

# William Butler Yeats: *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as the Point of Sacrifice

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*Involving harsh nationalism and a call for sacrifice for the greater good by presenting the audience with Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Ireland seems to be one of the crossroads in Yeats' career, motivated by desire for gaining popularity amongst the Irish nation and reappearing in the literary spotlight.*

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Yeats' venture into the world of drama at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century represented a completely different approach to his work than usually. Given that his readers had been used to his dreamy poems with many symbols and hidden meanings, in 1902 a loud cry for sacrifice for Ireland from his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* led to a crossroad in Yeats' career revealing a thin line between nationalism and literature. Such facts draw us towards exploring the literary and political state of that time, all with a view to recognizing some interesting facts which triggered Yeats' cry for a sacrifice in the mentioned play. At the same time, he offered his own sacrifice by transforming into a nationalist writer, consciously becoming singled out for harsh criticism of many, from that point onward. This makes us wonder whether Yeats' desire to evoke nationalist feelings in Ireland was in fact a propaganda well thought of, a grasp for popularity aimed at uniting and reforming Irish nation through artistic expression, and an object of his well known desire to "bring the halves together" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 102).

In terms of criticism, such sacrifice resulted in many unabashed attacks on Yeats and other co-writers involved in his literary reformation movement, on account of delivering sacrifices for the greater good in their plays as fairly positive enterprises. Even before *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, as the opening play of Irish National Theatre in the year 1899, *The Countess Cathleen* gave Frank Hugh O'Donnell, a well known politician and writer, sufficient reason to challenge Yeats' sacrificial writing methods in his work *Souls for Gold!: A Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin*. Furthermore, as noted in

*Joyce, Bakhtin and the Literary Tradition*, Critical observation of G. J. Watson suggested that “the Irish nationalist movement espoused a belief in the necessity of blood sacrifice for national redemption – as evidenced by the sacrificial character of Yeats’ *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*.” (Booker 40). Among others, Yeats was not able to escape from James Joyce expressing his utter dissatisfaction with the movement’s sacrificial methods, which also involved strong, judgmental criticism against Yeats himself and his way of writing, as well as ridicule of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in his *Ulysses*. The consequences this play has had on Yeats could clearly be recognised later on, as the first translation of his work came out in Catalonia and Galicia, the two regions with circumstances similar to those in Ireland. The translation did not appear because of the artistic interests. Through their fight to separate from Spain, his poems and plays like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* were used in order to boost the national feelings. Proper translation of the play was not of high importance, only the nationalist atmosphere gained from such play (Hurtley 87). To a certain extent the sacrifice transformed Yeats into a universal symbol, as today we are free to debate over Yeatsian nationalism in the same manner as over Joycean epiphanies or Shakespearean puns.

The objective of this article is to present a sociological, historical, and literary context predating the first presentation of the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, a strikingly nationalist play calling for sacrifice in a strikingly sensitive time for Ireland. In such manner it might be possible to reach the answer to Yeats’ commercial, literary or otherwise reasons for writing and publishing such play at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, as shown by different reviews and future use of it, proved to be leading him from a writer of symbolic lyrics to a sanguine nationalist. In short, the objective of the article is to research possible reasons for this particular point of sacrifice, so the actual point of the sacrifice could be revealed.

The first part points out to a sociological context, a general picture of Irish nation, the meaning of sacrifice and martyrdom in Ireland, and furthermore, closeness and complexity of correlation of literature, nationalism and religion in Ireland through a sacrificial model, which was bound to shape Yeats’ personality and work. The second - historical context presents literary circumstances of both England and Ireland following Yeats’ career of that time, and its influence on Yeats’ literary path. Ultimately, the third - literary context, demonstrates the analysis of Yeats’ literature predating the first appearance of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* revealing a firm connection with the previous two parts.

## The Complexity of the Martyrdom Phenomenon in Ireland

Through the vast influence of Catholic religion which flourished on the roots of Celtic Paganism and had prevailed in the old Ireland, as well as through the suppression of England and constant search for their own Irishness, Irish nation broadened their appeal for celebrating people who made sacrifices for higher causes. As a logical outcome of historical and religious events, Irish martyrs became symbols of worshipping due to their unselfish sacrifices, compelling others to respect them and build their future in Ireland from it. Due to those facts, people of Ireland (ones who James Joyce condescendingly called “the rabblement” (Joyce 1) became miracle-believers, people connected to nature who believed in fairies and tales, and just like Yeats and Maud Gonne, believed that Ireland was a magical place. As Yeats once stated: “In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities” (Martin, *Yeats* 57).

