

YEATSIAN NATIONALISM: A PROGRESSION OF HEROIC PARAGONS IN W. B.
YEATS'S IRISH LITERARY THEATRE

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English .

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ABSTRACT

A surge of Irish nationalism in the late nineteenth century inspires W. B. Yeats to devote his life to contributing to the Irish Literary Renaissance. At the beginning of Yeats's playwriting career, he co-founds the National Irish Theatre and writes plays depicting common Irish people as heroic figures at odds with their uniquely Irish struggles. As the political atmosphere in the early twentieth century turns violent in Ireland, Yeats's plays begin reflecting his disapproval of violent nationalism. Yeats utilizes heroic archetypes in an attempt to transform the riotous Irish into what he considers to be the exemplary Irish being. Within these plays, he often utilizes Irish mythological figures to revitalize Ireland's knowledge of its distinctive myths and to instruct the enraged and resentful British colony. After Ireland declares itself a free state, civil conflict and opposition from Britain erupts with greater fervor. At this time, Yeats begins utilizing Christ as a failed heroic figure to demonstrate to the sectarian divisions throughout Ireland the hindrance of Christian divisions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: YEATS'S ARTISTIC INTENTIONS

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) lived throughout a tumultuous period in Ireland's history, experiencing the unrest that led to the eventual division between Ireland and Great Britain. He wrote throughout the Easter Rising, the civil conflict, and the early years of independent Ireland, capturing the liminality of his country's political and social structures. With Ireland's independence came the emergence of a new identity, a new nationality. William Butler Yeats, among other Irish artists of the time, wrote to unite, educate, and advance Ireland. Striving for advancements in Irish literature in a cooperative effort with other writers, Yeats co-founded the Irish Literary Theatre and penned many plays throughout his lifetime.

In Yeats's time, many doubted the importance of revitalizing Ireland's culture. Douglas Hyde, an Irish scholar and president of the Gaelic League, was a contemporary of Yeats. Hyde reproaches his fellow Irishmen and Irishwomen in his decisive essay "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland": "In Anglicising ourselves wholesale we have thrown away with a light heart the best claim which we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality" (138). He asks his readers to remember how certain prominent British journalists decried that Ireland "ought to be content as an integral part of the United Kingdom because we have lost the notes of nationality, our language and customs" (Hyde 138). Along with Hyde, Yeats argued for the importance of nationality. However, Yeats denounced violent nationalism. His efforts were to bring back the "best claim" the nation had to a unique cultural identity that Hyde alludes to. Within his plays, Yeats utilized Irish mythological figures, long forgotten from nearly eight hundred years of Anglicization, to revitalize national identity.

He sought, along with many of his fellow Irish writers, to rebuild Ireland's waning culture at the time of its burgeoning independence from British rule. Renowned for his poetry, Yeats is seldom remembered as a playwright, yet a student of Yeats's work would be remiss to ignore Yeats's contributions to an art form he was deeply consumed with, not only co-founding the Irish National Theatre, but holding influence as a director of the theatre for more than twenty-five years. Yeats's plays, although sometimes not well received by critics and audiences, will have a lasting impact on drama, concedes Bernard O'Donoghue, a leading contemporary Irish academic, in his evaluation of Yeats's career as a playwright (113). Yeats was drawn towards "symbolist drama" as opposed to the naturalist drama of Shaw (O'Donoghue 103). Yeats rails against this naturalist drama or "theatre of commerce" in his *Ideas of Good and Evil*: "As audiences and actors changed, managers learned to substitute meretricious landscapes, for the descriptions of poetry, until the painted scenery, which had in Greece been a charming explanation of what was least important in the story, became as important as the story" (265). Yeats wished to create plays with meaning; his motivation for playwriting was never to entertain an audience. His position as director of The Irish National Theatre afforded him a unique view behind the scenes. He attests that "at the same time the managers made the costumes of the actors more and more magnificent, that the mind might sleep in peace, while the eye took pleasure in the magnificence of velvet and silk and in the physical beauty of women" (265). Yeats's preferred austere stage and symbolic language may have, in part, caused his mixed reviews, yet Yeats's thoughts from *Ideas of Good and Evil* hardly show any modesty or impetus to utilize a more entertaining dramatic form:

We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends, and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from

scholarship and thought. We have planned the Irish Literary Theatre with this hospitable emotion, and, that the right people may find out about us, we hope to act a play or two in the spring of every year; and that the right people may escape the stupefying memory of the theatre of commerce which clings even to them, our plays will be for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal. (259)

Yeats's ideas concerning drama show his resolution to continue with his "ideal" form and subject matter for drama and his unwillingness to bend to the mass appeal. Yeats preferred to instruct his audience rather than entertain them.

Yeats used heroic figures in his plays to inspire and instruct the new nation. His earlier works demonstrate his willingness to depict common Irishmen as heroic figures. Later, a change is apparent with his increased use of Cuchulain, an Irish mythological hero. Yeats intentionally used Cuchulain as a hero, for it is a symbol capable of uniting the people of Ireland. Throughout Yeats's playwriting, Ireland struggled for its independence, seceded from the United Kingdom as the Irish Free State, and ultimately became the Irish Republic. When the Irish were recently independent, using Cuchulain reinforced their freedom and uniqueness. Yeats endeavored to reestablish a national identity. Carl Jung's theories in *Man and His Symbols* regarding mythological heroic reenactments suggests the effect Yeats hoped for:

The universal hero myth, for example, shows the picture of a powerful man or god-man who vanquishes evil in the form of dragons, serpents, monsters, demons, and enemies of all kinds, and who liberates his people from destruction and death. The narration or ritual repetition of sacred texts and ceremonies, and the worship of such a figure with dances, music, hymns, prayers, and sacrifices, grip the audience with numinous emotions and exalt the participants to identification with

the hero. ...An initiation of this kind produces a lasting impression, and may even create an attitude that gives a certain form and style to the life of a society. (68)

Yeats hoped to transform his society with the utilization of the Irish demi-god Cuchulain.

However, as Yeats became further disillusioned with the nation's masses, he adopted yet a new approach to playwriting. In contrast to one of his earlier plays, in which a common Irishman advances to higher Christian spiritual consciousness, in some of his later plays, Yeats depicted Christ as an inept heroic figure. Yeats lived in a politically and religiously violent era. Ireland was divided into Christian sects, fighting and killing each other for political power. Therefore, a heightened awareness of sectarian violence led Yeats to dismiss the heroic abilities of the Christ figure. Moreover, the invocation of Christ would not have had the same effect as Cuchulain: England could also claim Christ as a heroic symbol. Using Christ as a heroic figure would not help unify the nation. As violence increased, Yeats's plays denounced Christ as a leader in an attempt to curtail sectarian violence and reshape the national identity.

CHAPTER 2

YEATS'S COMMON IRISH HERO

When William Butler Yeats begins playwriting, his intentions are to build upon the nation's literature to strengthen national identity. Some earlier plays show his confidence to persuade the Irish audience without demigods as heroic figures. However, Yeats gradually loses his faith in the Irish people to make logical decisions and understand the meanings of his plays when the political climate in Ireland turns violent. In Yeats's later plays, mythical heroic figures become common, but before Yeats develops more spiritual and symbolic plays, in which he utilizes heroic figures to inspire an audience, he uses Irish men and women to serve as role models for the public, depicting everyday scenes from Irish life. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Where There is Nothing*, Yeats portrays men who circumnavigate violent political uprisings and stifling religious and societal institutions. He establishes his faith in the common Irish man to make logical decisions. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, written in 1902, depicts a traditional, agrarian family disrupted by an Old Woman who calls their eldest son to war. *Where There is Nothing* follows a man on a nontraditional spiritual journey--from the beginning of his disillusionment of the Church and society until his death. Yeats's central characters have no role models. Yeats shows no example that had come before them that they may learn from. The men portrayed in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Where There is Nothing* make their own decisions after ruminating on their options and come to--what Yeats would consider--logical conclusions.

Yeats sets his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1798 at the start of the French invasion of Killala, Ireland. Yeats portrays a peaceful and pleasant existence for the Gillane family. The play's opening scene depicts a rural home with a family preparing for their eldest son's marriage for the following morning. They prepare his wedding clothes and envision Delia, the wife to be,

joining their household. Peter and Bridget, the parents of the household, also discuss a future for Patrick, their younger son. Bridget suggests they send Patrick to become a Priest: “We will be well able to give him learning, and not to send him tramping the country like a poor scholar that lives on charity” (51). Yeats conceives a household unburdened by monetary constraints. Their lives are comfortable. They have enough money to take in a daughter-in-law, and they contemplate Michael buying land with Delia’s dowry. The family has enough to offer food, drink, and shelter to an Old Woman when she comes to the door. But the Old Woman offers something to Michael that he cannot gain by marrying Delia and continuing the agrarian tradition. She is a representation of Ireland, luring young men to war. This perfect pastoral image is threatened by the uprising. The Old Woman, Cathleen ni Houlihan, represents Ireland. She can be seen along the path, enlisting recruits for war. She attempts to lure all young men she finds. The younger son, Patrick, affirms this as he watches her walk along the path: “I think it is a stranger, but she’s not coming to the house. She’s turned into the gap that goes down where Maurteen and his sons are shearing sheep” (50). She finds men who are busy with their pastoral chores, keeping their way of life secure. The uprising disrupts an idyllic community of farmers.

