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W. B. Yeats, Cultural Nationalism and the Mythical Element

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine how William Butler Yeats' early poetry hails an Irish national identity, by means of a cultural nationalism based on Celtic mythology. In recent discussions of Yeats' early poetry scholars have argued that the extensive use of mythological elements in Yeats early poetry simply function as an outlet of his imagination and sexual unease. In the words of Daniel Gomes "If the heavy use of Irish mythology [...] can be read as Yeats's declaration of national allegiance, it can also be read as a blank screen onto which Yeats projected his own fantasies and desires" (376). According to this view it would seem that Yeats early poetry serves no meaningful purpose, and thus it would just be read for the sake of pleasure. What this thesis argues, however, is that uses mythological elements to reinvent a cultural identity by means of cultural nationalism. To achieve this, I will analyze three of Yeats early poems and their context. The poems "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892), "The lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890) and "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889) will illustrate that above all, Yeats is a cultural nationalist transpiring both occult and mythological symbolism. This is significant because it explains what gave rise to the cultural and literary prosperity of the 1880s and 1890s in Ireland.

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my daughter, who entered our lives during the process of writing this thesis. I would also like to thank my supervisor Dr. Peter Paul Ferry for being patient and available whenever I got stuck. Last but not least, I would like to thank my girlfriend and her parents for helping out when I needed it the most.

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1 Introduction

“All the Irish movement rose out of Yeats and return to Yeats”

(George Moore qtd. in Reid 150).

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is credited for being the man behind the revitalization of the Irish cultural identity. He lived and worked in an Ireland which was undergoing an extensive transformation. Throughout his life, he always kept Ireland close to his heart and he was constantly pondering the question of national identity. Yeats is commonly recognized as a theatre director, journalist, playwright and Nobel prize winner but above all he was a poet and a cultural nationalist (Mays Ch. 30; Hutchinson and Aberbach 503). Yeats career as a poet has been a topic of research for more than a century and his accomplishments are reflected by his stature within the Irish literary tradition. He is regarded as the inventor of modern Irish literature written in English and the most prominent literary figure of his time (*Oxford Companion to Irish Literature - OCIL* 611). Yet, his role as a cultural nationalist has not been widely considered. Thus, this thesis investigates how Yeats developed as a poet and cultural nationalist and subsequently how his poetry reveals his cultural nationalism. In order to understand Yeats as a cultural nationalist we must discuss the fundamentals of cultural nationalism.

John Hutchinson defines cultural nationalism in his book *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism* (1987) as “moral regeneration of the national community rather than the achievement of an autonomous state” (9). The important defining component of a national community is, according to Hutchinson, historical memory rather than language (9). Therefore, a cultural nationalist seeks not to reinstate a believed utopia but to aid his or her community to strive for a higher level of development. Accordingly, this thesis will argue that the regeneration of the Irish national community was initiated by means of poetry devoted to the Celtic mythological tradition. With regard to language, this thesis will solely focus on Irish literature written in English.

This thesis applies the words Anglo-Irish, Celtic, Irish, and Gaelic. The term Anglo-Irish is only used to denote that we are discussing Irish literature written in English. This thesis will describe 19th century life, culture, literature, and nationality as Irish, and ancient life, culture and mythology related to Ireland as Celtic. For the purpose of this thesis, the term

Celtic will always refer to ancient times or the mythological tradition. Gaelic will always relate to the language e.g. Gaelic literature. Gaelic literature, material or poetry will always refer to material written in Irish-Gaelic and Scottish-Gaelic.