If we analyse martyrdom as a specific occurrence in Ireland and try to understand why it appeared there, we might find that Ireland can be seen as a perfect place for investigating the need to sacrifice for the greater good. The Celtic magical beings and martyrs of the old time combined with more recent Jesus Christ and his doctrine of suffering to save humanity, shape this Irish need for sacrifice and martyrs as one (un)comfortable shortcut to strengthening ideals about the nation and raising morale of Irish people. Even if we explore martyrdom as an occurrence in general, we might come across the description of people of Ireland by reading a basic definition, since martyrs “are usually a group phenomenon, taking strength from their sense of collective identity and representing in their defiance and denial of the existing order and judicial code, serious drifts within society. Unbalanced and unstable societies experiencing a process of cultural, economic and political restructuring obviously generate martyrs” (Smith 18).

It is well known that Ireland was not able to develop in cultural, economic and political spheres so well as England, which caused vast differences between the two nations. As Yeats himself explained it was “a war between two civilizations, two ideals of life” (Ellmann, *Yeats* 116). Since there was no England’s strong industrial revolution in Ireland to form an industrial conscience, people of Ireland remained simple, pious, in a way superficial and prepared to acknowledge sacrifices for their benefit and celebrate martyrs in their favour. As Hurlley described: “The people of Ireland [...] are heroic, violent, and fearsome in the extreme when swept away by passion. It’s unfortunate that their political sense is weak. They’re more a race of martyrs than fighters. And when they enter the fight with

fanatical courage, they're bent on sacrifice, not triumph" (78). Such martyr-like characteristics of the nation could present a basis for the complexity of connection between Ireland's nationalism, literature and certainly, religion. In practice, such connection could be seen through various activities akin to the mentioned cultural, economic and political restructuring, which were highly noticeable in Ireland throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and were able to solidify the mentioned characteristics. From a historical perspective, such activities were performed by various Irish leaders and groups of that time, who later served as an example to Irish nation and helped to form firm beliefs about the fact that sacrificing for a cause can be an effective tool to gain greater good. Sacrifices made for the sake of country's independence were automatically related to the religious feelings and the idea of personal sacrifice aimed at gaining religious self-gratification. Those were immediately connected to the reformation of national literature, evoking the old Irish martyrs and heroes.

One such example occurred in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was headed by Daniel O'Connell, a politician, lawyer and persistent fighter for Irish national rights. As a Benthamist and a Catholic he abhorred violence, so he brought about political and charismatic actions to form Catholic Association without British guidance, in order to become politically active in the British Parliament and fight for Irish rights, which would eventually result in Ireland's separation from Britain. The reason for Daniel O'Connell's significance for the Irish nation was that, with his charismatic speeches delivered through Ireland he reintroduced the importance of being Irish and Catholic, belief in the sacrifice of Jesus and combined his beliefs with the efforts he made, all with a view to stopping the British rule in Ireland. Another coexistent example was a group of young scientists who called themselves *Young Ireland*. That popular movement remained active even until Yeats' time. They were implementing their ideas through journalism, thus gaining more and more followers and readers in Ireland. The main idea was: "renewal of the Irish identity based on old Irish cultural traditions and a potent mythology of Irish heroes and martyrs. They wanted the Irish to be more than West Britain" (Heyck 289). Their peaceful ways of advocating Irish dreams were giving actual results, but unfortunately there was a thin line between peaceful and violent. O'Connell's decades of fighting for Irish causes ended just before the Potato Famine. His speeches against Britain became more violent and just before he almost organized the biggest gathering of his followers, he was incarcerated for five months. Members of Young Ireland went from their peaceful methods to taking revolutionary actions. Several years later, after they had failed to organise a rebellion against the British rule, they were also incarcerated. Of course,

those two examples come from different branches, politics, literature and religion, which through continuous activism, as they were responsible for forging of what eventually became Ireland's target group for literary reforms, became closely connected. Today Daniel O'Connell's statue adorns Dublin's O'Connell Street serving as a memory of the leader who lectured and learned the Irish nation about respecting Catholic martyrs and who became a martyr himself for his country's political and religious causes. *Young Ireland's* activity showed their part of the sacrifice, as they were fighting through writing which ended with rebellion, and ultimately led to a sacrifice for a higher ideal. It resulted in a decades long continuous work aimed at development of Irish language and literature. Both examples were responsible for their tireless efforts focused on gradual moulding of paths of tradition and general opinions in Ireland. Nonetheless, their actions also had influence on people like John O'Leary, an Irish nationalist, writer and a member of the later *Young Ireland* movement, whose nationalist actions sent him to his own martyrdom, to a twenty years long exile from Ireland. His return to Ireland in 1985 was greeted with respect and had enormous influence on both Yeats and his muse Maud Gonne who recognised O'Leary as their patron, and continued to do so until his death in 1907. Yeats especially liked to call himself "a nationalist of the school of O'Leary" (Ellmann, *Yeats* 51) and was well taught by his father figure O'Leary about the fact that: "[...] there are things one must not do to save a nation" (Ellmann, *Yeats* 46). O'Leary was yet another nationalist, whose ideas represented the close connection of nationalism and literature, and as such, made an overwhelming impact on Yeats' writing.