The Old Woman has a hypnotizing effect on Michael, and all young men. Michael listens intently, curiously to the Old Woman and her songs of Irishmen dying for love of her. He repeatedly asks her questions as she begins to tell the family of her misfortunes. Bridget asks why she’s wandering, to which she replies, “too many strangers in the house” and that her “four beautiful fields” were taken from her (53). These four fields refer to the four provinces of Ireland: Connacht, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. She assures Michael, “many a man has died for love of me.” They die in the north, the south, by the sea, “a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die to-morrow” (54). She foreshadows

the imminent uprising. But the Gillanes do not understand what the Old Woman is. They question whether the Old Woman's wandering has made her crazy. Bridget wonders if she's afflicted with a mental condition or if she may be "a woman from beyond the world" (55). Michael, however, is the only member of the family who seems consumed by the old woman's plight and her songs of men who have died for her. While unyieldingly concentrated on her stories, he speaks to his father unsuitably, exclaiming, "Hush, father, listen to her" when the father urges Michael to unite with the family around the fireplace (56). His father, Peter, attempts to pull Michael back into the pastoral and familial sphere as Michael begins to drift into the lure of martyrdom for Ireland, but Peter no longer has authority over Michael.

The Old Woman represents a threat to the upcoming marriage of Michael and Delia. Cathleen ni Houlihan's competition with the Gillanes and Delia for Michael establishes her as a potential suitor. Michael is intensely interested in Cathleen's story from the moment she walks in. She tells him of her suitors and how many have died for love of her. These men are not unlike Michael: "I remember him ploughing his field, turning up the red side of the ground, and building his barn on the hill" (54). Michael is just the age to start his life as a man. He would be building his own barn and plowing his own field. He is the type the Old Woman seeks for the uprising. Michael proclaims, "I will go with you" (55). He forgets his wedding when his mother reminds him why he cannot leave: "What wedding are you talking of? What clothes will I be wearing to-morrow?" (57). Going with her would be akin to choosing another woman, as the Old Woman admits, "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (55). Despite Cathleen's ability to mesmerize young men, Michael nearly chooses Delia. As Delia sees Michael leaving to join the French, she cries out, "You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married!" (57). Delia also interprets his decision to join the

uprising as choosing a different life, a different woman. If he should leave for war, he would not return to her. But the Old Woman wins out. Cathleen calls from outside: “They shall be speaking for ever, / The people shall hear them for ever” (57).

Yeats portrays Ireland as a potential suitor, tempting men with the gift of immortality. Yeats uses this metaphor of the female competitors vying for Michael’s future because the 1798 uprising failed. Many men died in the uprising and its aftermath. Choosing Delia is preferring a comfortable, peaceful, pastoral existence; choosing the Old Woman is accepting death. Yeats does not depict any threat to these agrarian people. Many Irish may want an uprising, but in this play, these families appear to be unaffected by British rule. Yeats seems to take the position of the parents, and of Delia. He does not suggest that their way of life is at risk, that they are threatened by the political atmosphere in Ireland. The threat then comes from the Old Woman, from rebellious Ireland, and from the invading French. Michael does not need to revolt; he is lured by the Old Woman’s call: “They shall be remembered for ever, / They shall be alive for ever.” But Cathleen does not promise success in their venture: “many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid” (56). She does not claim they will be well paid but only that they will “think” it. In Yeats’s opinion, they are not. They are promised immortality and lured by it before they experience much of life. Most will not experience adulthood. They will never become men with families; those that revolt will die in the adolescent stage. The play ends with Patrick seeing no old woman stride down the path, but “a young girl” with “the walk of a queen” (57). Cathleen is revitalized by Michael’s youth and by his accepted martyrdom and is transformed into a young queen. He relinquishes his youth and his life for her.

Yeats and Lady Gregory, having collaborated to produce *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, designed a different ending for Michael, as Stephanie Pocock, a 20th century Irish literature scholar, explains in her analysis of the play: “Yeats acquiesced, as he was wont to do whenever Gonne pleaded with him, and the final step of Michael Gillane across the threshold of his small cottage in pursuit of the ‘young girl’ with ‘the walk of a queen’ met with roaring approval” (99). Michael’s decision was not written in the original play. The final scene was only changed after Maud Gonne, performing the part of the Old Woman in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, urged her long-term suitor, Yeats, to change the ending because “it doesn’t make a good curtain—We are all of the opinion that Michael ought to go right out of the door instead of standing *hesitating*. It doesn’t seem clear if he doesn’t go out. If he goes out Delia can throw herself on Bridget’s shoulder in tears which makes a much better end” (Pocock 99). Yeats envisions a young, speculative man at the doorstep. Even though Michael has been mesmerized by Cathleen ni Houlihan’s preternatural persuasion, he is able to stop at the door to ponder his decision. Yeat’s demonstrates his hope and his confidence in Ireland to do the same. Because of this revised ending, many audiences, perhaps understandably, misinterpret Yeats’s intention. But Yeats remained dismayed at his audience’s misunderstanding, as the audience laughed during some scenes, not comprehending the play’s tragic figures. Yeats believed a difference in dialect caused some of the confusion as “many phrases that have a tragic meaning in Connacht have no meaning or even a comic meaning in Dublin” (Pocock 103). Pocock argues, “Cathleen expresses Yeats’s ambivalence toward physical force nationalism, a notion largely lost on its nationalistic early audience” (102). One startlingly obvious detail overlooked or ignored by the audience is the play’s setting. The audience would have been aware of the failed uprising and the French invasion in the northwestern region of Ireland during the uprising. They know Michael is

doomed to fail if he follows Cathleen ni Houlihan and the crowd to join the French. Yeats portrays a quiet agrarian life in Killala; the inhabitants live unburdened by British laws or tithes. Perhaps this portrayal was not accurate enough to persuade an audience.

Thomas Pakenham, a scholar of Anglo-Irish history, explains in *The Year of Liberty* that in 1782, the British were “weakened and humiliated by the loss of the American colonies” (24) and Ireland was an encumbrance for Britain: “Ireland was still closer to bankruptcy than Britain. The Irish army was costing three million pound a year, nearly half the revenue; unless Britain bailed out the Irish Treasury, neither business nor Government could continue” (Pakenham 24). Along with the declining economy of Ireland and England after the American Revolutionary War, Ireland suffered economically throughout the 18th century, as T. A. Jackson explains. The English banned trade and manufacturers that competed successfully with English rivals (Jackson 94). Tariffs were also placed on Irish goods, crippling Ireland’s economy. Eighteenth century Ireland experienced “furious discontent among the manufacturers and traders at the restraints upon trade, and at the acquiescence of the oligarchy,” but the agrarian community was, for many years, too disorganized to offer any resistance. (Jackson 100) However, leading to the 1798 uprising, “sporadic and occasional resistance to attempts to substitute grass-farming for tillage . . . developed into a permanent resistance to rack-renters, evictors, land-grabbers, and tithe-proctors” (Jackson 103).

Moreover, Catholics faced discriminatory penal laws throughout the 18th century. These laws prohibited landownership, representation in the oligarchy, and voting to all Irish Catholics. Pakenham explains, “The survivors of the Catholic upper class, aroused by the Volunteer movement, wanted equality with their Protestant neighbors: the right to serve in the army, to hold a commission of the peace, and above all to exercise political power” (27). To avert any

possible uprisings, the British loosened their constraints on the Irish, and the Irish parliament extended suffrage to many Catholics who did not own land, but Catholics still could not hold office and were forced to monetarily support the Church of England (Pakenham 27). This attempt to dispel the uprising ultimately failed. Along with a suffering economy and the majority of Ireland's continued religious discrimination, the increased confidence of the Irish after the American and French revolutions engendered the spirit of revolt.