Yeats poetry contains elements from both the Celtic mythological tradition and written and oral folklore. Thunent argues that the topics of mythology and folklore have been common areas of research with regard to Yeats, but they have rarely been properly defined, nor have they ever been examined comprehensively. Yeats himself understood the two topics to be related but still considered them two separate units with distinct elements in his own work (2-3). By studying Yeats in a chronological order, Thunent argues that one will see that Yeats interest in Irish folklore came long before his involvement with Celtic myths. His interest in both Irish folklore and myth developed as a result of the material available to him, together with his personal and professional development and interests. Thus, Yeats role as a collector and editor of Irish folklore developed by means of four sub-subjects being fairies, contemporary peasants, rogues and rapparees of the 18th century and ancient heroes, as well as his involvement with multiple genres such as folk hero legends, Anglo-Irish fiction, folk belief legends and ancient myth (Thunent 4). However, because this this argues that the topics of Irish folklore and Celtic mythology appear in a conjoint manner in Yeats poems, we will approach the topic of Irish folklore and Celtic myths in accordance to Edward Hirsch's understanding of the matter:

The contemporary [living] folklore of the Irish countryside and the ancient Gaelic literature [revived by archaeologists and translators] served as dual sources for a new Irish literature. It was Yeats's typical move to bring them together. (Hirsch "the Imaginary Irish Peasant" 1121)

Because both Irish folklore and Celtic myths work in accordance with the focus of this thesis, we will argue that they function better as one single category, and thus Celtic mythology will refer to both Celtic mythology and Irish folklore unless the focus of the discussed topic revolves around specific details with regard to one or the other.

By making no clear distinction between the two, Yeats worked to make his poetry both heroic and transcendental, hence, instead of resorting to imitation the incentive became symbolism. Furthermore, this thesis argues that it is important to be able to read Yeats'

mythical poetry in light of his contemporary world. Denis Donoghue defines this ability as “a movement of the reader’s mind from a mythic relation to an implied modern instance” (221). Hence, in order to understand Yeats’ symbolism and usage of mythical material, one must first understand the circumstances of which Yeats was producing his poetry. Moreover, one must be able to understand Yeats’ interests, both personally and nationally at the time of writing the poem.

2 Yeats in context

How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hand upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times?

(Yeats "The Symbolism of Poetry" 364).

William Butler Yeats grew up in a fragmented Ireland, disconnected from its culture and history. Following the dissolution of the Gaelic Order in 1601, Ireland's native culture was fading due to centuries of constrained provincialism imposed by English settlers. The feeling of what it meant to be truly Irish, both culturally and historically, had been slowly deteriorating since the Elizabethan colonization of the 16th century (Kiberd 3). The questions of identity and national identity must have been important to Yeats and his 19th century contemporaries. Arguably, it was these questions that sparked what Mary Helen Thuente describes as "one of the most distinctive literary movements of the century", namely the Irish Literary Revival (Thuente 1). So, what was this literary movement and which factors made it become so distinctive?

The Irish Literary Revival, as it has come to be known, lasted from 1890 to 1922 and concerned the growing need to become reconnected to Ireland and the urgency to "make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish" (Kiberd 3). Ireland was and still is a country filled with unique mythological and folklore material. Yet, before the Irish Literary Revival it seems as though most Irish did not consider it an important part of their national identity. Therefore, the revivalists needed something to fire up the national feeling of the Irish populace, namely the "dichotomy" of Irish versus English. Thus, the eagerness to prove Ireland's unity through uniqueness, by means of literature, became one of the first cornerstones of the Irish Literary Revival.

Thomas MacDonagh argues, in his book *Literature in Ireland: Studies Irish and Anglo-Irish* (1916), that Anglo-Irish literature had the ability to voice the cultural identity of Ireland and help manifest the differences between Irish and English literature (OCIL 13).¹

¹ Anglo-Irish literature is used to describe Irish literature written in English. This is a tradition set apart from English literature and Gaelic literature. The term surfaced during the 19th century as a response to the complicated social, cultural and political situation of the British settlers in Ireland (OCIL 13).

From this we might understand how the pressing matter of de-Anglicizing Ireland would help initiate the Irish Literary Revival. Yet, while this was a simple and effective strategy, it was not a new one. Clearly, a national consensus had been present since the 17th century, but the “dichotomy” of Irish versus English was not enough to hail an entire nation. England, as a colonial power, did not see national identity as something restricting them, as opposed to the Irish who dwelled within a stagnating nation regarded as a mere weak colony. Arguably, the detachment from their native tongue, and thus their national literature, succeeding the colonization of Ireland led to a ruinous disconnection to their past. So, in order to create a common national consciousness, the focus had to concern the topic of plain Irish culture. Because, compared to England, Ireland was a young nation, one that was yet to be constructed by cultural nationalism, and as we shall see, cultural nationalism played a major role in Yeats’ literary revival. But what then is cultural nationalism and how did it develop in Ireland?

