

### Social Implications of the Treatment of Yeats's Early Wanderers

Early in W.B. Yeats's career as a writer, when his literary interests were still largely in the Irish peasantry and their folklore, Yeats created several wandering characters. Three very notable characters in his arsenal are Oisín, Red Hanrahan, and Cumhal, the Outcast from his short story "The Crucifixion of the Outcast." These characters all, through their individual decisions to break away from mainstream society and everyday life, embark upon journeys of personal discovery which set them even further away from the group mind of the common people. This sort of personal discovery, however individually beneficial it may seem, keeps Oisín, Hanrahan, and Cumhal from having any true home, as not one of these characters is fully accepted upon his return.

The worlds to which they return reject them, essentially, because of what they represent: the values of an older time and knowledge hidden from general human understanding. With this in mind, we may take into account what Robert Langbaum says: that "each age values opposite things, and ... the new age brings back values rejected by the old" (579). If this statement is to hold true, we must further suggest that one who represents the values of an old age will both be rejected by the world of which he is a part and reject it, thereby being forced into a life of further wandering. Yeats himself may also be seen here, especially when considering what biographer R.F. Foster says about this time in his life: "On 9 August 1887 he set off from London via Liverpool by courtesy ... of the Sligo Steam Navigation Company. He arrived in the town on 11

August, and by September was staying out at Rosses Point: but here too he now felt displaced” (71). Apparently Yeats did not feel at home in London or in his own country during this period. But this aforementioned treatment has implications beyond the effects upon the individual characters and the mental state of the author: one must also consider the political situation in Ireland at the time these works were being created. Ireland was a British colony, and several men, like Charles Stewart Parnell, were working for a free Ireland. Taking this situation into account, we see Yeats presenting the question of how an Irishman should view himself as an individual in a colonized land as well as how an Irishman who may not follow the general sentiment of his countrymen may be treated.

When Red Hanrahan, “the hedge schoolmaster, a tall, strong, red-haired young man” (213), is first introduced coming into a party in the story “Red Hanrahan,” we find that he is quite popular among the gentry, and that his sweetheart has bidden him, by word of a messenger, to come to her so that she may keep her promise to marry him. Hanrahan decides then and there that he will leave the party and begin his day’s journey to his betrothed. But upon this decision, “some of [the men] asked him to drink a glass before he went, and a young man caught hold of his coat, and said he must not leave them without singing the song he had made in praise of Venus and of [his sweetheart] Mary Lavelle” (215). Hanrahan decides to hear them out and stay for a while, but gets into a seemingly endless game of cards with an old wanderer whom the men did not dare throw out of the party earlier, the party being on Samhain night, a night when faeries and ghosts of all sorts abound and take many forms. During the card game, though, a pack of hounds and a hare (two figures which seem to represent an eternal chase) jump from the deck, and the old man cries out “follow the hounds, follow the hounds, and it is a great hunt you will see to-night” (218), but it is “only Hanrahan that [rises] up and that [says], ‘I will follow, I will

follow on" (219). His following leads him to a faery haunt, in which he is shown, in expectation of his being able to awaken their lady, four sacred treasures. Hanrahan, however, does not know what to do, and is sent to sleep by a sigh from one of the ladies. When he wakes the next day, he has no memory of the previous night, but wanders for a year until he is "very thin and worn, and his hair very long and wild" (222).

Oisín's history is a bit different, though similar in many ways to Hanrahan's. He was on a hunt, he relates to St. Patrick, with several of the Fenian warriors. But before catching the deer they were after, the company found "a pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode/ on a horse with bridle of findrinny" (Book I 20-21). This turns out to be Niamh, a faery woman, who bids Oisín:

mount by me and ride

To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,

Where men have heaped no burial-mounds,

And the days pass by like a wayward tune,

Where broken faith has never been known,

And the blushes of first love never have flown. Book I. 80-5.

Oisín follows on and journeys to three islands, which critic Harold Bloom has named "The Island of Dancing," "The Island of Victories," and "The Island of Sleepers," respectively, upon each of which he lives for one hundred years. But before he leaves, two of his friends and his father, "Caoilte, Conan, and Finn," respectively, "came near/ And wept, and raised their lamenting hands/ And bid me stay, with many a tear" (Book I 111-13), much like the men at the Samhain party bid Hanrahan stay. And between each of the islands, Oisín, like Hanrahan with the hounds and the hare, sees images of eternal chase. But in Oisín's case, he tells Patrick that "a hornless deer/ Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound/ All pearly white, save one red ear"

(Book I 139-41). After his three hundred years away from the world of men, he awakes on the Island of Sleepers to find “a starling like them that forgathered ‘neath a moon waking white as a shell/ When the Fenians made foray at morning with Bran, Sceolan, Lomair” (Book III 104). After the starling reminds Oisín of his mortal past, a horse comes to him to take him back, “a creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle of his beard never dry” (Book III 192), to an Ireland conquered by Patrick’s Catholicism.

