



Exploring the Native, Nation, and Stage in W.B. Yeats' Select Plays

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Abstract

W.B. Yeats is celebrated as an Irish writer because he produced a body of work deeply rooted in Irish culture and history and actively contributed to Ireland's cultural and political reawakening during a pivotal period. The synthesis of Native and Modern in the dramas written by W.B. Yeats often sought to blend native Irish elements with more modern theatrical techniques. His writings continue to be celebrated as a significant part of Ireland's literary heritage, and he is considered one of the greatest poets in the Irish and English literary traditions. As a prominent literary figure in the Irish Nationalist Movement, which propagated a cultural movement that sought to revive and celebrate Ireland's native Celtic traditions, folklore, and mythology, Yeats's speculative theatrical rendering of Irish nationalism depicted the significance of Irish folklore and mythology to create a sense of native identity and cultural pride. For example, "The Celtic Twilight" and "The Land of Heart's Desire" may be considered milestone works drenched in Irish mythology. His plays reflect a tension between the ancient and the contemporary, exploring how the native culture could be preserved and adapted to the modern world. In the context of Irish Nationalism, he played a significant role in the cultural and political movements leading up to Irish independence. Many of his plays have nationalistic undercurrents, endorsing the idea of Ireland as a distinct nation with its own culture, language, and identity. Yeats uses allegory to comment on the political situation of Ireland.

Keywords:

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W.B Yeats and his plays have nationalistic undertones, as he has been widely read and discussed for a complex political and sociological discourse through his dramatic and poetic exuberance, followed by leading a movement for the Irish Literary Revival and the Irish Renaissance. Yeats was awarded a Nobel Prize for his contribution to translating the Upanishads. Augustine Martin aptly says about his influence and various accomplishments:

“A dreamer, an escapist, infatuated with lake isles, hazel woods, spooks and fairies, a right-wing visionary, precursor of a Fascist apocalypse in which swarms of rough beasts, iron hawks, and swans will bring in a new authoritarian world order, an eccentric figure, self-marginalized by a hatred of England, and by a brand of Irish nationalism learned from his father’s friend, John O’Leary and a pseudo-philosopher.”

(Martin *XXIII*)

Yeats’ political ideology concerning Irish Theatre and performativity received significant scrutiny in the past few decades, from which two basic camps have emerged. Cusack George Thomas, in his article *Restaging Ireland: The Politics of Identity* aptly remarks that the first camp, most notably represented by Seamus Deane, contends that Yeats’ interest in the Irish nation masked a nostalgia for the lost authority of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy”. Edward Said also argues that Yeats’ status as an “indisputably great *national* poet who articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an off-shore power” (“Yeats and Decolonization” 69).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a theatrical experience stuffed with various conflicts and controversies. Nationalism directed Ireland’s popular and political aspects, stemming in multiple ways—the Home Rule movement as a legitimate political vent to nationalist ideas.

When conducting a critical inquiry into W.B. Yeats’ plays and their connection to Irish nationalism, it’s crucial to analyse specific plays in depth, explore the historical



and cultural context in which they were written, and consider how Yeats' views and evolving political perspectives influenced his dramatic works. Reading scholarly articles and books on this topic can provide valuable insights and interpretations.

The primary targets of Yeats' criticism in this play are the character's tragic flaws. Because of Conchubar's treachery and Naoise's and (even more so) Fergus's blind faith in logic and conventional renderings of gender, Deirdre and Naoise die, and Fergus is forced to swear revenge on his former, beloved, yet trust betraying "near friend," King Conchubar. On a more positive note, by the end, all of the characters have at least learned to "put meaning upon words spoken at random"—all, that is, except Conchubar, who unwaveringly demands his rights as a royal authority to the end. In the famous last words of the play, Conchubar continues to rail against circumstances, refusing to see how the misreading that led him to believe Deirdre did or could love him ironically caused him to lose what he had spent his life trying to obtain. Yeats defines one of the critical problems in the play, and indeed in society, as blind faith in the conventional definitions of gender and in conventional social contracts that declare that men, especially kings, do not betray other men. The play thus points out the necessity to be aware of, not swallow whole, social classifications.