With a socio-historic image of Ireland presented in such manner, was it possible to reform the national literature without including the basic idea of martyrdom and sacrifice? Yeats' notions of Irish literature reformation had already had O'Connell's religious martyrdom in both word and action as a basis of the tradition, and O'Leary's Irish nationalism attached to it. Once an idea includes a national event, it requires the understanding of such national and sociological context in order to succeed. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was exactly a complex mixture which showed Yeats' understanding of that context, a work of literature with an old pagan legend placed into a nationalist context. By another definition, martyrdom in general has been defined as "an act of symbolic protest and a necessary means to some transcendent end" (Smith 12). This state in Irish society gave Yeats, the master of symbolism, necessary tools to reach this transcendent goal. He was to take advantage of the long tradition and the institutions' constant martyr-friendly influence for the benefits of the cultural restructuring of Ireland.

## A Historical and Literary Context

One of the Yeats' career turning points was in 1897, at the beginning of cooperation with Lady Gregory on creating the *Irish Literary Theatre*. Before that he was walking a fine line between nationalism and art, and between action and spirituality. By that time, his artistic and political views were constantly influenced by Maud Gonne's practical nationalist work setting an inerasable mark on his literary career with militant, revolutionary enterprise, even though his primary goal was merely literature reformation. In doing so, Yeats was trapped in his own dichotomy of personality: spiritual and practical. When following Maud Gonne, an Irish revolutionary and a woman of action, his practical personality was drawing him away from his writing as he followed her nationalistic actions and aspirations. Yet he was gaining other sort of power and inspiration from her strengthening his spiritual side in that manner. His personal struggle was whether to pursue the nationalist path next to his loved one or to continue through his spiritual path and writing. He was "the man of action lost in his reverie and the man of reverie who could not quite find himself in action." (Ellmann, *Yeats* 2). Ultimately, a choice between the two had to be made, a choice which would pave the future path of his work. It was Queen Victoria's visit to Dublin on her diamond jubilee in 1897, when Yeats prevented Maud Gonne to act against the event when they started growing apart from each other. It was also the outset of the idea about forming the *Irish Literary Theatre* and the cooperation with Lady Gregory in the same year to help Yeats make the choice not to follow Maud Gonne any more. He grew fond of his work and cooperation with Lady Gregory, which also meant his more serious beginning of writing theatre plays. However, their Irish Literary Theatre was forced to be shut down in 1901, one year before presenting *Cathleen Ni Houliban*, due to lack of funding.

Yeats' years in London in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave him solid experience, but also an insight into where and how he should carry on with his literary ideas. A historic view to literature of that time shows occurrences of massive commercial prints, driven by the desire to gain popularity and wide range success. Yet such prints, as we make a comparison between England and Ireland of that time, occurred in two rather different manners, influenced by various political, cultural or economical facts. This is how Terence Brown explained the turbulent changes in London of that time:

"In an apparent paradox, it was increased literacy which put the role of the man of letters in question. [...] Newspapers, sensationalist novels, cheap magazines,

works of self-improvement, encyclopaedias flooded the market. The old role of the man of letters as arbiter of taste, of political, social and cultural ideas, of public opinion, was superseded to a disturbing extent by that of the hack writer, who catered for a growing, often philistine readership. A historian of this process has observed: ‘what had been created was a mass semi-literate, working-class, reading public, about whom the serious literary figures knew almost nothing and felt little commonality of interests and values, and yet who threatened to win the dominant position in political and economic life’ (56).

Those side-effects of changes prompted by the industrial revolution were probably too much for a young Irish poet in England. There, he was still trying to build his image with his unique symbolic poetry, but it seemed that there were not enough people in England interested in poetry concerned with Irish mystic stories. Changes in literary sense meant many more writers in London, much more competition and less interest in his own poetry. On the occasion of speaking about the *Rhymers Club* in one of the meetings, Yeats addressed the colleagues in the following manner: “None of us can say who will succeed, or even who has or has not talent. The only thing certain about us is that we are too many” (Brown 62).