The history of the Outcast, whom “many called...Cumhal, the son of Cormac, and many called...the Swift Wild Horse,” is not given to much degree. We are only told that he “was of the blood of the Ernaans, and his birthplace was the Field of Gold” (“Crucifixion” 147). It is perhaps for this reason that Cumhal is the best character with which we should begin our exploration into treatment. When Cumhal, a Gleeman, seeks shelter in an Abbey, the monks who run it provide him only with “a big and naked outhouse strewn with very dirty rushes,” a washing tub filled with water that “was so dirty that he could not see the bottom,” and a black loaf of bread that “was hard and mouldy” (148). Aside from this, he was also given a jug that was so filthy, when he “put [it] to his lips...he flung it from him straightway, for the water was bitter and ill-smelling,” and a blanket that was “alive with skipping fleas” (149). This inhospitality, however, was not reserved for Cumhal in particular. The same treatment, it seems, would have been given to anyone who was given shelter in this Abbey without being a member of the order. Thus we cannot rightly consider this a type of mistreatment toward Cumhal, as it does not single him out.

What we may consider as mistreatment, however, is the way that the abbot responds to Cumhal’s outrage, as well as the way the townspeople respond to that punishment. From ancient times in Ireland there has been a certain amount of generosity in quartering deemed necessary

from a ruler. In Alwyn and Brinley Rees's book *Celtic Heritage*, they write of a tale when King Conaire, faced with an old woman at his doorstep "is caught between his kingly obligation to be hospitable and one of his personal gessa [, a birth obligation which, if broken, can lead to death]" (331). Thus, when Cumhal considers himself snubbed by those who put him up, those who rule the land, he invokes his right and decides to "sing a bard's curse on the abbot" (150) for the inhospitality. But the abbot fears that Cumhal's shouting will "teach his curses to the children in the street, and the girls spinning at the doors, and to the robbers under Ben Bulben" (150). This fear supports, or at least appears connected to, the idea found in a *Musical Times* journal published in 1885, that "an important section of the bards, as the poetry of the Irish Ossian goes to prove, supported the Druids in their opposition to St. Patrick" (713). With this in mind, the abbot can be seen as looking below the immediate qualities of Cumhal's song and seeing him as subversive, one who wishes to overthrow the church and its power. Seeing no alternative and believing that to give in to him would feed his pride and allow him to tell others how he fared by using his rhymes, the abbot decides that Cumhal must be crucified. Upon his walk to the cross, Cumhal gives food that he has saved for desperate times to the beggars that make up the community around the Abbey, but even they turn their backs on him in the end, leaving the birds to light "all at once upon his head and arms and shoulders, and...peck at him, and the wolves...to eat his feet" (156).

In this instance, we may take the Catholic Church as representative of the colonizer, its power being the organizing and dominating force over the land in the time period represented. What we can see, then, is the colonizer, which is also supposed to be the spiritual center of the land in this particular instance, treating all who are colonized equally horribly. The Church has thus pitted itself against its own values, making it what critic Philip Marcus says is "clearly the

embodiment of external and material values” (46). Even those who would typically be a part of a sort of secular hierarchy are disrespected, and when anyone dares to oppose the self-righteous and belittling rule of the imperial power, they are put to death for fear of their suspected attempt at undermining its power.

As the church is a symbol in this case, we should not take this treatment as specific to it. Marcus has also written that “[Yeats’s] statement that the negative treatment of the Church in [The Crucifixion...] had been necessitated by ‘the symbolism which is the heart of [his] story’ makes it clear that he did not bring Catholicism into *The Secret Rose* stories to evaluate its specific merits and faults, but rather as an instrument for expressing his central theme” (48). This central theme seems to be the drying up of a spiritual source and the materialization and self-centeredness that are the result of it. Thus, the fact that all of the people in this tale are essentially beggars, as all are ultimately subject to the hospitality and generosity of the Church, is not a direct attack on the Church itself, but on the thing that the Church represents: a colonizing force with no concern for those whom it colonizes. The empire makes beggars of those over whom it rules, robbing the common Irishman (in this instance) of his livelihood and of the power to regain it.

