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W.B. Yeats: Searching for a National Identity through the Ritual of Theatre

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Contents

Acknowledgments....................................................................................................................... i

Abbreviations of frequently cited texts.................................................................................... ii

Introduction................................................................................................................................... 1

A Theatre, an Audience, and a Ritual form of Drama............................................................... 5

Matters of Faith, Honour and Heroism ...................................................................................... 17

A Personal Point of View............................................................................................................ 47

The Staging of Ritual .................................................................................................................. 62

On Reflection ............................................................................................................................... 94

Bibliography.............................................................................................................................. 97
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## Abbreviations of frequently cited texts

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Introduction

Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work’s sake what I have called “the applied arts of literature”, the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance; and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design? Perhaps even these images, once created and associated with river and mountain, might move of themselves and with some powerful, even turbulent life, like those painted horses that trampled the rice-fields of Japan. (“Four Years: 1887-1891”, Auto, 194)

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) was a leading figure in the Irish Literary Revival, a movement established in the late nineteenth century to promote Irish literature. Yeats and the other writers of the Revival were concerned that Ireland was lacking a serious literary tradition to call its own. They believed that by raising the awareness of the people to their cultural heritage it would help restore a sense of national pride, identity and cohesiveness: elements that had been lacking throughout Ireland’s modern turbulent and divisive history. In his essay “Ireland and the Arts” (1901) Yeats calls on his fellow artists to look to the abundance of “imaginative events” and legends available in Ireland, telling them that “there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend” (E&I, 205). He states that by so doing, they would inspire the Irish and instil in each and every one of the people an overwhelming love of, and pride in, their country. The Irish as a race would then be set apart from all others: they would be “one of the pillars that uphold the world” (E&I, 210). To this end, the Irish Literary Theatre was established with the aim of connecting the people to the literary traditions of their country through the medium of theatre.

Yeats had long looked to the civilisation of ancient Greece as the epitome of the “ideal” society: he considered it the place where “civilisation rose to its highest mark” (Expl, 439). His dream for his own country was to create an Irish equivalent of the Greek Theatre of Dionysus, a national theatre in which the people would watch “the sacred drama of its own history, every spectator finding self and neighbour, finding all the world there as we find the sun in the bright spot under the looking glass”.2

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The coming together of the people to share in the drama of their history would, he believed, assist the unification of the Irish on a national level. By “rediscovering the association of literature with music, speech and dance”, Yeats intended to “so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer, would accept a common design” (Auto, 194). A nation, he said, should be “like an audience in some great theatre” (P&C, 416) This thesis sets out to show that rather than promote a sense of national identity, Yeats’ dramas made little impact on the national consciousness, primarily because they were more concerned with the expression of his personal views and ideals, and the development of his own dramatic career as an innovator of theatrical experimentation.

The subject matter and themes of many of Yeats’ early plays in particular were based on the folklore, mythology and legends of Ireland’s ancient past. He was not interested in portraying the “realities of life”, which he considered to be for “the common people” (“Certain Noble Plays of Japan” (1916), E&I, 227). Instead, it was through the dramatic recreation of the tales and times of long ago that he believed his audiences would gain a true sense of national pride and identity. The problem with this approach was that, aside from the fact that the plots of these plays had little relevance to the lives of the Dublin theatregoers, he appeared to be presenting elements of the ancient way life as the “ideal” way to create national unity for the modern day society. In this regard he took little account of the current social and religious conditions in Ireland: indeed, there were many aspects to his portrayals of the “traditional” life which his audiences found to be objectionable and offensive. The Land of Heart’s Desire (1894) and The Countess Cathleen (1899) both suggested a return to an “ancient” form of religion that drew on the supernatural beliefs of the country folk: this caused a huge amount of outrage from various quarters, especially staunch Catholics. The Countess Cathleen further upset many viewers with its representation of the “sinful” peasantry, which they considered to be an affront to their honour, and the preferential treatment that was shown to the nobility in this play was also an unwelcome reminder of the exploitation against the working classes by the gentry. The members of this latter group were predominantly of Protestant Anglo-Irish ascendancy, as of course was Yeats: from the very outset this placed him in a precarious situation with regard to his portrayal of the noble classes.

The plays that were based on legendary heroes such as Cuchulain were intended to motivate the Irish into recreating the heroic culture and spirit of those times. On Baile’s Strand (1904) was one such example that offered the audiences a dramatic experience full of passionate intensity,
nobile, heroism and tragedy. But plays such as this belonged to the realm of fantasy: the ability to reproduce the essence of a bygone era in modern day Ireland through the medium of theatre was an idealistic dream on Yeats’ part.

Yeats also used his dramatic works as vehicles to express his annoyance and frustration at current social, cultural and political matters: the emphasis in these plays was on his own personal message to society rather than on reacquainting the people of Ireland with their literary past. One major obstacle for Yeats was the insistence by the militant Nationalists and press that the national theatre should be used as a means of propaganda. Yeats vehemently disagreed with this view, insisting that theatre should be about art, and that the freedom of the artist was paramount. He wanted his plays to inspire the people and unite them with feelings of pride for their country and ancient heritage, not act as a divisive factor in the battle between Nationalists and Unionists. *The King’s Threshold* (1903) adamantly made the point that art and the artist have an important role to play in society. It was based on various ancient legends but Yeats adapted the story to suit the expression of his own grievance. Unfortunately, the play did not work in his favour as many regarded the protagonist, a poet, to be distinctly ungrateful, mean-spirited and churlish. Yeats was not going to gain support for his artistic stance with a main character who elicited feelings of disgust and alienation.

The vexation and irritation Yeats felt with sections of the Nationalist movement expanded to include the Irish as a whole. The catalyst for his despair was the public reaction at the Abbey Theatre to two of John Synge’s plays, *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Their very realist portrayals of Irish life caused quite a stir and outraged the sensibilities of many: the productions in the first week of *Playboy* even resulted in riots. Yeats was outraged too, but at what he viewed to be the pettiness and narrow-mindedness of the Nationalist press and the rioting public. His response was *The Green Helmet* (1908), a mocking satire which affirmed the strong sense of disdain he felt towards his fellow countrymen.

One of the main factors preventing Yeats from making a positive connection with his Irish audiences was his insistence on a highly ritualistic form of drama. His pursuit of the “ideal” way to present his literary plays took precedence over consideration of the style of drama with which the theatregoing public would be most comfortable. *The Shadowy Waters* (1900) and *The Hour-Glass* (1903) exemplify his minimalist and highly symbolic approach to theatre, an approach that placed the dramas on an intellectual level that was beyond the comprehension of many. Yeats’ search for the “perfect” ritual ultimately resulted in a series of dance plays that were based on the
Japanese Noh tradition of theatre. *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916) demonstrates his prowess as an innovator of experimental production methods, but some of the techniques employed were just too challenging in their unfamiliarity and “foreignness” – even to an elite intellectual audience.

In order to illustrate the argument of this thesis, a selection of Yeats’ plays that had their first performances between the mid-1890s to 1916 will be discussed with particular attention given to subject matter, language style and form, stage setting and method of acting. The aim is to show how Yeats’ use of these elements tended to hinder rather than help his nationalistic endeavours through the medium of literary theatre. The discussion will take into account the current social conditions of Dublin and the demographic of the typical audience member at the turn of the twentieth century.

The timespan covered finishes in the year Yeats produced the first of his Noh-based dance-plays. By this stage he was beginning to question the role he had played creatively in the struggle for Irish independence, as he directed his dramatic and poetic endeavours towards more esoteric subjects.

The political environment in Ireland was obviously a key motivator for Yeats at the outset of his dramatic career: he believed that his literary plays would aid the Nationalist movement indirectly by uniting his audiences with a shared sense of patriotic pride and identity. The focus of this essay however is on the content and style of the plays themselves, and their potential impact on the national consciousness at the time they were first produced. As such, comment on political events will be made only as necessary in order to strengthen the argument as it relates to the dramatic works.

Before commencing discussion of the individual plays, the essay will outline Yeats’ intentions for the type of play to be performed at the newly established literary theatre. This will be presented against the backdrop of the state of theatre in Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century. It will show how the “ritual form of drama” that Yeats desired was very different from the “theatre of commerce” (such as melodramas and variety shows) that the Dublin audience was used to seeing. It will also show that Yeats had an “imagined” desired audience of individuals with superior literary intellect which was vastly different from the “real” middle-class audience members who made up the majority of theatregoers. This is revealing in that it confirms from the outset that Yeats was more concerned with producing intellectual theatre for an elite audience than with providing everyday people with a theatrical experience that would speak to them on their own level.
A Theatre, an Audience, and a Ritual form of Drama

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. (“The Theatre” (1899), E&I, 166)

In his essay “The Theatre”, Yeats discusses his intentions for the type of play to be produced at the proposed Irish literary theatre. He was vehemently opposed to the variety shows and melodramas, the “theatre of commerce”, that were playing to the audiences in Ireland at that time, and particularly objected to the use of elaborate and ostentatious scenery in place of the descriptive poetry of the spoken word. He was also disdainful of the cumbersome way contemporary actors delivered their lines, and determined to bring back the “noble art of oratory”, the half-chant form of speaking from the “old times” (E&I, 168). In his view, only a return to the ritual form of drama could return to the people “the emotions of sailors and husbandmen and shepherds and users of the spear and the bow” (E&I, 167). To this end, the national consciousness of each and every member of the audience would be awakened and they would be filled with an overwhelming sense of pride in their country.

It was certainly the case that at the turn of the twentieth century Ireland was lacking a national drama that took its people and its country seriously. The New Theatre Royal and the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin both produced light dramas, comedies and melodramas by mainly English touring companies. The Queen’s Royal Theatre (commonly known as The Queen’s) was managed by an Englishman, J.W. Whitbread, and produced the Irish plays of Dion Bouicicault³ and patriotic neo-Boucicaultian melodramas written by Whitbread himself. The quality and production values of the plays were very low, and provided “a mélange of cheap thrills, laughter, pathos and patriotism, which offered an exaggerated and unrealistically simple view of Ireland”.⁴ Mary Trotter sums up the typical offering at the Queen’s:

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³ Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot (1820-1890), commonly known as Dion Bouicicault, was an Irish actor and playwright famed for his melodramas.
Queen’s Royal Irish melodramas were passionate, simple, straight-forward, but ultimately unrealistic interpretations of the nationalist struggle. Heroes were nationalists, villains were traitors, heroines loved heroes while being stalked by villains. And through it all, a character actor with an Irish brogue would laugh and fight and endure for Ireland.  

The theatre reviewer and actor Frank Fay (who was later to be instrumental in the establishment of the Irish National Theatre Society, along with his brother William) stated in his review of Whitbread’s *Wolfe Tone*: “We have not yet had a real historical Irish drama, and the author of *Wolfe Tone* cannot give us one”.  

The state of a specifically Irish theatre was not advanced by the fact that most of the dramatic writers at the time were producing plays based on conventional English scenarios and situations. For example, in 1894 the popular fiction writer Mary Costello published a play called *The Tragedy of a Simple Soul*. The list of principal characters gives an indication as to the nature of the play: the Hon. Edgar Haldane (Captain, Knightstream Guards); Miss Constance Pennefather; Miss Edith Pennefather; Miss Nancy Hart (daughter of a bankrupt sporting squire). Dramas with a strong emphasis on English upper-class conventions and culture might have conformed to the expectations of the Anglo-Irish, but they had little relevance to the culture and lives of the Catholic Irish who represented the majority of the population.  

It was clear to Yeats and his associates that their challenge was to offer an alternative to the predominantly English-influenced dramas and third-rate Irish melodramas. They needed to come up with a contemporary Irish drama that captured the imagination, instilled a sense of national identity and offered a more serious and honest representation of Ireland, its people and its history.  

The theatre that they proposed would “show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism”. To forestall opposition from the established “theatres of commerce”, the application to the Dublin Town Clerk for permission to give performances stated that: “The plays proposed to be acted are of a

more literary nature than are usually acted in theatres, and are not expected to appeal to a popular audience”.

In 1899 the Irish Literary Theatre was officially founded by Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory (1852-1932) and Edward Martyn (1859-1923). In 1902 it merged with W.G. Fay’s Irish National Dramatic Company, and in 1903 became the Irish National Theatre Society. During this time performances took place in various halls, concert rooms and theatres around Dublin. In 1904 it found a permanent home at the Abbey Theatre, due to the generosity and patronage of Annie Horniman, a wealthy English friend of Yeats. It achieved professional status in 1905 under the directorship of Yeats, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge (1871-1909) and was renamed the Irish National Theatre Society, Ltd., followed in 1906 by its permanent title of National Theatre Society, Ltd.

The question arises at this early stage as to how successful a theatre company based in the capital city of the land could be in delivering a message of cultural nationalism to all parts of the country (particularly given that the majority were not predisposed to “literary theatre”). According to the 1901 census, the total population of Ireland at that time was around 4.5 million, with the population of Dublin City being around 300,000. That left a large percentage of the people, many of whom lived in rural areas, without easy access to the national theatre. The audience in Dublin itself would be limited too, as many of its citizens would have been too poor to attend ticketed cultural events: about a third of all Dublin families at the turn of the twentieth century lived in one-roomed accommodation.

As it eventuated, the endeavour was successful in that it inspired theatre groups in towns and cities around Ireland to join in the literary and dramatic revival. In 1904, for example, the theatre company based in Belfast reformed as the Ulster Literary Theatre. Also in 1904, the Cork National Theatre was established, with Yeats’ *A Pot of Broth* being selected as one of its first performances. After 1903 the Society began to tour, initially to London but then

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throughout Ireland, as well as the rest of the United Kingdom and, after 1911, to the United States. Many small amateur dramatic groups around Ireland later produced the works of Yeats and the other Irish playwrights, ensuring that the plays were seen by as many people as possible. The theatre critics of the national press kept its readers informed of the Society’s productions through their regular reviews, and the theatrical periodical Samhain (published by the Society) provided news, reviews and commentary. The Abbey Theatre also published the plays that they produced: Yeats insisted that “As we do not think that a play can be worth acting, and not worth reading, all our plays will be published in time”. It is unlikely that anyone other than a student, literary scholar or someone with a keen interest in drama would buy the published books of the plays, but at least they were available in print form for those unable to see a live performance.

Although the national theatre group managed to reach beyond the confines of Dublin, their plays were primarily aimed at, and viewed by, the people of that city. Success (or otherwise) in the capital city would not necessarily equate to success in the rest of the country. Given this constraint, it seems unlikely that Yeats and his colleagues could ultimately succeed in raising the cultural awareness of the whole nation. That aside, if Yeats’ literary dramas were successful in evoking a sense of national pride and identity in the hearts and minds of the people of Dublin, the positive effect would filter throughout the country, particularly through news media. The various national newspapers regularly provided theatre reviews, and a good write-up would be viewed by a wide readership. (Of course the converse also applies as Yeats was to discover in later years: his plays received much criticism from sections of the Nationalist press who disagreed with his stance that the role of the theatre was to provide art, not political propaganda.)

From the outset there was a disconnection between the theatre audience that Yeats (and the members of the Literary Theatre) hoped, or “imagined”, would see his plays, and the “real” audience who would actually sit in the seats. The 1897 statement of purpose for the Irish Literary Theatre expressed the founders’ wish that they find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome [...]. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.16

14 Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 11.
This statement suggests that “all Irish people” were united in their desire to support a drama that would immerse themselves in the “deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland”. It also implies that they were united in their frustration at the stereotypical way they had been misrepresented on stage through melodramatic plays such as *The Shaughraun* (1874) by Boucicault. This implication is very far-fetched, given the popularity at the turn of the century of the Irish melodramas. *(The Shaughraun continues to play to captive audiences to this day.)*

Yeats clearly had very grandiose images of what this new theatre would represent and the type of person who would come to see his plays. His essay “The Reform of the Theatre” (1903) includes the comment:

> We have to write or find plays that will make the theatre a place of intellectual excitement – a place where the mind goes to be liberated as it was liberated by the theatres of Greece and England and France at certain great moments of their history. *(CWVIII, 26)*

The pursuit of the intellectual was foremost in his ambition. An article he wrote for the May 1899 edition of the literary magazine *Beltaine* stated that the plays would be different from those seen in London and Paris, because “the intellect of Ireland is romantic and spiritual rather than scientific and analytical”. The article went on to reinforce his image of the “ideal” audience:

> Their writers will appeal to that limited public which gives understanding, and not to that unlimited public which gives wealth; and if they interest those among their audience who keep in their memories the songs of Callanan and Walsh, or old Irish legends, or who love the good books of any country, they will not mind greatly if others are bored. *(19)*

By referring to a “limited” public (his fellow writers, intellectuals and those with an understanding and love of literature and the history of their country) Yeats is ignoring that very group of people who made up the majority of Dublin’s theatregoing public: the urban middle-classes.

Yeats’ attitude towards the middle-classes was always going to work against his nationalistic ambitions. He was never going to reach out effectively to a group of people for whom he felt no

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17 Reynolds, 41.
18 The New York Irish Repertory Theatre provides the following description of *The Shaughraun* for its 2011 season: “Against a background ripe with the intrigue of the secret Fenian Uprising in Ireland in 1866, Dion Boucicault, the undisputed master of melodrama, unravels his comic masterpiece, THE SHAUGHRAUN … Desperate forbidden passions! Beautiful damsels in distress! Swashbuckling swordplay! Mustachioed [sic] villains! Lots of kissing, and a charismatic hero whose fiddle is the soul of every fair and the life of every funeral […] also a dog.” Irish Repertory Theatre, accessed March 25, 2015, http://www.irishrep.org/theshaughraun.html.
19 W.B. Yeats, “Plans and Methods”, *Beltaine*, May 1899, in CWVIII, 144.
20 Reynolds, 43.
empathy or commonality – more than that, for whom he felt a deep level of disdain and contempt:

The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland – the lower-middle class from which the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for the last ten years – have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of the movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent of a certain operation [i.e., emasculation]. Hence the shrillness of their voices. They contemplate all creative power as the eunuchs contemplate Don Juan as he passes through Hell on the white horse. (Auto, 486)

People such as this, in Yeats’ opinion, would never be able to understand or appreciate art, if indeed they had any interest in it at all. When it came to discussing his theatrical work he did not hold back with his opinion of the “average” audience member. In a letter to John O’Leary, dated March 1894, he referred to his play The Shadowy Waters (1900) as a “wild mystical thing carefully arranged to be an insult to the regular theatre goer who is hated by both of us” (CLI, 384). And in his Notes on The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919), he stated that: “While writing these plays, intended for some fifty people in a drawing-room or a studio, I have so rejoiced in my freedom from the stupidity of an ordinary audience” (P&C, 440).

However, the economic reality for the National Theatre Society was that they needed to attract a larger audience (particularly as it became clear in 1906 that Annie Horniman was about to revoke her financial support).21 Yeats’ opening address for the 1906 season at the Abbey included the announcement that from then on the price of a seat in the stalls would cost sixpence (down from one shilling). This piece of news was greeted with enthusiastic applause, showing that there had been constant demand for these cheaper tickets.22

Yeats needed therefore to reconcile his aesthetic dream of an intellectual theatre with the reality of the typical theatregoer.23 In 1906 he articulated his dilemma:

How can I make my work mean something to vigorous and simple men whose attention is not given to art but to a shop, or teaching in a National School, or dispensing medicine? […] I have always come to this certainty: what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life, intonations that show them, in a book or a play, the strength, the essential moment of a man who would be exciting in the market or at the dispensary door. They must go out of the theatre with the strength they live by strengthened from looking upon some passion that could, whatever its chosen way of life, strike down an enemy, fill a long stocking with money or move a girl’s heart. (“Discoveries”, E&I, 265)

21 Reynolds, 48.
23 Reynolds, 49.
On paper at least he recognised the need to create dramatic works that the “vigorous and simple men” could relate to on a social and intellectual level. But the “inferior” intellect of the average man on the street was always going to be a major source of frustration for him, as he testily acknowledged just a couple of years later: “The Irish people were not educated enough to accept images more profound, more true to human nature, than the schoolboy thoughts of Young Ireland” (Auto, 494).

It was apparent that to effectively promote his form of cultural nationalism Yeats had to make a connection with a very diverse and mainly non-intellectual audience. In Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century, the mix included Nationalists and Unionists, Protestants and Catholics, Anglo-Irish and Irish – not to mention people from different social backgrounds. George Roberts, whose firm Maunsel and Company published many of the new Irish writers, recalled the audience at a 1902 performance of George Russell’s (commonly known as AE) play *Deirdre* and Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The production took place in St Teresa’s Hall, which was owned by the Carmelites and used for temperance entertainments. The audience was

a very mixed crowd, being made up of members of the Cumann na nGaedhal (a Nationalist political organisation), the Gaelic League, the National Literary Society, and the usual attendants at the weekly temperance entertainments.24

Frank Fay wrote a review for the *United Irishman* in July 1899 that gave a withering description of the audience attending an Irish melodrama at the Theatre Royal:

The majority of them seemed to be of the intensely uncritical and ignorant type, only too common in Dublin, the class who will madly applaud a singer or an instrumentalist, no matter how much out of tune the former may sing or how wretchedly the latter may play, provided they finish with conventional bluster. That they were noisy and ill-behaved is nothing, because one does not expect much from such people; but that they should scream with boorish laughter, when one of the characters in the play spoke a few words of Irish, will scarcely be credited by anyone who was not present.25

James Joyce also drew attention to the poor behaviour of theatre audiences in “A Mother”, one of the tales from *Dubliners*, his “warts and all” naturalistic depiction of Irish middle-class life in the early part of the twentieth century. The action in this story revolves around a series of concerts organised by the Eire Abu Society to showcase local musicians. At the second concert

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it is noted that “The audience behaved indecorously, as if the concert were an informal dress rehearsal”.26

But Yeats adhered to the Victor Hugo quote that “In the theatre, the mob becomes a people”: in this respect he shared the optimistic belief of many Irish modernists that the mob mentality could be controlled and ultimately trained through the portrayal of intelligent literary drama.27 In his review of the 1902 performance of Cathleen ni Houlihan referred to above, George Roberts also commented that

The reception of the play was very curious. […] the speeches of Cathleen were received with laughter by a section of the audience who were apparently so much accustomed to associate dialect with humorous characters in the Queen’s Theatre melodramas that they saw humour where none was intended.28

Yeats responded to this incident in an article in the United Irishman, in which he stated that the reason for the [inappropriate] laughter that greeted the actor W.G. Fay on the first night was that “Mr Fay has so long delighted Dublin audiences with excellent humorous acting that they are ready to laugh even before he speaks”.29 In a letter to Lady Gregory dated April 5, 1902, Yeats reported that “The audience now understands Cathleen ni Houlihan and there is no difficulty getting from humour to tragedy” (Letters, 368). In this instance it would appear that the audience had been successfully trained to appreciate the solemnity of the action. It would remain to be seen however if they would “draw together” in a finer appreciation of the “remote, spiritual and ideal” plays of his literary theatre.

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Yeats believed that the method of ritual drama would be most appropriate for his literary works, as opposed to the conventional dramatic structure used by the “theatres of commerce”. There are significant differences between the two styles, particularly in the development of plot and character, and the way in which the action is presented visually on the stage. As Richard Taylor explains:

27 Reynolds, 31.
28 Roberts, 12.
[Conventional drama] was normally based on the interaction of characters and events as a dramatic situation was introduced to the audience, developed, reached a catastrophe or crisis and then worked itself out towards a climactic resolution or unravelling of the original conflict.\(^{30}\)

The characters are usually fully-realised, three-dimensional personalities who interact with each other in a realistic fashion. The plot may be complex or simple but it would normally depict events that are recognisable to the theatre audience. Similarly, the costumes, scenery and setting may be lavish or minimal, depending on the requirements of the play, but are usually straightforward in the way that they denote social setting, time and place for the audience. A “conventional” stage such as the proscenium-arch separates the players from the audience: the audience observe the development of the action and become involved to a greater or lesser degree depending on their individual response to the performance. This was the style of theatre used by the Dublin theatres for the various melodramas and variety shows at the turn of the twentieth century: it was therefore the style most familiar to the people of that city.