And while London was boiling with new names in literature, new cheap literature and tough market for any serious writer, across the sea there was Ireland, ready for what Yeats had to offer. Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yeats was eager to earn more and more respect as a poet in Ireland, and by his return, to put into effect the idea of reforming himself both as a poet and a man through reformation of Ireland’s literature. Nonetheless, the rise of cheap literature in Ireland appeared in a different manner at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was, without any surprise, related to Irish nationalism:

“The last year of the Irish Literary Theatre, 1901, saw two main results of the enterprise: Yeats gave up on theatre in Ireland, and Ireland took up the theatre on its own in a large way. Padraic Pearse, future leader of the Easter Rebellion, reported that more than a dozen Irish dramas in Gaelic were presented in 1901 and 1902. There were plays in Gaelic at the Pan-Celtic Conference in Dublin and at the Feis in Galway during August 1901. The plays were, in some sense, authorless: at the request of amateur acting companies, and to meet the demand of massive and enthusiastic audiences, they were put together by priests, teachers, and patriotic women. Literary quality was irrelevant to their success. They formed the occasion for practicing Gaelic speech, singing Gaelic songs, wearing traditional clothes, and in general manifesting national enthusiasm. In scale, this dramatic activity amounted to a mass movement. Not only did the audiences run to 3,000 at the Dublin Rotunda, but the theatre movement had become part of an immense political network, the Gaelic League” (Frazier 51).

Literary efforts of the mentioned literary movement appear as semi-serious, unorganized, not well taught through attempts to revive Irish language and literature through not so distinguished efforts. From literary and political perspective, similar as it was to the London's spread of cheap literature, the nationalist tone it conveyed was much more serious. The followers proved only that the Irish were prone to taking artistic, sacrificial shortcuts to achieve nationalist goals. It did not matter whether it was good literature; what mattered was the use of Irish language in it. The aim of Yeats' efforts in Ireland was completely the opposite: the reawakening of Irish national feeling through artistic expression. He was of the opinion that national art can help rebuild nationality and cure divisions in a much better way. So what should have appeared with Yeats in Ireland was an inevitable, positive, artistic evolution. Inevitable because it had been started by somebody like Yeats, a gifted Irishman proven to be one of the key writers in Britain of that time, determined to devote his flair to specific causes. Positive because its goal was to change Irish literature to a better national and international recognition, so it could better fit Irish readers and better show others that the literature is proper, and ultimately create new and positive Ireland. And in the end, it was artistic because proper art, literature in particular which was the opposite of the imposed authorless plays, was bound to be in the centre of the changes. Unfortunately, due to the pre-dating circumstances achieving that goal proved to be not a promising venture, especially after realising the strength of England's influence on Ireland. Another Queen Victoria's visit to Ireland showed Yeats that Ireland was not ready for any sudden national changes. As Brown once again notes: "The huge crowds which turned out to greet Queen Victoria in Dublin in 1900 also suggested that Ireland was safely in the bosom of the Empire, whatever literary cultural nationalists with Fenian sympathies, like Yeats, or extreme revolutionary separatists, like Gonne cared to believe" (99).

As seen by Brown, by the time of the queen's visit Yeats was considered a separatist and nationalist by some, and indecisive by others. The divisions in Ireland had an impact on the writer's career. Revolutionary actions with Maud Gonne, poor literary state of mind in Ireland, as well as mass political support of the English queen took their toll on the writer's career at that time, distancing him from achieving the literary goals he wanted. The years before *Cathleen Ni Houliban* seem to have been ruthless for his writing:



“In May 1901 he was disturbed by how little welcome his publisher A. H. Bullen received in Ireland: no one wanted Yeats’ books, not his mystical *Secret Rose* or even his lyrical drama *The Shadowy Waters*. He wrote to Lady Gregory that the Catholic priests and the nationalist D. P. Moran did not like him because of his “heterodox” mysticism, and the Trinity College bookseller and the men of the Ascendancy Constitutional Club did not like him because they suspected him of revolutionary designs: too Protestant for one group, too Irish for the other” (Frazier 44).

In order to change the existing literary status described above, Yeats had to perform a thoroughly thought through action at the right time. Queen Victoria, condescendingly called “the famine queen” (Gonne 1) by Maud Gonne, died on January 22, 1901, one year before the first presentation of the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in Ireland. That time seemed perfect for a concrete, efficient, risky literary action from Yeats’ part, which would make his ideas more possible, and him more prone to success in Ireland.