This is supported by critic Edward Said in “Yeats and Decolonization.” In this paper, Said looks at several countries that had been colonized by Britain and France, and discovers that “all of the subjugated people had it in common that they were considered to be naturally subservient to a superior, advanced, developed, and morally mature Europe, whose role in the non-European world was to rule, instruct, legislate, develop, and at the proper times, to discipline, war against, and occasionally exterminate non-Europeans” (72). Considering, as we are, the Church as colonizer, this gives a slightly deeper understanding of the general mindset of

the abbot toward Cumhal and all others who may fall and have fallen under his dominion. In the light of Said's insight, the abbot, considering himself the local representative of government, believes it to be his duty to punish all those who may stand against "the state" for the good of the people themselves and for the state. The problem is that the people have allowed him this power. "Imperialism after all" says Said, "is a cooperative venture. Both the master and the slave participate in it, and both grew up in it, albeit unequally" (74). The larger problem is that under such a rule, all who are ruled become faceless.

Oisín encounters the Church under very similar circumstances. He, much like Cumhal, represents an older vision of Ireland. The main difference is that Oisín represents that image much more directly, being an actual figure of Ireland's legendary history, whereas Cumhal only upheld the old ways in his modern (with regard to the actual period of the story) context. Robert Langbaum says that Yeats "wrote *The Wanderings of Oisín* as an escape from history. Oisín lives out his inner life in a timeless world; and when after three hundred years he returns to the world of time, he finds 'progress.' St. Patrick has Christianized Ireland and the old gods are now devils" (579). This sort of progress was something that Langbaum paints Yeats as finding abhorrent. Oisín's inadvertently stumbling upon it, then, should automatically be taken as a problem for the hero, as a direct negation of his character by his surroundings in the human world. When Oisín begins his story for Patrick, the saint tells him that he is "still wrecked among heathen dreams" (Book I 31), and later, as he tells Patrick, when he returns from his three hundred years' journey, he is told by a man that "the Fenians a long time are dead" (Book III 172). Essentially, Ireland has "progressed" past the need or the desire, under Patrick's rule, to remember its pagan past (or its pre-colonized past which that pagan past would represent) and the rich culture which Yeats seems to have believed that past provided. There is obviously no

chance of Patrick's new vision of Ireland persuading Oisín, the old Ireland, to be an integral part of it. Thus the two worlds are something that must remain apart.

This is not the first time that Oisín encounters this idea about these two types of worlds needing to remain separate. At one point in his visit to the first island he is passed a harp. But, as Oisín tells Patrick:

When I sang of human joy  
 A sorrow wrapped each merry face,  
 And, Patrick! by your beard, they wept,  
 Until one came, a tearful boy;  
 'A sadder creature never stept  
 Than this strange human bard,' he cried;  
 And caught the silver harp away,  
 And, weeping over the white strings, hurled  
 It down in a leaf-hid, hollow place  
 That kept dim waters from the sky. Book I. 231-43.

Human happiness has no place in the faery world, because it is still too sad for the folk who live there. Oisín himself is allowed to stay, but he is essentially stripped of his past, and thus of his personality. If he is to remain, it is to be without the memories of who he once had been. This is a feat that he is able to accomplish, but the effects are not long-lasting, and he soon remembers his human past and must leave the island. It is this same memory that causes him to feel the need to leave the second and final islands, as well as Niamh at the tale's close.

But through all of Oisín's exploits, he does discover, to a degree at least, who he is as an individual and what he means as a representative of an era. He has done too much now to allow

himself to fade into the new Ireland and disappear, once more being forced to rid himself of his past. Marjorie Howes says that “Yeats’s earliest Celtic writings repeated, both overtly and covertly, the imperial gendering of the Irish as feminine, but in rejecting colonialism’s (and Irish nationalism’s) equation of femininity with inferiority and subordinate status they suggested a profound, though incomplete, departure from the axiomatics of imperialism” (18). The Celtic past that Yeats was writing of, according to Howes, was a feminine one, though not in the pessimistic, dominated way that imperialism would like to paint femininity. Oisín, then, as masculine and heroic as he may be, is the representative of a feminine nation. But this sort of heroic femininity can only maintain its integrity within its own context. Under the masculine imperialism that Patrick represents, there is no place for such a nation, for the impressions of dominance and of subservience that femininity represents under imperialism become attached by nature.

We can now see Yeats, a young Anglo-Irish poet, torn between two worlds of his own and attempting to relate to them, to find his own place within them. But those who would try to connect with their Irish roots by connecting to their glorious legendary history would automatically be connecting with a feminine culture and the subservient status with which it equates in a colonized society. With regards to this, Said says that “since one of the purposes of colonial education was to promote the history of France or Britain, [the colonizing nation], that same education also demoted the native history” (74). Any Irishman attempting to define himself or his nation by his nation’s past would have no place in his nation’s present; it will have “progressed” beyond him. But, as Harold Bloom points out,

Yeats had chosen to find a model for what he hoped would be a new kind of *antithetical* quester, closer to the communal experience... Where Browning

recoiled from the Shelleyan subjectivity, the internalization of the quest, Yeats entered it, embracing the quester's natural defeat as a victory ... of a man divided against himself, natural against imaginative, neither capable of final victory over the other. 103.