The uprising began in May, but the French did not invade Killala until August of 1798. They found in Killala a city lacking British resistance where they could distribute arms and rally the Irish to join them (Pakenham 299). But the uprising's lack of proper leadership and foresight doomed it to fail. Throughout the uprising, many lives were lost: "contemporary evidence suggests 30,000 as the best estimate including the numerous deaths of soldiers on both sides from exposure and exhaustion, and the murders of men, women, and children trapped between rival terrors" (Pakenham 342). In the aftermath of the uprising, many men were executed in Killala for their part in the uprising. Perhaps even with Yeats's exaggerated portrayal of a blissful agrarian lifestyle, the audience remained unmoved by the cautionary tale of war. Britain's denial of rights and Ireland's dire economic standing compel the Irish to revolt in 1798, and Yeats's play only ignites the spirit of rebellion with the promises of immortality from *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

After Yeats's misunderstood attempt to dissuade the Irish masses from violence fails, he tries again to portray a heroic Irishman. Yeats displays his trust in the Irish people to evade group mentality with his play *Where There is Nothing*, written in 1903, just one year after *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. His protagonist, Paul Ruttledge, defies societal standards in a heroic venture to leave behind his middle class privilege in search of a more meaningful life. He is not always successful

in his endeavors. He assumes a life without money will yield a more genuine lifestyle, but he finds the group of drifters too intoxicated, vulgar, and violent. After undertaking the lifestyle of a drifter, Paul leaves his community of poor tinkers to join a monastery. A few of the Fathers believe in the authenticity of his messages from God; however, the majority fear him, for his epiphanies undermine the Church's authority. Yeats portrays the Fathers as rigid in their beliefs of societal order, yet too eager to relinquish the prescribed lifestyle of their sect in pursuit of wealth. Paul attains what the Fathers could not. Paul proclaims, "Where there is nothing, there is God." Without everything, he finds God. His society subverts the possibility to find the voice of God. Yeats claims that if one looks for Christ or God within these groups, one conforms to a mob mentality and strays further away from God.

Throughout *Where There is Nothing*, Yeats avoids denouncing Christianity. Instead, he proposes that the Church has become materialistic and corrupt—no longer maintaining tenets of charity. When Paul reaches the monastery, the Fathers condemn his methods of meditating and fasting to obtain epiphanies. The monastery's superior denounces Paul as a heretic, but from Yeats's description of the Church's money-driven mentality, Paul must be proclaimed a heretic—his insights threaten to undermine the Church. Yeats demonstrates how materialistic the Church has become: Father Jerome is pleased to inform Paul that the Church is putting up "new buildings," and their school's size increases. They add non-biblical subjects to their schools when they obtain a grant "for technical instruction" (19). Father Jerome's litany also reveals the Fathers' interests in earning money by learning trades: "some of the Fathers are learning handicrafts. Father Aloysius is going to study industries in France. We are changing with the times, we are beginning to do useful things" (20).

Throughout Paul's spiritual journey, the Church limits Paul, and therefore, he must advance beyond it to reach God, and his messages urge others to do the same. At the beginning of Paul's spiritual pursuit, Father Jerome urges Paul to join the monastery, but Paul argues, "I daresay, I daresay; but I am not even sure that I am a Christian" (28). The other Christians in the play may cause Paul's religious confusion. When Paul's brother Thomas and the magistrates discover Paul living amongst the drunken tinkers, one magistrate appeals to Paul: "I wish you would come back and live like a Christian." Paul responds, "Like a Christian?" (110). His confusion originates from knowing the magistrates and recognizing their unchristian behaviors. He then proceeds to put the magistrates on trial. In his argument to the mock court of tinkers, Paul proclaims that the magistrates are unchristian:

They do not love their enemies; they do not give to every man that asks of them. Some of them, Mr. Dowler, for instance, lay up treasures upon earth; they ask their goods again of those who have taken them away. . . . They break the Law of Christ for their own pleasure, but you take pay for breaking it. When their goods are taken away you condemn the taker; when they are smitten on one cheek you punish the smiter. (121)

Although Yeats depicts the middle-class magistrates and the Fathers of the monastery as hypocritical figures, he does not argue within *Where There is Nothing* that authentic followers of God do not exist or that Christianity should be renounced.

Unlike Paul's middle-class contemporaries, Yeats portrays Paul as being far from unchristian. Indeed, Paul may be considered a misunderstood Christ-like figure. Paul speaks in parables, which confuses Father Jerome. After assuring Father Jerome that the magistrates have been scratching at the ground in his yards as chickens do, he confesses to "talking in parables"

(21). Paul explains his theory: “I think all the people I meet are like farmyard creatures, they have forgotten their freedom, their human bodies are a disguise, a pretence they keep up to deceive one another” (22). To which Father Jerome replies, “What is wrong with you?” (22). After Paul reaches solitude, he believes he must relay a message to the world. In the final act, he realizes the path to God. His meditation ritual allows him to become more closely aligned with his visions and newfound truths, which he preaches to the monastery, or to whomever will listen. In his trance, Paul appears to be dead. The Superior angrily waits until Paul awakes from his trance to speak with him: “I will wait till he is alive again, there is no use wasting words on a dead body” (139). Here Paul appears to undergo a Christ-like resurrection, as he awakens to proclaim his newfound epiphany to the men of the monastery. Yeats reveals that any person willing to renounce group beliefs can attain Paul’s same enlightenment. But Yeats surpasses creating a Christ-like figure only, he creates a Christ-like figure who preaches that anyone can be their own connection to God. Paul meditates because “if a man can only keep his mind on the one high thought, he gets out of time into eternity, and learns the truth for itself” (136). Paul refers to it as “getting above law and number, and becoming king and priest in one’s own house” (136). Thus Paul becomes Christ-like, as anyone can who frees their minds of group thoughts and communes with God.

Paul requires freedom and solitude to reach his epiphanies. Paul echoes Yeats’s distrust and disillusionment of crowds throughout the play. Yeats believes only the solitary thinker can advance beyond the mentality of the masses and make progressive changes in society. Paul claims, “There’s nothing interesting but human nature, and that’s in the single soul, but these neighbors of mine they think in flocks and roosts” (23). Paul believes that group thinking adulterates human nature; the authentic human is solitary. To join a group, one adopts the

group's opinions and the group's way of life. Paul echoes this sentiment when he is fitting in with the tinkers and learning how to mend cans: "The dark. Yes, I think that is what I want. The dark, where there is nothing that is anything, and nobody that is anybody; one can be free there, where there is nothing" (65). Paul yearns to evade groups and titles. If he escapes the title of "magistrate," "tinker," or "Father," he maintains freedom to believe what he wants and follow his path to God. He begins his search for solitude by leaving his family, who are overbearing in their efforts to force Paul to join groups. By relinquishing his class status and adopting the life of a drifter, he finds more freedom, and his solitude increases further when he enters the quiet life in the monastery. There he is finally given enough distance from groups to relay messages from God. In Paul's final message, he claims God made all places, all things, and all time holy: "man said that only the day on which God rested from life was holy, and though God had made all places holy, man said, 'no place but this place that I put pillars and walls about is holy, this place where I rest from life'; and in this and like ways he built up the Church. We must destroy the Church" (160-161). And finally Paul proclaims, "We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God" (163). Ridding man of the demands society places on him, would lead to the path of God.

In *Where There is Nothing*, Yeats portrays his belief in a common Irish man to find the path to enlightenment, but Yeats will come to lose faith in the Irish people. These two earlier plays demonstrate common Irish people following paths they feel are intelligent and nonviolent, or at least considering those paths. Paul Ruttledge initiates a spiritual journey, leaving behind the unspiritual, hypocritical life he comes from. And Michael, in Yeats's original version, pauses at the doorway and considers both paths. He stops to ruminate on the important decision to join the war, for even though Cathleen ni Houlihan has mesmerized him with her songs of Irish

martyrdom, he does have the ability to choose his future. He is not completely beguiled.

Therefore, Yeats's earlier plays demonstrate his confidence in the Irish audience to consider their actions, to scrutinize their society, and to produce changes to unacceptable societal demands placed upon them.

CHAPTER 3

CUCHULAIN: AN EXEMPLARY IRISH HERO

Wanting to reacquaint Ireland with its history, Yeats incorporates his country's mythological figures in many of his plays. As Yeats writes, a multitude of Irish natives are oblivious to Irish mythological figures, esoteric after Ireland's Anglicization. Yeats familiarizes himself with the myths of Ireland so that he can use distinctly Irish heroes within his plays. Alex Zwerdling, a scholar of 20th century British literature, explains Yeats's attempt to educate his audience:

In his first years as playwright for the Abbey, Yeats felt compelled to supply program notes to educate those still ignorant about Celtic myth. After explaining in *Beltaine*, the organ of the Irish Literary Theatre, the many references in *The Countess Kathleen* to the cycle of Oisín and Finn, to the Shéu, to Cúchulainn and Conchobar, Yeats apologizes by saying that it 'is necessary to explain these things, as the old Irish mythology is still imperfectly known in modern Ireland.'