### **The Nationalist Ideas in Yeats’ Literature**

When compared to the colleague Irishman James Joyce, him and Yeats seemed to be on a different level of consciousness. The critical attacks of James Joyce directed at Yeats’ methods of writing were the attacks on a person trying to dedicate his professional life to returning to Ireland and forming a proper Irish national literature. The attack came from abroad, far away from Ireland and from “the centre of paralysis” (Ellmann, *Letters* 83). As Joyce spent his life in “a voluntary exile” following his own wishes (Ellmann, *Letters* 56) we can refer to the life of Yeats as a voluntary sacrifice, given that he voluntarily returned to confront the problems of Irish nationality and national literature in his own manner. Similarly as in his dreamy poems, Yeats seemed to have had a divine, romantic view of Ireland, and considered it a utopian escape to a land of fairies and magic; Joyce on the other hand seemed as Yeats’ sobering medicine, who was even from the distance capable of waking him up from the dreamy escape. When compared to English literature, the glorification of sacrifice for the country appeared in a similar manner in war poems of Rupert Brooke. This poet glorified the acts of war and claimed sacrifice for the country an honourable gesture for future generations. His literary opponent was Wilfred Owen, who had tasted the bitter taste of war and explained it thoroughly in his poems, vigorously opposing and satirizing Brooke’s intentions to glorify all the monstrosities. Brooke’s glorification of sacrificial aspirations and Owen’s ridiculing of the slogan *Dulce et Decorum est*

*Pro Patria Mori*, at war time, can easily be compared to Joyce's and Yeats' literary disputes at peace time.

After Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in Dublin in 1897, Yeats and Maud Gonne stopped working together on practical nationalist ventures, so Yeats was able to devote his entire attention to writing. The same year his book *The Secret Rose* was published, and if we were to make connection between Yeats' life at that time and *The Secret Rose*, we would be surprised with Yeats' insecurity, trepidation and desires, probably concerning fulfilment of his plans. It seems as Yeats wanted to express his thoughts and show perplexity of his choices through this collection of short stories. Rose is the central symbol of this collection. Through his starting poem we can assume that the rose symbolizes Ireland, when he addresses her in the end with the desire to be free:

When shall the stars be blown about the sky,  
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?  
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,  
Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose? (Yeats, *Rose* 35-45)

His rose becomes a glimmering decoration made of ruby, on the uniform of an old knight in *Out of the Rose*, and Brother Dove explains to a little child about rubies as a symbol of love for God in *Where There's Nothing There's God*. This is as if his emotions connected to nationalist, natural desires with Ireland were clashing with the spiritual desires of poetic escapism and symbolic dreaming. As Yeats remarks, in his occult sessions he was practicing next to a rosy cross, which represents the war of the spiritual with the natural order (Martin, *Rose* 97). Yeats wanted to express his desire to send a message, along with his fears that the message would not be accepted properly. In *The Crucifixion of the Outcast*, a gleeman becomes a martyr and gets crucified for pointing out to problems through forging verses. The monks who held him in captivity and decided to crucify him realized the dangers of the gleeman's crafts: "for to-morrow or the next day the mood to curse would come upon him, or a pride in those rhymes would move him, and he would teach his lines to the children, and the girls, and the robbers" (Yeats, *Rose* 80).

Even though the nationalist activity followed Yeats through his love for Maud Gonne, his work shows that he was more satisfied as a writer and perhaps a prophet who has something to say to his readers. If we were to identify Yeats in the character of the gleeman, we would become aware of Yeats' fear of being the prophet advocating his Celtic beliefs to a nation of O'Connell's Catholicity. He commits the gleeman to crucifixion, just like Jesus had been committed. And in the same manner as Jesus started

a new religion, he wished to commence a new order that would continue living many years onward. Even though the sacrifice is difficult and frightful, it presents its rewards many years later.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yeats' desire to write plays grew stronger. It was the time of the closing of the *Irish Literary Theatre*, Yeats' downfall of popularity of his work, and the spread of cheap Gaelic literature through Ireland. He wrote to enlighten Irish masses about their own Irish identity, as that would earn him in Ireland a rank Shakespeare had had in England. It would at the same time deprive the Irish nation of English prejudices and prove that Irish wits can be equal to Shakespeare's puns. Moreover, Shakespeare was one of the two very important writers to inspire him to try out a new approach in his writing. While reading about Shakespeare, as it seems Yeats was excited about Victor Hugo's book, elaborating that he "abused critics and coteries and [...] that Shakespeare wrote without care or premeditation and to please everybody" (Yeats, *Ideas* 5). Yeats was thereby encouraged to write for the Irish masses, as he himself revealed in one of his essays in 1901, for he believed that "all good literatures were popular. [...] He] thought that one must write without care, for that was of the coteries, but with a gusty energy that would put all straight if it came out of the right heart" (Yeats, *Ideas* 5). The popularity of Yeats' literature in Ireland was a possible key to cease labelling him with Yeats the Anglo-Irish or Yeats the promoter of Celtic Gods and finally prove as their own. The second writer was Friedrich Nietzsche, whose sharp, arrogant strength of thought proved to have come in the right moment to reform Yeats from a man of reverie to a man of action: "He is exaggerated and violent but has helped me very greatly to build up in my mind an imagination of the heroic life. His books have come to me at exactly right moment, for I have planned out a series of plays which are intended to be an expression of that life which seems to me a kind of proud hard gift giving joyousness" (Brown 152).

