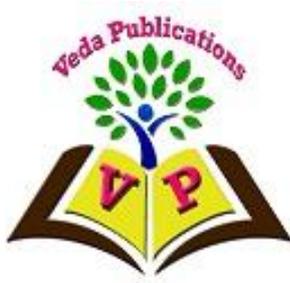


**YEATS AND CELTIC HEROISM: AN APPRAISAL**

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The paper intends to analyze the importance of Irish mythological heroes in the poetry of W.B. Yeats in the context of Irish nationalism. The Irish Literary Revival had its ramifications, as is quite evident from the inspiration which rebels got from the Irish legendary heroes like Finn, Oisín and Cúchulain in fighting against all odds for the sake of Irish soil. Yeats being a serious artist and staunch patriot was well aware about the importance of myths, folklore and legends in shaping the psyche of the common masses. The paper will try to highlight the significance of these mythological heroes as a source of inspiration for the Irish nationalists. Taking 'time and space' limitations into consideration, the main focus will be on Irish legendary heroes like Cúchulain and Oisín.

**Keywords:** *Mythology, Folklore, Nationalism, Oppression, Rebellion.***Citation:**

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**DISCUSSION**

There are many legendary heroes in Irish mythology but none has surpassed the heroism and bravery of Cuchulain. Yeats has written many plays and poems highlighting the feats of Cuchulain. Such was the influence of Cuchulain's heroism upon the rebels that a statue of Cuchulain was installed in 1934 to commemorate the Easter Uprising in the General Post Office building of Dublin. According to Yeats, "Some of the best known of the young men who got themselves killed in 1916 had the Irish legendary hero so much in their mind that the government has to celebrate the event with a bad statue"(Tuohy 161). Cuchulain's *Fight with the Sea* is a very interesting and artistically beautiful poem by Yeats. But before giving the summary of the poem and its symbolic significance, it would be quite relevant to have some information about the legendary hero Cuchulain whose influence upon the Irish nationalists was immense. Often called as the Celtic Achilles, Cuchulain is a heroic figure in Irish mythology. He withstood the ferocious assault of Culain's hound by hurling his ball down the hound's throat. The mythological hound was famous in Ulster and was deemed as something unbeatable. As a young boy Cuchulain achieved this feat and won the hearts and minds of his people. Everybody in Ulster admired him for his extraordinary power and bravery except the owner of the hound called Culain. Realising his deep sorrow, he promised him to be his watchdog till he would raise a new whelp for Culain. At this point of time Cathbad, the very famous Irish druid, gave him the name Cuchulain or the hound of Culain (Conner 40-41).

In the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" Yeats describes the last phase of Cuchulain's life which culminates in his tragic death while fighting 'the horses of the sea'. The poem deals with a story in which Cuchulain returns to his castle along with a gorgeous and sweet-throated woman after achieving victory in the battlefield. The news of sweet throated women makes Emer, his wife, very uncomfortable out of jealousy and feels quite dejected. As such she convinces her step-son *Conleach* to kill his father *Cuchulain*. The step-son decides to kill his father to console Emer. With the intention of killing his father, *Conleach* appears before *Cuchulain* who spots him

without knowing his identity and immediately orders his army to chase the intruder. As a result a battle ensues and *Conleach* gets killed at the hands of his father. However, before taking his last breath, he reveals his identity and causes psychological distress to *Cuchulain*. As he is ready to avenge his son's death from his own army after three days, *Conchubar* summons the magicians and assigns them the task of putting a magic spell on him so that instead of fighting his army he should fight the horses of sea or sea waves. The magic works and *Cuchulain* after hearing 'the cars of battle and his own name cried', fights with 'the invulnerable tide'. According to Conner:

The image of fighting the waves in anger and frustration, after he has inadvertently killed his only son, is perhaps the most forceful in Yeats's Cuchulain material, symbolizing as it does man's anguish in the face of destructive life...In his later work, Yeats changed Cuchulain's death to a death resulting from battle wounds and treachery...(41-42)

The death of Cuchulain resulting from battle wounds and treachery suited much to the nationalistic aspirations of Yeats. Such a death was definitely going to inspire many nationalistic people to offer supreme sacrifices to restore the prestige and glory of their beloved Ireland. Yeats also highlights the same reality when he says:

What stood in the post office  
With Pearse and Connolly?  
What comes out of the mountain  
Where men first shed their blood?  
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed  
He stood where they had stood?

*(The Collected Poems 123)*

Cultural nationalism on the theoretical lines of Ferguson, J C Mangan and others helped Yeats to assert his Irish nationalistic identity without writing much overt political verses and without compromising his artistic subtleties and aspirations. Yeats along with other fellow writers was successfully



moving in the direction of the Irish literary revival. The revival played huge role in imbibing the feeling of nationalism in the minds of the Irish people contributing in some way to the shaping of future nationalistic events like armed rebellion against the British rule. When we remind ourselves that it was Yeats who had given them the character of Michael Gillane in his most patriotic and most celebrated nationalistic play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. It was he who had imbibed them with the philosophy of martyrdom and self-sacrifice for the sake of the motherland. It is a fact beyond any doubt that they had been inspired by the words of the same Cuchulain whom Yeats had highlighted as a legendary hero of Ireland in his literary works. He was himself aware about the fact that some way and somewhere he has also contributed in shaping the ideology of the rebels. In this regard, Yeats told Rothenstein that "Some of the best known of the young men who got themselves killed in 1916 had the Irish legendary hero Cuchulain so much in their mind that the Government has to celebrate the event with a bad statue" (Tuohy 161). In his poetry, Yeats has expressed the same feeling like this:

Now that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answer right.  
Did that play of mine sent  
Certain men the English shot.