(43-4)

Including a brief history of each mythological character within the play's program both familiarizes the audience with forgotten myths of Ireland, strengthening nationality, and enhances the audience's understanding of his plays.

As Yeats writes, Ireland struggles to find its national identity and sectarian violence threatens progression. This civil unrest prompts Yeats to elect Cúchulainn as a heroic figure. Throughout Yeats's playwriting career, he often uses the myths of Cúchulainn as the foundation for plays. Cúchulainn's exploits in Ireland and abroad are recreated to instill what Yeats believes are invaluable traits in the Irish people. As Yeats argues in *Samhain No. 5*, when "a hero moves

us most deeply, it is the moment when he awakens within us for an instant our own heroism, our own sanctity, our own desire” (Zwerdling 2). Many Irish men and women are fighting, rioting, protesting, and some dying. In this period of Ireland’s struggle for independence, Yeats asserts that Ireland needs a heroic figure. In his earlier works, Yeats disapproves of violence among unionists and nationalists; he advocates the strengthening of Ireland’s literary worth, the knowledge of its past traditions, and its self-respect, in turn strengthening its confidence as a future sovereign nation.

Yeats’s *The Green Helmet* and *At the Hawk’s Well* illustrate this use of the hero Cuchulain to affect Ireland. Yeats elects Cuchulain as a vehicle for introducing his paragon of the heroic ideal in *The Green Helmet*. Yet he employs the same mythological hero in *At the Hawk’s Well* seven years later to illustrate the quintessence of an immature braggart. Yeats’s belief in the hero to inspire his audience and influence the political atmosphere may offer an explanation for this.

In 1910, Yeats writes *The Green Helmet* as commentary on England’s rule over Ireland and Ireland’s lack of preparedness to rule itself. Cuchulain returns to Ireland from Scotland to find he is unwelcome in his homeland. His comrades, Conall and Laegaire have shamed the land and attempt to hide their indiscretion from Cuchulain. In a beheading game, reminiscent of the fourteenth century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Conall and Laegaire expose their cowardice by refusing to let The Red Man take a turn to behead them after they have already swung and succeeded in decapitating the otherworldly Red Man. As Cuchulain enters the play, The Red Man revisits to cause strife between the men in the guise of bestowing a gift—the green helmet. The dispute between nationalists and unionists is represented by the bickering between Conall and Laegaire, extending to their servants and wives, debating which is the braver

man and therefore the rightful wearer of the green helmet. Conall and Laegaire admit to bringing shame to the land; however, when the Red Man offers them the green helmet their greediness effaces their shame, as each assumes it is their right to the helmet. The green helmet represents Ireland's sovereignty. The rightful wearer of the helmet, made evident to the audience, is Cuchulain, who saves the nation from shame and staves off the inner turmoil of the house by offering to share the helmet among the three men. With *The Green Helmet*, Yeats demonstrates to the audience that political quarrels will not be solved by irrational violence between unionists and nationalists.

Nevertheless, two years after Yeats writes *The Green Helmet* and before he wrote *The Hawk's Well*, the political climate in Ireland became savage when Ireland introduced the Third Home Rule Bill. The bill's provisions were suspended until the end of the First World War and would eventually be resisted by Ulster unionists and the Conservative Party (Hopkinson 3). Irish historian Michael Hopkinson elucidates the uncertain and precarious political tone at this time in Ireland: "The Ulster Crisis brought the gun back into Irish politics and together with the First World War undermined constitutional nationalism. Catholic nationalists of all shades viewed the failure to stand up to Ulster and to force the passage of Home Rule as the ultimate British betrayal. Vast numbers of moderates become radicals almost overnight" (3). Nationalists, infuriated by the disruption of what seemed to be their assured course to autonomy, gradually became more militant in their attempts to gain independence, which culminated in the 1916 Easter Rising. The rising, an insurrection of nationalist rebels, took place the morning after Easter and lasted nearly a week. The rebels occupied strategically chosen buildings, including the General Post Office and the Four Courts, and set up their provisional government (BBC par. 2). After the British gathered sufficient reinforcements, the rebellion was gradually suppressed,

resulting in nearly 450 lives lost, the internment of nearly two thousand rebels, and the execution of 90 of those rebels (BBC par. 6). This rebellion and its aftermath helped rally Irish support for the nationalist movement (BBC par. 6). Yeats writes *At the Hawk's Well* in 1917, after these events occur. As Hopkinson assesses, "The immediate causes for the radicalization of Irish nationalism were the Ulster crisis, the effects of the First World War, and the Easter Rising" (11). Therefore, when Yeats writes *At the Hawk's Well*, many nationalists have gradually accepted a more radical approach to gaining independence.

At the Hawk's Well demonstrates Yeats's hesitation to support radical nationalist movements, while still in favor of nationalist sentiments. Yeats accomplishes this by portraying Cuchulain as a younger man in *At the Hawk's Well* than he was in *The Green Helmet*, rather than choosing a different Irish mythological figure for this play. This allows Cuchulain to represent an impetuous, immature mob of civilians, too quick to wage war, yet still capable of an intelligent course of action that avoids bloodshed, for Yeats has shown Cuchulain's capacity for rational compromise in *The Green Helmet*, written seven years prior to *At the Hawk's Well*. Yeats establishes Cuchulain as an Irish heroic figure and designates him again in the *At the Hawk's Well* to demonstrate that a young hero is capable of indiscretions, and these lapses may change the course of Cuchulain's life, but this hero is not destined for future failures. If Yeats's audience identifies with Cuchulain, they will perceive the failure in themselves to avoid violent conflict. In *At the Hawk's Well* Cuchulain travels to an unknown land to find immortal waters, but he fails in his quest: his arrogance brings a curse upon him when he ignores a warning from an elderly man that could have prevented this curse. Cuchulain lacks the experience and acumen he will display in Yeats's aged version of the hero.

In *At the Hawk's Well*, Cuchulain appears to be a younger man than he was in *The Green Helmet*: though he has yet to meet Aoife--one of his consorts, in *At the Hawk's Well*--he tells his wife Emer, in *The Green Helmet*, not to think so highly of him or to cling to him "like a barnacle," for he has found other women abroad. Another indication that *At the Hawk's Well* takes place in Cuchulain's younger adventures is the Old Man's referral to him as "Young Man." The written play maintains this title of "Young Man" throughout their dialogue. This "Young Man" title also appears in *The Green Helmet*, but the title changes once he identifies himself to the other characters as "Cuchulain." In contrast, when he proclaims he is "Cuchulain" to the Old Man in *At the Hawk's Well*, the Old Man replies, "I have never heard that name." He reveals that he is "Sualtim's son" and assures the Old Man that the name Cuchulain is "not unknown" and that he has "an ancient house beyond the sea" to no avail. The young hero assumes his name is well known everywhere, but is mistaken. The brash nature of his youth will be the cause of his future curses.

At the Hawk's Well shows Yeats's impression of the dichotomy between the elderly and the youth of Ireland. The Old Man is a failure: "doubled over a speckled shin," his mother would cry, "How little worth / Were all my hopes and fears / And the hard pain of his birth!" if she were alive to see him (137). He has wasted fifty years of his life at the empty well, waiting for something that will never come. The water, it is supposed, will render the drinker immortal, yet the Guardian of the well lulls the Old Man to sleep before filling it. When he awakes, the well is dry and the leaves of the hazel tree are withered. The landscape is perpetually barren. Yeats creates a hopeless, potentially deadly place. The hawk women, and the savage women who live beyond the well, threaten to curse or kill those who seek water from the well. And the second musician says, "I am afraid of this place" (137). The musicians sing: "It is time to sleep; / Why

wander and nothing to find? / Better grow old and sleep” (138). The musicians describe the only option left for the Old Man. The Old Man does not remain by the well because he is hoping the guardian will fill it; he stays by the well because he has spent his youth and has no usefulness left. This is Yeats’s view of Ireland’s downtrodden spirit after the failure of so many attempted uprisings. As Zwerdling attests, the famine of 1847-48, created the image of a dying land along with mass emigration, and “Irish insurrections had failed so often that they seemed only to emphasize the pointlessness of such perpetual sacrifice. The resultant political apathy lasted through the time of Yeats’s youth and into his young manhood” (30).

Cuchulain enters and represents the new generation in Ireland with his impetuosity. The Old Man knows his kind immediately: “You are like those who are crazy for the shedding of men’s blood, / And for the love of women” (138). The Old Man was once the Young Man. Yeats sees the potential for the newer radical uprisings in Ireland to result in the same disappointment as the others. A long succession of uprisings predates Yeats’s time. Ireland’s past is fraught with violence: in 1534 Ireland revolts over the refusal to implement English feudal tenures, in 1641 the Irish attempt to reclaim ownership of their land during the English civil war, and again in 1798 United Irishmen hope to gain autonomy in Ireland with the assistance of France. All of these uprisings will fail, resulting in England’s continued dominance over Ireland. Ireland’s history is fixed in a cyclical pattern.