Consequently, there were two more plays set on stage close to the time of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* which marked the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The battle between Shakespeare's puns and Irish humour is well reflected in the first play, *The Pot of Broth* which was presented in 1902, the same year as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Even though it is a remarkable, relaxed comedy, it also shows that Yeats still had faith in Irish people, their wits and their natural, country-smart spirit. In the play, the Irish tramp was able to outsmart a lady just with his Irish wits: "If I don't do it one way I'll do it another. My wits against the world!" (Yeats, *Glass* 64).

Yeats' experimental beliefs, and pushing the boundaries further in order to find the truth with deliberately asking "what if?", were shown in

his poem from the year 1897 *The Adoration of the Magi*, where the biblical Magi were not the wise ones, but the lost ones. Nevertheless they were set into action once again in the second play, *The Hour Glass* shown in 1903. He addressed the question “what if” to the other side when he introduced this play, wishing to explore the side of reality where the wise disbelievers were wrong. He allowed the wise man who had spread his religious disbeliefs to be outsmarted by a common fool, and to say: “Pupils, dear friends, I have deceived you all this time. It was I myself who was ignorant. There is a God. There is a heaven. There is fire that passes, and there is fire that lasts forever” (Yeats, *Glass* 20).

However, the obvious culmination of attention Yeats achieved with the first appearance of *Cathleen Ni Houliban* in 1902. It was a strong nationalist play set on stage not a long time after the queen’s death, with Maud Gone playing the leading role. At that time, as Yeats was aware of the power which so-called ‘Hiberno-English’ language (Dolan) possessed - he was working on making his plays melodic, and practiced daily with actors to achieve that feature. It was English novelty and Irish spirituality joined into one language. As we can see through Walkley’s research, it was: “a reminder of the potential of the language and of the ‘courtly’ values it can still possess if it is used correctly, as the Irish players use it. Moreover, it is the English who have a ‘rough workaday use of it’” (McKenna 409).

Once spoken by an Irish person, it reaches an entirely new level of speech, and once heard by an Irish person, it conjures up the Irish history and symbolizes all the battles, suppressions and cultural tortures which had shaped it that way. A question presents itself, whether Yeats’ sacrifice for his country made him an Irish hero or perhaps demonstrated his lack of experience and naive ideas as well as Joyce’s better or more trustworthy insight into what was happening in the country. Yeats claimed on two occasions that he had dreamed a dream, which helped him turn what he was dreaming about into a work of art. The first time it happened was when he wrote the poem *The Cap and Bells* and the second time was with his play *Cathleen Ni Houliban*. Both the poem and the play represent different approaches to what his usual style of writing was. *The Cap and Bells* is a magnificent ballad, as Cecil Bowra says: “[...] a fascinating, delightful poem, but it has no intellectual meaning like the song of Wandering Aengus, nor even an emotionally intelligible meaning like the poems about the Rose” (192), but differs from the whole collection by its style and avoids his usual way of playing with meanings of symbols. It is simply on a different level of understanding. *Cathleen Ni Houliban* had been a dream which shaped a very brave or very foolish attempt to let Ireland voice its opinions. Here is what Yeats had said to Lady Gregory about his attempt to write the play:

“One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and fire light and talk of a marriage, and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen Ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. I thought if I could write this out as a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it [...]. She has been a serving-maid among us, before one can think the thoughts of the people and speak with their tongue” (McKenna 413).

Yeats appears here like a messiah, who had been given an opportunity by God to show where people of Ireland had been mistaking in their relationship to their country, and to show where the future should lead them. The old woman, whom the messiah summoned, was a symbol of Ireland, and a mythical being which everybody in Ireland had heard stories about, something that kept all Irish together, regardless of their political or religious aspirations. This distinct vision should have been the one reforming awareness of people of Ireland about their country, their history and culture, and along with that, awareness about their future. As such, this ultimate Irish symbol was to serve as the ultimate means of recreating the nation as undivided.