Yeats represents Cuchulain's loss to majority rule in an interesting way. Traditional depictions of this portion of the Cuchulain myth blame Cuchulain's change of heart on a sort of pagan *deus-ex-machina*. In these versions, Cuchulain capitulates to Conchubar's entreaties to fight the Young Man because he falls under the spell of ages or, as Yeats calls it here, "witchcraft" (508). In Yeats' version, Cuchulain also becomes convinced by the others that witchcraft is involved, but not right away. In fact, he balks at the first mention of witchcraft, which occurs immediately after Cuchulain admits he is not afraid to say he "was afraid" (508) to save the peace.

W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) stirred its audience with the prospect of revolution in its romanticisation of the need for young men to defend Mother Ireland until death. In her performance, Maud Gonne became an icon for whom "the youth of the country saw all that was magnificent in Ireland" (Qtd. In Golway, 201) and was



worth fighting for. John Bull has ravaged the Poor Old Woman, but her honour will be defended once her sons heed her call.

“The stereotype of an older Irish woman—the benign, silver-haired lady, framed in an archway of roses—is as false and misleading as that of the Irish colleen. The truth is that the Irish women [were of formidable character and tenacious will, if not always of distinguished ancestry” (12).

Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, argues that Yeats’ “poetic invention” was a creation of an “ideal Ireland in his imagination” (202), which correlates to Keane’s commentary on Yeats’ choice of Maud Gonne for the role, as well. In 1902, Maud founded the Nationalist group Daughters of Erin, and she agreed to act in a play Yeats would write for her if he allowed her group to produce it (4-5).

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, written for a popular nationalist audience, Yeats likewise directs a critical eye toward the subjugation of the more noble pursuits of family, romantic love, and nationalist fervour for material gain. As in *The Countess Cathleen*, anti-materialism is not *Cathleen ni Houlihan*’s central theme. The clash between pagan and Christian values has been critically exposed. The main conflict in the play might also be described as that between a spiritual (pagan) world and that of material existence, the latter of which Yeats colours specifically as Christian, bourgeois and, given the Catholic context of the play, somewhat ironically as reflective of the Protestant work ethic.

The centrality of the family in Christian life is represented by the frequent references to, and attempts to enforce, family gatherings by the hearth fire beneath the loving and watchful eye of Jesus, ever-present in the form of the crucifixion. As innocuously agreeable as contentment, wisdom, and a warm turf fire sound, Yeats does not allow Maurteen’s description of idyllic family life to go unchallenged. For the “best of life,” according to the Bruin family, also means living according to the standards of the nuclear family, the Christian family, the hardworking, philistine, bourgeois-aspiring



(if not in socio-economic fact) family. Yeats further exposes the weaknesses of Christianity by portraying some of its subtle hypocrisies. The depiction of Christ as a tortured creature corresponds to Mary's state in the play and may represent, for Yeats, Christianity's martyrdom to contemporary bourgeois values. The crucifix, for example, loses its reputed power to shield the house from the fairy child's influence when the fairy convinces Father Hart to remove it from the wall physically.

Dramatically, Deirdre's eccentric nurture is the context that ultimately works in her favour in her dealings with Conchubar. It allows her to see through Conchubar's attempts to manipulate her and the others, as men invested in being "men," Naoise and Fergus ignore the obvious signs that they are being tricked and instead put their trust in Conchubar's word, which they assume, as the word of a man and a king, to be honest. Yeats chose to revise Fergus's hysteria into self-control, one of the signatures of masculine rationality, showing that Yeats perceived with growing importance the need to critique strict social constructions of gender. Writing the feminine out of Fergus's characterisation, thereby making him more conventionally male, might indicate Yeats' conformity to traditional gender roles.