The Young Man, Cuchulain represents a young, arrogant, rebellious Ireland, destined for failure if it uses the same violent methods to gain power. Cuchulain informs the Old Man that he has heard a rumor of the immortal water of the hawk’s well and he left that same night to find “lucky winds” that sent him over “waves that seemed charmed” to the shore. Cuchulain refers to his luck often within the play, believing divine forces guide him and his quest will be successful,

even after the Old Man assures him it is impossible that the well will fill up for Cuchulain. Cuchulain never heeds the advice of the Old Man. He continues to ignore the Old Man even though he has been waiting fifty years at the well. Cuchulain only draws upon his own limited experience: he has never “had long to wait for anything” (140). He doubts the power of the guardian: “nor will they / That dance among the stones put me asleep; / If I grow drowsy I can pierce my foot” (140). His violent answer to the preternatural dance of the guardian shows his ignorance in the hawk’s power as well as his bloodthirsty nature that the Old Man notes earlier. This war mongering will only continue.

Along with the young Cuchulain’s lack of wisdom, his penchant for violence also engenders his failure. When he proclaims to the mountain witch Sidhe, who is actually the hawk that protects the well, that she will be perched on his wrist before the end of her dance, his arrogance causes Sidhe to curse him, as The Old Man had warned. The curse is a mixing of hatred with love. The Old Man portends that someday, as a result of this curse, Cuchulain may lose his own children: “you will find them, their throats torn and bloody, / Or you will be so maddened that you kill them / With your own hand” (141). By mixing the hatred and brutal killing of something Cuchulain loves, Yeats shows the parallel of the young radical nationalists and unionists killing each other in a frenzy without realizing they are killing part of Ireland—something they love. Hoping their efforts will be memorialized further fuels their conflict, which Yeats demonstrates as Cuchulain calls out to the Guardian of the Well, “Do what you will, I shall not leave this place / Till I have grown immortal like yourself” (142). But it is the youth of Ireland’s unrelenting violence that will cause their efforts to be ineffectual, as are Cuchulain’s endeavors. When the enchanting dance begins, Cuchulain drowsily follows the hawk, which will lead him to ruin and cause him to fail in his quest: the Old Man is bewitched and sleeps; both

men fail to drink the water. Cuchulain refuses to be humbled by Sidhe, which distracts him from his quest. As a result, Cuchulain causes the curse to materialize. Sidhe summons Aoife to fight, and Cuchulain runs to meet her in battle. In the Irish myths of Cuchulain, Aoife is one of the consorts with whom Cuchulain father's children. These children he will kill in a frenzy, as if possessed.

Yeats's creation of this quest for the hawk's well foreshadows Cuchulain's misfortune with Aoife and places the blame on Cuchulain's foolishness. His brash readiness for conflict will cause his downfall. His fight with Aoife, Yeats finds unnecessary to include within the play. The audience will be aware of the misfortune that awaits Cuchulain as he rushes to battle, having been made aware of the myths by Yeats and his Irish contemporaries. The play ends with the musicians that opened the play. Their song denounces war, speaking of the futility of staying at the hawk's well: "Who but an idiot would praise / Dry stones in a well?" This the empty well cries out. And the leafless tree says it praises the man who "has married and stays by an old hearth, and he on naught has set store but children and dogs on the floor. / Who but an idiot would praise a withered tree?"(144-5) I choose a pleasant life / Among indolent meadow; / wisdom must live a bitter life" (144). The Old Man has gained wisdom, but at the cost of happiness.

Yeats's vision of a young Cuchulain is quite striking in comparison to the mature Cuchulain he portrays in *The Green Helmet*. The young heroic figure is mistakenly guided by his readiness to fight, but as audiences have seen earlier in *The Green Helmet*, Yeats believes change is possible. The heroic figure in *At the Hawk's Well* is used to caution the youth of Ireland, whereas the leading figure in *The Green Helmet* is created to inspire a nation.

Yeats writes *The Green Helmet* to portray Cuchulain as an ideal hero, a purveyor of civilized customs he felt were lacking in Ireland. In this reimagining of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, none of the men, women, or servants in the play function as “heroes,” placing an emphasis on Cuchulain as an exemplary heroic figure. Not only do the Irish men and women act cowardly, but throughout the play, they admit to Cuchulain that they have shamed their country. At the beginning of the play, the Irishmen, Conall and Laegaire, are inhospitable and mistrustful when Cuchulain comes upon their house. Conall and Laegaire are evidently noblemen: their discourse with Cuchulain alludes to their friendship. Their wives live in the main house with Emer, Cuchulain’s wife, while he is away. These are no poor men: they have flagons of ale, stone habiliments perfectly capable of hosting a guest, and they are not uneducated about the proper conduct for greeting strangers who are in want of lodging. Yet when they spot a man in a green cloak, knowing they will be expected to lodge him for the night, they agree not to permit him: “He must look for his dinner elsewhere” (149). After they recognize the man as Cuchulain, they are still rude without warrant. Cuchulain is surprised at their unfriendly welcome: “If I lived here a hundred years, could a worse thing come than that / Laegaire and Conall should know me and bid me begone to my face?” (150). A change has taken place in Ireland, even among the noblemen of the country. Cuchulain’s surprise hints at this new trouble in Ireland that affects his countrymen.

This change in his companions’ behavior is caused by their dispute with the Red Man. The Red Man has made them ashamed of themselves. Conall and Laegaire do not wish to greet him when he returns, even though he rightly should have a chance at their heads as they have had at his. They intend to kill him if he appears again, showing their cowardice. The Irishmen are not proud of this, however, which is why they bid strangers leave them. They do not maintain a

civilized society for fear of the Red Man. He has disrupted their civilized attributes. Conall and Laegaire's cowardice is contrasted with Cuchulain's courage when the Red Man returns to meet Conall and Laegaire. The men are too frightened to speak to the "foxy man" in the green helmet, so Cuchulain orders the Red Man to leave them unharmed. Surprisingly, the red giant offers them the gift of the green helmet: "I will lay it there on the ground for the best of you all to lift" (152). Cuchulain's superior intellect is demonstrated immediately: after Conall and Laegaire squabble over the gift, Cuchulain advises they share the helmet by pouring ale within it and each drinking from it. They ignore this opportunity to be equals in ownership of the green helmet. Each eventually draws swords to attack Cuchulain. After realizing the trick played on them by the Red Man, Cuchulain throws the green helmet into the sea, hoping to rid them of their cause for violence. The Red Man returns once more before the men attack Cuchulain for disposing of the helmet, their great prize. The red figure demands a head. Cuchulain, displaying the fairness that the other men lack, kneels down, offering his head: "He played and paid with his head, and it's right that we pay him back, / And give him more than he gave, for he comes in here as a guest" (158). In this line, Cuchulain reestablishes the hospitality and integrity that was absent from the country before his arrival. Cuchulain has proved himself worthy, and the Red Man places the helmet on his head.

The Red Man represents Britain, wearing the green helmet of Ireland. The Red Man is tall without the helmet, but with it Yeats describes him as "very tall, and his height increased by horns on the Green Helmet. The effect is intentionally violent and startling" (149). This represents England's increase in power by maintaining control in Ireland's affairs. When they tell Cuchulain of the man "with a red foxy cloak" and "half-shut foxy eyes" that came to drink with them, their recount describes a scheming man with hidden intentions. He has come to drink

with them. This is something intimate. The Irishmen welcome him into their homes and this leads to the disgrace of their country. Yeats uses the threat of the Red Man and the subsequent disgraced land to represent the effect of English suppression upon the Irish people. Conall and Laegaire, when discussing their friend before his arrival, hope that he does not return, thinking that luck has found him in another country, for in Ireland “neighbour wars on neighbour, and why there is no man knows, / And if a man is lucky all wish his luck away, / And take his good name from him between a day and a day” (149). With this Yeats implies a deeper problem than England’s control over Ireland’s politics: England’s culture has pervaded the Irish culture to the detriment of Ireland’s customs. This imperialism has lessened the country’s confidence, and Yeats would argue that the common Irishman now lacks the heroism to confront England to reclaim Ireland, and the common Irishman is deficient of the integrity needed to lead their country if they were granted the opportunity. Yeats contends, with the last scene of the offering of the green helmet to Cuchulain, that England will not relinquish control over Ireland with inner conflict and confusion within the country. Ireland must actualize Cuchulain’s heroic display of probity to gain sovereignty.