Ritual drama, on the other hand, is a “direct presentation of inevitability”:

\[\text{[It] directs the attention of the audience towards the inevitability and representative meaning of the action rather than towards the inner conflict of tragedy or the reassertion of outward order after a comic inversion or intervention [...] Characterisation and action are limited in development so that attention may centre on the working out of an inescapable conclusion.}\(^{31}\)

This form of theatre does not allow an explicit role for comedy or melodrama. It is ceremonial, with each element of the production having a specific purpose and meaning. The dialogue, costumes, stage direction and scenery come together to create a symbolic and structured world on the stage that is removed from the realities of everyday life. As such, a distance is created between the audience and the players. Characterisation is simplified to the bare minimum, and each movement and gesture of the actor is exaggerated or stylised to raise it from the ordinary to the level of ritual. F.A.C. Wilson comments that the writer of a symbolist play needs to “isolate, in as small a compass as possible, a single sequence of images, which were to communicate mystical emotion, ‘stillness’, or what the reader will”.\(^{32}\) To pick up on the emotional and symbolic meaning of the action inevitably requires a different, and arguably more challenging, level of participation from the viewer.


Yeats was inspired to follow the ritualistic method following his involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn: the systematic training in symbolic systems, ritual practices and mental discipline could be said to have acted as a form of training ground for his career as a playwright.\textsuperscript{33} It was typical of Yeats’ experimental approach to his work however that he adapted the basic concepts of ritual to create his own dramatic structure. From the outset he had particular views on how best to present his plays, from the rhythm of the dialogue through to the lighting effects and stage scenery.

One of the major factors that distressed him about the “theatres of commerce” was that the actors delivered their lines “as if they were reading something out of the newspapers” (“The Theatre” (1899), E&I, 168). He believed it was essential to “make speech even more important than gesture upon the stage” (P&C, 47). The challenge was to find a method for his actors to speak poetical verse in which “the full force is given both to the dramatic meaning and the poetical rhythm of the poem”.\textsuperscript{34} He felt this could be achieved by returning to the “chanted ode […] to delight our ears more than our eyes” (Letters, 309). It would be a revival of the “art of musical speech”, the “art of the bard and of the troubadour, and of the rhapsodist” which was once “inseparable from poetry”.\textsuperscript{35} He did not require a “monotonous chant” from his actor, it was more the case that he wanted something similar to “the sing-song in which a child says a verse” (P&C, 47). Yeats eventually found his ideal delivery of a dramatic lyric in the “masculine and varied, rhythmical and musical” speech of actor Frank Fay.\textsuperscript{36} For the female roles, his ideal was the delivery of the actress Sara Allgood (1879-1950) who performed a “beautifully humble and simple method akin to ‘folk singing’”.\textsuperscript{37} Irish folk songs have long stirred the passions of its people: Yeats would no doubt have hoped that the sentimental value of this particular style of delivery would have a strong emotional appeal for his audiences.

To ensure that full attention was directed towards the subtleties of the spoken word on stage, he demanded that the acting style be simplified: “We must get rid of everything that is restless, everything that draws the attention away from the sound of the voice, or from the few moments of intense expression” (P&C, 48).

\textsuperscript{34} “A Poet’s Discovery”, Irish Daily Independent and Nation (October 31, 1902), 5, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 32.
\textsuperscript{35} “A Poet’s Discovery”, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 32.
\textsuperscript{36} Skene, 92.
\textsuperscript{37} Skene, 92.
It was very much a case of the less movement the better, although Yeats did modify this view over time, as he began to appreciate that the movement of the body in an instinctive, or organic fashion, could in fact strengthen the effect of poetic speech on the subconscious mind of the audience.38 The acting style of the early Abbey Company was described by the critic John Masefield as “lacking personality” but on the other hand “it is never obvious, it never intrudes”.39

His philosophy of simplification also applied to stage scenery and costume:

The theatre of art [...] must discover grave and decorative gestures [...] and grave and decorative scenery that will be forgotten the moment an actor has said “It is dawn”, or “It is raining”, or “The wind is shaking the trees”; and dresses of so little irrelevant magnificence that the mortal actors and actresses may change without much labour into the immortal people of romance. (“The Theatre” (1899), E&I, 170)

Yeats felt that the use of representational scenery would “inhibit the imagination of an audience”.40 In a letter to Fiona MacLeod (the pseudonym of the Scottish writer William Sharp, 1855-1905) dated January 1897, he clarified this theory: “A forest, for instance, should be represented by a forest pattern and not by a forest painting. One should design a scene which would be an accompaniment, not a reflection of the text” (Letters, 280).

Songs, musical interludes and dance sequences would be interspersed among the dialogue to either provide commentary on the progress of the action (in much the same way as a Greek chorus), or to enable the audience to more readily accept a ritual or supernatural event.41 The visual effects of costuming and stage production would also be considered in order to ensure the attention of the audience was on the spoken word rather than on the surroundings.

Yeats’ ritual form of drama as it applied to three of his plays, and the reaction to this method from the viewing public, will be discussed later in the essay. It could be said at this stage however that Yeats’ choice of dramatic method was not likely to gain the confidence of the audience given that in general they were not looking for an intellectual “challenge”. That was not to say that they would not be able to enjoy the particular play, but that they would not take away from it the depth of feeling and understanding that Yeats wanted to convey. Frank Fay stated in a letter to the theatre enthusiast Joseph Holloway: “Yeats is not obscure at all and

38 Skene, 104.
39 Review of the opening performance of the Abbey Theatre by Fraser Drew in “The Irish Allegiance of an English Laureate: John Masefield and Ireland”, Eire-Ireland (Spring 1968), 27, in Flannery, 244.
40 Wilson, 37.
anyone who really loves poetry will not have much difficulty in understanding him. But Irish people will not, as a rule, give themselves trouble to do anything [...].

It would most probably have been the case that only a small percentage of the audience would have “really loved” poetry. A further issue is that the theatregoers expected to see a play, not listen to a poetry recital. Yeats was first and foremost a late-Romantic poet, and his early plays in particular were written and performed as ritualistic poetry for the stage, rather than as vibrant dramatic pieces to capture the attention of an eclectic audience.

Yeats (and his colleagues) had great plans and hopes for the new Literary Theatre. He would reawaken the nationalistic pride and passion of the people of Ireland through plays that took a serious and in-depth approach to the history and literature of their great country – quite unlike the stereotypical and frivolous Irish drama currently on offer at the turn of the twentieth century. It was a wonderful ambition, but from the outset it was fraught with obstacles. For one thing, it would be near impossible to reach out to the whole of Ireland: the viewing audience would be mainly the city folk of Dublin, where the National Theatre made its home. The main difficulty however came down to Yeats’ approach to his own dramas. He wanted to write intellectual plays for an elite audience: not only that, but he wanted a ritual form of drama that was completely unfamiliar and alien to the theatregoing audience of the time. This was not a realistic starting point on which to base a literary theatre that was intended to gain the interest, confidence and nationalistic fervour of all of the people of Ireland.

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42 Letter from F.J. Fay to J. Holloway (August 21, 1903), in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 66.
Matters of Faith, Honour and Heroism

The contemplation of great sacrifices for great causes, the memory of rebellions and executions, the reveries of a religious faith, founded in visions and ecstasies, and uncountable old tales told over the fire, have given them imaginative passions and simple and sincere thoughts. (Letter to the Editor of the Daily Chronicle, January 27, 1899, in Letters, 311)

One of the criticisms that dogged Yeats throughout his dramatic career was that his plays “had little, if any, relationship to everyday life”.43 John Synge was of the opinion that “no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulainoid”.44 This observation is debatable, and Yeats would certainly disagree with the sentiment, but it is probably true that in order to raise the cultural awareness of the people and evoke a sense of national pride, the drama needed to be relevant to the times and be able to “speak” to them on some form of personal level. The Irish melodramas of the early twentieth century were immensely popular and evinced a rowdy form of emotional patriotism from the audiences: it was this type of “bawdy” nationalistic drama that the members of the literary theatre wanted to replace. But the Dublin crowd was familiar with the plot situations and the format of these performances – they would be looking for the same type of familiarity with the dramas staged by the literary theatre.45

Yeats was not interested in portraying the “realities of life”, which he considered were “created for the common people [...] and all those whose minds, educated alone by schoolmasters and newspapers, are without the memory of beauty and emotional subtlety” (“Certain Noble Plays of Japan” (1916), E&I, 227). Of course it was the “common people” – those middle-class working men and women who bought tickets to see a show at his theatre – to whom he needed to appeal. Indeed, as Synge was to discover with the production of his plays In the Shadow of the Glen and Playboy, the Irish audiences found much to complain about with his very “real” portrayal of their everyday behaviours. In the third act of Playboy, the character Christy Mahon talks of “a dreft of Mayo girls, standing in their shifts itself maybe”. At this reference to women’s underwear,

“the theatre erupted in hissing, stamping, and yelling, and the remainder of the play was noisily overwhelmed”.46 During the first few productions of this play, the audience outrage escalated to riots and the police had to be called to the theatre.

The majority of Yeats’ plays looked to the ancient Celtic past for their subject matter, to tales of peasant folklore, the supernatural, heroic legend and mythology. In his opening address of the 1906 season at the Abbey Theatre, Yeats stated that the most successful national theatres and dramatic movements “began by founding themselves on the history and legends of their country, or on the peasant life of the country”.47

He steadfastly believed that only by looking back to the stories and way of life of Ireland’s ancient past would her people gain a true sense of national pride and identity. This may well have been the case if he had staged realistic re-enactments of the ancient tales and myths. Instead, he would take elements of a fable or legend, or a certain aspect of the traditional way of life, and rewrite it to create a version which was stamped with his own personal philosophy or ideals. For example, the protagonist of *At the Hawk’s Well* is the well-known Irish legendary character, Cuchulain, but the storyline has nothing to do with any of the existing body of material featuring the heroic figure. The audience would have struggled to make the connection between the Irish character with whom they would most likely have been familiar, and the action unfolding on the stage.

By taking this approach, he appeared to be presenting elements of the ancient way of life as the “ideal” way to create national unity for the modern day society. He did not take into account the current religious, social and political environment of Ireland, with the result that many aspects of his portrayals of the “traditional” life managed to upset and offend his modern day audiences.

One of the main areas of contention arose from his belief that national unity would not happen without spiritual unity. In this regard he looked to the Irish peasantry who, he believed, still retained elements of a purely Celtic culture and faith. Their moral ideals, traditional values and belief in the supernatural epitomised for him the Unity of Being – the “ideal state of the human personality”.48 By focussing on this traditional culture, Yeats intended to revive his country’s spiritual heritage by reawakening a sense of wonderment at Ireland’s “ancient holiness”.49

46 Reynolds, 39.
47 “Address by Mr. W.B. Yeats”, 9.
48 Flannery, 59.
49 Flannery, 82.
believed that in order to successfully “develop national feeling” it was essential that Ireland return to a form of Christianity where “the natural and supernatural are knit together”, unified by a conception of Christ “posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism, not shut off in dead history but flowing, concrete, phenomenal” (“A General Introduction for my Work” (1937), E&I, 518). Most importantly, the “rigid formulas and strictures that divided Protestant and Catholic would be transcended”.  

One can only wonder what the city folk of Dublin would have thought – or even understood – of Yeats’ concept of “ancient holiness”. They would probably have been familiar with the history of Ireland’s religious past, and would have had a knowledge of Druidism, to which Yeats refers. They might therefore have associated Yeats’ spiritual call for Ireland with this particular order which prevailed in the period before the arrival of Christianity in the fifth century A.D. The Druids followed no sacred text or bible equivalent and so it was free of the dogma associated with current orthodox religions. They believed in either one God, Goddess or Being, or many: some Druids believed instead that Deity did not exist as a “God” but was present in all things. Whatever their particular viewpoint, all Druids focussed on the forces of nature as being sacred or divine: “every part of nature is sensed as part of the great web of life, with no one creature or aspect of it having supremacy over any other […] humankind [was viewed as] just one part of the wider family of life”. A major part of their ideology lay in a belief in the existence of the Otherworld, a “realm or realms which exist beyond the reach of the physical senses, but which are nevertheless real”. It was also the place the people believed they went to after death. The Druids were the priests who acted as intermediaries between the mortal life and the Otherworld: one of their traditions was to open the doors between the two worlds on one night a year to allow the souls of the dead to revisit their homes. This ritual still exists today as part of the Gaelic festival of Samhain, which traditionally marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter. One of the places it is celebrated is at the Hill of Tara, an archaeological complex in County Meath, Ireland. According to ancient Irish religion and mythology, Tara was revered as a dwelling of the gods and an entrance place to the Otherworld where no mortal ever grew old.

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50 Flannery, 82.
52 “Druid Beliefs”.
This then was the “ancient holiness” upon which Yeats wanted to base the religion of Ireland. He would have expected to receive some support from the villagers in the west of Ireland: many of these people had a strong belief in the faery world, even if they did not believe in Hell and ghosts:

There are some doubters even in the western villages. One woman told me last Christmas that she did not believe either in hell or in ghosts. Hell she thought was merely an invention got up by the priest to keep people good; and ghosts would not be permitted, she held, to go ‘trapsin about the earth’ at their own free will; ‘but there are faeries’, she added, ‘and little leprechauns, and water-horses, and fallen angels’. I have met also a man with a mohawk Indian tattooed upon his arm, who held exactly similar beliefs and unbeliefs. No matter what one doubts one never doubts the faeries, for, as the man with the Mohawk Indian on his arm said to me, ‘they stand to reason’. Even the official mind does not escape this faith.54

It was unlikely that Yeats’ solution to the troubles created by the disunity between the major Christian parties would have had widespread appeal. The problem associated with this ideal of creating a form of folk religion based on peasant culture was that it did not take into account the firmly-held orthodox religious beliefs and practices of the people of Ireland, nor the socio-economic dimensions of this disunity. At the turn of the twentieth century around 76.9% of the Irish population belonged to the Catholic Church, and 12.34% to the Anglican Church of Ireland.55 The Catholic Church was held in high regard by the community – the Irish peasantry in particular were staunchly Catholic. The faith of the average Dublin theatre-goer would have been well and truly established: they were not going to approve “Druidism” as opposed to the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is very likely too that the suggestion that Christianity move away from the umbrella of Catholicism would have been seen as a challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church.

Two of Yeats’ early plays, The Land of Heart’s Desire (originally published in 1894, first performed in 1894) and The Countess Cathleen (originally published in 1892, first performed in 1899), support his vision of an Irish society which embraced a “Druidic” form of Christianity. The Land of Heart’s Desire presents a group of characters who represent both the “modern” Christian world and its associated values, and also the more pagan traditional folk beliefs and superstitions of the country people, including their belief in the co-existence of a supernatural world. The main message that Yeats wanted to convey is that neither approach is perfect, but

that a combination of the two forms of faith would come close to a harmonious ideal – spiritual unity would be achieved, which would in turn equate to national unity.

Set in County Sligo “at a remote time” the play focuses on the spiritual dilemma of a newly married peasant girl, Mary Bruin. Mary has to choose whether to stay in the temporal world of Christianity, where she receives the warmth and love of her husband but also has to endure hard work, self-denial and the nagging criticism of her mother-in-law, or depart forever with the faery child to the world of the supernatural, with its promise of eternal youth and joyfulness. Each of the characters plays a part in influencing Mary’s choice: through their individual behaviours Yeats presents both positive and negative aspects of the different forms of faith.

To show the flaws in a rigid Christian world Yeats presents the character of Mary’s mother-in-law, Bridget Bruin, as a negative example of Christian living. Bridget encompasses meanness of spirit, bitterness and the jealousy of old age: the type of person who resents the gaiety and innocence of youth. The play opens with Bridget making a complaint about her daughter-in-law’s preference for reading as opposed to doing some work:

Because I bid her clean the pots for supper
She took that old book down out of the thatch;
She has been doubled over it ever since.
We should be deafened by her groans and moans
Had she to work as some do, Father Hart;
Get up at dawn like me and mend and scour
Or ride abroad in the boisterous night like you,
The pyx and blessed bread under your arm. (1.i.1-8)

The message is very clear: Bridget considers Mary to be lazy and useless. The tone of the speech is harsh and abrupt, and the first line, with its sibilant alliteration of “Because”, “pots” and “supper”, comes across as angry hissing. The repetitive use of “she” in place of Mary’s name adds to the coldness of tone and Bridget’s obvious contempt for her daughter-in-law. The last four lines of the stanza highlight her disdain for the girl by drawing attention to her own, and Father Hart’s, selfless and unceasing hard work. Yeats specifically used blank verse throughout the play in order that speeches of the characters would seem like their “natural utterance” (PC, 302). The rhythmic pattern does not allow the same easy fluidity as free verse, but the language of the individuals effectively reflects their unique personalities. In this instance, poetic doubles such as “groans and moans” and “mend and scour” fittingly mirror Bridget’s dour and vinegary temper.
As the opening speech of the play, the impact on the audience would have been significant. Straight away they were drawn into an atmosphere of hostility. Their feelings of discomfort at this introduction would have grown as they witnessed Bridget’s unceasing complaints about the girl: “She would not mind the kettle, milk the cow, / Or even lay the knives and spread the cloth” (I.i.19-20). She accuses her husband Maureen of taking sides with Mary, stating that he is “the fool of every pretty face” (I.i.143). The viciousness of her attacks culminate in her declaration that Mary “is not a fitting wife for any man” (I.i.175). The only time Bridget is seen to soften is when the family and Father Hart come under the spell of the supernatural in the presence of the faery child. She then shows a gentleness and concern towards the child that Mary would have found unrecognisable.

It would appear that this God-fearing woman possesses very little in the way of Christian compassion. It is significant that Yeats chose the name “Bridget” (Irish: Brigit or Brigid) for this character. Most of the audience would have been aware that Brigid is one of the patron saints of Ireland, known for her compassion to the poor and those who were suffering. Yeats turns this association on its head with his portrayal of a “Bridget” who is anything but compassionate.

The audience would also likely have been disturbed by Bridget’s behaviour as regards the solid Christian tradition of marriage. This institution was sacrosanct in the eyes of the Catholic community, but here was someone providing such an unpleasant example that she was causing a younger woman to want to escape from such a life. Maureen and Father Hart also manage to reinforce to Mary the notion that married life in the Christian world promised only boredom and domestic drudgery. Maureen believes that over time the girl would lose her restlessness, and

… will grow
As quiet as a puff-ball in a tree
When but the moons of marriage dawn and die
For half a score of times. (I.i.14-17)

Similarly, Father Hart believes that Mary will soon settle down, particularly once she starts to bear children:

… I have seen some other girls
Restless and ill at ease, but years went by
And they grew like their neighbours and were glad
In minding children, working at the churn,
And gossiping of weddings and of wakes. (I.i.68-72)

From these exchanges Yeats appears to be saying that the rigidity of a “typical” Christian life is not ideal. He emphasises this point through the character of Father Hart who represents the love...
of God as a powerful and binding force of Christianity. The priest tells Mary that she “should not fill [her] head with foolish dreams” (I.i.43), as God will provide everything she needs. He also reminds her that if she follows her dreams she is in danger of being lured by “wrecked angels” (I.i.62). His reaction is one of shock and disbelief when Mary calls out to the faeries to

… take me out of this dull house!
Let me have all the freedom I have lost;
Work when I will and idle when I will! (I.i.183-5)

At this stage he moves to assure the girl that through the pure love humans feel for one another they will be protected:

God binds us to Himself and to the hearth,
That shuts us from the waste beyond His peace,
From maddening freedom and bewildering light. (I.i.208-10)

Father Hart clearly considers the “maddening freedom” of the world of the faeries – a world of imagination, youthfulness and escape from the drudgery of daily chores and Christian traditions such as marriage – to be a perilous choice. As Mary has indicated from the start of the play, however, it is “freedom” that she wants above all else.

The message that comes across is that Christianity, in its current form, can be all-encompassing, rigid and restrictive in its insistence on blind adherence to God and acceptance of the institutions that embody the faith. Yeats softens this viewpoint slightly with the more compassionate personalities of Maurteen and Shawn. Maurteen is kindly and indulgent towards Mary, and sympathetic to her need to lose herself in books and daydreams. He tells Father Hart:

She’s dull when my big son is in the fields,
And that and maybe this good woman’s tongue
Have driven her to hide among her dreams
Like children from the dark under the bedclothes. (I.i.79-82)

The language he uses is affectionate, and the tone of speech is gentle and flowing, which fits his more relaxed character. But even this more amenable representative of Christian living gives rise to the possibility that all is not as perfect as it seems. Maurteen’s comparison of Mary’s need to hide among her dreams with that of children hiding under the bedclothes indicates protective feelings for the girl, but it could also indicate a lack of respect for her as a mature woman – she is like a “child” to him. His promise to her of “a stocking full of yellow guineas” (I.i.141) when he has passed away and his love of the creature comforts of the Christian world,
such as an “abundance of good wine” (I.i.156) and the warmth of a well-stoked fire, could also be suggestive of a greediness and adherence to materialism.56

Mary’s husband, Shawn, symbolises the physical aspect of Christian love, as well as security and companionship. Clearly devoted to his young wife, he praises her beauty at the same time as telling Mary he is concerned she is not happy:

Do not blame me; I often lie awake  
Thinking that all things trouble your bright head.  
How beautiful it is – your broad pale forehead  
Under a cloudy blossoming of hair!  
Sit down beside me here – these are too old,  
And have forgotten they were ever young. (I.i.197-202)

The language is uplifting, playful and colloquial when compared to Bridget’s terse mode of speech. It is reassuring and comforting, and has the effect of eliciting sympathy from the audience towards his personal claim on Mary. They would certainly be moved by Shawn’s compelling plea to his wife to stay with him rather than leave with the faery child:

Beloved, I will keep you,  
I’ve more than words, I have these arms to hold you,  
Nor all the faery host, do what they please,  
Shall ever make me loose you from these arms. (I.i.412-15)

Mary is not swayed by these assurances. As far as she is concerned, her life in the mortal Christian world is destined to be one of enslavement. She tells Father Hart that she is weary of “a kind tongue too full of drowsy love, / Of drowsy love and my captivity” (I.i.195-6). The term “drowsy love” is very negative in the context of describing a relationship, and “captivity” gives the message that a woman’s life and any happiness is over once she gets married.

This is not a viewpoint that the female members of the audience would necessarily agree with, and it seems a particularly harsh judgement for Mary to make about her loving husband. The audience would likely not have held sympathy for her – indeed, she could well be accused of being lazy and ungrateful – had they not already witnessed the overwhelming unkindness and bitterness of her mother-in-law. Barbara Suess suggests that Mary’s “idleness” upholds the Victorian attitudes pertaining to the necessity to be productive “in a world in which active

56 Barbara A. Suess, Progress and Identity in the Plays of W.B. Yeats, 1892-1907 (New York: Routledge, 2003), 78.
functioning holds social, economic, and spiritual value”. By that reasoning, her choice to “idly” read a book renders her “useless”.