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out the necessity to be aware of, not swallow whole, social classifications. A critical inquiry into this topic can reveal the complex and multifaceted ways Yeats engaged with Irish nationalism in his plays. Many of his early plays, such as “The Countess Cathleen” (1892), were influenced by this revival and contributed to promoting Irish cultural identity. Yeats drew heavily from Irish mythology and folklore in his plays. Works like “The Celtic Twilight” and “The Hour-Glass” explored Irish culture's mystical and mythological aspects. Using these elements in his plays helped reinforce a sense of Irish identity rooted in a rich cultural heritage. While Yeats’ early plays may have emphasised cultural revival, his later works, such as “Cathleen ni Houlihan” (1902) and “The Dreaming of the Bones” (1919), took on more overtly political themes. These plays depicted the sacrifices and heroism of Irish nationalists, aligning Yeats with the cause of Irish independence.

Yeats’ relationship with Irish nationalism was not always straightforward. He was often critical of some aspects of Irish nationalism and politics, and this complexity is reflected in his plays. For example, his play “The Herne’s Egg” (1938) explores the tensions between different strands of Irish nationalism. Yeats frequently used symbolism and allegory in his plays to convey deeper meanings. These symbols often had political and nationalist undertones. Understanding the symbolic elements in his plays is essential for a comprehensive critical analysis.

Yeats’s theatrical politics at the Abbey can be summarised as promoting Irish Identity and asserting the formation of Irish Nationalism. Yeats was deeply committed to promoting Irish cultural and national identity through theatre. He believed drama should reflect the Irish people’s history, mythology, and folklore. He wrote and encouraged the production of plays that celebrated Irish heritage and challenged British cultural dominance. Nationalism and politics moved around W.B Yeats's plays, and Yeats, an active member of Abbey Theatre, asserted and attempted to gain Ireland’s cultural independence from British influence. Artistic Innovation in the works of Yeats was found in abundance as the Irish culture, literature, and theatre became a platform



to showcase the poverty of Ireland. His plays often featured poetic language and symbolism.

Yeats collaborated with several other notable playwrights and artists, including J.M. Synge, Sean O’Casey, and Lady Augusta Gregory. W.B. Yeats’s theatrical politics at the Abbey Theatre were driven by his passion for Irish identity and his desire to use theatre to promote Irish culture and nationalism. His influence on the Abbey’s programming and his commitment to artistic innovation left a lasting impact on the development of Irish drama.

To conclude, a reassessment of W.B. Yeats’ plays through the lens of “Native, Nation, and Stage” reveals his dramatic works’ profound complexity and evolution. Yeats, a literary giant of the 20th century, used his plays not only as a platform for artistic expression but also as a means to grapple with the complex issues of his time. Yeats’ exploration of the themes of “Native” and “Nation” in his plays reflects his deep engagement with Irish identity and the struggle for independence. Through his characters and narratives, he delved into the complexities of Irish history, folklore, and mythology, offering a nuanced perspective on the nation’s cultural heritage” and its quest for autonomy. Yeats’ plays underscore his innovative approach to theatre. He sought to revitalise Irish drama by infusing it with symbolism, mysticism, and a profound connection to the spiritual world. His plays were not merely theatrical performances but also spiritual journeys that invited the audience to contemplate life’s deeper mysteries. Yeats, who bridged the gap between tradition and modernity, leading a possibility of exploration of the native, the nation, and the stage, not only enriched Irish drama but also contributed to the broader discourse on identity, culture, and the human condition.

Yeats’ plays continue to resonate with audiences today, reminding the audience of the enduring power of theatre to explore the complexities of our world and the timeless questions that define our existence. Through “Native, Nation, and Stage,” I tried to explore a deeper gratitude for Yeats’ artistic legacy and his enduring impact on the world of drama and literature.



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