2.1 Cultural Nationalism

The cultural nationalist’s ultimate goal is the regeneration of a national community which alludes to a national culture. With regard to Ireland, Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival, this regeneration of the national community came through the production of art, especially literature. In relation to this it is interesting to see how Yeats believed that “good art could achieve the goals nationalist propaganda ultimately sought – to create and re-invigorate national community” (Howes and Kelly 219). Nationalist propaganda separates from culturally nationalistic art in that it often revolves around contemporary events. Cultural nationalism is commonly seen as a branch of nationalism, but instead of being a mass movement, cultural nationalism usually understood as an “enthusiasm of coteries of intellectuals” (Hutchinson 2). Still, even though they are related they are also distinctively different.

Nationalism, with its ideological roots from the European Romantic era, only matured and developed properly as a response by the oppressed colonies to their colonial power. As nationality becomes more closely defined when occupied, the nation cannot be understood as something static, which goes to show how nationalism is dynamic and dialectical because of the circumstances it arises from. Yet, what makes nationalism different from cultural nationalism is that the main goal for nationalism is to create a politically independent state reflecting the social and historical values of the nation. Cultural nationalism comes in here as a subordinate element of nationalism working towards the “larger” political aim. However,

nationalism is always initially cultural because cultural material such as stories, language, customs etc. is what the nationalist looks to when looking for resources (Mays Ch. 30). In this sense one might say that the cultural impact is not as notifiable as that of the political, thus making it harder to define Yeats' impact on Irish cultural nationalism as opposed to that of Eamon de Valera (1882-1975) and Michael Collins' (1890-1922) influence on political nationalism. The importance of the artist is arguably greater than that of a politician. An artist is one who works to claim his/her nation's distinctiveness, and in doing so, using their creative powers in order to gain independence. Additionally, the artist is the one speaking on behalf of the nation, consequently representing its heart and conscience when trying to regenerate its moral standing (Hutchinson and Aberbach 502). Hence, national identity is closely related to nationalism when a national identity can only hail one nation because culturally, historically and geographically there can never be another nation for the said people and "the culture of nationalism is [...] national culture" (Mays Ch. 30). Therefore, this means that nationalism and national identity will always be cultural. Of course, a nation exists in equal regard both politically and culturally, but the legitimacy of a nation often happens after the establishment of a high culture (Hutchinson and Aberbach 501). In Ireland's case this meant that in order to fight for independence revivalists such as Yeats needed to establish a national consensus of what was truly, deeply Irish and thus creating a national consciousness which in turn would hail a common Irish identity, that would aid the fight for independence through a common aim. However, the Irish cultural nationalism brought forward by Yeats and his fellow revivalists was not something new and it did not even stem from the 19th century.

The general perception of the concept of cultural nationalism during Yeats' time derived from an 18th century shift which arose from two separate groups of educated men: one being the secular intellectuals who functioned as developers of the ideology, and the other being the intelligentsia who helped configurate the first electorate and its political coordinators.² Both groups arose from a culture based in secular science which gained foothold during the 18th century. As a result of this shift, two types of cultural nationalists started gaining ground: one which included the artists and historical scholars who defined the cultural ideals; and the other which saw journalists and politicians turn these ideals into political, social and economic programs. Yet, both groups saw the usage of cultural nationalism as a means to deal with the crisis of identity and purpose (Hutchinson 3).

² Hutchinson defines intelligentsia as a people set within vocational and occupational groups residing from professions of modern standard and institutions of tertiary education (4).

Having said that, let us take a closer look at how this relates to 19th century Ireland. The wave of cultural nationalism in Ireland began during the 1840s with the production of Celtic influenced literature produced by authors such as Thomas Davis, James Clarence Mangan, Samuel Ferguson and William Allingham (Brown 66). This cultural nationalism focused on deploying various literary texts in an effort to encourage a sense of national identity (Murphy 23).³ These poets, of whom most were considered politically active, chose Gaelic literature because of its romantic components and thus resulting in the production of Irish national romantic literature as history written in a strict sense was seen as a tool pushed upon the Irish by their colonial overlord (*The Oxford Companion to Irish History – OCIH* 335). Arguably, this specific focus on Gaelic literature written in a romantic sense must have influenced contemporary cultural nationalists and further strengthened the cause of the cultural nationalists.