Having presented different aspects of traits and behaviours associated with Christian values, Yeats also explores elements of the more pagan tradition of faith through the actions of the faery child and the traditional beliefs surrounding the supernatural. On the positive side, the immortal world appears to offer (to Mary’s eyes at least) an everlasting life of freedom, peace and kindness, not to mention release from any form of binding obedience to religion or a relationship. The book that Mary is reading at the start of play concerns the “daughter of a King of Ireland”, Princess Edain, who follows a singing voice to the “Land of Faery”:

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue. (I.i.49-51)

This is exactly what Mary is seeking. The faery child knows this and repeats the girl’s own words in her promise of a better life in the Land of Faery:

But I can lead you, newly-married bride,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue …. (I.i.389-92)

Not only will Mary never become as bitter, jealous and unkind as her mother-in-law, but the words “Where nobody gets old and godly and grave” promise a life free of the religious constraints of the Christian world. To reinforce the absence of religious dogma in the immortal world, the faery child lets out a terrified shriek when she spies the crucifix – a powerful symbol of martyrdom, suffering and redemption. This particular action would have come across as especially powerful to later audiences following the 1897 publication of Dracula by the Irish writer Bram Stoker.

At a couple of significant points in the play the child sings and dances: these actions have the effect of reiterating to Mary that life in the immortal world is one of happiness and spontaneity. The song “The wind blows out of the gates of the day” has a deeper meaning than that of playfulness, however. It is sung on three different occasions to signify the powerful presence of

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57 Suess, 79.
58 Suess, 79.
the supernatural: as the child enters the house, as she reveals her true nature, and at the moment when Mary is about to make the transition to the supernatural world.\textsuperscript{59}

The actions of the faery child make it clear that not everything to do with the supernatural world is sweetness and light: on the contrary, it is also associated with power, control and deceit. The child is cunning and clever: in her attempt to win Mary over she draws on the negative aspects of the girl’s life and future by repeating her own words in the promise of a better life in the Land of Faery. The people of the immortal world are also manipulative. It is made clear early in the play that it is May Eve, the time of the Festival of Beltane: according to Celtic tradition this is the time when faeries have potentially fatal power over mortals. Hence the branch of “blessed quicken wood” (I.i.86) that is hung over the door to ward off evil, and the insistence that no milk or fire should be given to any strangers. As Bridget explains:

\begin{quote}
The Good People\textsuperscript{60} beg for milk and fire  
Upon May Eve – woe to the house that gives,  
For they have power upon it for a year. (I.i.127-9).
\end{quote}

But Mary gives milk to a child outside the door, and she also provides fire to a “little queer old man” (I.i.167) who wanted to light his pipe. It later transpires that these were “messengers” of the faery child. The sweet singing of the child outside the door of the cottage causes Maurteen to feel sorry for her and to “bring her in out of the cold” (I.i.249). He gives her wine but she says it is bitter and pleads to Bridget: “Old mother, have you no sweet food for me?” (I.i.263), at which point Bridget brings her some honey and milk. Her final act of manipulation is to persuade Father Hart to take the crucifix off the wall and hide it away in another room. By so doing she knew that the family would lose all means of resistance and they would fall completely under her power:

\begin{quote}
Because you took away the crucifix  
I am so mighty that there’s none can pass,  
Unless I will it, where my feet have danced  
Or where I’ve whirled my finger-tips. (I.i.355-8)
\end{quote}

Not surprisingly, this part of the play fuelled fierce criticism from various Catholic quarters. Frank Hugh O’Donnell (1848-1916), an editor and former Member of Parliament, referred to the

\textsuperscript{59} In the notes to his poem “The Unappeasable Host”, published in The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), Yeats explains the symbolic meaning behind the use of wind: “I use the wind as a symbol of vague desires and hopes, not merely because the Sidhe are in the wind, or because the wind bloweth as it listeth, but because wind and spirit and vague desire have been associated everywhere” (\textit{NCP}, 51).

\textsuperscript{60} A euphemistic name for the faeries, used because it might be dangerous to call them by their real name (\textit{CWII}, 832).
drama as a “revolting burlesque of Irish Catholic religion” and “blasphemous twaddle”.61 He was particularly incensed by the action of the Priest hiding the crucifix and scathingly declared that “Mr. W.B. Yeats often shows this amazing ignorance of the faith of the Celts he pretends to reveal to the British Public […]. When you pretend to be Irish and Celtic, you must follow, not outrage, Irish and Celtic sentiment”.62

The blustering anger over the religious aspects of the play did not stop it gaining considerable success at the box office. The Irish critic and writer Ernest Boyd observed that “If frequent productions be the test of popularity, then The Land of Heart’s Desire is Yeats’ most successful appeal to the playgoer”.63 Yeats himself noted that “amateurs perform it more often than any other play of mine” (P&C, 301). The popularity seemed to arise from the tragedy of the relationship between Mary and Shawn, though, rather than from a consideration of the spiritual issues. Yeats had hoped that the play would convince the audience of his belief that in order to achieve a national unity it was essential to achieve spiritual unity. The Land of Heart’s Desire does not depict either Christianity or the more pagan world in a completely positive light: Christianity in particular is associated with suffering, drudgery, sacrifice and captivity. It does not deny that the supernatural world has its dark side too, but that somewhere in between lies the ideal form of spirituality, where “the natural and supernatural are knit together”.

Yeats testily expressed his disappointment in a letter to George Russell, dated April 1904:

In my Land of Heart’s Desire […] there is an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly. The popularity of The Land of Heart’s Desire seems to me to come not from its merits but because of this weakness. I have been fighting the prevailing decadence for years, and have just got it under foot in my own heart – it is sentiment and sentimental sadness, a womanish introspection. (Letters, 434)

He had wanted to convey a strong message to his audience about the attraction and benefits of a traditional way of life and a more uniting form of religion. But that was not what the theatregoers took away with them from this play: it was the emotional drama of the love story between two young people that reached out and spoke to them. This was the type of subject matter that would get their attention, plays that concerned the “realities of life” that Yeats so

scathingly dismissed as for “the common people”. The Irish writer and Nationalist Padraic Pearse clearly believed so: he suggested that Irish literature (and drama) should focus on

The loves and hates and desires and doubts of modern men and women; the drama of the land war; the stress and poetry and comedy of the language movement; the drink evil; the increase of lunacy; the loveless marriage.  

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It seemed unlikely that Yeats was going to appeal to the nationalistic spirit of the public through the imposition of his own spiritual philosophy. But he continued the call for religious unity with his play *The Countess Cathleen*. Set in Ireland in medieval times, it depicts the story of a rural neighbourhood of peasants during a time of famine who barter their souls to two merchants acting on behalf of the Devil in exchange for money. The Countess intervenes by bartering first her worldly possessions and then her own soul in order to redeem theirs. This charitable act causes her own death but also the redemption of her soul by God.

Much of the play concerns the interaction between the Countess, who represents “modern” Christianity, and her poet companion Aleel, who is representative of the faith and beliefs of pre-Christian Ireland. Both are worthy characters: the Countess in particular is full of the Christian values of kindness, selflessness and charity. Having given away all the money in her purse to the starving people, she gives the peasant boy Teigue her purse:

The silver clasps on’t may be worth a trifle.
And if you’ll come to-morrow to my house
You shall have twice the sum. (I.i.112-14).

This is one of a couple of occasions where Yeats alludes to the Biblical quote: “And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”.  

Earlier in the play the peasant woman Mary, a devout Christian, makes a more direct reference to the parable in her defence of the actions of the Countess:

Mary:    God’s pity on the rich!
    Had we been through as many doors, and seen
    The dishes standing on the polished wood
    In the wax candle light, we’d be as hard,
    And there’s the needle’s eye at the end of all. (I.i.62-66)

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65 *King James Bible*, Matthew 19:24.
Yeats’ interpretation of “the needle’s eye” was that it signified “the eternity of death” (CCP, 7). By selflessly giving up her worldly possessions, the wealthy Countess is assured of a welcome to Heaven. She ultimately of course makes the supreme sacrifice of offering her soul in order to let the peasants regain theirs.

Aleel appeals to Cathleen to consider escaping the dangerous, material, Christian world of self-sacrifice and go with him to the peaceful and timeless pagan world of dreams, beauty and art. He tells her that the Celtic God of Love, Aengus, came to him in a vision and implored him to persuade her to

\[ \text{… live in the hills,} \\
\text{Among the sounds of music and the light} \\
\text{Of waters, till the evil days are done. (I.iii.465-7).} \]

The life that he is offering sounds idyllic to the Countess:

He bids me go
Where none of mortal creatures but the swan
Dabbles, and there you would pluck the harp, when the trees
Had made a heavy shadow about our door,
And talk among the rustling of the reeds,
When night hunted the foolish sun away
With stillness and pale tapers …. (I.iii.474-80)

But she cannot leave the Christian world. She has promised herself that she will stay true to her own world and faith, believing that she and her people will be given salvation in the Christian heaven:

\[ \text{I have sworn,} \\
\text{By her whose heart the seven sorrows have pierced,} \\
\text{To pray before this altar until my heart} \\
\text{Has grown to Heaven like a tree, and there} \\
\text{Rustled its leaves, till Heaven has saved my people. (I.iii.498-502)} \]

She rejects Aleel’s suggestion that Aengus is angelical, declaring that he is of the old gods who disturb the peace:

\[ \text{No, not angelical, but of the old gods,} \\
\text{Who wander about the world to waken the heart –} \\
\text{The passionate, proud heart – that all the angels,} \\
\text{Leaving nine heavens empty, would rock to sleep. (I. iii.493-6)} \]
Although she loves the poet, she denies the symbolic union which would allow the old heroic world of the “passionate, proud heart” to be merged with that of the new.\(^{66}\) She sends him away from her, but her depth of feeling towards him and what could have been is evident in her moving address:

I kiss your forehead.  
And yet I send you from me. Do not speak;  
There have been women that bid men to rob  
Crowns from the Country-under-Wave or apples  
Upon a dragon-guarded hill, and all  
That they might sift the hearts and wills of men,  
And trembled as they bid it, as I tremble  
That lay a hard task on you, that you go,  
And silently, and do not turn your head …  
… Would my imagination and my heart  
Were as little shaken as this holy flame! (I.iii.517-25; 530-1)

The message that comes through strongly is that she desperately wants the two “holy” worlds to be united but that her fealty to the Christian mortal world requires her sacrifice. Her deathbed speech reaffirms to the audience that she views the two worlds in the same light, as she pays equal honour to the pagan Aleel and her Christian servant, Oona:

Bend down your faces, Oona and Aleel;  
I gaze upon them as the swallow gazes  
Upon the nest under the eave, before  
She wander the loud waters. (I.v.893-6)

Her confirmation of allegiance to both the pagan and Christian worlds offered a strong suggestion that Irish spirituality should encompass both orthodox and non-orthodox elements – as indeed it had throughout its history. Yeats himself stated that the play “is an attempt to mingle personal thought and feeling with the beliefs and customs of Christian Ireland” (VPL, 1288). But the suggestion of an alternative to the orthodox religious beliefs and practices of the modern day was too outrageous for some. Prior to the opening night of the play The Daily Nation printed an article attacking the forthcoming production, stating that

We trust […] that those who are responsible for a gross and scandalous breach of faith with the public of this country, will receive their deserts on Monday night in the practical evidence afforded them that the people of the Catholic capital of Catholic Ireland cannot be subjected to affront with impunity.\(^{67}\)

\(^{67}\) Editorial, _Daily Nation_ (May 6, 1899), 4, in Hogan and Kilroy, _Irish Literary Theatre_, 38.
This very blatant “call to arms” resulted in a group of Catholic students attempting on opening night to “defend the holiness of the Catholic Church”. Joseph Holloway described their presence and actions in the theatre as an organised claque of about twenty brainless, beardless, idiotic-looking youths [who] did all they knew to interfere with the progress of the play by their meaningless automatic hissing and senseless comments.

Holloway goes on to say however that “their ‘poor spite’ was completely frustrated by enthusiastic applause which drowned their empty-headed expressions of dissension”. There were clearly many in the theatre that night who were able to appreciate the play as something other than a deliberate affront to their religious beliefs.

Whether the audience were outraged or not, Yeats’ aim to direct the awareness of his audience towards the spiritual culture of the peasantry as a means of developing national unity was neither realistic nor relevant to the times. It is certainly the case that in times of depression and hardship people will look to their faith for comfort and support, and the economic and social conditions in Ireland at the turn of the century were poor. The decline of the labourer, cottier, and small-farmer class had led to increased urbanisation with the result that the major towns and cities became economically depressed. But it is also the case that at times of uncertainty people are more likely to hold on to whatever in their lives is solid, comforting and consistent. The spiritual alternative that Yeats was proposing through his plays was neither what they were looking for nor was it what they needed.

The respect and admiration that Yeats held for the Irish peasantry is well documented, and many of his works reflect the depth of his feelings towards this group of people. His poem “The Fisherman” (published in The Wild Swans at Coole, 1919), for example, speaks about his ideal Irish man, a “wise and simple man” – in this case a fisherman – from the district of Connemara (on the west coast of Ireland). Yet the behaviour of the peasants as portrayed in The Countess Cathleen managed to elicit outrage from many of the theatregoers, especially fervent Nationalist...

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supporters. In this case it would appear that Yeats’ definition of the “ideal” peasant did not sit well with his fellow countrymen.

The main point of contention was the ease and willingness of the peasants to barter with the Devil. Shemus Rua and his son Teigue are easily bribed by the demon merchants to “spread the word” to the villagers that they can sell their souls: a group of peasants are later overheard eagerly discussing the beauty and value of the gold that they intend to receive. Just as shameful, in the eyes of many, was the depiction of the peasants haggling for the best price in the same room in which a dead body (Mary) has been laid out.

It is revealed during this process too that among the peasantry are many “sinners”: at least one of the Irish peasants is a thief and another is an adulteress. This last would certainly have upset the Nationalists: the purity of Ireland’s women was a major ticket in their campaign. As Arthur Griffith (1871-1922) commented in his paper the United Irishman: “Irishwomen are the most virtuous women in the world […]. A play which leads those who witness it to form a contrary conclusion can only be a lie and nothing more”.

The English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) presented a more grounded and realistic image of the peasantry in his works. Lyrical poems such as “Michael” (1800) and “The Leech-Gatherer” (or “Resolution and Independence”) (1802) reveal a pragmatic respect for the men and women who worked on the land. The reader gets a strong sense – lacking in Yeats’ peasant plays – of Wordsworth’s personal affinity with nature, and his empathy for, and understanding of, the pleasures and hardships of a life lived in the great outdoors.

Yeats had always been aware that his productions were liable to adverse criticism, particularly from “those enemies of life, the chimeras of the Pulpit and the Press” (“The Theatre, The Pulpit, and the Newspapers”, 1903, in CWVIII, 36). Yet with this particular play he observed that the criticism also came from “the very girls in the shops [who] complained to us that to describe an Irishwoman as selling her soul to the devil was to slander the country” (CWVIII, 38).

70 Frazier, 8.
71 Griffith was a journalist and newspaper editor, later to become leader of the Sinn Fein movement.
72 Arthur Griffith, an untitled note appended to Yeats’ essay “The Irish National Theatre and Three Sorts of Ignorance”, United Irishman (October 24, 1903), 2.
The style of language that Yeats used for the dialogue of the peasantry also raised objection. He gave them speeches that tended to be short and abrupt, using only basic vocabulary and a degree of non-standard English syntax:

\[\text{Shemus:} \quad \text{What is the trouble of the poor to her?} \\
\text{Nothing at all or a harsh radishy sauce} \\
\text{For the day’s meat.} \]

The language is intended to emphasise the rough lives of the country people: “\textit{harsh radishy sauce}”, and “we’d be as \textit{hard}”. The alliteration of the “sh” sound reinforces the somewhat brutal and sneering tone of Shemus’ speech. His language is very direct and colloquial: he says “radishy” instead of radish, and refers to the Countess as “her” instead of the more polite “the lady” or “the Countess”. Mary’s tone of speech (as indicated in the ‘needle’s eye’ quote earlier) is more sympathetic but it is still direct, and the imagery is very down-to-earth: “dishes”, “polished wood” and “wax candle light”.

The abrupt rhythm of speech to denote the lowly status of the speaker was emphasised by way of contrast with the formal and ornamental language of the heroic characters, Cathleen and Aleel. Their speeches are rich, fluidly rhythmic and employ a more archaic syntax, as can be seen in this elegant piece of verse from Aleel on Queen Maeve:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{She sleeps high up on wintry Knocknarea} \\
\text{In an old cairn of stones; while her poor women} \\
\text{Must lie and jog in the wave if they would sleep –} \\
\text{Being water-born – yet if she cry their names} \\
\text{They run up on the land and dance in the moon} \\
\text{Till they are giddy and would love as men do,} \\
\text{And be as patient and as pitiful.} \\
\text{But there is nothing that will stop in their heads,} \\
\text{They’ve such poor memories, though they weep for it.} \\
\text{O yes, they weep; that’s when the moon is full. (I.ii.305-14)}
\end{align*}
\]

Unlike the direct utterance of the peasants, this passage flows beautifully like a Shakespearean soliloquy. It is a much longer speech than any given to the peasantry, and the underlying structure is a more complex heptameter, most commonly used for Romantic and Classical verse. The longer lines help to give it a greater fluidity too. The language Yeats uses is wonderfully poetic, with descriptive and colourful imagery, such as the women dancing on the moon.

Many of the Dublin theatregoers were not impressed to hear their countrymen speak in base or colloquial language. The audience would have comprised mainly city dwellers who considered themselves to have a certain level of sophistication: they did not want to be represented on the
national stage by the rough and ready speech of the peasant folk. This became very evident when they heard the native Irish speakers Yeats had brought in from Galway give a realistic *caoine* (keen) or death-wail over the body of the Countess at the end of the play. It was the first time in Irish theatrical history that this had been attempted and it resulted in extreme derision and heckling from the audience.73

The problem of language was exacerbated as the players in these early productions were mainly English actors putting on Irish accents: this was another cause for derision from the patriotic audience. The difficulty for Yeats and the National Theatre Society was that the limited number of Irish actors currently working had “learned the traditions of an alien theatre [the Theatre of Commerce], and of an alien habit of thought, and they were at their very worst when they tried to play Irish characters”.74 Yeats publicly acknowledged the issue in his 1906 opening address and assured the crowd that steps would be taken to “train their actors from the beginning”:

> They [the National Theatre Society] had tried to get plays on Irish life produced by English actors, but it was always a failure – their mere accent made it a failure. Neither had they the necessary knowledge or thought or feeling of the country. They had, therefore, to create Irish actors.75

Much of the vitriolic reaction to *The Countess Cathleen* was fuelled prior to opening night by a pamphlet distributed throughout Dublin by Frank Hugh O’Donnell. Entitled *Souls for Gold!* *Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin*, it was a vindictive and venomous attack aimed directly at Yeats and his depiction of the peasantry. One of the accusations was that:

> Mr W.B. Yeats seems to see nothing in the Ireland of old days but an unmanly, an impious and renegade people, crouched in degraded awe before demons, and goblins, and sprites, and sowiths, and thivishes – just like a sordid tribe of black devil worshippers and fetish-worshippers on the Congo or the Niger.76

It is possible that when O’Donnell made this statement he had in mind the recently published (1899) book *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad – a tale of a white man’s voyage up the Congo River that was equally open to criticism for its perceived racism.

Cardinal Michael Logue (1839-1924), in a letter to the anti-Parnellite *Daily Nation*, stated that “an Irish Catholic audience which could patiently sit out such a play must have sadly

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74 “Address by Mr. W.B. Yeats”, 9.
75 “Address by Mr. W.B. Yeats”, 9.
degenerated, both in religion and patriotism”. A letter printed again in the *Daily Nation* from a group of students of the Royal University in Dublin strongly protested the performance, stating that they felt duty bound “to protest against an art […] which offers as a type of our people a loathsome brood of apostates”.

The reaction of many militant nationalists was summed up by the poet, teacher and political activist Patrick Pearse in a letter published in the Gaelic League Journal, *An Claidheamh Soluis* (of which he was to become editor in 1903). He stated that the play was “not Irish” and that the Irish Literary Theatre was likely to “give the Gaelic League more trouble than the Atkinson-Mahaffy combination. Let us strangle it at its birth”. The *Irish Times* similarly declared that the play was not representative of Ireland or its people:

> *The Countess Cathleen* is neither a play nor a presentment of either the ideas or actions or motives of Irish men and women […] and in as much as it offends against the tenour of Irish history in regard to Theological connection and against the position of the Irish peasant in face of physical pain, it cannot be considered an Irish play.

The founders of the National Theatre Society would have incurred further negativity from all sides of the house as they launched the theatre with the manifesto that they would promote “the real Ireland and the ideal Ireland” – the proliferation of helpless and godless sinners as portrayed in *The Countess Cathleen* was not what the Irish believed themselves to be, nor what they wanted to be.

James Joyce was in the audience at the opening night of *The Countess Cathleen* and is reported to have clapped “vigorously” at the end of the production: clearly he saw nothing offensive in the portrayal of the “degraded” peasantry. On the contrary, he was probably in full agreement with Yeats’ characterisations. His own work *Dubliners* exposes the drear reality of life for the people of that city, along with its hypocrisy, greed and hopeless despair. The atmosphere pervading “Araby”, for example, is gloomy, dank and soulless. The narrator is not named and the girl he is infatuated with is only referred to as “Mangan’s sister”. The children play in “dark

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81 Frazier, 7.
82 Frazier, 20.
muddy lanes” and amongst “dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the
dark odorous stables”.

The story ends in disappointment: the bazaar at Araby had offered the
chance of escape from the dull monotony of everyday life in Dublin, but the boy arrives as the
bazaar is closing up and all is in darkness.

Joyce was writing about working- and middle-class city people in the early twentieth century as
opposed to peasants of a bygone era, but the message was the same. Life for the majority of the
population is generally difficult, harsh, dull and disappointing. People do not behave like saints
and they often lie and cheat to get what they want. Once you scrape away the veneer of
sophistication and grandeur, their lives are revealed for what they really are. The city folk
watching The Countess Cathleen did not want to be reminded of their basic roots. They certainly
did not want to see themselves portrayed in a less-than-golden light, speaking in a rough and
ready manner.

The audience may not have been impressed with a “warts and all” portrayal, but neither were
they taken with the preferential treatment shown towards the upper classes. Yeats’ affinity
towards the aristocratic way of life is not in doubt; his social mix was with the intellectuals and
the elite, not the lower- to middle-classes. He and other members of the Irish Literary Revival
were personal friends of Lady Gregory and they spent many hours at her estate home at Coole
Park near Gort, County Galway. Yeats was also a frequent guest of Lady Ottoline Morrell at
Garsington Manor, southeast of Oxford, and of Lady Dorothy Wellesley at Penns in the Rocks,
near Withyham, Sussex. To his way of thinking, the “noble” classes were essential for ensuring
the establishment of social order and propriety: this high regard for the aristocracy revealed itself
in his plays and was a further cause for Yeats’ alienation from many of his audiences.

The elevated status he gave to the nobility in The Countess Cathleen, as exemplified by the
countess, was extremely marked – particularly when compared with the representation of the
peasantry. The countess is an archetypal figure of noble goodness: whilst most of the peasants in
the play are shown to be ungrateful, greedy and sinful, the countess is generous, compassionate
and selfless. She not only gives away all her money and possessions, but barters her soul in
order to save her fellow countrymen.

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83 James Joyce, “Araby”, in Dubliners (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Press, 2014), accessed March 18,
Yeats also believed that some people were naturally of higher nobility than others, and thus had more to offer society. Taking the actions and demeanour of the countess as representative of this belief, with nobility came virtue, and with wealth came wisdom. This philosophy is enforced in *The Countess Cathleen* by the peasant woman Mary:

> When those that have read books,  
> And seen the seven wonders of the world,  
> Fear what’s above or what’s below the ground,  
> It’s time that poverty should bolt the door. (I.i.146-9)

There is also the implication that being wealthy meant one could afford to be generous, whereas being poor only allowed for the virtue of gratitude, and this only in small measure, as it is Mary alone who displays any form of appreciation towards the countess:

> … But first sit down and rest yourself awhile,  
> For my old fathers served your fathers, lady,  
> Longer than books can tell – and it were strange  
> If you and yours should not be welcome here. (I.i.93-6)

The highest amount that the peasants are able to barter from the demon merchants is one thousand crowns for the soul of an old peasant lady, whereas for the countess the price is five hundred thousand. The countess is also considered worthy of redemption by God, who at the closing of the play redeems her noble soul. This seems to reinforce the message that the lives of the peasantry are worth very little in comparison to those of the nobility.

