to wake up the Irish people and remind them of their duty towards Ireland. In the play, Cathleen comes to the cottage where Peter and his family were preparing for his son Michael's wedding. When Cathleen comes disguised as the old lady, Peter offers her food and money which, to his great surprise, she rejects saying that she needs someone to give her his entire self. In return for that, he will be "remembered for ever" and "alive for ever". When she reveal her true identity, Peter remembers that he had heard of her in a song a long time ago. Although Peter did not show

any interest, even after he remembered the old songs that glorified Cathleen ni Houlihan, his son Michael was ready to abandon his promising future for what he believed was a greater cause. When he surrendered himself to Cathleen, he had no memory of his wife; all he wanted was to fight for her, for his country. Cathleen reminded the people to take matter into their own hands, promising them in return eternal glory. As the men started to follow her, she turned into a beautiful, young queen, meaning their willingness to sacrifice themselves for her gave her strength and rejuvenation. When the common people came together, Cathleen, i.e. Ireland, flourished.

As Jeffares (1967) notes, this play represents the peak of Yeats's nationalistic ideas. He also notes that, although he never stopped being a nationalist, he retreated from an active political life and his political activism became more aristocratic, reflecting the Protestant part of him (Jeffares, 1967). As noted before, Yeats was not fond of the Catholic middle-class that was rising and he expressed his dissatisfaction in the poem "September 1913".

Before publishing the poem "September 1913", Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory and told her that he was never more furious and disappointed about a public event as much as the Gallery of Dublin. (Howes, 2008) The problem was, as Howes (2008) notices, the fact that Hugh Lane wanted to donate his collection of modern art pictures to Dublin, but the Dublin Corporation refused to sponsor a gallery to house it. Jeffares (1968) demonstrated Yeats´s dissatisfaction by quoting a letter he wrote that can be found in *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* (1914), in which he openly speaks against the clerics who were diminishing the cultural and artistic value of the picture saying

> These controversies, political, literary, and artistic, have showed that neither religion nor politics can of itself create minds with enough receptivity to become wise, or just and generous to make a nation. (Yeats, 1914, cited in Jeffares, 1968, p.125)

Yeats starts the poem by calling out the Catholics, asking them what needs to happen so that they can come to their senses. They have "dried the marrow to the bone", emphasizing how they have no regard for art and its value. He mentions the "Romantic Ireland" and this is how Howes explains the meaning behind it:

> In "September 1913", O´Leary stands for a public sphere in which culture (…) should provide the civilizing influences the masses need and provoke the right kinds of public spirited passion. (…) The poem´s major figures for positive action in the public sphere are expenditure, self-sacrifice, waste, the gift. Romantic Ireland is embodied in the wind, the flight of the wild geese, the shedding of blood, and the excesses of madness and passion. (…) In the grave with O´Leary is the time when such gestures had a positive public effect (…). Catholic Ireland, on the other hand, is defined through its preoccupation with forms of retention-reasoning saving, praying. (Howes, 2008, p.67-68)

O´Leary represents the Celtic values that Yeats is promoting and that the Catholics are trying to supress with their reason, prudence and prayers. Yeats believes that they are destroying the Romantic notion and the passion that it brings, which seems to be more than necessary to the Irish people. Yeats also saw the Catholics opposing what he believed were Celtic qualities such as bravery, nobility and, as Howes (2008) noted, self-sacrifice and passion. Those are all qualities that speak to the romanticized Ireland Yeats promoted in his works. He saw the middle-class Catholics as the killers of art and everything it stands for. They are the killers of the magical, mystical world Yeats so often incorporated in his poems. As Howes (2008) noticed, the relishing in the excess of madness, the expenditure and passion is what brought a positive effect on the public, is what art brought. Without it, the public, and Ireland, are just a dried bone, emotionless and dull, and, as previously stated in Yeats´s (1914) quote, without art, there cannot be minds that are wise and generous enough to create a nation. He continues

by mentioning names of various people, asking was this what they have died for. Fitzgerald, Emmet and Tone were all revolutionaries who died because of their beliefs and political activities (Jeffares, 1968). Their deaths seem to be in vain even though they, at least as Yeats presents them, loved Ireland above all. However, if Yeats felt that their spirit had been forgotten and lost in Ireland, the 1916 Easter Rising appeared to contradict these forebodings.