With Yeats’s undertaking to revitalize the Irish identity, some may find it odd Yeats reconfigures a fourteenth century English poem. But Yeats has a precarious effort before him. The goal of the Irish Literary Renaissance is to reintroduce the Irish culture (as unadulterated by English culture as possible) in an effort to strengthen the national identity, but after nearly eight hundred years of English rule, finding purely Irish traditions and myths is nearly impossible. Yeats’s reimagining of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* perfectly illustrates this, as the poem has three sources and may not be entirely English. The original source of the beheading scene in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is much disputed. Larry Benson, a scholar of classic philology,

discusses the debate reviewing three sources: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (English), *Le Livre de Caradoc* (French), and *Fled Bricrend* (Irish). He claims that “the parallels between *Sir Gawain* and *Caradoc* are far more numerous and detailed than has hitherto been known, and most of the details that until now students have thought appeared only in the Irish and English versions also appear in the French” (2). Benson makes the argument that the direct source of the beheading episode in *Sir Gawain* is the French version *Le Livre de Caradoc* (2). Although the beheading scene may originate from the French, the English and Irish versions are believed to have been written within the same period. Yeats incorporates elements of both English and Irish versions to create the Green Helmet. He utilizes the heroic Cuchulain, the same mythological figure used in *Fled Bricrend*, yet he titles his play *The Green Helmet*, recalling the English version.

What the green knight represents in *Sir Gawain* may provide reasoning for Yeats’s decision. Lynn Arner, a scholar of medieval England’s colonization campaigns, argues that the Green Knight poem is “thoroughly tied to England’s colonial project in Wales” (79). The impetus for the poem may have occurred during the disruption of England’s attempt to conquer Wales: “After the widespread Welsh uprising in the first decade of the fifteenth century, the English realized that the Welsh were not the submissive and deferential natives they had feigned to be, but were a perfidious people, on par with the wild Irish” (Arner 79). In the English poem, the Green Knight represents those barbarous races of men who “oppose knights,” courts, and refined manners. He is Celtic in nature, “his horse’s mane and tail are elegantly braided in a green and gold pattern recalling Celtic design” (Arner 88). He represents the races living in the regions England is colonizing: Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Yet he is called a “Knight.” The writer of *Sir Gawain* brands him with their own concept of a courtly man in English society. He

is not referred to as a savage. From this endeavor to place the green barbarian into the structure of their own society with the title of “Knight,” his failure to meet their expectations of a knight are apparent. They can only compare him to their standards of a common man, beginning the imperialism that will last for centuries.

In Yeats’s *Green Helmet*, it is not a green knight who torments Conall and Laegaire, but a Red Man who wears a green helmet. The scenery on stage is decorated in different shades of green: the rocks are speckled with green, the sea luminous and green. All of the men except for The Red Man and the cat-like Black Men are cloaked in different shades of green. Cuchulain, Conall, Laegaire represent the 14th century Green Knight and his kingdom. This rewriting of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* contradicts the barbarous nature of the Green Knight, tormenting the courtly heroes; instead, it is the English, symbolized by the Red Man, who torment the Irish.

Borrowing English tales of colonization and reimagining them to show the injustices of the English and the aftermath of their colonization works for Yeats’s nationalist aims. He wishes to advance society and avoid civil conflict. Instead of depicting Conall and Laegaire as barbarous, Yeats maintains their antagonistic, rapacious nature is a result of the Red Man’s manipulation. They have the ability to regain their honor. Yeats selects Cuchulain to model Ireland’s missing virtues to affect an audience he believes is in need of guidance.

CHAPTER 4

YEATS'S RE-CONCEPTUALIZED DEFICIENT HEROIC CHRIST

W. B. Yeats's religious and political motivations are intertwined in his portrayal of Christ's failure to obtain heroic status in *Calvary* and *The Resurrection*. Yeats does not follow a traditional religion (as his conceptualization of reincarnation cycles and historical patterns in *A Vision* suggests). He would not personally view Christ as a heroic figure, and might seek to persuade his audience of Christ's deficiencies; however, Yeats also has political reasons for dissuading the Irish public from viewing Christ as a heroic leader. Because Yeats portrays a hero of integrity—Cuchulain—to improve his nation's political dialogue without evoking religious figures and because Ireland's sectarian violence continues to increase by 1920, when he writes *Calvary*, an exploration of the possible political motivation for *Calvary* and *The Resurrection* may be more elucidating. Yeats wishes to convince the Irish public that Christ is limited as a heroic figure, and therefore, should not motivate the public to political action. In Ireland's early years as an independent nation, Christianity is a divisive matter. Aside from the Christian division within the nation, Christ also unites Ireland with England—Christianity is a connection Ireland has with its colonizer. Because Yeats chooses Cuchulain as his heroic figure within his plays, a purely Irish mythological figure, there is a greater opportunity for strengthening nationalism and assigning heroic qualities to Cuchulain to edify the Irish public. Evoking a heroic Christ within his plays, on the other hand, will only strengthen religious sentiment, and possibly motivate violence between religious sects.

Yeats introduces Cuchulain in his plays as a heroic figure. He believes the original Irish hero can provide a model for Irish citizens. Yeats does not incriminate specific political parties for lacking heroic traits, but utilizes Cuchulain's attributes to inspire all Irish citizens to abstain

from a radical course in politics and to develop a more civilized society. Yeats argues only intelligent discourse will help the nation gain autonomy and maintain a fair government. He also uses Cuchulain as an example to heroic young men wasting their energies and their lives on violence, when so many before have done the same and gained nothing for their country. Cuchulain transcends political boundaries; therefore, Yeats finds him to be an exemplar Irish hero.

Cuchulain is the precise heroic archetype to use in this time period to rally the Irish people and encourage nationalist sentiments, especially because this figure lacks Christian origins. Yeats avoids Christianity in much of his playwriting before *Calvary*. However, after Ireland's continuing radicalization, Yeats illustrates the deficiencies he finds in Christ in his controversial play *Calvary*, in which he demonstrates his opposition for a heroic Christ. Yeats writes his first play denouncing Christ as a heroic figure in 1920, after the country has declared its independence from Britain and bloody conflict increases between the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). As Fearghal McGarry, a historian of modern Ireland, contends in his research on The Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War of 1922-3 were "profoundly shaped by the legacy of 1916" (286). The determination of the IRA only increased as "IRA members had sworn an oath, not to achieve an Irish republic but to defend the living Republic that had been proclaimed in 1916" and "Yeats had recognized as early as 1917, the Easter Rising had undermined the possibility of compromise" (McGarry 287). As McGarry asserts, many conflicts will arise from the failure of Protestantism to proliferate as widely as it had in England. This caused "subsequent conflict between both Ireland and England and Catholic and Protestant communities within Ireland" (10). Indeed, many uprisings were the result of sectarian conflicts, as laws in Ireland for centuries

“repressed Catholic worship and excluded Catholics from political and administrative offices, land ownership, education, and professions such as the law and army” (McGarry 12). These religious and political conflicts increase after Yeats writes his early plays in 1902 and engender his response in *Calvary* (1920) and later in *The Resurrection* (1931).

Yeats portrays Christ in *Calvary* as a disappointing leader, for he is unwanted and unnecessary yet inescapable for Lazarus and Judas. The play begins with a song from the play’s musicians describing a white heron. They repeat, “God has not died for the white heron.” Peter Ure hypothesizes in his study of Yeats’s Christian mystery plays that this “is the first of four variations on the theme of Christ’s powerlessness to save those who can live without salvation” (173). While it is true Lazarus and Judas both accuse Christ of relentlessly harassing them with salvation and foreordained decrees that they do not desire, Christ’s failure does not lie in his powerlessness to save them, but in his powerlessness to convince all men that they should want saving. Lazarus and Judas are quite emphatic about salvation being forced upon them when their only desire is freedom from Christ. They do not ask for salvation and go to extraordinary lengths to avoid it. Lazarus confronts Christ on the walk to Calvary to take Christ’s death from him, as Christ has stolen his, and Judas, wishing to escape Christ’s power, deceives the Messiah.