The portrayal in this play of the privileged status of the countess was objected to by the [Catholic] lower classes, who considered the landed class – mostly of Protestant Anglo-Irish ascendancy (as was Yeats) – to be the cause of much exploitation against the peasantry and working classes. One example which would have been fresh in the memories of the people was that of the Protestant landlords offering soup to the starving peasants at the end of the Great Famine on the condition that they changed their religion. Very few actually complied with this demand, and those who did were severely ridiculed. However, the political implication within the play was that the Protestant landlord (the Countess Cathleen) was a benevolent and heroic saviour to whom the starving peasants owed their lives and eternal gratitude.

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84 Frazier, 11.  
85 Frazier, 11.  
86 Frazier, 11.  
87 Frazier, 14.
The Nationalists were strongly of the opinion that a national theatre should represent Irishness and Irish nationalism in a way that was totally favourable. They wanted their national drama to portray the Irish as “valiant, pious rebels”88 fighting (and winning) the battle against an unjust land settlement. What they saw instead was the depiction of starving, sinful peasants bartering their souls for gold and haggling over the price, suffering the final indignity of being “rescued” by the aristocratic Anglo-Irish landlord.89

Yeats’ own cultural background placed him in a delicate position with regard to the way he portrayed the different classes. By creating class and social distinctions which made his audience feel uncomfortable, if not resentful, he distanced himself from gaining their trust. Without this trust, they would not attain the necessary appreciation for the plays that would allow them to feel any form of nationalistic pride or sense of identity.

Once the initial controversy and outrage had died down, The Countess Cathleen became a success and was staged several more times at the Abbey Theatre to no protest. That particular play, however, and those that similarly characterised the Irish peasantry, would always struggle to gain the empathy of the audience on a cultural level. A few of the newspaper reviews at the turn of the century pinpointed the main issue:

Mr. Yeats would do well to leave the presentation of the Irish peasantry and their religious atmosphere to those who know them intimately. Mr Yeats is a king in fairyland – in the world of imaginative symbol and spiritual thought – but he does not know the Irish peasant and what he believes and feels […].90

It may be doubted whether Mr. Yeats’s ideas are really Irish ideas, or that his art is as Celtic as he supposed. To speak of his verse or his prose tales – charming as many of the latter are – as an interpretation of Irish character is profoundly to misinterpret that character.91

The main point these critics were making was that Yeats had no real understanding of the peasantry or the “Irish character”: he was imagining a very Romantic and ideal version of Ireland and her people that was not based on the social and economic realities.

The reality of life for the peasantry was that the status of those working on the land was changing rapidly. The “Land War” of the late 1870s between tenant-farmers and landlords was finally resolved by the Land Purchase Act 1903, which provided loans to enable the peasants to

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88 Frazier, 19.
90 “The Literary Theatre”, Daily Express (May 9, 1899), 5, in Hogan and Kilroy, Irish Literary Theatre, 42.
91 “Celtic or Decadent?”, Irish Times (August 26, 1904), 9, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 98.
purchase their own land. This Act meant that the social and economic status of the peasant changed from that of tenant farmer to small landowner. Many of the children of these new landowners were choosing to leave the rural life in the hope of finding a more prosperous existence in the cities of Ireland or overseas to England or the United States. The group of people who provided the inspiration for Yeats’ early plays, therefore, were rapidly distancing themselves from their traditional role.  

As it was, his focus on the peasant culture as a means to promote feelings of nationalism may have resonated with the Irish peasantry currently living in the West of Ireland, but he was presenting these plays in the city of Dublin, to an audience which would have included the “rising generation of Catholic intellectuals”. There were many notable figures in this set who did not agree that the “romantic” country life was the best way to promote Irish literature and raise cultural awareness. James Flannery suggests that there were two main drivers behind their rejection of the peasant culture: their own ancestors had come from the peasant classes so they saw little “romance” in the country life, and their Catholic backgrounds pushed them to look to Europe for their intellectual heritage. The Dublin journalist D.P. Moran best summed up the thoughts and feelings of many with his remark that “The real Ireland is not a Land of Heart’s Desire”.  

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Around 1902 the subject matter of Yeats’ plays shifted attention from tales of the peasantry and controversial religious themes towards depictions of the legendary past and the heroic ideal. He was inspired from an early age by the writings of Standish O’Grady (1846-1928), whose books History of Ireland: The Heroic Period (published 1878) and The Coming of Cuchulain (1895) recreated the tales of the Gaelic Heroic tradition. Lady Gregory provided Yeats with a major breakthrough in his studies with her translations of the Ulster cycle legends in Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902) and of the Fenian cycle legends in Gods and Fighting Men (1904). These resources gave him access to the epic tales of Ireland, such as “The Cattle Raid of Cooley” (Táin Bó Cúailnge), composed between the fourth and seventh centuries AD.

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92 Flannery, 337.  
93 Flannery, 341.  
94 Flannery, 341.  
Yeats placed great importance on the power of the ancient legends, as he revealed in a letter to O’Grady in 1898:

There is humour and fantasy as well as miraculous poetry in our old legends, and one can find in them all kinds of meanings […] They are the greatest treasure the Past has handed down to us Irish people, and the most plentiful treasure of legends in Europe. (Letters, 308)

He believed that the myths and tales of Ireland’s legendary past were ideally suited to assisting the nationalist cause as they were “uncoloured by modern politics or sectarian religious controversy”.96 This is an interesting viewpoint but their applicability as “ideally suited” is debatable. The legends were from such a long time ago as to be totally irrelevant in modern society: if the Nationalists were looking for heroic exploits they wanted them to be about “real” people and stories that the Irish could relate to.

Yeats also hoped that the accessibility of the legends would make them an attractive source of inspiration for other literary writers, as well as appeal to an audience of mixed beliefs. It was not that he wanted to recreate an historical account of Ireland’s mythological past, more that he wanted his audience to be inspired by the spirit of those times. As he wrote in his introduction to Lady Gregory’s Cuchulaine of Muirthemne: “If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea”.97

A return to the heroic culture of Ireland’s ancient past was essential, he believed, for the establishment of national unity amongst the people. He openly stated his aim in a lecture he delivered in New York in 1904:

In Ireland alone among the nations that I know you will find, away on the Western seaboard […] a race of gentlemen keep alive the ideals of a great time when men sang the heroic life with drawn swords in their hands […]. Yes, we desire to preserve into the modern life that ideal.98

The idea of recreating the attitudes and culture of a time when men were sword-brandishing conquering heroes sounds quite preposterous. Today we go to watch movies on the big screen about the life and times of legendary characters such as Robin Hood, King Arthur and Genghis Khan. We admire their skill, strength, tenacity and courage, and are happy to be swept along by

the fantastical and often outrageously unbelievable events that unfold before our eyes. We relish the escapism that such an experience gives us from the predictability of our everyday lives, but we know that what we are seeing and experiencing is fanciful.

So it would have been for the theatregoers in Dublin in the early part of the twentieth century. As mentioned earlier, work and living conditions for many of the city’s inhabitants were poor. On the political front, Nationalist groups such as Sinn Fein (with a mainly Catholic following) were gathering momentum in their push for Home Rule, but equally the Unionists were loudly proclaiming their position. These mainly Protestant supporters maintained strong feelings of loyalty towards Britain and they were also fearful of a Catholic-dominated country. Tensions throughout the whole country naturally began to run high and spill out onto the streets, particularly as families and friends often found themselves on different sides of the nationalist debate. There was also dissent within the Nationalist movement itself, including disagreement over the extent to which revolutionary, or physical force, should be used in the fight for independence. Given this highly-charged and very tense environment, plays about the exploits of legendary characters from a time long past were difficult for the people to relate to. At the most they might only be regarded as a form of escapist entertainment.

But the Romantic ideal that drove Yeats in his life and work isolated him from the realities of life for the common man and woman on the street. He was steadfast in his belief that plays based on the legends of Ireland would open up the imagination of the audiences and instil a sense of the spirit and heroic culture of those times. To help achieve this he looked to the archetypal hero Cuchulain as the symbolic embodiment of the qualities that represented the Nationalist ideal. Cuchulain was the central figure of the Ulster cycle legends, a series of tales which revolved around the heroes of the kingdom of Ulster in the early first century. Lady Gregory’s translations of the stories in *Cuchulaine of Muirthemne* provided both the opportunity and inspiration for Yeats to bring the heroic ideal to life on stage.

As the embodiment of the heroic qualities of the times of old, Yeats would have wanted his audiences to be inspired by the courage and passionate intensity of Cuchulain. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley dated August, 1938, Yeats wrote that: “Cuchulain seemed to me a heroic

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figure because he was creative joy separated from fear” (*Letters*, 913). A letter to Frank Fay in January, 1904, outlined the human traits he wanted to bring out through his plays:

> I have also to [suggest] in Cuchulain’s character a shadow of something a little proud, barren and restless, as if out of sheer strength of heart or from accident he had put affection away. He lives among young men but has himself outlived the illusions of youth. The touch of something hard, repellent yet alluring, self-assertive yet self-immolating, is not all but it must be there. (*Letters*, 425)

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*On Baile’s Strand* (originally published in 1903, first performed in 1904) was largely based on the chapter titled “The Only Son of Aoife” in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. It is the first of the five plays Yeats wrote about Cuchulain, and it firmly identifies the heroic background of the character. The teachings from the Cabalistic lore of the Golden Dawn encouraged Yeats to give Cuchulain personality traits that blended qualities symbolised by the sun (masculine forces associated with discipline and pattern) and the moon (opposing feminine elements associated with passion and infinitude). Cuchulain took on archetypal status: not only did he have the power, strength, skill and cunning as befitted ancient Ireland’s greatest warrior, but he embraced free-spiritedness, passion and pleasure – he also maintained a close relationship with the spirit world. He was believed to be the offspring of Lugh, the Sun God, to which the High King, Conchubar, alludes during his admonition of the man in the play: “And you for all the wildness of your blood, / And though your father came out of the sun” (I.i.211-12). As such it is fitting that the oath of fealty that Cuchulain is obliged to take is performed over a bowl of fire.

He was also associated with the hawk, and is said to have had a hawk-like nature and the grip of a hawk’s claw. There are many references to the hawk throughout the play, including during the exchange at which Conchubar is trying to get the Young Man (who turns out to be Cuchulain’s son, Conlaoch) to identify himself as being of noble blood. The Young Man states: “I will give no other proof than the hawk gives / That it’s no sparrow!” (I.i.435-6), to which Cuchulain replies: “To have shown the hawk’s grey feather is enough, / And you speak highly, too” (I.i.439-40).

Cuchulain lists many of his own achievements during his angry speech in response to Conchubar’s insistence that he take the oath of loyalty:

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100 Holdeman, 43.
I whose mere name has kept this country safe,
I that in early days have driven out
Maeve of Cruachan and the northern pirates,
The hundred kings of Sorcha, and the kings
Out of the Garden in the East of the World. (I.i.187-91)

“Maeve of Cruachan” was the Queen of Connacht: with her consort, Ailill, she was a powerful enemy of Ulster, and central to the tale of “The Cattle Raid of Cooley” (CWII, 852). “The northern pirates” is a reference to the Norsemen who invaded Ireland and eventually set up trading posts, and “Sorcha” is part of the Celtic Otherworld (CCP, 103).

Other characters in the play also point out Cuchulain’s strengths and feats. The Blind Man tells the Fool that Conchubar is coming to assert himself as Cuchulain’s master, to which the Fool replies “He must be a great man to be Cuchulain’s master” (I.i.34). Shortly after this, the Fool sings a song about some of Cuchulain’s deeds, during which the warrior is portrayed as possessing powers over both the natural and supernatural worlds:

- Cuchulain has killed kings,
- Kings and sons of kings,
- Dragons out of the water,
- And witches out of the air,
- Banachas and Bonachas and people of the woods. (I.i.82-6)

“Banachas” and “Bonachas” are female and male goblins who resided in remote, lonely glens, and could commonly be found shrieking and howling at the time of a battle crisis. It is also suggested that they may be related to the banshee, a female faery who is heard keening or wailing when a death is imminent.101 In her translation of the Ulster legends, Lady Gregory refers to them accompanying Cuchulain when he goes into battle.

It is unlikely that the average audience member would have understood the background to these mythological references, nor how they were connected to Cuchulain. Yeats’ notes on the 1899 production of The Countess Cathleen include the declaration that: “audiences – even at the Abbey Theatre – are almost ignorant of Irish mythology” (CCP, 5). But this did not stop him from including whatever allusion to legend or myth he felt appropriate for the telling of the story. It may well have been his intention to raise the cultural consciousness of the people but, unless they were studying the text of the play very carefully, they would most likely have felt alienated

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101 Skene, 161.
from the action, if not angry with themselves for not knowing the references. As such, the majority of this dialogue would simply have gone over their heads.

Much of the action of *On Baile’s Strand* arises from Conchubar’s need to maintain a tight hold on power for himself and his heirs: he feels threatened by Cuchulain with his “wild” non-conformist ways. He demands an oath of loyalty, ostensibly because a part of the shore was left un guarded allowing a young man from Aoife’s country to land without being challenged. The king also declares that his children are concerned that they will not be safe once their father is gone as they do not believe Cuchulain will show similar loyalty to them as he does to the current king. It becomes clear, too, that Conchubar wants to subdue Cuchulain in order to placate the other nobles of the country who are both fearful and envious of the legendary character’s status in the land.

The king taunts Cuchulain’s childless state, reminding him that he has no son to protect or carry on his lineage. Cuchulain realises that although he himself is still the same free-spirited and fearless adventurer, the people around him have changed. He reluctantly agrees to take the oath:

> I understand it all.  
> It’s you that have changed. You’ve wives and children now,  
> And for that reason cannot follow one  
> That lives like a bird’s flight from tree to tree.  
> It’s time the years put water in my blood  
> And drowned the wildness of it, for all’s changed,  
> But that unchanged – I’ll take what oath you will:  
> The moon, the sun, the water, light, or air,  
> I do not care how binding. (I.i.339-47)

The mood of Cuchulain’s speech is resigned yet defiant: he recognises that Conchubar and the other kings fear his independence and resent his heroic fame. Joseph Holloway recalls Yeats saying: “People who do aught for Ireland, ever and always have to fight the waves in the end”.

The fate of Cuchulain successfully illustrates this viewpoint: his reckless bravado, freedom of spirit and non-conformity were characteristics that helped him win many of his many battles, but ultimately these qualities were crushed by the forces of politics, resentment and jealousy. The tragedy of the play is that Cuchulain is forced through his oath to Conchubar to fight and kill the Young Man, whose identity is still unknown to him. He is driven mad with rage and despair.

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when he discovers the truth about his opponent’s identity, and plunges into the sea to slay the waves.

The audience would very likely have felt sympathy for Cuchulain, particularly when they witnessed the tragic consequences of his oath-taking. They would also have been impressed by the nobility of his assurance that he would keep the oath:

I’ll take and keep this oath, and from this day
I shall be what you please …
I never gave a gift and took it again. (I.i.400-01; 407)

The compassionate way Cuchulain tried to dissuade the young man from fighting him would definitely have appealed to their sense of justice. The dramatic structure of the play was pure classical tragedy, as was the plot. This genre has always held great popular appeal, but would the audience have been inspired by his courage and “passionate intensity”? Would they have left the theatre wishing that the world they lived in reflected the spirit and heroic culture of the world they had just witnessed? It seems unlikely. The world of supernatural and mythological beings, where semi-divine archetypal heroes fought battles against kings, witches and dragons, was a fantasy domain which had no connection with their own.

A review that appeared in The Academy and Literature in 1904 echoed the sentiments of Synge and Padraic Pearse with regards to the need to present Irish dramas about “real life”. With reference to a few of Yeats’ plays, including On Baile’s Strand, The King’s Threshold and Cathleen ni Houlihan, it states:

These plays have been written for “an Irish Theatre”; there is much good work in them, much good poetry, but no drama and no characterisation; they will not do anything in my opinion to help the Irish stage […]. What is needed? Simply living, human dramas and comedies of Irish life today. If Mr Yeats and his fellow workers desire to found a living Irish drama they must look to the life of today, not of yesterday, and must take for their characters human being, not abstractions […]. I have every sympathy with these endeavours, and would have them succeed; but exotics will not ‘do’, we want hardy plants.103

There was a small but vocal group of observers who were not convinced that the Celtic legends should be brought to the stage at all. Oliver St. John Gogarty, in his review for On Baile’s Strand in the Dublin Evening Mail, put those thoughts into print: “I cannot help feeling that

103 Unsigned review of The Hour Glass and Other Plays (1904), The Academy and Literature, April 2, 1904, in Jeffares, The Critical Heritage, 140.
experiments like Baile’s Strand tend to Lilliputianise our legends”. Arthur Griffith, writing for the *United Irishman*, took a similar view:

> It cannot be said that the people of the drama are at all adequate to the people of the legend: there is a lack of dignity and of strength in the play which a considerable amount of melodramatic acting by Mr. Frank Fay as Cuchulain did not serve to remove.\(^{105}\)

These comments tie in with the thoughts expressed by various members of the Irish intellectual set, as discussed earlier, as to whether it was appropriate to look to the peasant culture as a means of expressing “Irish-ness”. The country life was considered by many to be too base to be promoted for such an important cause whereas the heroic legends were considered by some to be too precious.

Whichever way the arguments are considered, Yeats’ choice of subject matter and themes for his early plays did not help in raising the awareness of the people to their cultural heritage. The issue was not so much that they did not focus on everyday life and events, but that they were primarily a reflection of Yeats’ own Romanticised and idealised view of Ireland. This view did not take into account the current religious or social conditions of the country and as such the “peasant” plays managed to raise suspicion and distrust, as well as a fair amount of anger and ridicule. Similarly, the “heroic” plays were an expression of his own longing to resurrect the spirit and passion of an era that was long gone and just not relevant to contemporary society.


A Personal Point of View

I would sooner our theatre failed through the indifference or hostility of our audiences than gained an immense popularity by any loss of freedom. (CWVIII, 34)

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the focus of Yeats’ dramatic works move further away from thoughts of nation building towards the expression of his personal views on contemporary social and political matters. Two principal motivators prompted this development: a sharp difference of theatrical opinion with those who fervently supported the Nationalist cause; and frustration at what he considered to be the increasing narrow-mindedness and pettiness of the Irish in general.

The driving force behind the establishment of the literary theatre had been the belief that the plays that were staged there would raise the public’s awareness to their cultural heritage: this in turn would assist the Nationalist movement by reawakening feelings of national pride and identity. It was also Yeats’ strong belief that artistic excellence and aestheticism should unfailingly be the prime criterion for theatre. This approach was not in line however with how the Nationalists viewed the role of the theatre: Arthur Griffith made it very clear to Yeats and the members of the National Theatre that art must always be subservient to nationalism. 106 Yeats of course did not agree with this dictum and persisted in reinforcing his own creative point of view.

This difference of opinion ensured that there was always going to be an element of society who were suspicious of, and negative towards, the productions of the new theatre company. Right from the outset Yeats had encountered resistance from the Nationalists, particularly from those he termed the “Harp and Pepper pots”. 107 This group of “flag-wavers” was not impressed that the Irish National Theatre should include in its membership suspected Anglophiles and Unionists. They were also suspicious that the purchase of the Abbey Theatre, in which the Society made its home, was acquired and renovated through the funds of an English patron of the arts, Annie Horniman, on the condition that it not become a venue for political propaganda.108

Yeats would have found solidarity with James Joyce over his frustration towards those who loudly proclaimed their “Irishness”. Joyce encountered much hypocrisy in the Nationalist movement which he drew upon in some of his own writings. As an example, his portrayal of

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106 Flannery, 324.
107 Skene, 78.
108 Skene, 78.
Jimmy Boyle’s father in “After the Race” (from *Dubliners*) depicts a once-fervent supporter of Irish independence whose actions make a mockery of his outwardly spoken beliefs. He sent his son to be educated in England, he secured contracts with the very police who upheld the British law, and he encouraged Jimmy to make an investment in a French motor-car business: “money to be made in the motor business, pots of money”. Mr Boyle clearly considered financial concerns to be of greater importance than patriotic sensibilities.

At this point it should be mentioned that one particular peasant play did gain favour with the Nationalist crowd. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (originally published in 1902, first performed in 1902) stood out amongst Yeats’ early plays as a rousing success – particularly with the militant Nationalists who included it in their propaganda as a rallying call to action. It is set in a cottage on the west coast of Ireland in 1798 at the time of the French invasion to assist the United Irishmen in their rebellion against British rule. Yeats adapted the conventions of the Irish literary genre of the *aisling* in order to represent a vision of the nation personified as an old woman: she enters the cottage and inspires Michael to reject his wedding plans and promise of a comfortable life in favour of patriotically fighting for his nation in the battle for liberation.

The play is simple yet has a very powerful message. Yeats wanted the Dublin audience to get a sense of the passion that the countryman feels for the land: it was this kind of intense pride that he wanted to reawaken in the hearts of all Irish in order to achieve patriotic unity. The following dialogue between Bridget, Peter and the Old Woman gently and powerfully pulls at the heartstrings:

*Bridget:* What was it put you wandering?
*Old Woman:* Too many strangers in the house.
*Bridget:* Indeed you look as if you’d had your share of trouble.
*Old Woman:* I have had trouble indeed.
*Bridget:* What was it put the trouble on you?
*Old Woman:* My land that was taken from me.
*Peter:* Was it much land they took from you?
*Old Woman:* My four beautiful green fields. (I.i.139-146)

To add authenticity to the characters Yeats wrote the play “… in the English of the West of Ireland, the English of people who think in Irish”. Lady Gregory helped him perfect the slow and deliberate speech of the country people: she developed a style known as Kiltartanese, after the region around her estate in County Galway. There is some debate as to the extent of the

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110 W.B. Yeats, article in *United Irishman*, May 5, 1902, in CCP, 28.
contribution Lady Gregory made to this play. Her diary entry for July 18, 1925, states: “I see in a list of Yeats’ plays Unicorn as before and Pot of Broth now – put as ‘written with Lady Gregory’. Rather hard on me not giving my name with Cathleen ni Houlihan that I wrote all but all of.”

The songs that Cathleen sings in the play, which Yeats based on an old Gaelic folk-song, were similarly dealt with in the traditional manner:

Cathleen’s verses by the fire [...] are sung as the country people understand song. Modern singing would spoil them for dramatic purposes by taking the keenness and the salt out of the words. (CWII, 758)

These nods to tradition would have had a significant emotional impact on the audience. The lyrics are poignant and powerful, such as these that Cathleen (as an Old Woman) is heard singing once she is outside the door:

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever. (I.i.267-70)

The use of anaphora and epistrophe in these few lines (“They shall … for ever”) places the emphasis on the brave men who went to fight for their country. It also gives the song an incantatory quality: to a nationalistic audience it would have taken on the gravity of a church ritual honouring the heroic fallen. In a number of his plays Yeats conflated the two very different environments of Church and theatre (as will be discussed in the next chapter). For the most part this approach elicited a negative reaction from the audience, but in this particular case it worked effectively in creating the desired honorific mood.