As McGarry (2016) describes it, the period 1913-1923 was marked by political turmoil in and out of Ireland: World War I, and the constant rebellions that culminated with the civil war in Ireland. Before the Rising, Irish Catholics were in favour of the, as McGarry (2016) calls it, moderate constitutional nationalism of the Irish Parliamentary Party, while after it the majority was supporting more radical measures. According to McGarry (2016), the separatists, the ones who wished for complete Irish independence, were failing before 1916 to effectively gain support both in military and political terms. He also states that even though the Home Rule for Ireland was enacted in 1914 by the British, the separatists destroyed any chance of it becoming effective with the Easter Rising, when 1,600 rebels entered Dublin and occupied certain buildings, which they held for roughly a week. Jeffares (1968) noted that from the 3 to 12 May most of the leaders were executed. The rebels may not have lived, but their legacy did and it greatly affected the Irish people.

> The Rising was seen as a heroic fight by selfless patriots who had recklessly taken on the might of the British Empire, the nobility of their cause and vindictiveness of the British response resurrecting a quiescent Irish nation. From the Rising followed the rise of Sinn Féin, the war against Britain, and ultimately Irish independence. (…) It was the ordinary people of Dublin who were sacrificed for the nation, and the achievement of the rebels was not to strike a blow for freedom but to kill the Irish Party´s efforts to fashion a peaceful path to independence. (McGarry, 2016, p.121)

Yeats, who said in a letter to Lady Gregory that the Dublin tragedy has been a great "sorrow and anxiety" (Jeffares, 1968, p. 225), was deeply affected by the event and so the poem "Easter, 1916" was born. Yeats starts the poem by describing an ordinary day in an ordinary life. It is possible to read a snobbishness in Yeats's attitudes, as he seems completely uninterested in the common people surrounding him. Nevertheless, he describes some kind of everyday routine. This changes in the end of the first stanza where Yeats places an oxymoron, "a terrible beauty is born", that will be repeated three times in the poem. In the beginning we may not be completely aware of what he wanted to say with that line, but, as the poem progresses, we slowly unveil the meaning behind it.

Yeats starts the second stanza by mentioning a woman whose voice "grew shrill". Jeffares (1968) claims that that woman is Constance Gore-Booth, wife of Count Casimir Markievicz. Yeats mentions her because she was had a part in the Easter Rising, but he also uses her character to demonstrate how politics affected her. When she was younger, and when she was not politically active, she was "young and beautiful" with the sweetest voice. After she became involved in politics, her voice "grew shrill" of all the time spent arguing about politics. In keeping with the ambivalence Yeats shows throughout the poem, he describes her as having had an "ignorant good-will". It means that her intentions were probably good in nature, but it is questionable whether or not it was worth it. He showed the toll politics took and how she was only left with a voice that "grew shrill".

He continues by mentioning two men, and while he does not name them, Jeffares (1968) states that Yeats is referring to Patrick Pearse who was, among many other things, a poet, and Thomas MacDonagh, also a poet. Yeats claims that "this other", referring to MacDonagh, "was coming into force" and that "he might have won fame in the end". As with Constance Goore-Booth, his ambivalent feelings continue when he talks about MacDonagh. Yeats believed he could have accomplished great things with his poetry, but, as he was executed

during the Rising, nobody will ever know exactly what could have happened. Yeats does not diminish his political role in the event, but is asking himself was it all worth it. Yeats continues the poem by mentioning a "drunken, vainglorious lout". This refers to John MacBride, Maud Gonne´s husband, a man Yeats obviously disliked because of his relationship with the woman Yeats was so fond of (Jeffares, 1968). Even though MacBride has "done most bitter wrong to some who are near my heart", he is mentioned in the poem because of the part he played in this "casual comedy". Yeats wanted to show his respect for everyone who has sacrificed their life for an independent Ireland, even though that means that he has to eternalize someone he hated in his poem. Although Yeats celebrates all the men killed and imprisoned after the Easter Rising, he cynically calls it a "casual comedy". He feels the need to mention the names of all the people involved, but he is unsure how exactly he feels about the whole cause. He shows respect, that is for sure, but on the other hand, it all seems to him as if it was in vain. When he mentions the names of Fitzgerald, Emmet and Tone in "September 1913", he seems more sure about how he feels about them, but it is also important to notice that he did not personally know those people while he knew those from "Easter, 1916": it was probably easier for Yeats to mythologise people he did not know than the people he knew very well. Yeats knew their flaws and virtues, he watched them live their lives and he knew their everyday habits, thus it was hard for him to suddenly see them in the same way as he saw Emmet or Fitzgerald. Their names stand for sacrifice and heroism, he does not wonder what they could have achieved if they were still alive. In "Easter, 1916", it seems that Yeats believed that the people who have died, could have a bright future in front of them if they had not gotten involved with the Rising, not because their deeds were not noble enough, but because he was unsure whether or not will it all pay out in the end. He feels the need to mention their names and give them credit for all they have done, but it does