Moreover, knowing that every artist ventures into a different approach to his work at some point in his career, we might offer another explanation to this intrigue. As a person and a writer with highly spiritual interests, it was easy for Yeats to offer a dream and meta-reality as reason for writing those two particular works, which provided him with fertile soil to try an atypical, undiscovered path in his career. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, as an entirely different play, was Yeats' transition to another era of his work, the era of more secure, braver approach to writing. When the 20<sup>th</sup> century started and the *Irish Literary Theatre* project failed, with the continuous support from Lady Gregory, with him overcoming the fact that Maud Gonne was married to another man, and also coming to terms with the decline of interest in his work in Ireland, he was developing into a more mature person and it was about time for him to take a firmer stand and work on his Irish dream. His thoughts of old Irish heroes and martyrs were related to his interests in doctrines of writers like Nietzsche. And as Nietzsche felt he needed to wake the world up from its sleep and unsatisfactory everyday life, so did Yeats feel that he should do the same for Ireland.

Insecurity of a young writer was replaced with security of an experienced one. Moreover, the artistic crucifixion in *'The Secret Rose'* revealed itself in a different form. The experienced writer was able to venture into writing plays with help of Lady Gregory, and was ready to call all the Irish to make sacrifice for their country if needed, with him in the forefront,

sacrificing his name by performing an Irish nationalist play in public. The messenger actually became the one sending the message.

Yeats' wish was to achieve the marriage between the Irish and Anglo-Irish through common literature, as well as to show that it already existed and was reflected in the marriage of English and Gaelic language. The efforts Yeats had made to make the play more musical enhanced the feelings that the old woman speaking Hiberno-English played by Maud Gonne evokes. Thanks to the contribution of Lady Gregory with regard to the language and tradition in the play he managed to conjure up a perfect, idyllic atmosphere of an Irish family, sharing happiness while preparing for a wedding in a traditional manner. This helped Yeats lead the plot from that happiness, to the climax of pressure when the groom leaves the young bride to join the fight for Ireland.

In the year of 1901, one year before publishing and presenting *Cathleen Ni Houliban*, as he said in his *Ideas on Good and Evil*, Yeats expressed his understanding of the state of the Irish masses: "The gatherers mock all expression that is wholly unlike their own, just as little boys in the street mock at strangely-dressed people and at old men who talk to themselves." (Yeats, *Ideas* 10). Yeats was aware of their religious habits and lives, their disability to look outside the margins, and embrace something different, so he used their deep religious feelings in his favour. What Joyce called "The most Catholic country in Europe" (Jonsen 80) where people were used to worshipping their heroes and martyrs, Yeats' powerful symbol, the old woman, showed them how to become one for greater good of the nation. In that manner, in the literary war between the two cultures, English and Irish, Ireland would gain more followers.

That cognition about people of Ireland and the influence of Victor Hugo's ideas about Shakespeare's popular writing, his attempt to reach popularity appeared with *Cathleen Ni Houliban*. Together with the other plays of that time, it showed him a different path his writing should follow, as he gave the Irish nation what it needed, and what it was used to. With *The Hour Glass* he served the pious with the possibility of scientists, lecturers or various non-believers being wrong in their doctrines, with *The Pot of Broth* he showed them that even the 'small' people from Ireland can be victorious using their wits, and finally, he used *Cathleen Ni Houliban* as his means to be heard around Ireland. Setting *Cathleen Ni Houliban* on stage was Yeats' ultimate point of sacrifice. The sacrifice reflects through Yeats' enormous risk to change his literary career and life by becoming a symbol for promoting Irish nationalism and at the same time reminding about the Irish-English historical differences and calling for sacrifices. The risk of that action was to change William Butler Yeats the poet of

dreamy symbolism and escapes to other realities, to William Butler Yeats the Irish nationalist and fighter for Irish causes.