The people deciding to join the cause of the cultural nationalists consisted mainly of newly graduated students from both catholic and protestant middle-class backgrounds. Together they worked through the medium of a newspaper called *the Nation* and focused entirely on content which supported the cause of the cultural nationalists. Simultaneously, a group founded in 1842 called Young Ireland, however not labelled until 1844, grew popular. This group included influential nationalists such as Thomas Davis (initiator), John Dillon and Charles Gavan Duffy. However, their existence did not endure their failed rebellion of 1848, but they did manage to infuse the future of Irish cultural nationalism with a romantic understanding of nationalism (*OCIH* 633). Despite their short existence, one can argue that Young Ireland managed to draw attention to which type of literature Ireland that would best represent the Irish people, and especially Davis had a strong opinion of this.⁴

The type of literature Davis was talking about was that of romantic ballads. According to Davis, the literature produced needed to be not Saxon, not Celtic but Irish (Davis 222).⁵ What Davis wanted to initiate was the production of a national literature unlike that of the English and hence the production of romantic ballads came about. Charles Gavan Duffy saw

³Thomas Davis (1814-1845) was the leader of the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s. A group of nationalists who sought to liberate Ireland (*OCIH* 633).

⁴ Thomas Davis initially sought to gain economical and individual rights for the Irish through English citizenship, but his view changed in 1839-40 as he then saw his dream of a modernized Ireland submerge with a cultural nationalism based on history. The Irish claim was based two different grounds; one being historical right (uniqueness as a culture, rejecting the model of material progress made by England) and the other being natural right (Equality, industry, progress) (North 27).

⁵ Gaelic literature in this instance must be understood in terms of history and language. Davis wanted the literature to be distinctively Irish and not a mere reproduction of a distant literature which Ireland itself felt disconnected from (Davis 222).

that these romantic ballads needed to be Anglo-Irish and not just those of the popular culture often used by the country peasants (Duffy 15). Aiming to define an Irish nationality, Irish art was set up in a canonical fashion in an attempt to oppose what came out of England. Yet, it was still an early phase for an Irish nation trying to construct a national identity by use of literature (Duffy 23). Clearly, Davis and Duffy understood Ireland's need of a literature which would serve as solely Irish both in form and in spirit, but what could arguably be seen as equally important was the contents of this literature which was yet to be fully defined.

2.2 Introducing the Mythological Element

MacKillop says that the word myth has developed throughout history. From its etymological origin of *mythos* from Greek it has come to “denote those episodes or stories handed down within a culture that are continually retold or referred to for their resonant meaning” (MacKillop xxi).⁶ This is interesting because, when studying traditional literature, the connotations of a myth almost always correlates with ancient times as opposed to modern, and accordingly, someone, somewhere must have handled these events with a serious consciousness. Clearly, these stories are what keeps a nation connected, but more importantly it is what they tell off that makes them unique to their nation. Most nations do have stories which are bound to its people through generations, which is the case for Ireland as well. Furthermore, MacKillop adds that myth “like music, can never reveal its ultimate secret” (xxi). The secrecy is what intrigues the ones reading and listening, even more so when the reader has a hereditary connection to the myth. Having a personal connection to a mythological tradition is arguably of the outmost importance if the goal is to make the mythological tradition a part of an identity.

This missing content of the Irish literature was the mythological element, identified by the Northern Irish Unionist, Samuel Ferguson. Ferguson was a big advocate for the Irish legends and throughout his literary career he focused on the production of epic poems and the translation of Gaelic poems. Ultimately, what Ferguson wanted was to educate the Irish on the subject matter of ancient Ireland (*OCIL* 186). As Robert Welch argues, what Ferguson intended to do is something common within colonies:

⁶ *Mythos* translates to speech, story or plot (MacKillop xxi).