not seem that their names will receive the same sort of eternal glory and fame that Cathleen promised her followers in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*:

> They shall be remembered for ever,
>
> They shall be alive for ever,
>
> They shall be speaking for ever,
>
> The people shall hear them for ever. (Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan,* 1903a, p.8)

They are eternalised because they are mentioned in the poem, but they do not receive the heroic connotation, instead they receive lament and ambiguity.

Here we can witness the clear difference between Yeats his nationalistic peak and the post-Easter Rising Yeats who respects the cause, but, to an extent, sees it as a failure. The Easter Rising had a great impact on the future and it is probable that if it had never happened, Ireland would not have gained independence for a very long time. At the time the poem was written, Yeats could not know how big of an impact the Rising would have on the future. With the lines "a terrible beauty is born" he is foreshadowing it to an extent, but he is not sure what the future will bring, hence the ambivalence in his feelings. He is unsure whether or not the Rising was worth the "chang[ing] utterly" of everything, and so many deaths. The first four lines of the third stanza, describe how the "hearts with one purpose alone", i.e. the rebels, "through summer and winter", i.e. for a long time, "trouble the living stream". The rock that symbolises their dedication has an impact on the present and probably will have an impact to the future. The disturbance the stone causes is necessary, but the consequences it brought about were not. Yeats continues by talking about changes or, more precisely, how some things do not change. He uses different image to show how nothing is constant and how everything can change "minute by minute" except the "hearts with one purpose" who are through all seasons "enchanted to a stone". In this stanza, Yeats wants to show the will and

dedication of the people who wished, fought and died for one goal. Their dream of an independent Ireland stood strong, resisting all change and no matter what, it was always "in the midst of all". In the last stanza, Yeats continues with the symbolism of stone, but this time he uses it to say that "too long of a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart". Jeffares (1968) claims that these lines refer to Maud Gonne in particular. It seems that Yeats believed that she was too focused on the revolutionary ideas that she ignored other things. According to Yeats, too much sacrifice can cause the heart to turn into stone, numb the emotions, not permitting one to see the beautiful things in life but become completely immersed in politics. This differs from his play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, where sacrifice was wanted and necessary. Those who died in the name of Ireland would be glorified heroes, eternally famous and praised. In "Easter, 1916", Yeats did not see the sacrifice for Ireland in a romanticised sense as he did when he wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan.* When the things that he evoked in the play became reality, he realized the devastating consequences they had. What was even worse, the rebels did not accomplish what they wanted, at least not before they died. The fact that things turned out the way they did was probably very depressing and disappointing, and that is why the feeling of ambivalence lingers throughout the poem.

In the last stanza, Yeats again debates whether or not all of this was worth it, saying that maybe the "excess of love bewildered them till they died". The line "we know their dream; enough to know they dreamed and are dead", shows again how unsure he is about what to think because he does understand what drove them to cause the rebellion, but the only thing their dream brought them was their own deaths. In the end, Yeats says that however he feels about the Easter Rising there is only one thing that he can do and that is "write it out in a verse". We are still unsure about how the poet feels. He feels the urge to immortalise them by incorporating them into his poetry, but, on the other hand, the sense of ambiguity is still present in the poem. Their dream was very clear to Yeats and he probably supported it to an

extent, but the way they executed it was something with which he felt ill at ease. Although he seems very indecisive about how he feels, he recognizes the need to commemorate those who have put their country above everything else because they deserved to be remembered. On the other hand, Yeats shows what extreme nationalism and violence can cause and that is what causes the constant feeling of ambivalence in this poem.