And as Cecil Bowra said: “The drama allows no time for its listeners to ponder over difficulties. It must secure its impression at once and it must be clear” (200). Yeats took advantage of the immediate influence exerted by drama, to take a stand in front of the Irish spectators. “Moses was little good to his people until he had killed an Egyptian” (Frazier 29), so *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was about to become a meaningful explosion to shake the public and make them turn their heads that way and think about certain subjects. Even though Yeats had spoken in a negative manner about commercial ventures in plays, and said that “commercialism had little use for fine writing, being a theatre of big stage effects, coarse oratory, and grandiose scenery” (Frazier 54), as the point of commercialism was to please the crowds, he found a different commercial approach, not expressed by means of big stage effects, but not less grandiose. It was by means of making a high quality play in nationalist wrapping, to defeat the ostensible Irish literature in Gaelic popular at that time and promoted by Gaelic League, and to turn all eyes on him and his work. Still, the grandiose effects were replaced by meaningful production, by putting the play on after the queen’s death and assigning the leading role to Maud Gonne. “All good literatures were popular” (Yeats, *Ideas* 4) as he stated, and popularity can be gained with commercial ventures. Should the reward come afterwards, the sacrifice had been for the greater good. For all that, the greater good should have reflected in re-earning the trust of literary followers in Ireland, to avoid the obstacles his Countess Cathleen had, which would result in continuing his writing and plans accordingly. James Joyce was obviously aware of the directions the theatre in Ireland was moving, as he provided a serious warning in 1901 in his article *The Day of the Rabblement*, concerning the work of The Irish Literary Theatre: “If an artist courts the favour of the multitude he cannot escape the contagion of its fetishism and deliberate self-deception, and if he joins in a popular movement he does so at his own risk” (1).

## Conclusion

The reception of the play was heterogeneous. It was discussed and reviewed for years, from English critics praising the musicality of the play, to Stephen Gwynn’s famous critique in Ireland who was pondering if “such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot” (Cantwell and Jochum, 200). Then again, to perform

this play to unsecure, pious people of Ireland who strive to reach sinless perfection was a double-edged sword. It did help Yeats to step into an entirely new braver, more secure chapter of his life and work, however the side-effects were present in a form of awaking numerous nationalist apprehensions and their promotions, with possible detours of the whole idea. Still, a serious doctrine usually requires sacrifices in order to endure:

[...] it took to fully convince even the disciples that Jesus was in fact the child of God. Until that moment they are depicted as a singularly inept and unattractive collection of followers – quarrelsome, boastful, cowardly, rebellious, vacillating, shallow, unbelieving, and in one case traitorous. Only after Jesus' return from the tomb did they have faith even unto death and accept without reservation or hesitation his oft-repeated words "Follow me" (Matthew 16:24; John 21:19). (Smith 71)

Both Yeats and Joyce wanted the same thing, a better literary Ireland. Even though he was in voluntary exile, Joyce still felt uneasiness about the situation in Ireland shown through his critical and other work. He wanted changes to take place slowly, by stopping the need for pointing out Irish perfections and starting to point out the paralysis which stops the progress. Yeats' views showed a path from insecurity to concrete sacrificial action hitting the core of the problem. Nonetheless, even though Yeats' methods might be labelled as "political martyrology, ostensibly made in the church's image, but in fact a monstrous satire of the passion" (Jonsen 91), what he was certain of was a fact that he needed to survive the literary sacrifice made by presenting *Cathleen Ni Houliban*, and hope for a positive outcome in future, with the spirit of a proper Irishman, martyr for a higher cause, so that his doctrines lived on.

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## William Butler Yeats: Cathleen Ni Houlihan kot smisel žrtvovanja

Ključne besede: irska književnost / irsko gledališče / nacionalno vprašanje / nacionalizem / Yeats, William Butler / *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*

Članek obravnava prepričanje, da je William Butler Yeats z gledališko uprizoritvijo igre Cathleen Ni Houlihan na Irskem leta 1902 potegnil premišljeno potezo, s katero bi lahko celo žrtvoval svojo kariero; uprizoritev naj bi ga po eni strani prikazala kot večnega nacionalista, po drugi pa bi šokirala gledalce z močnim sporočilom in tako povzročila preobrat v njegovi karieri. Priljubljenost, ki bi jo na ta način dosegel med domačimi množicami, bi mu pomagala izpolniti načrte v zvezi s preoblikovanjem nacionalne književnosti. Izid tega žrtvovanja se kaže v vplivu te igre in poznejših Yeatsovih del na Irskem in drugod, saj je dobro znano, da so se njegove pesmi uporabljale za razpihovanje nacionalizma med irskim uporom leta 1916, pa tudi še veliko pozneje v Kataloniji in Galiciji. Raziskovalci so prišli do zaključka, da je Cathleen Ni Houlihan izredno vplivna nacionalistična igra, članek pa skuša uporabiti drugačen pristop in predstaviti dejstva o razlogih za njeno odrsko uprizoritev. Glavni cilj članka je predstaviti sociološke, zgodovinske in literarne okoliščine pred nastankom igre, ki bi pojasnile razlog za Yeatsovo žrtvovanje in posledično tudi njegov dejanski smisel.

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