The search for the authentic Irishness and ancient tradition is a phase of the post-colonial experience when a native or the native's spokesman asserts the continuity of racial substrate of the colony in mystical terms. (Welch, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* 34)

Welch's argument, which in essence concerns the search for a common Irish identity and consciousness, is that myths, in broad terms, are racially bound and that they need to be asserted by one considered representative of the nation both culturally and nationally. In this case, that representative would be Ferguson, yet for the purpose of this research, Yeats will be argued to suit this position. Of course, Welch argues that this search for myth happens at a post-colonial stage, however this process is arguably initiated long before. In light of this, myth as a subject matter, and what it connotes, needs to be defined in order to understand Ferguson and ultimately Yeats' reasons for emphasizing its importance.

Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744-1803) and Gottlob Heyne's (1729-1810) established that "mythology' dealt with the origin of the world and the many creatures in it, the vicissitudes of vegetation, weather, eclipses, the discovery of fire, and the mystery of death" (MacKillop xxi). This 18th century study of traditional literature was an important contribution to the study of national stories, because if we explore the uniqueness of Ireland's literary tradition, we will find stories filled with plants, birds such as swans, animals and trees such as yew and alder, all of which carry mystical characteristics.⁷ However, a notable issue arises when talking about these stories in such a general manner. Stories originate from people of different vocational standings within a society, and the referents of these stories are further divided into specific categorical groups. In Ireland, we find these stories within both folklore and mythology, and even though they relate to each other, they are still unique when studied separately.

⁷ **Swan:** The swan is considered vital in early Irish literary tradition and is seen as the epitome of potential good luck, beauty and purity (MacKillop 394). **Yew:** The Celtic Druids are known to have used yew in order to make wands. Several Irish stories mention the importance of Yew, such as origin story of the Eóganacht capital, Cashel, where Corc mac Luigthig sees angels dancing over a yew bush in a vision. Furthermore, the Irish name Eógan translates to "born of yew", thus giving way to Eóganacht, the Munster dynasty, being glossed as "people of yew" (MacKillop 430). **Alder:** A special tree within Celtic tradition. In ancient Ireland the alder was considered holy because its wood changes color from white to red when cut. At some point in time it was illegal to cut down alder and it is still considered bad in modern times. Furthermore, in ancient Ireland the alder was considered powerful and it was even used in order to diagnose diseases. Additionally, the alder might have served as a measuring device for graves and corpses in pre-Christian Ireland (MacKillop 12).

In *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (1980), Mary Helen Thuente claims that Irish mythology and Irish folklore are ultimately part of the same subject matter but as two separate branches. Notably, what critics loosely refer to as Irish mythology has been given significantly more attention than the Irish folklore, to the extent that the subjects of folklore and Irish folklore as a 19th century literary tradition, both oral and written, has remained relatively untouched by critics. What separates them are their areas of focus: Thuente argues that folklore refers to the many oral traditions of the Irish peasantry of the 19th century such as songs, customs, narratives and beliefs. Irish mythology, for Thuente, is the reference to narratives which concern written material on heroes and ancient Irish gods, which at Yeats' time existed in old manuscripts and translations. Furthermore, Irish mythology is to be regarded as a branch of literature connected to traditional folk narrative, which is set apart from folktale (Thuente 2-3). With that being said, it is important to consider how and why mythology and folklore is relevant to Yeats.

2.3 The Development of Yeats' Subject Matters

Mythology and folklore were important topics with regard to Yeats almost from the day he was born. Born in Dublin in 1865, Yeats spent his first years in the outskirts of the vivid and naturally beautiful Irish city of Sligo and these years must be seen as Yeats' first affiliation with Irish natural landscape and mystical geography. It was not long after Yeats turned two years old that his family moved to England and accordingly it is from this life event that Yeats formed an even stronger relationship with both Sligo and Ireland (Kiberd 102). From this we might argue that Yeats developed a need to protect his childhood memories symbolized through his exalting of Sligo. Clearly, the young Yeats was drowning in distress after being dragged from the idyllic Irish landscapes of Sligo and thrown into the concrete jungle of London, hence commencing a tense relationship to the modern, industrialized English life.