Christ’s intentions are to carry out his father’s will and save mankind from death, but Yeats demonstrates Christ’s oblivious nature to his own disciples’ perspectives in his reimagining of Christ’s walk to crucifixion. Christ looks for a friendly face, but finds none in the crowd that has come to witness his death. As Lazarus approaches, Christ believes Lazarus will remember him and thank him for rescuing Lazarus from death. Lazarus does remember, but his reason for finding Christ during the walk is to gain death: “You took my death, give me your death instead” (290). Christ maintains that he gave Lazarus life, but Lazarus admits, “death is

what I ask. / Alive I never could escape your love, / And when I sickened towards my death I thought, 'I'll to the desert, or chuckle in a corner, mere ghost, a solitary thing'" (120). Lazarus does not yearn for salvation, but is quite content not to have it. Yeats scholar Peter Ure explains Yeats's argument regarding Christianity: "During the Christian era, God, seeks, ... to find everywhere his own image and to change what he loves into himself" (176). In this instance, Christ is sent to save men from death, thus changing man into something godlike. This results in Christ as a failed leader, in Yeats's opinion, because Christianity "begins with the Annunciation of a God who seeks to live like a man while teaching that man must seek to live like God" (Ure 171). His portrayal of Christ within *Calvary* delineates the dysfunctional relationship between a god who urges or forces man to live like a god: "The living man endeavors to live like an immortal, spiritual creature, to 'ascend to heaven', or to be, like the resurrected Christ, 'a phantom with a beating heart'. In this way man diminishes his humanity" (Ure 172). In *Calvary*, a problem exists for Lazarus—he is forced into a resurrection, a fitting end for Christ, but not for man. He cannot find death because of this forced emulation. Additionally, Judas, as Yeats portrays him, feels compelled to betray Christ, not because he doubted Christ was the Messiah: "I have not doubted; / I knew it from the first moment that I saw you; / I had no need of miracles to prove it" Then Christ accuses him of betrayal, and he concedes: "I have betrayed you / Because you seemed all-powerful" (291).

Judas admits the impetus for his deception was to avoid Christ's power:

I could not bear to think you had but to whistle
And I must do; but after that I thought,
'Whatever man betrays Him will be free';
And life grew bearable again. And now

Is there a secret left I do not know,
Knowing that if a man betrays a God
He is the stronger of the two? (291-92)

Christ intercedes, claiming it was foreordained that someone would deceive him: “But my betrayal was decreed that hour / When the foundations of the world were laid” (292). Judas argues with Christ:

It was decreed that somebody betray you—
I’d thought of that—but not that I should do it,
I the man Judas
...
And neither with a nod nor a sent message
But with a kiss upon your cheek.
I did it, I, Judas, and no other man, and now
You cannot even save me. (292)

It remains unclear if Christ refutes Judas’s argument that he alone came to the idea to deceive Christ and that God played no part in the decision. Because Christ’s betrayal was foreordained and Judas instigates the betrayal of Christ, Judas’s claims cannot be proven. By betraying Christ, he believes he will be “the stronger of the two,” but in his act to escape Christ’s power, he paradoxically succumbs to it. Judas’s only consolation is that he evades Christ’s salvation.

Yeats further shows Christ’s lack of heroism, and lack of awareness, by interpreting him as a leader of crowds. Lazarus accuses Christ: “You dragged me to the light as boys drag out a rabbit when they have dug its hole away” (290). Christ says he only called “Lazarus, come out” and he came. But still Lazarus claims, “I was lying still / In an old comfortable mountain cavern /

When you came climbing there with a great crowd / And dragged me to the light” (290).

Lazarus’s death was dark, peaceful, and solitary. He perceives Christ as a tormentor, forcing him out of death and subjecting him to a crowd of his followers. Twice he refers to Christ’s followers who witnessed Lazarus’s resurrection, calling them “a great crowd” and metaphorical “boys.” Having solitude in death is obviously one of death’s main attractions to Lazarus. He wishes to escape the mob of people. Therefore, Lazarus finds further offense that Christ did not only drag him “to the light,” he did so “with a great crowd” watching. The crowd that follows Christ is as ignorant of Lazarus’s wishes as Christ is. Even if they do know of his preference to avoid salvation, as Christ now does, they would be as dumbfounded to hear him reproach Christ. They have no allowance for other opinions. They lack open minds, and Lazarus views them as “boys” who drag a rabbit out to light. The crowds are, therefore, dangerous for Lazarus. Lazarus claims they are like boys, not like men, and Lazarus is defenseless against the rough immaturity of their dragging.

The crowds Yeats fears are like these crowds that follow Christ. Marjorie Howes, an expert on 20th century Irish literature, examines Yeats reaction to the 1897 Jubilee Riot, during which one person was killed and over two hundred injured (77). Yeats found that although the crowd was violent and destructive, “one of the more threatening features ... was its ability to allure” (77). Yeats himself was lured into the riot: “Yeats sought to lead the crowd, but ended up succumbing to it instead.” In his description of the riot, Yeats states, “I had spoken too much through a disorderly debate at the council, and my voice had gone. Then I too resigned myself and felt the excitement of the moment, that joyous irresponsibility and sense of power” (Howes 78). Howes concludes that when Yeats co-founded the Irish Literary Theatre and began writing plays, he did so “wanting mass mobilization into one kind of collectivity, a nation, and fearing

mass mobilization into another kind of collectivity, a crowd or mob” (78). Yeats knew the difference between the two collectives and wanted to avoid the irresponsible, influential mob that he witnessed. He urged others against joining crowds that congregate for sectarian violence. Lazarus voices Yeats’s own disappointment with religious and political groups, and he places the blame on the crowd’s existence upon Christ. Yeats shows his frustration with Christianity and groups who associate themselves with Christ through Lazarus’s disappointment with his forced resurrection, brought about by Christ and his followers.

Yeats rejects the standard Christian doctrine in *A Vision*, elucidating his conception of a cyclical system of reincarnation. Yeats scholar Joan Carberg explains, “Having grown up in Ireland, familiar with both pagan and pseudo-Christian traditions of the supernatural, Yeats came to magic easily” (143). And being “very much a modern man, he could find no existing theology quite acceptable” (Carberg 155). Throughout his life, Yeats followed his interests in Druidism and early Celtic myth. They led him to join the Golden Dawn, where he studied Jewish Kabala, Rosicrucianism, and techniques of meditation (Carberg 143). His studies, and his wife’s communion with spirits, or instructors, through her automatic writing, led Yeats to develop *A Vision*. Carberg extrapolates that Yeats’s system of archetypal opposites of light and dark and his conception of the soul’s journey between lives display “intriguing resemblances to the antics of the Unconscious as reported by Freud and Jung” (147). The opposites Yeats subscribes to are what Jung explicates in his theories about the human psyche.

Carl Jung’s theory of the Christ archetype offers insight into Christ’s lack of comprehension at Lazarus’s indictment. A Jungian exploration of the Christ archetype elucidates Yeats’s refusal to employ Christ as a heroic figure. In *Psyche and Symbol*, Jung subscribes to the theory that Christ, unspotted by sin, corresponds to Adam before the Fall, when the latter was

still a pure image of God (36). Antinomies existing within all human psyches suggests Christ is lacking something essentially human. Jung argues that each human has a “shadow,” and that it is the “most accessible, personal unconscious, negative side” of a personality (36). However, Christ is the bright, one-sided redeemer; Christ has no shadow—which Jung speculates we all have and must recognize to become “whole” (21). This archetype then is unsuitable for Yeats to use as a heroic figure. Christ lacks humanity, and therefore, lacks understanding of man’s struggles. For Yeats, a hero with a shadow is the correct model for Ireland to follow. He finds a worthy heroic leader in Cuchulain because he demonstrates psychic divisions. Cuchulain is a demi-god, as is Christ, but Yeats denies his portrayal of Christ any humanity. And indeed Jung’s theory would also deny Christ humanity. Cuchulain is portrayed as an intelligent, confident leader; whereas Christ is confused and out of touch with his own followers because he is not fully human. Christ cannot reflect the psyche of Ireland; there is no conflict within Christ. As Jung explains, “the Christ symbol lacks wholeness in the modern psychological sense, since it does not include the dark side of things but specifically excludes it” (38).

Like Christ, Cuchulain is a heroic figure, but Cuchulain experiences struggles that Christ does not, even though Cuchulain is also a demi-god. Unlike Christ, Cuchulain marries and begets children. He unknowingly kills his own son and goes mad with grief, and he is said to have killed hundreds of men (Knapp 235). Bettina Knapp, a Jungian theorist, postulates, “Psychologically speaking, Yeats was a divided human being. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that the creatures of his fantasy suffer antinomic conflict in every domain . . .” (228). Being a demi-god, Cuchulain is endowed with both mortal and superhuman faculties, but despite Cuchulain’s superhuman faculties, his flaws—his struggle with his Jungian shadow—nominate him as a model representation of man.

Christ has difficulties displaying human traits. At the end of Christ's discussion with Lazarus, Christ claims, "I do my Father's will." Lazarus responds, "And not your own; / And I was free four days, four days being dead" (290). Christ lacks free will. He has no thoughts independent of God's thoughts. In this way, Christ fails to be a heroic figure in *Calvary*. Yeats depicts Christ as emotionless. He gives short unenthusiastic responses to Lazarus. Lazarus accusing Christ of not performing his own will elucidates Yeats's argument that Christ is not human enough to be considered a hero. He is a part of God. He needs no thoughts of his own. Christ is not a man, but a substitute for God. "Christ is at the center of the scene not as a tortured victim but as the pantokrator, Byzantine and unrealistic, rigid like the figure in an icon" (Ure 174).