The audience would also have been emotionally moved by the action of the final moments of the play. Delia has put her arms around Michael and is pleading with him not to leave her. The directions then state: “Michael breaks away from Delia, stands for a second at the door, then rushes out, following the Old Woman’s voice. Bridget takes Delia, who is crying silently, into her arms” (CWII, 93).

Although this play was hugely popular, Yeats never intended it to be used as a propagandist piece. He seemed to recognise though that he may have inadvertently stepped into political waters as he spent a lot of time [anxiously?] denying its nationalistic association. In a 1904

memorandum to the Unionist MP Horace Plunkett (1854-1932), he provided a form of justification for its content:

I took a piece of human life, thoughts that men had felt, hopes they had died for, and I put this into what I believe to be sincere dramatic form. I have never written a play to advocate any kind of opinion and I think that such a play would be necessarily bad art, or at any rate a very humble kind of art. At the same time I feel that I have no right to exclude for myself or for others, any of the passionate material of drama. (CLIII, 623)

According to the Labour leader James Connolly (1868-1916), the primary function of a national theatre should be that “of restoring our national pride”. 112 It was Arthur Griffith who made the loudest and most persistent noise through the editorials of his newspaper concerning the role of the national theatre. Griffith was in fact a keen supporter of literature, and was responsible for the discovery and promotion of many new Irish writers. 113 But he was firmly of the view that “a valid art was impossible without a pervasive Nationalism”. 114 He stated that “We look to the Irish National Theatre primarily as a means of regenerating the country. The Theatre is a powerful agent in the building up of a nation.” 115 Griffith also drew on the title of the theatre in his challenge to Yeats over the type of plays the company should produce:

If the Theatre be solely an Art Theatre, then its plays can only be fairly criticised from the standpoint of Art. But whilst it calls itself Irish National its productions must be considered and criticised as Irish National productions. This is surely obvious. 116

As discussed earlier, The Countess Cathleen raised the ire of the Nationalists over its depiction of the Irish and its people. But it was the representation of the Irish in Synge’s play In the Shadow of the Glen that caused particular outrage from many of the theatregoers and started a bitter exchange of views between Yeats and the Nationalist press, most notably with Griffith’s United Irishman.

The plot involves a farmer who deceives his wife into thinking he is dead in order to catch her out at adultery. When his scheme is revealed he orders her away and she leaves with a tramp, who offers her a life of freedom. This last was too much for the patriotic crowd, who considered

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113 Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 76.
114 Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 75.
116 Arthur Griffith, an untitled note appended to Yeats’ essay “The Irish National Theatre and Three Sorts of Ignorance”, United Irishman (October 24, 1903), 2.
it “an insult to Irish womanhood”.\textsuperscript{117} Even the \textit{Irish Times}, which was generally unbiased in its reviews as regards nationalism, stated that “we found it exceedingly distasteful.”\textsuperscript{118}

In 1908 Yeats remarked in an appended note to his essay “The Irish National Theatre” (1903) that the \textit{United Irishman}

from that time on has attacked almost every play produced at our theatre, and the suspicion it managed to arouse among the political clubs against Mr Synge especially led a few years later to the organised attempt to drive \textit{The Playboy of the Western World} from the stage. (\textit{CWVIII}, 32)

The Nationalist press, and many sections of the patriotic audience, were incensed at Synge’s very realist and often satirical depictions of his fellow Irishman and those institutions the Irish held so dear, including the Church, the peasantry, and family. This essay has already noted that much offence was taken at any suggestion of impropriety by the women of Ireland, and the critical reviews of Synge’s \textit{Playboy} added to the cacophony of outrage. The \textit{Freeman’s Journal} declared that the play was an “unmitigated, protracted libel upon Irish peasant men and, worse still, upon Irish peasant girlhood” and added “It is quite plain that there is need for a censor at the Abbey Theatre”.\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{Dublin Evening Mail} similarly criticised the plot as “absurd and un-Irish … [it] smacks of the decadent ideas of the literary flâneurs of Paris rather than of simple Connaught”.\textsuperscript{120} The nationalist newspaper \textit{An Claidheamh Soluis} took their indignation at Synge’s works to the extreme:

Mr Synge […] is using the stage for the propagation of a monstrous gospel of animalism, of revolt against sane and sweet ideals, of bitter contempt for all that is fine and worthy, not merely in Christian morality, but in human nature itself.\textsuperscript{121}

During this period Yeats seemed to spend much of his time arguing that the National Theatre should be free of censorship of any form. In his essay “Moral and Immoral Plays” (1903) he responded to the accusation that he did not appear to care whether a play was moral or immoral:

Every generation of men of letters has been called immoral by the pulpit or the newspaper, and it has been precisely when that generation was illuminating some obscure corner of the conscience that the cry against it has been most confident. (\textit{CWVIII}, 29).

He also tirelessly defended the role of the theatre as an institution of artistic creativity as opposed to a medium of nationalistic propaganda. “Though one welcomes every kind of vigorous life, I

\textsuperscript{117} Hogan and Kilroy, \textit{Laying the Foundations}, 74.
\textsuperscript{118} “The Irish National Theatre”, \textit{The Irish Times} (October 9, 1903), 8, in Hogan and Kilroy, \textit{Laying the Foundations}, 74.
\textsuperscript{119} Hogan and Kilroy, \textit{The Years of Synge}, 125.
\textsuperscript{120} Hogan and Kilroy, \textit{The Years of Synge}, 125.
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{An Claidheamh Soluis} (February 9, 1907), 7, in Hogan and Kilroy, \textit{The Years of Synge}, 158.
am most interested in The Irish National Theatre which has no propaganda but that of good art”
(Expl 100-101). He was not averse to the inclusion of politics in the dramatic works of the
theatre, provided it fitted in with the action of the play:

If, in the sincere working-out of their plot, [the playwrights] alight on a moral that is
obviously and directly serviceable to the National cause, so much the better, but we must not
force that moral upon them. (“An Irish National Theatre” (1903), CWVIII, 33)

The tit-for-tat quarrel with Griffith in the pages of the United Irishman came to a head when
Yeats firmly reinforced his position:

I am a Nationalist […] But if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but
drama with an obviously patriotic intention instead of letting my work shape itself under the
casual impulse of dreams and daily thoughts I would have lost, in a short time, the power to
write movingly upon any theme. I could have aroused opinion, but could not have touched
the heart.\(^{122}\)

To this Griffith retorted:

He who is prepared to give up a good ideal for his country is no doubt a good man, but
unless he is prepared to give up all he is not a good Nationalist.\(^{123}\)

Yeats wrote *The King’s Threshold* (originally published in 1904, first performed in 1903) to
publicly make his point that art and the artist have an important role to play in society. Despite
his declaration that he had “never written a play to advocate any kind of opinion”, this play was
written very much in response to the current climate and from the desire to express a personal
political/social view rather than to promote any sense of national identity. As Yeats remarked in
a 1906 note to the play:

*[The King’s Threshold]* was written when our Society was having a hard fight for the
recognition of pure art in a community of which one half was buried in the practical affairs
of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism. (VPL, 315)

Although it was based on a number of sources, including “Seanchan the Bard and the King of the
Cats” from *Ancient Legends of Ireland* (1887) by Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde (1826-1896),
and *Sancan the Bard* (1895) by Edwin Ellis (1848-1916), Yeats ensured that his version was told
“from the poet’s point of view, and not, like the old story-tellers, from the king’s” (Expl. 102-
103). Seanchan, a poet in the court of King Guaire, goes on hunger strike on the steps of the
palace in protest at having been removed from the State Council because the courtiers felt it went

\(^{122}\) W.H. Henderson, *The Irish National Theatre Movement*, press cuttings with annotations, National Library of
Ireland, Mss. 1729-1732, (October 10, 1903), 305, in Flannery, 332.

\(^{123}\) Henderson, press cuttings (October 17, 1903), 307, in Flannery, 334.
“against their dignity / For a mere man of words to sit amongst them” (I.i.39-40). It is his belief that the artist plays an essential role in the governing of a fair and just society. His action places the king in a very difficult position as ancient custom states that if a man who believes he has been wronged dies upon another man’s threshold, everlasting disgrace is placed upon that threshold. A range of characters bring dishes of food and use various means of persuasion to try to get Seanchan to give up his protest, but the poet either rebuffs their attempts or exposes the hypocrisy in their arguments.

In early versions of the play the king capitulates and Seanchan lives, but in the 1922 version Yeats revised the end and the poet dies a martyr’s death. Many critics have noted the parallel between the new ending and the death of Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920), the playwright, Nationalist politician and Lord Mayor of Cork, who died following a 74-day hunger strike while imprisoned in Britain for possessing a Royal Irish Constabulary cipher. Yeats was to publicly deny this connection, yet in September 1920 he stated in a letter to Lennox Robinson (1886-1958) that he was rewriting the play in case “the Mayor of Cork may make it tragically appropriate”.

Yeats orchestrates the encounters between Seanchan and his challengers on the palace steps in such a way as to place the poet in a position of superiority. The behaviour and manner of the Mayor of Kinvara (Seanchan’s home town) – a figure of supposed authority – is ridiculous. He stumbles over an ill-prepared speech in which he tries to make Seanchan feel guilty over his actions and demonstrates a complete lack of understanding or empathy of any kind towards the poet: “What is he saying? I never understood a poet’s talk more / than the baa of a sheep” (I.i.298-9). The soldier and the monk treat Seanchan with contempt, referring to him as “wanton”, proud and obstinate, but each receive a retort that exposes their own weaknesses and hypocrisy. A couple of court ladies who try to tempt him sexually are rebuffed, and Seanchan rails against the hypocritical flattery of the two princesses who tell him that although their father “cannot have you at his table”, the poet may “ask any other thing you like / And he will give it to you” (I.i.595-7). He angrily tells them that they are “contaminated”, and opens up this accusation to all those assembled to declare that there is “no sound hand among you … You are all lepers!” (I.i.621-3).

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124 Ross, 349.
The debates are intended to assert the right of the poet to sit at the king’s court (or rather, to assert Yeats’ belief in the importance of the role of art in society). But it is unlikely that his intended message would have been well received or understood by the theatre audience. A.S. Knowland succinctly makes the observation that Seanchán’s behaviour, lying on the steps of the palace surrounded by delicious food to stubbornly prove a point, looks dangerously like “a fit of the sulks”. It would be hard for many people in Ireland in the early twentieth century to understand how a point of principle could be considered more important than, for example, the promise from the King of “a house with grass and tillage land, / An annual payment, jewels and silken wear” (I.i.84-5). They would certainly find it hard to comprehend how the poet could not be swayed by the argument from the Mayor that if he did not end his hunger strike the King would not give his townspeople the grazing land they desperately need for their survival. Similarly, they would be at a loss to see how Seanchán could harden his heart against the information from Brian, his faithful servant, of the terrible grief that his parents were suffering at the prospect of his death. Arthur Griffith’s review in the United Irishman scathingly picked up on this “selfish” behaviour:

As we watched the play, our sympathy went out to the honest soldier who wished to put his sword into the selfish old man who lay on the King’s steps intimidating where he could not convince, contending for a soft life in a King’s bosom instead of an eternal one in a people’s heart. We hold it a pity that King Guaire did not hang Seanchán. Had he done so, Art would have been for all time his debtor.

Frazier makes the observation too that the theatregoers would have [unfavourably] identified Seanchán as “a pampered product of the aristocracy”: he points to Brian’s deference to the poet as “your honour” (I.i.280) as an example of the obsequious behaviour typical of a “forelock-tugging […] nineteenth century Catholic peasant before a Protestant on a horse”.

The negative reaction to the actions of the poet would have been exacerbated by a close consideration of some of the arguments Seanchán put forward in defence of the role of the artist. One of his main claims was that poets such as himself act as mediators between the supernatural and the natural world: the images they project through their work have the ability to summon either good or evil spirits which in turn affect the physical and mental state of the unborn child in

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127 Arthur Griffith, “All Ireland”, United Irishman (October 17, 1903), 1, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 77-78.
128 Frazier, 69.
pregnant women. On demanding of the oldest pupil as to why poetry is honoured, the boy replies:

… the poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden
About the child-bed of the world, that it,
Looking upon those images, might bear
Triumphant children. (I.i.129-33)

The poet further demands that the pupil explain to the gathering what “evil thing” would happen if the arts were to perish, to which the boy responds:

If the Arts should perish,
The world that lacked them would be like a woman
That, looking on the cloven lips of a hare,
Brings forth a hare-lipped child. (I.i.138-41)

Seanchan later builds on this quite disturbing proposition that a lack of poetry – or even bad poetry – has the potential to create a society of mentally and physically deficient beings, when he asks of a group of cripples: “What bad poet did your mothers listen to / That you were born so crooked?” (I.i.649-50). He also suggests to Fedelm (his beloved) that the power of poetry was essential in order to beget

… that great race
That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-bodied,
With a high head, and open hand, and how
Laughing, it would take the mastery of the world. (I.i.690-3)

David Holdeman warns against making any association between Yeats’ ideal of a “white-bodied”, masterful race and those of societies that experimented with eugenics, such as Nazi Germany. He reminds us that Yeats lived in a world prior to the development and support of such atrocities and, whereas he may certainly have been guilty of the class and racial prejudices typical of his time, the supremacy that he envisaged was of a more metaphysical kind. By this Holdeman is referring to Yeats’ belief that intellectual poets such as himself could connect to the supernatural power emanating from the universal spirit, Anima Mundi, and summon a divine force that would spiritually “reshape human minds and bodies”. It is fair to remind ourselves though that Yeats held a very poor opinion of the middle-classes and considered creative intellectuals to be superior – by that token, metaphysical supremacy is also class related. Evil intentions notwithstanding, the suggestion of a spiritual influence on the physical and mental

129 Holdeman, 44.
130 Holdeman, 45.
shaping of society would have been an extraordinary concept for Yeats’ audience to grasp, even for those who “loved” poetry.

The King’s Threshold did receive some positive reviews: the Irish Times commented that it was “an arresting and beautiful little drama” and the Daily Express observed that “in the matter of staging, nothing could be better”. But the play did not contribute to a raising of cultural awareness among the Irish: instead its prime function was as a vehicle to promote Yeats’ belief in the essential role of the artist in society. In that respect too it failed: Yeats did not manage to gain the sympathy of his audiences as the play showed a total disconnection with the thoughts, feelings and needs of the “average” man on the street. Standish O’Grady alluded to this in his review:

The incredibility of a man abstaining from food or drink until he died, died before our eyes, was so contrary to nature, so unhuman, that of itself it was enough to make the whole play unreal, unaffected. Add to this the preposterous notion that the poet, the true poet, can even demand honour and recognition from the average man, even when typified as the King […]. The central unreality, incredibility, spread an atmosphere of insincerity over the whole, so that the observer looked on apathetically.

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Yeats’ relationship with the Nationalist community deteriorated during the first decade of the twentieth century, particularly following his very outspoken defence of Synge over the Playboy outrage. This was the turning point which brought his relationship with Arthur Griffith to the level of enmity. His stance also increased the distrust of many Catholics who had never been convinced that he was suited to the role of leader of the Irish literary movement. Flannery provides Thomas Kettle’s quote as being particularly apt at this time: “Ireland awaits her Goethe – but in Ireland he must not be a Pagan”.

The Green Helmet (originally published in 1910, first performed in 1908) was written by Yeats partly as a response to what he regarded as the narrow-mindedness of the Nationalist press and the theatregoing public who rioted over Synge’s Playboy. He was also becoming increasingly

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131 Noted without references in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 73.
132 “Irish National Theatre Society”, Daily Express (October 9, 1903), 5, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 73.
133 Standish O’Grady, “On the King’s Threshold”, All Ireland Review (October 24, 1903), 340, in Hogan and Kilroy, Laying the Foundations, 73-4.
134 Cantwell and Jochum, 204.
135 Flannery, 336.
frustrated at the rising level of greed and pettiness that he perceived in Ireland. The play was based on “The Feast of Bricriu” and “The Championship of Ulster” in Lady Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, and it places Cuchulain in a situation which highlights his courage, determination and sense of honour. The dominant “mood” that pervades this play however is more that of a farcical romp than grand heroic ideal: the sub-title is “An Heroic Farce” and the action reflects Yeats’ personal feelings towards his country at this time.

The play sees Cuchulain returning to Ireland after many years away only to find that his homeland is in disarray and chaos. Two years previously, the Red Man (a supernatural being) had challenged the heroes of the land to a game of head-for-head. Conall and Legaire accepted the challenge but when they lopped off the giant’s head he laughingly picked it up and strode off into the sea. A year later the Red Man – with head intact – returned to the land and demanded his debt be paid. He told the terrified champions that he would return to their shores in exactly one year and take what was owing to him. That day had now arrived, the same day that Cuchulain returned home. The Red Man returns: he denies that the game had been in earnest and leaves a green helmet which he says is to be given to the bravest man. Amidst all the squabbling among the warriors, the wives, servants and stable boys as to who that should be, Cuchulain throws the helmet into the sea. The warriors and their wives then aggressively turn on Cuchulain and Emer, his wife. At this point the Red Man returns and demands he get the head that he is owed. Cuchulain accepts the challenge and offers his own head: the Red Man reveals himself to be the Rector of the land and, instead of beheading Cuchulain, places the helmet on his head and declares him to be the land’s Champion.

*The Green Helmet* is replete with scenes and speeches that affirm Yeats’ sense of disgruntlement and frustration with the Irish. Conall refers to Ireland as “this unlucky country that was made when the Devil spat” (I.i.48) and wonders why Cuchulain would want to come back to a country where

… 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. (I.i.16-18)

Cuchulain confronts the Red Man with the suggestion that he may wish to

… find a sport  
Of a more Irish fashion, go fight without a rest  
A caterwauling phantom among the winds of the West. (I.i.119-120).
These barbed remarks very pointedly picture Irish society as being full of drunken, brawling and delusional (“phantom”) louts. This reinforces the stereotypical racist image of the Irish that the English were very keen on promoting as an “expression of colonial superiority” (SP, 301).

The contempt Yeats felt for the mobs who rioted and tried to stop production of Playboy is revealed throughout the drama. Their brawling and ignorant actions are mirrored in the play by the charioteers, kitchen-hands and stable boys who argue among themselves as to who is the “bravest” man. Upon hearing a “great noise” outside the door, Conall describes what is happening:

… the charioteers and the kitchen and stable boys
Shouting against each other, and the worst of all is your own,
That chariot-driver, Laeg, and they’ll keep it up till the dawn …

There, do you hear them now? Such hatred has each for each
They have taken the hunting-horns to drown one another’s speech
For fear the truth may prevail … (I.i.155-7; 160-2)

The wives also join in the petty debate:

\textit{Laegaire’s Wife}: Mine is the better to look at.
\textit{Conall’s Wife}: But mine is better born.
\textit{Emer}: My man is the pithier [braver] man. (I.i.207-09)

Yeats also manages to express his disdain for the Nationalists and their insistence that a national theatre should put the politics of Nationalism before art. The Red Man identifies himself as the “Rector” of Ireland: by making the presiding spirit of Ireland male, and giving him a clerical title normally associated with Protestantism, the play makes a “daring departure from the nationalist tradition of personifying Ireland as feminine and Catholic”.137

The verse style and language of the play match the tone of the heroic farce. For the most part the verse is constructed of couplet-rhyming fourteeners, which help the speeches to flow with a rolling, informal and playful rhythm:

\textit{Conall}: We told him it over and over, and that ale had fuddled his wit,
But he stood and laughed at us there, as though his sides would split,
Till I could stand it no longer, and whipped off his head at a blow,
Being mad that he did not answer, and more at his laughing so,
And there on the ground where it fell it went on laughing at me.

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137 Holdeman, 55.
Laegaire: Till he took it up in his hands –
Conall: – And splashed himself into the sea. (I.i.80-6)

The language used by the characters other than Cuchulain emphasises their sense of fear, pessimism and divisiveness. The dignified, matter-of-fact, slightly scornful language and tone that Cuchulain uses, on the other hand, reflects Yeats’ own aloofness and disdain for the petty squabbling and noise taking place in his own world. In particular his scenes with the Red Man suggest a light-hearted indifference to the potential danger the giant embodies:

Old herring – You whip off heads! Why, then,
Whip off your own, for it seems you can clap it on again.
Or else go down in the sea, go down in the sea, I say,
Find that old juggler Manannan138 and whip his head away. (I.i.114-17)

There is no indication here that Cuchulain holds any fear or respect for the Red Man, whom he refers to as an “Old herring”, and the repetition of the word “whip” adds to the tone of mockery.

The imagery that Yeats uses throughout the play perfectly complements his feelings of frustration towards the Irish in general. A case in point is the way he draws on the medieval fable of Reynard the Fox in his use of satire: in a letter to Standish O’Grady dated Christmas 1898, he stated that “the tricks Reynard played upon the wolf and the lion and other beasts was a cover for much fantastical satire of the lords and priests” (Letters, 307). Conall describes the Red Man to Cuchulain as “a wide, high man” with a “red foxy cloak” and with “half-shut foxy eyes” (I.i.67-68). The charioteer, Laeg, boasts that his master is “cock of the yard” to which another charioteer replies “Conall would scatter his feathers” (I.i.163-4). The quarrel of the wives as to whose husband is the bravest leads to them shrieking and wrestling each other as to who should be first in the house: this squabble adds to the general feeling pervading the play that the “crisis” the characters have placed themselves in is reminiscent of a crisis in a poultry yard.139 The imagery of a fox among the squawking chickens balloons towards the climax of the play as the stage erupts in a cacophony of noise and movement: “The Stable Boys and Scullions blow their horns or fight among themselves. There is a deafening noise and a confused fight” (CWII, 253).

Yeats’ instructions for the stage setting and for the characters’ costumes are certainly in keeping with the mock-heroic tone of the play:

138 Manannan: the god of the sea – a character in many old Irish tales, CWII, 864.
139 Skene, 149.
At the Abbey Theatre the house is orange-red and the chairs and tables and flagons black, with a slight purple tinge […]. The rocks are black with a few green touches. The sea is green and luminous, and all the characters except the Red Man and the Black Men are dressed in various shades of green, one or two with touches of purple […]. The Red Man is altogether in red. He is very tall, and his height increased by horns on the Green Helmet. The effect is intentionally violent and startling. (CWII, 241)

The visual effect for the audience would have been dramatic. The Red Man in particular, with his “intentionally violent and startling” costume, would have certainly caught their attention. As with all his works for the theatre, Yeats was very conscious of the overall effect the actors created on the stage, taking into account their movements, costumes and lighting. He was like a dance choreographer in the way he directed their movements for maximum impact: this was particularly evident in the fast-moving pace of this farce.

There is no doubt that in The Green Helmet Cuchulain emerges as a true hero. Despite the petty bickering, the fearfulness and brawling behaviour of those around him, he remains calm, dignified and level-headed. What confirms his archetypal heroic status is that despite his own people turning against him (with the exception of his wife), he nobly offers his own life in order to save theirs.

As a piece of theatre the play is extremely effective: it is full of colour, vibrancy, wit and humour, and has an unexpected ending that would have left the audience satisfied. The critical reviews in this regard were certainly positive. G.H. Mair in The Manchester Guardian summed up the general feeling:

When the declamation and the singing ended […] and the stranger had laughed his last and disclosed the riddle of his wager and the curtain fell you leant back in your seat with the even pleasure that comes of seeing something noble well done.140

It is unlikely all the audience members would have picked up on the allusions to Yeats’ opinion of the Irish, although that was possibly to his advantage! The same reviewer in The Manchester Guardian admitted that “its aspects as a satire on Irish quarrelsomeness did not occur to me”. Padraic Colum, writing for the same paper, did not miss the references. He called the play a “brilliant satire on Irish quarrelsomeness”, and concluded that “The Green Helmet is probably the most effective stage piece that Mr Yeats has written”.141 Yeats also received much praise for

his choice of verse style: Colum was not alone in stating that the “rhymed verse in the ballad metre seems certainly an innovation. The verse is crisp, brilliant, and effective.”