If Bloom's hypothesis holds true, then there is hope. While there may not be a static "place" for the Irishman attempting to identify with his uncolonized, pagan past, there is a forced potential for his personal growth. The cycles of victory and defeat will continue until the individual has also "progressed," perhaps beyond the need for acceptance by his society, free to move forward, as does Oisín, whether toward flames or a feast.

Critic John Cussen does not allow for this sort of victory in defeat in the case of Red Hanrahan. And while, to a certain extent, Hanrahan's journey is one that ends in failure because of his inability to recognize the hidden beauty of the otherworld and his own human world, Cussen criticizes Hanrahan for something quite different. "Once seriousness is put into the moral equation," Cussen writes, "prevailing interpretations seem grossly misguided in their estimate of Hanrahan as a tragic hero; to the degree that the presiding interpretations encourage pity for the itinerant poet, their sympathies seem misplaced" (10). But Cussen's understanding of Hanrahan strips the hero of what makes up much of the core of his character. His interpretation of Hanrahan as a character who lacks "seriousness" seems to analyze him from the group-mind perspective that imperialism seeks to instill in those who fall under the rule of empire. Essentially, under Cussen's view, if Hanrahan does not fit in with the group and take on the daily, menial responsibilities of the group, then he is a failure to the group. Says Cussen, "instead of staying in one place and contracting himself as one community's schoolmaster, Hanrahan wanders the countryside. Instead of working at poetry in a steady consistent manner,

he cultivates feelings that are passing and unreliable" (7). But Cussen does not take well enough into account that Hanrahan is faery touched, set apart from the group by his personal encounter with the divine, with the pure, with the essence of his pre-colonized, pre-christened past.

Hanrahan becomes what the common people cannot: free.

The view of Hanrahan that Cussen takes resembles very closely that of the people to whom he returns after his foray with the faeries. On his first encounter with people, a year after his adventure in Slieve Echtge, he is told that it would be best for him "to go to the priest now... and let him take off ... whatever may have been put upon you" ("Red Hanrahan" 224). And again, when he happens upon a party, the lady of the house says to her husband, "I would be well pleased for Hanrahan not to come in to-night, for he has no good name now among the priests, or with women that mind themselves" ("The Twisting of the Rope" 225). The husband, however, disagrees and lets Hanrahan come in. The wife's disdain for Hanrahan's character seems to be a perfect antithesis for her husband's admiration of it. While the wife, the representative of the subservient, feminized (considering Howes's aforementioned theory), colonized country, wants nothing to do with Hanrahan – especially not for him to lure away her daughter, which he attempts and nearly succeeds in doing -- the husband, in fighting for the company of the poet, is defying the contemporary viewpoint and reclaiming the old feminine strength, the pre-colonized femininity of Oisín's Ireland. But it is the wife who eventually wins, tricking Hanrahan out of the house, sending him off to wander again, homeless and without a partner.

The wife's victory over Hanrahan is a victory for imperialism. She makes clear her place in the society and makes sure that Hanrahan remains in his: outside, unable to corrupt the social order. Said says that "before [a distancing of the native African, Indian, or Irish individual from the British, French or (later) American master] can be done ... there is a pressing need for the

recovery of the land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (77). Hanrahan, in his lack of "seriousness" and his freedom from the toils of the daily lives of the people with whom he comes into contact, is a direct representative of this type of imagination. And when he is sent out the door, the imaginative spirit and the hope for freedom that goes along with it is sent right out with him. Thus the prospect of recovery is lost.

These three wanderers, Oisín, Cumhal, and Hanrahan, though specifically different, seem to represent one ideal: nonconformity with a dominating outside force. But the tales and the treatment of the three show us the tribulations that Yeats imagined someone taking on such a serious endeavor would encounter, as well as the disdain that he held for a society that did not welcome such behavior, did not allow itself to be challenged. The people under the rule of the abbey are criticized for turning away from Cumhal, the man who dared to fight against *their* tyrannical rulers, at his crucifixion. The people under Patrick's rule are equally criticized for snubbing their legendary past. And those who do not give Hanrahan the respect that he is due as a wandering poet and one who has encountered the faery folk are censured for their lack of understanding and their short-sightedness. The tales around these characters are a lament that an Irishman who wants to connect with his past and defy his colonizer who would strip him of the legitimacy of that past has no place among other Irishmen. Whether a man simply wants to recapture the beauty and power of his "feminine" nation which has been raped and left faceless by an empire, or if he wants to take a stand and call out against that empire, mocking it for the horrible conditions in which it leaves him, Yeats seems to believe that he has no place among the common men of Ireland.

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