The poem "The Second Coming" is a prophetic poem that was written after World War I, or, as Jeffares (1968) more precisely notes, in January 1919. Yeats does not glorify war and the sacrifices made for it, but changes his tone and gives us a prophecy of how the "mere anarchy loosed upon the world" has awoken the beast, and "darkness drops again". Yeats talks about the chaos that disrupted the world and that is, almost surely, leading us into a worse future. The falcon that is "turning and turning in the widening gyre" is both a metaphor and a reference to Yeats´s interest in the occult. The gyres theory stems from the myth of Judwalis and Robartes which states that the gyre is the symbol of the mind that has a precise movement which can never be altered.(Jeffares, 1968) The falcon is moving in a shape of a gyre but he cannot hear the falconer, meaning that the falcon has lost his path. As Jeffares (1968) noted, the falcon represents man and civilization that have, because of violence and bloodshed, became less connected to Christ who marked the new age with his arrival, but it is important to emphasize that, in this poem, Yeats uses Christ only as the symbol of a new era without any other religious connotations. The whole balance of the world is disrupted and the "centre cannot hold" anymore, which is a sign of instability. Although this poem was written after the First World War, Yeats noted that he had other events in mind when he wrote that "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

> In "The Trembling of the Veil" Yeats wrote that he had not foreseen (in the 1887-91 period) the "growing murderousness of the world" and he went on to quote "The

> Second Coming". He had "the troubles" in Ireland in mind, no doubt, as well as the Russian Revolution. (Jeffares. 1968, p. 242)

Yeats concludes the first stanza of the poem with more visions of how bloodshed has drowned all innocence and how the world is chaotic and upside down when "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity". In this case, passion is linked with ignorance, impulsivity and destruction. Passion must be subdued to reason, which contrasts the idea of passion being one of the qualities humanity needs, as it was the case in "September 1913". The world is a paradox that will soon be destroyed by itself. In the beginning of the second stanza, for a moment we think that Yeats found a type of salvation when he mentions that "surely the Second Coming is at hand". The Second Coming is seen as a success of civilizations (Jeffares, 1968), meaning that when one destroys itself, another, better will come. In the final lines, Yeats shows us how if and when the Second Coming arrives it will not be similar to the first one. Twenty centuries have passed from the First Coming, i.e. when Christ arrived, but those were "twenty centuries of stony sleep". A new order is coming, but it seems as if it will be darker than the previous era and that is all the fault of the people. Because of the desire for territory, blood and power, people have created a chaotic and imbalanced world, whose future is unsure. The message that this poems carries is applicable both to the Russian Revolution, the situation in Ireland and World War I. Yeats acknowledges that violence is inevitable, since this poem can also be interpreted as an invitation to a revolution and rarely any revolution is non-violent, but the proportions violence reaches are troubling. As in "Easter, 1916", Yeats invites us to think of the consequences before we act, even if we act out of passion and love and believe our cause is just. If people do not do that, they will continue to lose their lives unnecessarily. Yeats does not offer a solution, but offers a warning. If we continue to cause that much violence, it will reach unimaginable proportions and it will ultimately destroy us.

CONCLUSION

These poems have illustrated the deep impact, Celticism had on Yeats. By referring, directly and indirectly, to Celtic values Yeats managed to create, in Castle's terms (2001), an Irish identity. This thesis examined his early works in which Yeats was directly promoting Celtic values, inviting people to cherish art and step out of the haste and dullness of the modern world to find relish in everything nature has to offer. He encouraged people to open their minds to simplicity and spirituality, hoping that, in the same way as the fiddler in "The Fiddler of Dooney", he could bring people a sense of affiliation, teaching them that art and nature are our gateway to a more spiritual and transcendental world.

This thesis also explored the links and clashes between this idealised, Celtic, Ireland, and the political reality of Ireland by examining the shift in Yeats´s consciousness: from *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, where he openly invited people to give their lives for their country, to "Easter, 1916", where he expresses his doubts about the Rising and the people who died in it, to "The Second Coming" where, in a prophetic tone, Yeats warns us about excessive violence and its devastating impacts.

In doing this, this these has also traced the transition from a romantic Yeats, immersed in the world of fairies and hazy landscapes, to a modern Yeats filled with uncertainty and scepticism. As we have seen, Yeats embodied both the Romantic and the Modernist, the nationalist and the pacifist, the myth and reality; that is what makes his work so compelling and esteemed.

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