The play was a success for the National Theatre and it did not incur any controversy, religious or otherwise. The crowds clearly enjoyed the show for its wit, style and entertainment value but the appreciation would not have gone deeper than that. As with The King’s Threshold, Yeats used his skills as a dramatist to express his own personal views and opinions on the current social and cultural environment of Ireland: this approach was not going to help him “deepen the political passion of the nation” through the literature of their past.
The Staging of Ritual

All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen, must be firmly held against a pushing world. ("Certain Noble Plays of Japan", E&I, 224)

From the very outset of his dramatic career Yeats was drawn to the method of ritual as the ideal form for his literary plays. Chanted lyrics, minimal scenery, heavy symbolism and stylised movement: these elements and more were brought together to create a ritualistic theatrical experience in which focus was on the spoken word, and every utterance and movement conveyed significant meaning. But his enthusiastic pursuit of the ideal way to present his literary dramas did not take into account the capacity of the typical audience member to appreciate and understand his endeavours. The desire to educate the people of Ireland to a greater awareness of their cultural heritage became increasingly dominated by a personal need to explore and develop ever more innovative theatrical techniques. As Yeats’ methods became more stylised, the plays took on a foreignness and insularity that placed them well beyond the reach of the average theatregoer.

His early dramatic piece The Shadowy Waters (originally published in 1900, first performed in 1904) abounds with the techniques that exemplified his dramatic style. The plot, which has “a good deal of incidental Irish folklore and mythology but [is] not founded on any particular story” (VPL, 1283), relates a tale of the ancient sea-God Forgael as he embarks on a quest for happiness. He communicates with souls who appear to him in the guise of birds and they promise him love if he follows them. His crew capture a ship on which they find a queen, Dectora. Forgael lures her to his side with the help of a magical harp and they voyage away, alone, to follow the birds.

The dialogue is written in blank verse (iambic pentameter) and, in keeping with Yeats’ views on delivery of lines, the verses would have been chanted in the “simple method akin to ‘folk singing’”. The problem for the audience was that the whole play was presented in this style. The repetitious rhythm and sonorous chanting would have come across as monotonous: variety of tone and pace is needed in order to add texture and vibrancy, and to give dramatic emphasis. The following lines (spoken by Forgael) are beautiful and evoke a suitably moody and dreamlike atmosphere, but they would be more at home in one of Yeats’ early lyric poems:

142 Skene, 92.
… When I hold
A woman in my arms, she sinks away
As though the waters had flowed up between;
And yet, there is a love that the gods give,
When Aengus and his Edaine wake from sleep
And gaze on one another through our eyes,
And turn brief longing and deceiving hope
And bodily tenderness to the soft fire
That shall burn time when times have ebbed away.
The fool foretold me I would find this love
Among those streams, or on their cloudy edge.\(^{144}\)

The use of anaphora through the word “And” has the effect of drawing the attention of the listener into the almost dreamlike quality of the lyrics, and adds emphasis to the depth of emotion being conveyed. But the language is poetic and archaic: it is not the common speech of everyday people, nor even that of the dramatic speech of characters in contemporary drama at the turn of the twentieth century. Some degree of colloquial language and local idiom is needed in order to give credibility to the lives of the characters, allowing the audience to gain empathy with their status.

Audience comprehension of the dialogue would have been further hampered as Yeats does not alter the language to differentiate the individual characters: the common sailors, for example, speak in the same ornamental style as Forgael, a sea-King.\(^{145}\) One of the sailors presents a very Romantic view of the pirate life as he contemplates the end of his “career”:

\[
\text{I swore but yesterday if the Red God} \\
\text{Would end this peaceful life that rots the bones,} \\
\text{None should escape my sword: I would send all} \\
\text{To mind his cows and swine by the Red Lake.}\(^{146}\)
\]

This uniformity of language makes it very hard for the viewer to appreciate the nuances between the different characters and to become involved in the action on stage: the risk for the playwright is that they will lose interest and become bored very quickly.

Similarly, the play does not allow for interaction or conflict between the individuals on stage; instead, they tend to drift off into lofty poetic monologues. This would be acceptable at a poetry

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\(^{144}\) W.B. Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1900), 19. (No line numbers are indicated in this version)

\(^{145}\) Parkinson, 65.

\(^{146}\) Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters*, 23.
recital, but the audience have come to see the unfolding of a dramatic story: they need to believe they are watching real characters with whom they can feel some kind of connection or empathy.

It was not Yeats’ intention however for his characters to be three-dimensional with developed and realistic personalities. In a letter to Frank Fay, dated January 20, 1904, he stated that the play should be “deliberately without human characters” and that “… one should lose the persons in the general picture. The whole picture as it were moves together – sky and sea and cloud are as it were actors. It is almost religious, it is more a ritual than a human story” (Letters, 425).

A ritual that is “almost religious” may have been the ideal form of drama to Yeats’ way of thinking, but it was not ideal for uniting an audience towards thoughts of national identity. The Irish were no strangers to ritual – the dominant religion in Ireland was Catholicism and attendance rates for the highly ritualised form of the Mass would have been very high. As Myrtle Hill notes in her paper on religion and culture in Ireland at the turn of the century, the Church was “an important social and cultural institution” and “individuals and families depended on the Church for the celebration of the rites of passage – baptism, marriage and death”. 147 Sunday Mass in particular formed a significant part of people’s social lives: an opportunity to dress up in their “Sunday best” and meet with family and friends. This in itself was a ritual to which they were very accustomed. The Mass would have been said or chanted in Latin and the detail of much of the ritual was probably incomprehensible to most of the people, but they knew that the repetitive chanting in a foreign tongue was an important and essential part of their religious practice. They would also have been very familiar with the ceremonial aspects of the Mass, such as the ringing of the bells and the burning of the incense.

James Joyce’s stories about the people of Dublin include many observations of the relationship between the Dubliners and their religious beliefs and practices. The dependency that they place on the various rituals and formalities of the Church is keenly explored in “The Sisters”. The young narrator of this tale reflects on all that he had been taught by the deceased Father Flynn on the various Catholic rituals and ceremonies:

147 Hill, “Ireland: Religion & Culture 1870-1914”.
He had studied in the Irish college in Rome and he had taught me to pronounce Latin properly [...] he had explained to me the meaning of the different ceremonies of the Mass and of the different vestments worn by the priest [...]. His questions showed me how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the Church which I had always regarded as the simplest acts.148

The narrator subsequently learns that the priest’s increasingly erratic behaviour and fall from his esteemed position had started from the breaking of a ceremonial vessel: “It was that chalice he broke … That was the beginning of it”.149 The implication here is that the Irish placed more importance on the rituals and ceremonies pertaining to Catholicism than to the beliefs and doctrines that upheld it. Whether that is the case or not, it re-enforces the high regard and familiarity that they would have held for the various formalities and rites of that institution.

Ritual had a place in the lives of the Irish, but that place was in the Church, not the theatre. The theatre was a place they went to for escape, for entertainment, to forget about their worries and the daily drudgery of their lives. They did not expect to be presented with a form of ritual with which they had no understanding or sense of familiarity. They certainly did not expect to be intellectually challenged. The two very different environments of Church and theatre served two very different needs, but Yeats was trying to conflate them. In a letter to T. Sturge Moore dated 1929, Yeats declared that “I always feel my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith” (VPL, 526, quoted in Dirst, 132). He wanted the theatrical experience to be akin to a religious experience but that was not what the theatregoers wanted or expected. If it was indeed Yeats’ aim to inspire his audiences with tales based on their ancient past, he was going to need to come down from his “lofty” pedestal of high art and give them a drama which met them on their own level and with which they felt some familiarity.

The image of the “whole picture” in The Shadowy Waters would have included the very minimalist stage setting and scenery, for which Yeats issued the following instructions:

The sea or sky is represented by a semicircular cloth of which nothing can be seen except a dark abyss, for the stage is lighted by arclights so placed upon a bridge over the proscenium as to throw a perpendicular light upon the stage. The light is dim, and there are deep shadows which waver as if with the passage of clouds over the moon. (SP, 275)

The use of a curving cloth to represent the sea or sky was revolutionary in theatrical terms, and is testament to Yeats’ creativity and willingness to experiment with new and unusual minimalist

149 Joyce, “The Sisters”.
methods. The overall effect would have been dramatic and atmospheric, but would have come across as quite a shock to an audience used to the elaborate scenery of the commercial theatre.

A consideration of theatre productions outside of Ireland around this time show that Yeats was not alone in his attempts to push the aesthetic boundaries. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) caused quite a stir and much controversy with his highly unusual set and costume designs for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, in particular for the ballet “Parade”, which premiered in Paris in May, 1917. The set design drew on his current interest in Cubism, and the dancers wore geometric-shaped ten-foot tall costumes that were constructed of wood, metal, cloth, papier-mâché and other materials. A few critics were able to appreciate Picasso’s intention behind the dramatic sets and the clumsy and awkward costumes as “an expression of the mechanised, dehumanised modern era”\(^{150}\), but the general public were scathingly unimpressed, and the ballet closed after just two performances. It could be said that Picasso, like Yeats, was way ahead of his time: the expectation level that the designer/playwright held for his audience was much higher than that which the latter was able – or willing – to reach.

What would also have been quite a shock and a challenge for the Irish audience was Yeats’ very heavy use of verbal and visual imagery in order to give symbolic meaning. He believed in the existence of what Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614-1687) termed the Anima Mundi\(^{151}\), a “storehouse of universal intelligence and feeling bordering on the unconscious mind of every individual”\(^{152}\): Yeats referred to it as the “Great Memory”. As he explains in his 1901 essay “Magic”:

> Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or devils. Symbols are of all kinds, for everything in heaven or earth has its association, momentous or trivial, in the Great Memory, and one never knows what forgotten events may have plunged it, like the toadstool and the ragweed, into the great passions. (\emph{E&I}, 50)

Within this Memory were also stored the archetypes of myths and legends. For the purposes of Yeats’ writing, Irish symbols such as the symbolic characters Oisin and Aengus, or the hound with one red ear, could effectively evoke the powers of the Memory.\(^{153}\) The only individuals who had the ability to access Anima Mundi were the “masters of magic, or […] their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist” (\emph{E&I}, 49). To this end, Yeats pursued his interest in magic

\(^{151}\)Literally “soul [or mind] of the world”.
\(^{152}\)Philip Sherrard, \emph{W.B. Yeats and the Search for Tradition} (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1975), 10.
\(^{153}\)Sherrard, 10.
and the occult, from his early membership of the Theosophical Society and his subsequent association with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He believed that by connecting to the universal mind through the various rituals of magical practice he would be able to find strong and powerful symbolic imagery for his creative endeavours: the reader or viewer would then in turn be connected to this higher level through the medium of his poetry and dramatic works.\textsuperscript{154}

Yeats’ essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900) offers a detailed definition of his theory of symbolism and how it applies to poetry and the arts. In particular he refers to emotional symbols (those which evoke an emotional response only, such as a colour) and intellectual symbols (those that evoke a meaningful response to something that is learned or preordained, such as a cross):

\begin{quote}
It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. \textit{(E&I, 161)}
\end{quote}

He clearly believed that through the combined use of these “emotional” and “intellectual” symbols it would be possible to engage the imagination of the entire audience so that they became united as one. As he said, “I seem to myself most alive when a room full of people share the one lofty emotion” \textit{(P&C, 416)}. This expression supported his conviction that a group of people who were united in the theatre were more likely to become united as a nation – and the use of symbolism would greatly aid this unification. It was a lot to ask of an audience: maybe it would be possible in a small gathering of learned intellectuals, but was not likely to be achievable in a theatre of individuals with varying degrees of intellect and education.

The problem was that much of Yeats’ symbolism as it appeared in the plays would not have been at all obvious or clear to the audience. Symbols that are widely recognised and understood, if used strategically, are a very effective and powerful use of imagery. It is not essential that the audience understand every single symbolic reference in a play, but they need to recognise \textit{most} of the references in order to be able to fully participate in the action. They also need to be able to instantly recognise that a particular word or image is in fact a symbol at all. Shakespeare places a few references to “stars” throughout his play \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, for example, to symbolise the pre-ordained fate of the lovers. Astrologists have long held the belief that a person’s destiny was determined by the stars – even today we “look to the stars” for our horoscopes. This symbol is therefore easily recognisable and accessible to the audience. The

\textsuperscript{154} Sherrard, 10.
prologue introduces the “pair of star-crossed lovers”: this places the symbolism and its association firmly in the minds of the audience at the beginning of the play, making it much more likely that they will pick up on the later references.

In Yeats’ plays there was an over-use of symbols, most of which had obscure meanings known only to himself. It is unlikely that the average audience member would have made a comprehensive study of Yeats’ writings in this area. The Shadowy Waters was so full of symbolic references that it was referred to as “a kind of dramatic encyclopaedia of Yeats’s knowledge and theories of symbolism”. As such the play came across as completely bewildering to the audience. Their reaction was summed up by the theatre critic Joseph Holloway who stated that the play “fairly mystified the audience by the uncanny monotomy of its strange incomprehensibleness”.

The play contains much “primary symbolism”, including the sea on which the action takes place, the boats in which the lovers are sailing and the harp which is played by Forgael to lure Dectora to his side. Yeats provides an explanation for the symbolism of the sea in the notes to his poem “He Bids his Beloved be at Peace”, published in The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). He states that:

Some neo-platonist, I forget who, describes the sea as a symbol of the drifting, indefinite bitterness of life, and I believe there is like symbolism intended in the many Irish voyages to the islands of enchantment, or that there was, at any rate, in the mythology out of which these stories have been shaped. (NCP, 56)

Wilson suggests that the boat is an image for the “soul of man”: Forgael and Dectora, on their separate boats, represent “any man and any woman in their essential spiritual loneliness”. Throughout Irish history and legend there has been an association with voyages and boats: the tale of St Brendan (ca. 484-577), for example, describes his voyage around northwest Europe spreading the Christian faith and founding monasteries. The various accounts of this adventure contain descriptions of the construction of his boat, the make of which bears a close similarity to the currachs still made in Ireland today. The harp, too, features significantly in Irish history: it is the traditional symbol of Ireland and appears in many legends as an instrument that can

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156 Hogan and O’Neil, Joseph Holloway’s Abbey Theatre, 32.
157 Wilson, 38.
158 Wilson, 38.
159 Bridget Haggerty, “St. Brendan, The Navigator”, Irish Culture and Customs, 2011, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.irisicultureandcustoms.com/ASaints/BrendanNav.html. (A currach is a boat with a wooden frame over which animal skins or hides were once stretched, though canvas is now used.)
mystically charm its listeners. Yeats introduced it into this play as he believed it would symbolise for the audience the presence of a supernatural power on the stage.

The audience is thus presented with two very important visual symbols as far as Irish culture is concerned, but would they have recognised them as such and, even if they had, would the significance of the images have permeated their national consciousness? Without a prompt or explanation to clarify the connotation of the symbolism, it seems unlikely the audience would have understood Yeats’ intentions.

In his note on “He Bids his Beloved be at Peace” he went on to say:

I follow much Irish and other mythology, and the magical tradition, in associating the North with night and sleep, and the East, the place of sunrise, with hope, and the South, the place of the sun when at its height, with passion and desire, and the West, the place of sunset, with fading and dreaming things. (NCP, 56)

The mythological references that form a large portion of Yeats’ creativity are part of what makes his work so appealing, but for the average reader it takes time and much research to gain a full understanding of the associations. A typical theatregoer, who may or may not be familiar with Yeats’ poetic work, would not have the resources to hand to explain the connections. In the evocative passage quoted earlier in this section, Forgael refers to “Aengus and his Edaine”. For this reference Yeats drew on the legend of Aengus, the God of youth, beauty and love, and his liaison with Edain, the daughter of Ailill, King of the Ulaid. It was probably his intention that the mention of those names would make an instant connection in the minds of the audience and that they would understand the depth of the emotion Forgael is expressing. The comparison is meaningless, however, if the observer is not familiar with the legendary characters in the first place. As such a chance to create a powerfully emotive impact with the speech is lost.

The verbal imagery is full of symbolic references that would have flown over the heads of many of the audience. As an example, towards the end of the play Dectora is peering out over the waters and she spots a hound wandering after a deer:

… O look!
A red-eared hound follows a hornless deer.
There! There! They have gone quickly, for already
The cloudy waters and the glimmering winds
Have covered them. 160

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160 Yeats, The Shadowy Waters, 46.
Forgael asks her where they vanished to, and in response to her reply “Where the moon makes a cloudy light in the mist” he explains:

The pale hound and the deer wander for ever
Among the winds and waters; and when they pass
The mountain of the gods, the unappeasable gods
Cover their faces with their hair and weep.
They lure us to the streams where the world ends.\footnote{Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters*, 47.}

This exchange would undoubtedly have drawn bemusement from the audience. What would a hound and a deer be doing out on the open ocean, and why do the main characters not appear to be surprised or concerned? They may also wonder why Yeats chose to make the particular animals a “red-eared, pale hound” and a “hornless deer”. To add to the mystery, the pattern of the sails of their boat (as described in the stage setting) consists of “Three rows of hounds, the first dark, the second red, and the third white with red ears”.\footnote{Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters*, 13.} The significance of the hound and deer becomes clear from the notes to one of Yeats’ earlier works. His poem “He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World”, published in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), commences with the lines “Do you not hear me calling, white deer with no horns? / I have been changed to a hound with one red ear” (CP, 49).

The notes to this poem gives the following explanation:

I got my hound and deer out of a last-century Gaelic poem […] about Oisin’s journey to the country of the young. After the hunting of the hornless deer, that leads him to the seashore, and while he is riding over the sea with Niamh, he sees amid the waters […] a young man following a girl who has a golden apple, and afterwards a hound with one red ear following a deer with no horns. This hound and this deer seem plain images of the desire of the man ‘which is for the woman’, and ‘the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man’ and of all desires that are as these. I have read them in this way in *The Wanderings of Oisin*, and have made my lover sigh because he has seen in their faces ‘the immortal desire of immortals’. (NCP, 55)

With this information to hand it is possible to conjecture that the hound and the deer, who represent the desires of all men and women, symbolise the fate of Forgael and Dectora in *The Shadowy Waters*. It is not a very positive outlook, implying that the lovers will be forever wandering, searching for the fulfilment and satisfaction that alludes both mortals and immortals.\footnote{Parkinson, 63.} But the theatre audience would not have had access to this description: even if they did have pre-knowledge of the background, it would take a close and studious reading to establish the connections between the images, and understand how and why they develop the dramatic action. This type of close reading is not, of course, possible in a theatre situation where
the meaning of the visual and verbal imagery needs to be instantly clear and recognisable to a mixed audience. There are many stories relating to the legendary poet and warrior Oisin, and Yeats’ outline of his source and how he “read” the images is interesting and informative, but his use of the imagery in this play is just too obscure to have any kind of meaning for most of his viewers. The result is the same as with his treatment of Aengus and Edain: by taking elements of a legend out of context and incorporating them into a piece of ritualistic high art that goes over their heads, Yeats not only loses an opportunity to raise the awareness of his audience to a well-known legend, but he risks alienating them through lack of comprehension and understanding.

Rather than leave the theatre feeling impassioned with feelings of national pride and identity, it is likely that many in the audience of *The Shadowy Waters* would have wandered away feeling quite confused. John Synge attended a performance of the play and bemoaned that it was “the most depressing failure the mind can imagine – a half empty room, with growling men and tittering females”. The audience members were not alone in their distress: the majority of the theatre critics found the play “vapoury and incoherent”.

A review in the *Freeman’s Journal* summed up the main problem. Whilst acknowledging that Yeats was a great poet, with “a fond appreciation of the beautiful, a captivating facility for graceful phrase and haunting verse, and an eclecticism all his own”, it stressed that a playwright needed to present “real palpitating men and women”. The issue with Yeats’ characters was that they “do not come forth from the side wings, but from other worlds; they cannot live in an atmosphere of the earth, earthy; their language is not ours”. In short, the review stated, *The Shadowy Waters* “is, at best, a costume recital. A thing of beauty it is, but not a play”.

This reviewer pinpointed one of the major issues that prevented this play – and the majority of Yeats’ dramatic works – from connecting with the audiences in a meaningful way. The characters were “otherworldly”, they were not “real”, and their language was that of Romantic poets, not everyday people. Because of this remoteness, the plays themselves exuded a “foreignness” that made them inaccessible to the Irish audiences.

But Yeats deliberately chose not to make his characters “real palpitating men and women”. He believed that the fundamental objective of ritualistic theatre was to show “the staging of

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164 Synge, 76.
moments of intense life, passionate action or somnambulistic reverie” (SP, xvi). The main focus of the action should be on the procedures and influences involved in reaching that climactic state. As such the characters involved in the process “are freed from everything that is not a part of that action” (Expl 153-4). Character development would only detract attention away from the focal point of the ritual, the “working out of an inescapable conclusion”. This aesthetic was all very well, but judging by the reviews and audience reaction, it was not what the people wanted. What they wanted was to see characters on stage with whom they could relate and/or empathise. It must be remembered too that the Dublin audiences were easily offended: as discussed earlier, they were outraged at Synge’s very “real” portrayals of the Irish in a couple of his plays. If Yeats wanted to gain the trust and acceptance of the crowd he was going to have to tread carefully and modify his approach. As time would show, he was able to make small adjustments, but his dramatic creativity took him ever further along the path of obscure ritual.

Yeats soon realised that The Shadowy Waters was “the worst thing I ever did dramatically” (Letters, 458) and worked on a couple of revisions of the play (1906 and 1907). The 1907 version, which appears in his Collected Works, contains significantly less of the “needless symbols” (Letters, 453) that had so baffled the audience. He also modified the lyrical quality of the play by replacing the incantatory verse with a more naturalistic prose and colloquialism for the sailors. It became an easier work to follow, but the characters and situation were still too disconnected from the realities of everyday life for the audiences to be able to connect with the play on an emotional or cultural level.

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Although Yeats adapted his style following The Shadowy Waters in an attempt to make his dramas more accessible, he continued to develop his ritual approach to theatre. The productions of the morality play The Hour-Glass167 (originally published in 1903, first performed in 1903) clearly indicated that the focus of Yeats’ interest was on the experimentation of unusual theatrical techniques in the pursuit of his ideal, rather than on raising the awareness of the people to the literary traditions of their past. Unlike some of Yeats’ previous works, this play gave no cause for controversy or offence: on the contrary it was generally well-received and his innovative set design attracted much critical interest. But the increasingly ritualistic effects and

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167 A prose version of this play first appeared in 1903, following which Yeats made constant revisions, in both prose and verse. The quotes in this essay are taken from the 1914 verse version which appears in CWII.
lack of realism again placed the play on a remote level that was beyond the reach of the majority of the audience.

Based on the story “The Priest’s Soul” by Lady Wilde in her *Ancient Legends of Ireland* (1887), it presents the tale of a Wise Man (a teacher) who has always believed – and taught – that there cannot be a supernatural world as nothing exists that cannot be seen or touched. He is visited by an angel who tells him that he has one hour (the time it will take for the grains of sand to fall through the hour-glass) to find one person who believes in Heaven: that person will be his salvation from eternal torment in Hell. Yeats introduces a Fool, Teigue, to act as contrast to the Wise Man and to provide the means to make observations on the opposition of cerebral, materialist thinking (the Wise Man) with subjective insight or intuition (Teigue) (*SP*, 282). The Wise Man’s attempts to find someone who still has faith eventually lead him to the realisation that there is no difference between the temporal earthly existence and that of Hell:

> The last hope is gone,  
> And now that it’s too late I see it all:  
> We perish into God and sink away  
> Into reality – the rest’s a dream. (I.i.548-51)

The one person who could give him salvation is Teigue, but as the last grain of sand falls he stops the Fool from saving him, choosing instead to succumb to “whatso God has willed” (I.i.565).