*(The Collected Poems 298)*

The above remorseful lines written in July 1938 clearly reveal Yeats's psychological dilemma about his role in the event of 1916 and its aftermath. Although he was neither actively involved in its planning nor in its execution, yet his artistic soul was restless on seeing the death and destruction of his fellow Irish men. The artistic response of Yeats to the event and its aftermath can be comprehended from an analysis of his poems like 'Easter, 1916', 'Sixteen Dead Men', 'The Rose Tree' and 'On a Political Prisoner'. In these poems artistic and nationalistic tendencies of Yeats are at full display. By associating Romantic Ireland with personalities like O'Leary, Fitzgerald, Emmet and Tone, it seems that Ireland is a place where bravery and sacrifice of the legendary hero like Cuchulain is being celebrated. There can be

no compromise on the dignity and glory of the motherland. The question of surrendering to the occupying force does not arise. Resistance against invaders without caring for the consequences is a part of national culture.

Another legendary hero used by Yeats in his poetry from nationalistic point of view is Oisín. Oisín was the son of Fin-king of Fianna. According to Yeats, Oisín was "the poet of the Fenian cycle of legend, as Fergus was of Red Branch Cycle (Conner 136). 'Wandering of Oisín' is a story of Oisín's voyage to the country of the young where he spent three hundred years along with his beautiful wife Niamh on three different islands. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between Oisín and Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. The poem has been divided into three parts. The first part describes the coming together of the two lovers, namely, Oisín and Niamh followed by their subsequent nuptial ceremony on the island of fairies. Niamh was the princess of the country of the Young. "Niamh and Oisín lived blissfully in the country of the young for many hundreds of years, until Oisín began to long for Ireland and for a glimpse of his old comrades" (Conner 131). The second part of the poem describes his courageous but fierce fight with a protean demon and his heroic victory over him. The third part describes his longing for his country and his countrymen in Ireland. Despite living in the blissful company of Niamh, Oisín's soul becomes restless to see his native Ireland again. Realizing the anxiety of her beloved, Niamh permits him to visit his motherland but on the condition that he will not touch the ground there otherwise time will overtake him and he will turn into a withered old man. On this condition he bids adieu to Niamh and leaves for Ireland. After a long journey he reaches Ireland which seems altogether changed including his fellow countrymen. After trying to inquire about the pathetic conditions of Fenians, the answer comes that 'The Fenians long time are dead' and also 'the gods a long time are dead'. Then he sees two 'staggering and sweating' guys who 'fell with their burden at length' and he 'leaning down from the gem-studded saddle' 'fell on the path, and the horse went away like a summer fly'. As he touched the ground on falling from the horse, he changed to 'A



creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry'.

The poem is a blend of aesthetics and politics. For R.Fallis it "is a fine example of Ferguson's technique of dealing with Irish legend, in this case the Fenian stories, coupled with [sic] Yeats's sensibility"(Sinha 30). We have to appreciate Oisín's patriotic and nationalistic attitude as he leaves peaceful and blissful island of fairies for his homeland. Oisín's departure from the country of the Young is no less important than the departure of Michael Gillane from his nuptial bed in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Both of them seem less bothered about the consequences of their actions. For both of them Ireland seems to be the most cherished beloved for which they are ready to sacrifice their romantic love. Oisín is heartbroken on seeing the misery and hardships faced by his fellow Irishmen at the hands of some offshore power. It is in fact the tremendous pain he felt for his people that he jumped off the horse only to lose his youth, charm and his beloved *Niamh*. However he is not apologetic at his fate, rather, he is still thinking about his country-men when he says to Saint Patrick:

Put the staff in my hands; for I go to  
Fenians, O cleric to chaunt  
The war-songs that roused them of old; they  
Will rise making clouds with their breath,  
Innumerable, singing, exultant; clay  
Underneath them shall pant,  
And demons be broken in pieces, and  
trampled beneath  
Them in death.

*(The Collected Poems 333)*

Moreover, the fight between Oisín and the demon has been taken symbolically as the fight between heroic Irish men possessing nationalistic fervor and courage of Oisín and the nineteenth century demon of colonialism whose representative in Ireland is the colonial Britain. The passion for active resistance against the forces of tyranny and oppression is quite clear from the following lines:

We will tear out the flaming stones, and batter  
The gateway of brass  
And enter, and sayeth 'No' when there enters  
The strongly armed guest;  
Make clean as a broom cleans, and march

On as oxen move over young grass;  
Then feast, making converse wars,  
And of old wounds, and turn to our rest.

*(The Collected Poems 334)*

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