Yeats's characters in *Calvary* and *The Resurrection* are concerned that Christ will take something away from them. Lazarus is afraid of this, as is the Greek in *The Resurrection*. He says sins belong to the man; Christ has no right to take them. From a Jungian perspective, Christ would take away the shadow. No human would be whole. Jung would suggest that humans are not able to lose the antinomies that create unity within them:

The psychological concept of the self, in part derived from our knowledge of the whole man, but for the rest depicting itself spontaneously in the products of the unconscious as an archetypal quaternity bound together by inner antinomies, cannot omit the shadow that belongs to the light figure, for without it this figure lacks body and humanity. In the empirical self, light and shadow form a paradoxical unity (40).

This theory suggests that as Christ seeks to save men from death and sin, he will ruin man if he should succeed. Some of Yeats's characters protest, knowing they will be lacking their fundamental humanity if Christ forces salvation upon them.

Yeats's play *The Resurrection* consists of conversations between three allegorical characters: The Hebrew, The Greek, and The Syrian. Neither The Hebrew nor The Greek can fathom what Christ is. The Hebrew argues that Christ was not actually a God, but a man: "He was nothing more than a man, the best man who ever lived. Nobody before him had so pitied human misery" (367). He conjectures that Christ mistakenly took on the title of "Messiah": "He preached the coming of the Messiah because he thought the Messiah would take it all upon himself. Then some day when he was very tired, after a long journey perhaps, he thought that he himself was the Messiah" (367). The Greek disagrees, however. He believes Christ was a god, but cannot comprehend that he will be resurrected: "We Greeks understand these things. No god has ever been buried; no god has ever suffered. Christ only seemed to be born, only seemed to eat, seemed to sleep, seemed to walk, seemed to die" (366). The Greek thinks it's blasphemy to think a Messiah, a God could be born of a woman, "carried in her womb, fed upon her breast, washed as children are washed" (366). This thought disturbs him. The Hebrew argues that the savior had to be born of a woman, needed to experience human suffering and sin, so he could take it away. But The Greek claims, "Every man's sins are his property. Nobody else has a right to them" (367). So the Hebrew has lost faith and is glad because they may have wasted their whole lives in a lie. "One had to give up all worldly knowledge, all ambition, do nothing of one's own will. Only the divine would have any reality. God had to take complete possession" (367). The Hebrew finds gratification from believing Christ falsely represented himself because now he may have freedom. He fears what may have been lost: "to think of all the ambitions one has put

aside; to think, perhaps, a great deal about women. I want to marry and have children” (368). The Hebrew’s fears elucidate again Yeats’s assertion that Christ will take over a person so completely that they will not exist in the same sense that they once did. Their sins will be gone; they will lack the darkness that gives them humanity.

And along with their sins, the Hebrew says they give up “all worldly knowledge.” In a conversation later between The Greek and The Syrian, The Syrian asks, “What is human knowledge?” The Greek replies that knowledge is what “keeps the road from here to Persia free from robbers, that has built the beautiful humane cities, that has made the modern world, that stands between us and the barbarian” (371). To The Greek, human knowledge is order. Any order in the world, and anything humane comes from human knowledge. The Greek who says “A hand without bones, without sinews, cannot move a stone” shows his proclivity for logic. This is his reasoning for doubting Christ has resurrected and moved the stone back to leave his tomb. But The Syrian asserts, “What if the irrational return? What if the circle begin again?” Ure explains, Yeats “saw the pagan world, in particular the world of Greece and Rome, as a *primary* civilization; at the time of Christ’s coming it was drawing to its foreordained end in the cyclical movement of history and was becoming subject to the loss of control which heralded the birth of the next age.” This loss of control Yeats illustrates with the Dionysus worshippers who grow more frantic in the streets as the conversation continues. As the three characters converse, the men outside are dressed as women, holding the image of their dead god. Everyone has gone mad. They gash themselves with knives. The Greek says, “The worshippers of Dionysus are coming this way again. They have hidden their image of the dead god, and have begun their lunatic cry, ‘God has arisen! God has arisen!’” (371). These worshippers reflect the illogical frenzy Yeats would ascribe to Christians. He does not claim Christians exhibit the specific manic

traditions acted out by the Dionysus worshippers, but Christians “abandon themselves to their god and become completely his objects” as Yeats claims they must do to earn salvation (Ure 180). The worshippers are alike in this respect.

The Resurrection ends with a song from the musicians:

In pity for man’s darkening thought
He walked that room and issued thence
In Galilean turbulence;
The Babylonian starlight brought
A fabulous, formless darkness in. (373)

Christ being resurrected ruins the Greek’s concept of human knowledge. There now is a darkness. The darkness lies outside human knowledge. Yeats argues that the annunciation of Christ brings ruin for logic. His experience joining a large, riotous mob and witnessing his country’s continued radical progression of Christian sectarian violence may evoke his lack of faith for Christ’s heroic capabilities. Yeats witnesses Christianity’s failure to unify Ireland, and thus depicts Christ’s inability to successfully provide salvation within *Calvary* and *The Resurrection*. Sectarian violence has emanated throughout the history of the country’s colonization. Continued religious-inspired violence will not motivate Ireland to become a unified nation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: YEATS'S FAILURE TO INSPIRE NON-VIOLENT NATIONALISM

Yeats was deeply concerned with his nation's future. His plays are designed to illustrate heroic models for inspiring and instructing his audiences during Ireland's difficult transition from a colonized country to a fully autonomous nation. His first plays support the progress capable from common Irishmen. Further in his career, he will implement Irish heroic figures to promote national identity and serve as models for the Irish people. After he perceives his attempts have failed with Cuchulain, as the political climate becomes more radical and violent, he becomes disillusioned with heroic figures. He begins portraying Christ as a failed hero. Yeats resorts to controversial portrayals of Christ to elucidate his frustration with Christian sectarian violence that has pervaded his country for centuries. Yeats, despite not following any type of Christianity, sees credible political reasons for dissuading others from following the religion. Yeats not only argues that Christianity hinders its followers, but he claims it damages the nation wholly.

An extreme progression is noticeable when comparing *Where There is Nothing to Calvary*. *Where There is Nothing* does not condemn Christianity, it only insults the purveyors of the religion. The hero within the play is a man, not a demi-god, and this protagonist comes to realize how his societal institutions interrupt his relationship with God and corrupt his attempts at an honest way of life. There is no mention of Christ within the play. Yeats only criticizes the Fathers at the monastery who distort the religion. Paul circumvents societal pressures by seeking solitude and finds God where there is nothing. A materialistic, industrialized nation keeps Paul from God. Yeats does not condemn Christ or Christianity within the play, as Paul's main goal is to become closer to God. Yeats merely ignores the Christ figure. He does not argue within the

play that finding God or spirituality is a useless or deleterious undertaking. Contrarily, in his later plays utilizing the heroic archetype of Christ, Yeats displays his disappointment and distrust of Christianity, claiming it threatens logic and it does not allow freedom of thought for its worshippers. Yeats would argue that Christ lacks the humanity to properly lead a nation of people. His hope is to illustrate this to a nation that has seen sectarian discrimination and violence for centuries. With his later Christian plays, he pleads with the Irish to give up Christianity to help unify the nation.

Yeats does not consider himself successful in his endeavors to foster a non-violent nationalism. As his choice of heroic figures changes, the political climate increases in radical, violent tactics. Yeats perhaps failed to realize, as he attempts to inspire nationalism, that violent uprisings are engrained in his nation's history and not easily forgotten. He uses the uprising of 1798 for the background of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in his attempt to dissuade the public from violence, but utilizing this revolt in Ireland's history only seems to spur violent nationalist sentiments. His denigration of Christianity also fails to take root in Ireland. England's 18th century penal laws allowed systematic discrimination of Irish Catholics. If the Irish eliminated Christianity, Irish Catholics would suddenly find themselves on equal terms with the Anglo-Protestant ascendancy as these Christian designated sects would no longer exist. For Yeats, this is the ideal, but for Ireland, abolishing the religion would result in the loss of national identity. Christianity and the discrimination of Catholics after the Protestant Reformation in Britain proves to be fixed to Ireland's character. What Yeats can be credited for is revitalizing the national identity by reintroducing Ireland's mythological heroes. Yeats fails to dissuade radical nationalists from violence, but adds to his nation's literary renaissance and evokes his nation's

past heroic myths to revitalize a unique Irish cultural identity, separate from England's cultural character.

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