Yeats acquired the assistance of theatre designer Gordon Craig (1872-1966) to help with the visual effects of the play. Craig shared Yeats’ dream of restoring theatre “to its former dignity” and was similarly insistent that the evocation of “Beauty” be a primary concern.\footnote{Flannery, 246.} Their collaboration on this production (and on many subsequent plays) resulted in the introduction of some highly unconventional staging devices.

Craig had devised a system of portable, folding screens which could be arranged and rearranged quickly and effortlessly on the stage to create different spaces to suit the requirements of the play. They also allowed for a more natural use of light, as Yeats explained in an article in *The Evening Telegraph*:
Mr Craig’s invention […] enables one to use light in a more natural and beautiful way than ever before. We get rid of all the top hamper of the stage – all the hanging ropes and scenes which prevent the free play of light. It is now possible to substitute in the shading of one scene real light and shadow for painted light and shadow […]. One enters into a world of decorative effects which give the actor a renewed importance. There is less to compete against him, for there is less detail, though there is more beauty.169

His enthusiastic declaration that “less detail” results in “more beauty” proved that he was intent on progressing his drama as far away as possible from any kind of realism towards a more abstract form of art. He confirms this in an article written for the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

> I have acquired from Mr Gordon Craig the right to use (in Ireland) his wonderful new scenic system of folding screens […] and I do not want to stage any of my verse-dramas without them. Gordon Craig knows how to copy nothing, and to suggest all; and by the use of his screens, which are of many sizes, and run on castors, you can create an entirely beautiful scene full of suggestion (not realistic) and build up vast Cyclopean buildings.170

The reviewer from the *Irish Times* appreciated the use of the screens as a bold move away from the conventions of realism:

> The arrangement of the screens is designed with perfection, to permit of the most effective exits, entrances, and groupings of the characters, and also to admit of those variations in the lighting of the stage which supplied as powerful an aid to the expression of the emotional progress of the play as that afforded by incidental music in many productions. There is no attempt in Mr Craig’s scheme at realism; the new arrangements served to strip away everything that could distract from the emotional and dramatic unfolding, and to underline the most significant elements of the play.171

A significant departure from the conventional “realistic” stage settings of the time was an audacious undertaking for any playwright however. As discussed earlier, audiences were used to seeing their realist dramas or comedies presented against a backdrop of often lavishly painted scenery, and the stage would be filled with furniture and props that gave a clear indication of time and place, such as a nineteenth century drawing room. But now they were expected to place the action with only the “suggestion” of a scene. And in place of “incidental music” to guide them through the “emotional progress of the play” they had just the “variations in the lighting of the stage”. To be presented at the very start of a play with such an unfamiliar type of setting would have been quite unnerving and confusing: it would also have made it much harder for the audience to feel an empathy or connection with the actors and the unfolding drama.

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The setting for *The Hour-Glass* consisted of a number of screens arranged in such a way as to create the effect of a “dark, private sanctum, withdrawn down a curving passageway from a door that admits radiant daylight” (*SP*, 283). The aim was to mirror the dark, inner turmoil the Wise Man needed to work his way through until he found his own light of redemption. It is debatable whether the audience would have comprehended this intention without a deeper understanding or familiarity with the work as a whole. It was certainly a lot to ask of a mixed group of people that they recognise the psychological reasoning behind the stage setting for a drama they are seeing for the first time: particularly when the setting was so unlike anything they had seen before. In this regard Yeats was making an assumption about the level of literary understanding that his audience should hold: indicating again that he was not in touch with the intellectual level of the average Dublin theatregoer.

His pursuit of the aesthetic ideal also ran to ensuring that the actors’ costumes complement the stage setting: “The costumes of the players should show a corresponding dignity of design and line to harmonise with this staging, which has a fine severity”. ¹⁷²

This statement ties in with Yeats’ earlier comment in relation to *The Shadowy Waters* that the overall image on the stage be as a “whole picture”. The actors, their costumes, the settings and the background should all be in harmony, with the resulting effect for the audience being similar to that of viewing a tableau. This reinforces Yeats’ vision of drama as being ceremonial: every detail of the production was precisely thought out and placed in relation to how it fitted in with its surrounds. The costumes that were designed (by Craig) for the Fool and the Angel in *The Hour-Glass*, for example, were long robes that were cut to a simple but striking pattern, in one dominant colour and with no unnecessary adornment. No doubt the actors looked very impressive, posed against the plain ivory tone of the screens like characters in a landscape painting.

The effect for the audience however would have been quite extraordinary. They were used to seeing “real” people moving around a stage in a relaxed and “normal” manner, wearing whatever costume best suited that particular character, regardless of whether or not it clashed with other costumes or the background. The use of the screens in place of a painted background also required a giant leap of the imagination: the abstractness of the scenery may well have given a sense of unease to a theatregoing audience who were familiar with a traditional stage setup.

¹⁷² “The Irish National Theatre”, 127.
They certainly did not expect to be intellectually challenged as to establishing time, place and rationale.

Yeats was clearly excited by the variations afforded by Craig’s screens as they allowed him to create “elements of beauty lacking in an ordinary stage setting”. He seemed determined that the design innovations introduced in *The Hour-Glass* would enhance the dramatic intent of his works and capture the imagination of his audiences. He was moving ever closer towards his ideal form of ritual drama, but in the process he was also moving further away from his dream of creating an Irish “Theatre of Dionysus”. The unusual stage settings of this play were ahead of their time: for the Dublin audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century the experience was just too much of a radical change. This view is substantiated by a general review of Yeats’ plays in the *Birmingham Daily Mail* which stated that:

> Mr Yeats is perfectly right in his idealistic ideas of dramatic presentation, but they are a half century in advance of the means at his command. If he should awaken public interest in the drama of Ireland and establish a dramatic literature of practical possibilities, he must please the public. Far better, to deck the stage out in the tawdiest tinsel and play national plays with all the tricks and the glitter of modern melodrama, so that the first fundamental thing be assured – the awakening of the public interest. Refinement would follow as a natural process of evolution and the higher drama reached at last.

In a similar manner to *The Shadowy Waters*, Yeats conceived of *The Hour-Glass* as a ritual and again conflated the two environments of Church and Theatre:

> I have just done the Wise man’s dying speech in rhyme, and the Fool rings the bell for the pupils and the strokes of the bell come at certain arranged moments of his speech like a Dirge. These kind of effects begin to amuse me more and more, I conceive of the play as a ritual. It must not give all to the first hearing any more than the Latin ritual of the Church does, so long as the ultimate goal is the people.

The same argument that was put forward in discussion of *The Shadowy Waters* applies here: Yeats was giving his audiences a high-art religious experience rather than a play that allowed them a couple of hours of carefree entertainment.

Yeats pushed the envelope of Church ritual even further by introducing whole sections of Latin into the dialogue. About mid-way in the drama, the Wise Man and a couple of his pupils have an

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173 “The Irish National Theatre”, 127.
argument in Latin that goes on for many lines, interspersed with a few lines in English. The following is a part of the exchange, with the translation in italics:

*First Pupil:* Can you not see that he is troubled?

(*I have asserted God and the Mother of God to be nothing; but I have lied: both God and the Mother of God exist for the truly wise man*)

*First Pupil:* Argumentis igitur proba; nam argumenta poscit qui rationis est particeps.
(*Now prove by arguments; for he who is a companion of reason demands arguments*)

*Wise Man:* Pro certo haveo e vobis unum quidem in fide perstississe, unum altius quam me vidisse.
(*I know for certain that one of you has remained firm in his faith, that one has seen higher than I*)

*Second Pupil:* You answer for us.

*Third Pupil:* Be careful what you say;
If he persuades you to an argument,  
He will but turn us all to mockery.

*First Pupil:* We had no minds until you made them for us.

*Wise Man:* Quae destruxi necesse est Omnia reaedificem. 
(*It is necessary that all I have destroyed be rebuilt*)

*First Pupil:* Haec rationibus nondum natum opinabamur: nunc vero adolevimus: exuimus incunabula (I.i.295-309). 
(*These things did not enter our childish minds: but now we have grown up: we have laid aside swaddling-clothes*)

In a note to one of the later editions of this play, Yeats explained that he “got Mr Alan Porter to put into mediaeval Latin certain passages […]. Nothing said in Latin, necessary to the understanding of the play, cannot be inferred from who speaks and who is spoken to” (CCP, 127).

This assertion is debatable. From the tone in which the characters speak to each other it could be discerned that they are arguing, but the audience would have been taken aback by the sudden and unexpected use of Latin. As discussed earlier, they would have had some familiarity with Latin from church rituals, and it would have been taught in some of the schools, but it was certainly not a language in general everyday use. The use of it in this manner between pupil and teacher places the exchange on a pseudo-scholastic level that was not appropriate for a general theatre audience and could have been viewed as pretentious. It was highly unlikely therefore that any of
the spectators would have understood this part of the play: they may have felt annoyed at themselves for their lack of comprehension, or insulted at what they perceived to be a piece of intellectual patronising by Yeats. It is possible too that they would have felt uncomfortable, or even resentful, at the power differential implied by the inclusion of (Church) Latin. The Catholic priest delivering Mass was a figure of high religious authority who was regarded with a mixture of awe, respect and fear by his parishioners: by inserting Latin into the plays, the accusation could be made that Yeats was placing himself in a similar role as a domineering preacher to the masses.

Again this shows that Yeats was working on an entirely different level from his average audience member. He was probably convinced that the use of Latin was an appropriate dramatic device at that juncture, and that may well have been the case if he was presenting the play to a small group of literary intellectuals with a working knowledge of Latin. But it was not appropriate to present whole sections of a play that were totally incomprehensible to members of the general public who simply wanted an entertaining night out.

Yeats continued to push the boundaries with increasingly unusual and innovative theatrical techniques in his pursuit of the ideal method to present his “remote” plays. In 1913 he found what he was looking for in the form of the Japanese Noh tradition of theatre. He was introduced to the Noh through his close friend Ezra Pound, who had inherited a set of unpublished manuscripts on the Noh written by the late Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1903). A Professor of Philosophy at Tokyo University, Fenollosa was “a central figure in the transmission of knowledge of Oriental art and thought to the West”. He held a particular interest in Japanese culture and for many years had studied the Noh – including receiving some personal training as a Noh performer. Following his untimely death, his vast collection of material on the Noh – which included descriptions of the theatre layouts, costumes, masks, and many translations of different plays – was entrusted to Pound as his literary executor. Pound undertook to make some sense out of Fenollosa’s fragmentary and incomplete writings: this undertaking resulted in his publication of ‘Noh’, Or, Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan (1916). He commenced this work in the winter of 1913 whilst staying with Yeats at Stone Cottage in Sussex: during that time he shared Fenollosa’s material with Yeats, who soon realised that the Noh offered creative possibilities for his own form of drama.

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The origins of the present day Noh theatre date back to fourteenth century Japan. Originally a primitive form of rural folk theatre incorporating music and dancing, it developed into a ceremonial form of entertainment for the Samurai, and became increasingly stylised and formalised. The plots of the plays are taken from existing Chinese and Japanese literature, historical events, legend or myth, and the texts are full of literary allusion, classical poetry quotations, and Buddhist terminology and philosophy.177

Noh is based on simplicity: there is no scenery and minimal, if any, props are used. The Noh stage looks like a shrine or temple building, with three sides open around a main stage. There is no stage curtain to separate the audience and the chorus and musicians sit onstage.178 It is a non-realistic, highly ritual form of drama: each play concerns itself with recreating the emotional quality of an incident or experience through ritual movement, dance and language in a simplified and symbolic setting. Three main principles of the Japanese theatre stood out for Yeats as emblematic of what he was trying to achieve:

1. That Noh is concerned with an intense emotion fixed upon idea and not personality; a service of life, not the analysis of a set problem.
2. That unity of image through repetition and variation brings focus and intensification to the emotion expressed.
3. That Noh is a complete art in which poetry is assisted by music, dance and mime in expressing intense emotion.179

Yeats would also have been impressed by the way that the actors chanted the dialogue, using rhythmic and tonal control of the voice to express characterisation. Feelings and emotions were conveyed to the audience through a series of highly stylised dance patterns and movements: these movements were performed elegantly, slowly and deliberately, with exact and perfect precision and timing. No matter how simple the movement, it needed to be infused with “spirit”: it was very much the case that the simpler the movement, the more effective.180 Ishii Mikiko explains how the emotion of sorrow could be expressed by an actor in three different poses:

The choice of pose depends on the depth of sorrow that the actor is representing. In the first, slight sorrow, the actor merely lowers his face, while lowering the head and raising one hand to eye level indicates deeper sorrow. The deepest feeling of sorrow is expressed by lowering the head and raising both hands to eye level, and the repetition of this gesture suggests even deeper sorrow. The actor never sheds a tear or cries, nor does he stamp his feet. He represents the suffering of his sorrow quietly but profoundly.  

This very measured style of acting was exactly what Yeats craved for his actors – minimal ritualised movement which drew the attention of the audience to the intensity of the emotion being expressed.

Another main element of the Noh is the use of masks, which enable the actor to become fully immersed into his character:

The mask also functions as a means of depriving the character of individuality by generalizing the emotions that he is experiencing. Yet the wearing of a mask does not mean the obliterating or hiding of personality, but rather it helps the actor to transcend the particular personality that he is portraying and to achieve more universal representation.

Again, this aspect of the Noh would have greatly appealed to Yeats. His long-held theory pertaining to the use of the Mask formed an essential component of his approach to his work. To find true inspiration, he believed that it was necessary to connect with the “Anti-Self”, and the Mask was, literally and/or figuratively, a device to enable the artist to do this. The “Anti-Self” (a term coined by Yeats) was the alternative or antithetical self: it was the persona that was “contrary to one’s natural or socially available character”. The assumption of the mask would allow the individual to “act parts totally the opposite of his or her normal self”. Yeats provides an explanation to his theory in his essay “Four Years: 1887-1891”:

As life goes on we discover that certain thoughts sustain us in defeat, or give us victory, whether over ourselves or others [...]. Among subjective men [...] the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away, and so that fate’s antithesis; while what I have called ‘the Mask’ is an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature. We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy. (Auto, 189)

Susan Graf suggests that Yeats would use magical ritual – possibly wearing an actual mask – to immerse himself in his anti-self. He would then find himself in a “revelation of reality”, an “ecstatic state that enabled the artist to create works of genius”. Yeats’ concept of the Mask

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182 Mikiko, “The Noh Theater: Mirror, Mask, and Madness”.
did shift slightly over time. In *A Vision* (1925), his pseudo-philosophical writings on his vision of history, the Mask is “the image of what we wish to become, or of that to which we give our reverence”. The tragic actors of the theatre of ancient Greece wore masks of course. Yeats held that culture and society in high esteem, it epitomised for him the ideal “Unity of Culture” that he desired for Ireland. It was inevitable that he would be drawn to this same aspect in the Japanese form of the art.

Without the distraction of the actor’s facial features and personality, the masks also enable the spectator to concentrate more fully on the voice and movement of the actor. Taken in conjunction with the simplified setting and ritualised movement, the use of masks would allow the audience to become “immersed into the poetic, psychological and symbolic content of the play” (*SP*, xxvii). The possibility of this intellectual engagement was highly attractive to Yeats, who asserted that “the arts which interest me […] enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation” (‘Certain Noble Plays of Japan’, *E&I*, 225). This depth of involvement however was unlikely to occur to the average theatregoer: Yeats was drawing further away from his audiences as he moved closer to the realisation of his own very esoteric, dramatic interests.

He took the elements and principles of Noh – most importantly the dictum that “less achieves more” – and assimilated them into his own particular form of the drama. *Four Plays for Dancers* was published in 1921, with the debut performance of the first of these plays, *At the Hawk’s Well*, taking place in 1916. As he proudly declared in “Certain Noble Plays of Japan”: “I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way – an aristocratic form” (*E&I*, 221).

This was one of the strongest statements yet to indicate that Yeats’ theatrical commitment was not to the masses (the “mob”), but to the select few. He managed to get his desired audience at the first performance of *At the Hawk’s Well*: it took place in London in the drawing room of Lady Emerald Cunard, an aristocratic patron of literary modernism, and “only those who cared for poetry were invited” (*VPL*, 416). Yeats was not always going to be favoured with an elite audience of intellectual scholars: his dance plays were also scheduled for performance at the

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Abbey Theatre in front of the regular, middle-class audience – the “vigorous and simple men whose attention is not given to art but to a shop”.

Yeats’ desire to present his plays to a limited audience of intellectuals was not in keeping with the traditional concept of Noh theatre. Motokiyo Zeami (1363-1443) was a master performer and theoretician: he is generally recognised as the greatest playwright of the Noh and is believed to have perfected the essential form of the drama as it is known today. Zeami’s approach to his audience was far less divisive than that of Yeats. He wanted his plays to be appreciated and understood by all the members of his audience, regardless of their socio-economic level or education. The spectator, in his view, was an integral part of the performance of the whole. He recognised that individual audience members would have different levels of experience and knowledge of the Noh form, and to that end placed the onus of responsibility on the main actor (known as the shite) to “read” the initial emotional, psychological and educational level of the audience, and react accordingly with a “rhythmic, psychological movement that both responds to and moulds the audience’s reception of the play”.\(^{187}\) In one of Zeami’s many writings on the art of the Noh, he stated that “a truly gifted player […] should be able to move even an undiscriminating audience”.\(^{188}\)

Yeats, on the other hand, wanted the “refined, educated, discriminating side of Zeami’s audience without the bother of the less discriminating masses”.\(^{189}\) He had a very fixed view of who should comprise his “ideal” audience, which went totally against the primary aim of the literary theatre which was to reach out to all Irish in the hopes of raising their literary awareness. It is likely however that even those who “cared for poetry” would have found the experimental theatre methods of Yeats’ Noh dramas a major challenge, given that the experience was so vastly different from the theatrical conventions they were accustomed to.\(^{190}\)

The traditional form of Noh requires a certain level of discipline and concentration from its audience: even if the viewer is familiar with the historical event, legend or myth that the play is based upon, it is highly symbolic. As mentioned earlier, every movement the actor makes holds significant meaning: the shite may take ten minutes to walk a distance of twenty feet, for

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\(^{189}\) Putzel, 111.
\(^{190}\) Putzel, 111.
example. But every step he takes, every movement of his arms, or tilt of his head, is done deliberately to convey a certain emotion or feeling. The audience needs to be able to pick up on what is being expressed: the use of a mask does not allow them to rely on facial expressions.

Here again there is a major difference between the expectations of the Irish and Japanese audiences. The Japanese audiences know what to expect from the Noh plays, and are well-trained in their ability to follow the performances. This includes keeping very still and silent throughout in order to concentrate on the movements as they are expressed by the actor, some of which were extremely subtle. They also have a familiarity with the semiological codes, so that every billow of the sleeve, nod of the head, sliding step or moment of stillness, would have historical context for them.\(^{191}\)

The Irish audience would have had none of this foreknowledge, and Yeats himself had no real understanding of the codes. As will be shown in the following discussion of *At the Hawk’s Well*, he imposed his own interpretation of how his actors should move and hold themselves, which added to the strangeness of the whole production. He expected his audiences to immerse themselves in the poetry and emotion of his productions and thus become united as a single entity, but he was thinking only of his own creative desires, not of the needs or capabilities of his audience.\(^{192}\)

*At the Hawk’s Well* was Yeats’ third play in the Cuchulain series. He based the plot on the Japanese play *Yōrō* (*The Sustenance of Age*) by Zeami, which related the legend of a miraculous spring of eternal youth.\(^{193}\) Yeats’ drama shows the warrior as a young man arriving at a dried-up well at which the waters, which rise and then disappear, are said to bring immortality. Beside the well are an Old Man and a young woman, the Guardian of the Well, who is crouched down and covered by a black cloak. The Old Man urges Cuchulain to leave, saying he is wasting his time as he himself has been there for fifty years trying to catch the waters, but whenever they arise he is thwarted by the sudden urge to sleep. Cuchulain dismisses the Old Man’s urgings and they have a heated discourse. The Guardian of the Well cries out in the manner of a hawk, and they realise that she is possessed by the Sidhe. She then emerges from under her cloak and performs a hawk-like dance. The Old Man falls asleep and Cuchulain is mesmerised by the Guardian’s spell. Having temporarily lost his wits, he determines to capture the Hawk-woman.

\(^{191}\) Putzel, 112.

\(^{192}\) Putzel, 113.

\(^{193}\) Yeats is also said to have been influenced by the story the Well of Connlia, an Irish legend about nine magic hazel trees of knowledge, the fruit of which annually falls into the well.
and, moving in a trance-like state, he slowly arises and follows her offstage. He returns almost immediately, having regained his senses and declaring he lost sight of the woman. However, whilst he was under her spell the immortal waters had risen and fallen again. Cuchulain is then called away to fight the warrior woman Aoife, whom the hawk had stirred to battle.

The audience is aware that they are witnessing an unusual event before the play has even started. The stage directions for each of the four dance plays states that “The stage is any bare space before a wall against which stands a patterned screen”. There was to be no physical demarcation of space and no requirement for a curtain or any form of material to separate the place of action from the audience. Instead, Yeats introduced a ritual that symbolically marked off the section of the room, and announced the commencement and closure of the play. The “Preface” to *Four Plays for Dancers* explains the procedure:

> The play must be opened by the unfolding and folding of the cloth, a substitute for the rising of the curtain, and must be closed by it. This must be played to the accompaniment of drum and zither and flute, but on no account must the words be spoken ‘through music’ in the fashionable way. (*P&C*, 333)

This extraordinary opening would have appeared totally foreign to the Dublin audience who were accustomed to the realistic settings of contemporary theatre. They were simply not used to seeing anything that was even remotely “exotic”. *Japonisme* of course had arrived in Europe in the late nineteenth century, its influence being especially felt in France and parts of England. Because of the artistic and intellectual circles that Yeats inhabited, he would have been aware of this, and other avant-garde movements as well. But it would have been the case in Ireland then, as it still is to a certain extent now, that cultural avant-garde appeals to only a small coterie. It is not as if there was no “alternative” form of theatre in Dublin at the time Yeats introduced his dance plays: between 1914 and 1920 the Irish Theatre, led by Edward Martyn, produced a number of avant-garde plays by European playwrights such as Chekhov, Strindberg and Ibsen. But these productions appealed to a relatively elite audience who had an expectation and understanding of what the performance would entail. Yeats, on the other hand, was presenting something that was a totally unknown quantity in the hope of appealing to the nationalistic senses of *all* Irish.

At the commencement of *At the Hawk’s Well* three musicians ceremoniously unfold a black cloth on which is marked a “gold pattern suggesting a hawk”. As they do so they sing:

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I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind’s eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare. (I.i.1-8)

They then sing another song as they slowly and deliberately refold the cloth, “pacing with a rhythmic movement of the arms”. By the end of this song they have taken their places against the wall and picked up their instruments: a drum, a bamboo flute, a gong and a zither.

These opening actions by the musicians firmly establish the play as one of ritual. The song is intended to set the scene in the “mind’s eye” of the spectator: there is no painted scenery to establish the location or setting of the action, and the only “prop” is a square blue cloth on the floor to represent the well. Nor are there any special lighting effects: Yeats believed that “the most effective lighting is the lighting we are most accustomed to in our rooms”. The audience was expected to call to their imagination a dried-up well in a dusty, desolate and wind-swept location, where the boughs of the trees have long been stripped bare. Yeats vigorously applied the Noh principle of “less achieves more” and simplification was the key, particularly as regards scenery. His notes on the first performance of At the Hawk’s Well state that:

It has been a great gain to get rid of scenery, to substitute for a crude landscape painted upon canvas three performers who, sitting before the wall or a patterned screen, describe landscape or event, and accompany movement with drum and gong, or deepen the emotion of the words with zither or flute. (P&C, 418).

The aim as always was to focus the attention of the audience on the poetic meaning of the words, and Yeats firmly believed that “with every simplification the voice has recovered something of its importance” ("Certain Noble Plays of Japan", 222). The audience were faced therefore with a stage setting that had even less props or decorative features than Yeats’ early minimalist ritualistic plays. The Hour-Glass had no painted scenery, for example, but the screens did at least provide some depth and sense of place to the action. There were also very few props for that play, but the few it did employ were realistic, such as the desk and chair, the hour-glass and a large book. These would have given the audience some form of association, even if the lack of “normal” scenery was a bit of a shock. A “select” audience may have been receptive to the

195 Stage directions for At the Hawk’s Well, CWII, 297.
unusual setup for *At the Hawk’s Well*, but again, it would have been quite a challenge for an audience used to seeing at least some physical indicators of the dramatic location or setting.

Without these physical “clues” it was clear that the spectators would need to concentrate and listen carefully to the words of the musicians and actors to fully understand the action. As discussed earlier, this was also one of the reasons Yeats was so excited by the use of masks. The mask would force the audience not only to listen carefully, but also to study every movement the actor made in order to determine the emotion being expressed:

> A mask will enable me to substitute for the face of some commonplace player, or for that face repainted to suit his own vulgar fancy, the fine invention of a sculptor, and to bring the audience close enough to the play to hear every inflection of the voice. A mask never seems but a dirty face, and no matter how close you go is yet a work of art […]. (“Certain Noble Plays of Japan” (1916), *E&I*, 226)

Another function of the mask was its symbolic representation of an archetypal figure. Yeats employed the illustrative artist Edmund Dulac to design and create the masks for *At the Hawk’s Well*, as well as the costumes and properties. The mask Dulac designed for Cuchulain is representative of his “heroic” stature: it shows a “smooth, steely-eyed, square-jawed and sharp-featured face”.

196 The mask of the Old Man, on the other hand, shows sunken eyes in a gaunt face and wildly flowing white hair and a beard. The expectation was that the audience would find some familiarity with the visages, even in such an abstracted form. It is possible that Dulac drew his inspiration for the Old Man from the many iconic images of “wise old men” that have been portrayed throughout the ages, such as the mythological character of Merlin, or from paintings such as the *Meditating Philosopher* (1632) by Rembrandt. The challenge to the actor was to immerse himself in the character of the role, through the mask, and convince the audience that he is that archetypal being.

The difficulty here was that the actors were not used to the wearing of masks in this way. Traditional Noh actors in Japan are trained from a very young age in the art of Noh: the ability to effectively wear a mask to the point that it becomes like a second skin is just one of the many skills they have to learn. Yeats’ actors did not have this prior training, and their inexperience and frustration would have restricted their performance. As Richard Cave delicately points out, the difficulties encountered by an actor unaccustomed to wearing a mask needs to be handled

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with “patience and sensitivity, and Yeats was not skilled to offer the right kind of assistance” (SP, 315).

It was not just the actors who struggled with the use of masks. A review of *At the Hawk’s Well* in the *Irish Press* in 1933 (many years after the first production of the play) stated that “[even after all this time] the masks are difficult to get adjusted to”.\(^{197}\) This comment reveals that the use of masks in Yeats’ dance plays did not have the desired effect on the spectators. The aim was to draw the people in to an appreciation of the feelings and emotions expressed by the voice and movement of the actor, without the “distraction” of the actor’s facial features. But they appeared to have the opposite effect in that they made the audience feel distanced from the character. The Dublin theatregoers had not been brought up with this form of theatre – they did not understand the highly intricate techniques and methods that went into a Noh performance, and they certainly did not understand that they were meant to see “beyond” the mask to the portrayal of an archetypal figure. What they wanted to see was the familiarity of a “real” character who would portray emotion or feelings through easily recognisable expressive facial features.

A review by the *Irish Independent* in 1921 wanted to know: “How is it possible for masked players in a drawing-room theatre, at arms-length from the audience […] to create that illusion which is so vital an element in dramatic art?”\(^{198}\) Again, this shows a disconnection between Yeats’ dramatic aims and his audience. He was exploring areas of theatrical production that looked beyond the norms of what was considered to be “vital” in dramatic art. But the people watching his plays were not looking for a new or unfamiliar experience: they were not willing participants in Yeats’ theatrical experimentation. If he had shown his Noh-based dramas to an audience who had been raised with the tradition, he would have received a very different reaction. They might not have been impressed with the actors’ very obvious lack of Noh training, but they would have understood what he was trying to achieve. What he was attempting was just too esoteric for the average theatregoer and came across as completely inexplicable and “foreign”.

If the audience found the masks “difficult to get adjusted to”, they almost certainly had difficulty comprehending the unusual acting technique of Yeats’ Noh plays. Yeats had never seen a Noh

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drama in performance, but he formulated his own stylistic techniques based on the notes he had studied. For all his dance plays he directed his actors to “move a little stiffly and gravely like marionettes and, I think, to the accompaniment of drum taps” (P&C, 333). His directions for the Old Man near the beginning of *At the Hawk’s Well* state:

> He lifts his head at the sound of a drum-tap. He goes towards the front of the stage moving to the taps of the drum. He crouches and moves his hands as if making a fire. His movements, like those of the other persons of the play, suggest a marionette. 199

He encountered a similar problem with the way his actors approached their movements on stage to that of the way they handled the masks. They were simply not used to moving around the stage in such a deliberate fashion. Yeats became irritated with Henry Ainley (the actor who originally played Cuchulain) as was revealed in a letter he wrote to Lady Gregory during rehearsals: “The play goes on well except for Ainley, who waves his arms like a drowning kitten” (*Letters*, 609).

The audience found it all rather curious. The *Irish Independent* spoke for many of the people:

> And surely the gods must have played pranks with Mr Yeats when they moved him to bring Cuchulain on this exotic stage with its figures moving “a little stiffly and gravely like marionettes, to the accompaniment of drum and zither and flute”. Cuchulain, of all the figures in the Irish mythological cycles, symbolises for us the spirit of the Heroic age. His Promethean figure needs wide and lofty spaces for its setting. To seek to interpret his spirit through the art form of a Noh play seems as woeful an experiment as that of imprisoning those eagles that look at one so sick-eyed through their cages in the gardens of the zoo. 200

The comparison at the end of this statement is extremely apt, given that Michio Ito, the dancer who performed the role of the Guardian Hawk, gained inspiration for his dance by studying the birds of prey at Regent's Park Zoo.

To add to the bewilderment of many of the audience was the inclusion of a dance at the climactic point of the action. In traditional Noh, the second part of the play consisted of the *shite* performing a dance which re-enacted the events that had been told in the form of a story in the first part of the drama. At this point the true, supernatural or deific nature of the *shite* is revealed: his dance is also intended to make the audience consider the relationship between the supernatural world and their own mortal existence. 201 Yeats kept this concept but altered the approach somewhat for *At the Hawk’s Well* in that it is the Guardian of the Well, a secondary character, who becomes possessed by deity and performs the dance. Moving “like a hawk”, the

199 *At the Hawk’s Well*, 299.
200 “Mr W.B. Yeats In a New Art Form”, 3.
201 Dirst, 131.
Guardian entrances Cuchulain and lures him away from the magical well of immortality and towards a different, heroic destiny. This shift from the traditional Noh format supports Yeats’ assertion that it was never his intention to fully replicate the Japanese tradition, but assimilate elements of it and come up with a totally new style. To repeat his oft-quoted declaration: “I have invented a form of drama …” (emphasis added). In this particular instance it suited the action of his play to have the Guardian perform the dance.

As with the main movements of the actors, the dance was meant to be powerful and symbolic, and needed to be performed in a dignified, controlled and stylised manner. Again, Yeats had never seen a Noh performance, and was not sure how he wanted his own form of the dance to be portrayed. In his “Preface to Four Plays for Dancers” he admits that

> the dancing will give me most trouble, for I know but vaguely what I want. I do not want any existing form of stage dancing, but something with a smaller gamut of expression, something more reserved, more self-controlled, as befits performers within arm’s reach of their audience. (P&C, 333)

His dilemma was solved after seeing the Japanese dancer, Michio Ito, perform in London. This young man would, he believed, be ideal for the role of the Hawk Guardian. In his essay “Certain Noble Plays of Japan” he describes what drew him to Ito:

> There, where no studied lighting, no stage-picture made an artificial world, he was able, as he rose from the floor […] or as he threw out an arm, to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind. (E&I, 224)

He believed that Ito had the creative ability to reach deep within himself and find the passion and the strength to effectively interpret the Guardian’s dance. The fact that Ito was Japanese added a degree of authenticity to the drama, and Ito’s own personal ambition was that his dancing should “bring together the East and the West”. He had spent many years studying modern dance in Europe, however, and had little knowledge of the techniques behind traditional Noh. That aside, he took to the role with enthusiasm and, as mentioned above, he went to the zoo in Regent’s Park with Yeats to study the movements of birds of prey. As R.F. Foster points out, though, this approach “owed more to Isadora Duncan than to the traditions of Noh”.

To a theatre audience unused to a performance of this type, the insertion of a dance of any form in the midst of a drama would have been surprising, to say the least. For most of the play the

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Guardian is crouched on the floor, covered with a black cloth. It is not until Cuchulain goes to take a drink from the well that she throws off the cloak and begins to dance.\textsuperscript{204} If they had not read a synopsis of the play, or followed closely the conversation between Cuchulain and the Old Man, it is unlikely that the spectators would have comprehended that the Guardian had been taken over by the Sidhe.\textsuperscript{205} Nor would they have necessarily understood the significance of the Guardian’s movements, or why she took the persona of a hawk in particular.

The reviewer for the \textit{Irish Press} was clearly at a bit of a loss as to the role and function of the Hawk and its climactic dance. The review stated that “the Hawk was neither wholly bird-like, nor wholly fairy, and seemed stiffish at times and mechanical”.\textsuperscript{206} Yeats did not intend for the Guardian to become either wholly bird or fairy, but it was not clear to this reviewer, or (we can imagine) to many of the audience, what exactly the Hawk was meant to represent. The creature prevents Cuchulain from drinking the immortal waters from the well by putting him in a trance, and indirectly sends him off to fight the warrior woman Aoife, thus pushing him in the direction of his heroic destiny.

But why a hawk in particular? This problem of ambiguity with the imagery and symbolism was a recurring issue in Yeats’ dramas. He wanted to unite his audience so that they became “as one”, sharing “the one lofty emotion” but for this to happen the audience would all need the same knowledge and understanding of the imagery that filled his plays. This would not be easy to do under any circumstances, as the meaning of many of the references was clear only to Yeats himself. It would be especially difficult in a theatre situation with no text books or notes on hand to explain the imagery.

Much has already been written by scholars and critics about the use and possible meanings of his symbols and images, with a few different interpretations put forward as to the significance of the Hawk in \textit{At the Hawk’s Well}. Richard Taylor suggests that the Hawk is the “manifestation of a spiritual ideal which Yeats associated with an eternal and perfect female figure”.\textsuperscript{207} He also proposes that the dance of the Hawk was a “visible analogue of the creative power, violent antagonism and sexual attraction which characterises the relationship Yeats believed to exist

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{204} Yeats refers to the Guardian of the Well as “she”.
  \item \textsuperscript{205} The Sidhe (pronounced “Shee”) are an ancient divine race in Celtic mythology, fond of battles and stirring up trouble.
  \item \textsuperscript{206} “Mixed Bill at the Abbey Theatre”, 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{207} Taylor, \textit{Reader’s Guide}, 62.
\end{itemize}
between the supernatural and natural worlds”.

Birgit Bjersby views the Hawk as a “composite image of nobility, bravery and proud defiance, a superhuman or divine power, dangerous – but also attractive – to mortals”. Richard Ellmann looks to the autobiographical element of the play and considers the Hawk to be representative of Yeats’ “logic and abstract thought”. These differing interpretations are indicative of the complexity surrounding Yeats’ use of symbolism. If his intentions are not clear to those who have studied Yeats’ work, they are certainly not going to be clear to the average theatregoer sitting in the stalls of the Abbey Theatre.

Yeats’ use of the musicians in this play (and all his dance plays) was also unconventional. As well as opening the play and setting the scene of the action, they perform a similar ritual with the cloth at the end of the play. Throughout the drama they function like a Greek chorus, interspersing the protagonists’ speeches with commentary to provide clarification for the audience, or taking on the “voice” of the protagonists for added effect. Most notably they intervene at the climactic point in the action when the Guardian has been possessed by the woman of the Sidhe and begins the dance of seduction. The First Musician takes over the voice of Cuchulain as the hero begins to fall under the spell and “half-sings”:

O God, protect me
From a horrible deathless body
Sliding through the veins of a sudden. (I.i.213-15)

[The dance goes on for some time. The Young Man rises slowly.]

The Musician then “steps back” and observes what is happening to Cuchulain:

The madness has laid hold upon him now,
For he grows pale and staggers to his feet. (I.i.216-17)

The involvement of the musicians at this point was intended to heighten the sense of “otherworldliness”. Cuchulain is unable to speak but the Musician is able to take over his character and express what he is feeling – which in this instance is clearly quite terrifying. This narrative technique would not have been familiar to Yeats’ audiences – a high level of concentration is needed to establish exactly “who” is speaking.

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209 Birgit Bjersby, The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the Works of W.B. Yeats (Upsala, 1950), 87-93, in CCP, 91.
210 Ellmann, 218-19.
The music production itself was tackled in a very unusual manner. The multi-talented Edmund Dulac wrote the score for *At the Hawk’s Well*; he felt it needed “music based on simple chords, with a flute melody underlying vocal intonations”.\(^{211}\) To this end he introduced three musicians, one playing a series of bamboo flutes (constructed by Dulac), another a harp, and Dulac himself on drum and gong. Dulac was heavily influenced by modern and exotic music: the end result for this play was a score that was “archaic and remote, just as Yeats wanted”.\(^{212}\) It must have been quite a strange experience, as the musicians were instructed to use their instruments throughout the performance at their discretion. Dulac stated that

> The drum and the gong must be used at times during the performance to emphasise the spoken word; no definite notation of this can be given, and it is left to the imagination and taste of the musician. *(P&C, 423)*

This was a very experimental and novel approach for any form of drama, but it was a bit too innovative for the majority of the audience. The Irish author James Stephens put into words what many were feeling:

> I can’t help thinking it a pity he should put so much artifice between the play and the audience. The drum, that is, and the unwinding cloth and the little journeys round the stage. The play is so beautiful that these first aids to the feeble are not needed.\(^{213}\)

This statement is symptomatic of the problem Yeats needed to overcome if he wanted to get his audience to understand his dance plays. Stephens clearly held the view that the “play” (by which he presumably means the dialogue) was greatly disadvantaged *because* of the “artifice” (the drum beats, cloth folding and deliberate movements).\(^{214}\) But it was precisely these innovative ritualistic features that were meant to enhance the audience’s understanding and involvement in the drama. This reaction towards the “aids” was the same that was evoked by the use of the masks, as discussed earlier. Instead of directing their attention to the poetry of the words it would appear that they had the opposite effect and served only to confuse and distract them.

Liam Miller sums up why the audience did not react more positively to Yeats’ latest experiments in the ritual form of drama:

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\(^{214}\) Dirst, 130.
However prepared they were for the new form, they were still, in 1916, conditioned by realistic theatre which, although artificial or “theatrical” in its style of presentation, was more nearly a reflection of the taste of the age than was Yeats’ involved investigation of a deep and exotic inner concept of beauty which had little, if any, relationship to everyday life.\footnote{Miller, 225, in Dirst, 130.}

Yeats’ intention was that his simplified, highly expressive and ritualistic productions would “appeal to spectators’ anticipations and emotions and so recreate them as a single entity – an audience”.\footnote{Putzel, 113.} United as an audience, united as a nation. But this was an enormous ask for an average group of theatregoers who were accustomed to watching realism. His esoteric dance dramas were just too extraordinary and removed from the comfort zone of his everyday audiences: they were certainly far removed from Yeats’ initial dream of nation-building through artistic measures.

On the positive side, his experiments with the Noh form were recognised as ground-breaking and firmly established Yeats as a “trend setting experimental playwright”.\footnote{Holdeman, 72.} Richard Cave makes the point that there had been nothing remotely like this before in English-speaking theatre – not just in terms of dramatic structure but in the demands that structure made on the actors, particularly in the use of masks.\footnote{Cave, 313.} Eventually some of the crowd grew to appreciate and enjoy his unusual and innovative methods. He staged a few revivals of *At the Hawk’s Well* during his lifetime and it easily became the most popular of the four dance plays: it has twice been translated into Japanese and is still performed to this day.\footnote{In 2010 the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company performed the play at the Factory Performance Space in Sligo; In 1991 the composer Nigel Keay composed an operatic setting of the play which was commissioned by the Nelson School of Music (NZ) for the Nelson Sesquicentennial Celebrations and performed in March 1992 at the Nelson School of Music by the Nelson Symphony Orchestra; Several Japanese Noh versions of the play have been created, notably *Taka no Izumi (Hawk’s Well)* in 1949 and *Takahime (The Hawk Princess)* in 1967, both written by Noh scholar Yokomichi Mario.\footnote{In 2010 the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company performed the play at the Factory Performance Space in Sligo; In 1991 the composer Nigel Keay composed an operatic setting of the play which was commissioned by the Nelson School of Music (NZ) for the Nelson Sesquicentennial Celebrations and performed in March 1992 at the Nelson School of Music by the Nelson Symphony Orchestra; Several Japanese Noh versions of the play have been created, notably *Taka no Izumi (Hawk’s Well)* in 1949 and *Takahime (The Hawk Princess)* in 1967, both written by Noh scholar Yokomichi Mario.}
On Reflection ...

It was widely appreciated that Yeats (and the other playwrights of the National Theatre Society) worked hard to “express the thoughts, the feelings, the romance, the poesy which touch the spirit of the Irish race”.\(^{220}\) As testament to his skill as a dramatist, to this day a number of Yeats’ plays are still being produced in Ireland and overseas (although it is arguable that this interest in his dramatic works could be attributed to his fame as a poet).\(^{221}\) But despite the overall success that Yeats achieved, his literary plays did little to raise the awareness of the people of Ireland to their cultural heritage and evoke a sense of national pride and identity.

Even if Yeats had written simple adaptations of legendary tales and myths, produced in the conventional style that the people were familiar with, it is still unlikely that he would have successfully achieved his aim. The essay “Poetry and Tradition” (1907) shows that even near the beginning of his dramatic career he had come to the disappointing realisation that his fellow countrymen did not hold any particular interest in the literature and traditions of their ancient past. It had been his hope that he and his colleagues would “forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world” (\(E&I, 249\)). Instead, he regretfully realised that “Ireland’s great moment had passed, and she had filled no roomy vessels with strong sweet wine” (\(E&I, 260\)). James Pethica makes the observation that in his 1916 poem “The Fisherman” Yeats openly acknowledged that his early idealisations of the Irish peasant as a “wise and simple man” who could inspire him to “write for my own race” had been merely “a dream”.\(^{222}\)

The Easter Uprising of 1916 was a tragic event that had a significant impact on Yeats’ thoughts towards his countrymen. Having earlier proclaimed that “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” (from his poem “September 1913” (1914), he now found himself questioning this belief as a new kind of “hero” emerged in Ireland. He also began to question the role that he had played creatively in the struggle for Irish independence, as revealed in a letter to John Quinn, dated May 23, 1916:

\(^{220}\) Irish Daily Independent (May 6, 1899), in Cantwell and Jochum, 198.

\(^{221}\) For example, the ‘Crescendo’ theatre company produced together At the Hawk’s Well, Calvary and The Cat and the Moon in Sirály Theatre House, Budapest in April 2009. In May 2011 an experimental version of The Shadowy Waters was performed in French as Les eaux d’ombre at the Théâtre de la Vallée de l’Yerres à Brunoy in Paris.

The Irish business has been a great grief. We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away. I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction. (Letters, 614)

His moving poem “Easter 1916” (1921) contains those haunting and very illuminating lines which sum up Yeats’ conflicted feelings: “A terrible beauty is born” (CP, 152).

By the time Yeats wrote At the Hawk’s Well and his other dance plays he seemed to have given up on the notion that he could make any significant impact on raising the awareness of the Irish people to their literary heritage. In his 1919 essay “A People’s Theatre: A Letter to Lady Gregory” he speaks of his disappointment that the “head” had triumphed over the “heart”:

We thought we could bring the old folk-life to Dublin, patriotic feelings to aid us, and with the folk-life all the life of the heart, understanding heart, according to Dante’s definition, as the most interior being; but the modern world is more powerful than any propaganda or even than any special circumstance, and our success has been that we have made a Theatre of the head, and persuaded Dublin playgoers to think about their own trade or profession or class and their life within it, so long as the stage curtain is up, in relation to Ireland as a whole. For certain hours of an evening they have objective modern eyes. (CWVIII, 130)

Yeats was able to acknowledge that there did appear to be a place for realism in the theatre, as it encouraged audiences to “examine themselves and their role in the burgeoning nation-state with ‘objective modern eyes’”.223 It was not a genre he had ever been interested in however, and in the same essay he made it very clear in which direction he was headed:

I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never too many. I want an audience of fifty, a room worthy of it (some great dining-room or drawing-room), half-a-dozen young men and women who can dance and speak verse or play drum and flute and zither, and all the while, instead of a profession, I but offer them ‘an accomplishment’. However, there are my Four Plays for Dancers as a beginning [...]. I desire a mysterious art […]. (CWVIII, 131)

This ambition was far more in keeping with Yeats’ true self. “Unpopular”, “secret”, “mysterious”: these terms belong to the vocabulary of someone who sits on the outside edge of “everyday” society. Yeats had always been drawn to secrecy and mystery, as testified by his long association with the occult: membership of The Golden Dawn involved swearing an oath to keep the knowledge and rituals of that society a secret. He was estranged from the “common people” of the burgeoning middle-classes for whom he held a high level of disdain, preferring to mix with erudite, creative types and the elite. As such his preferred “unpopular” form of intellectual ritual theatre was never going to appeal to the masses: far better to openly

223 Potter.
acknowledge that fact and aim his work solely at that limited audience who would have an appreciation, if not a full understanding, of what he was trying to achieve.

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Towards the end of his life Yeats did a lot of soul-searching and reflection on the significance and meaning of his past poetic and dramatic works. One of his most poignant and revealing pieces of work from that time is “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (1939). This poem looks back in particular to the stage of his life discussed in this essay, the period when he was writing of mystical and mythological creatures, of peasant-life, faeries and legendary heroes. He dismissively alludes to these creations as his “circus animals” which were “all on show”, and the tone of the whole poem is one of frustration, despair and pointlessness.

Yeats refers to three of his major works, including The Countess Cathleen and On Baile’s Strand, and questions his commitment to them. He suggests that his motivations behind writing them were not always honest, and that he was chasing his own personal and fanatical dreams. The “masterful images” (his creations) grew “in pure mind” but they originated where all poetry must begin: amongst the ugly, dirty and broken experiences of everyday life, amongst the “foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” (CP, 296-7).

This is a brutally honest poem in which Yeats acknowledges that for many years he had been fancifully seeking an idealised Romantic dream-world for himself and his fellow countrymen that was completely out of touch with the harsh realities of modern life. But whatever his “real” motivations, his dream for a united Ireland never wavered.

I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.224

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224 From “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”, in CP, 59.
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