Equally as important as Sligo was the influence of Yeats' family. Irish culture and mystical geography were of importance within Yeats' household. As Pierce notes, Yeats' mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen (1841-1900), frequently told her son about the tales of the ancient people, which consequently must have had an effect on the young Yeats whilst living in England (Pierce 36).⁸ Furthermore, Yeats picked up on his mother's discomfort and misery

⁸ Terence Brown uses the term "ancient people" to define the Celtic tribes living in Ireland from the 6th or 7th century (Brown 41).

when living in London. His mother, being from Sligo where her family ran a shipping company, often spoke of her longing for Ireland and her hatred for London and England which influenced Yeats' feelings of anti-Englishness (Brown 23). Additionally, the family servant, who ended up serving as a substitute mother for Yeats after his mother died in 1900, also had a habit of telling Yeats folktales throughout Yeats early years (Pierce 37).⁹ Arguably, Yeats' exposure to these tales had an effect on him, but it is hard to say whether or not Yeats considered it important in terms of his future career at this point in his life.

We see that Yeats decided early on that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps, the painter John Butler Yeats (1839-1922), and pursue an artistic career. Upon returning to Ireland in 1881, Yeats started attending the Erasmus Smith High school in Harcourt street in central Dublin, and later and in 1884 he ended up enrolling in Dublin's Metropolitan School of art, Kildare street. It is during this period that people started recognizing his talent and where Yeats first saw himself pursuing an artistic career (Brown 27, 36). Understandably, this part of Yeats' life only started the process of molding the poet-to-be, but the young poet had a long way to go in terms of refining his art.

It is during Yeats' student years that we encounter one of his first subject matters, namely that of occultism. Yeats introduction to occultism came through conversations with classmates and a family friend named Edward Dowden (1843-1913), who was a professor of English literature. The common topic of their conversations was that of theosophy and the occult. Clearly, Dowden must have made an impression and he is said to have taught the young Yeats several lessons on the possibilities of how to create a cultivated life in Ireland, and the youthful and enthusiastic Yeats seem to have worshiped the old man up until he let his father's personal opinion of the man influence him. Yeats' father considered Dowden a coward who put his personal security ahead of the purity of art (Brown 27). Even though these topics of occultism and theosophy might have been inspiring and interesting to Yeats, these conversations seemed to sway his focus away from his studies at school.

One of Yeats' most important, if not the most important conversational classmates during this period was George Russell (1867-1935), a boy from Lurgan, County Armagh who also attended Dublin's Metropolitan School of art.¹⁰ What Russell had was an eye for the mysterious and what was considered folk and fairy. It might be argued that Russell was the

⁹ Because Yeats predominantly got to experience this "ancient wisdom" (A term used to cover folktales, lore, myths etc.) through women, he came to understand it as something female or feminine (Pierce 37).

¹⁰ George William Russell adopted the pseudonym AE which he used for the most of his career as a poet (*OCIL* 503).

one who opened Yeats' eyes to the world of Irish mysteries. Moreover, Russell was not the only acquaintance that Yeats made during his years at college, he also got introduced to two other young men, Charles Johnston and Charles Alexandre Weeks, both of which shared a similar interest in the occult (Brown 28).¹¹ Through having regular meetings where the topics of occultism and theosophy were thoroughly discussed, Yeats and his classmates started looking for platforms where they could further develop their knowledge and understanding of the mystic and the occult.

These platforms came in the form of clubs and mythical cults, which were highly popular amongst the fin-de-siècle because of their intellectual beliefs.¹² They also had a major influence on Yeats' connection to the folk. Yeats attended these mythical cults and clubs in both London and Dublin, and this subsequently led Yeats to later identify with the 'folk'. Hutchinson characterizes the mythical cults that Yeats became associated with, which were both Rosicrucian and theosophical, as evolutionary metaphysical (129). Arguably, this part of Yeats' life is very important with regard to Yeats' poetic career. As we shall see, Yeats' poetry is written in a dreamy way infused with a lot of symbolism and transcendentalism. Hence, in order to fully understand this part of Yeats' poetic style, we need to understand the system of belief within these cults.

In order to answer this, we need to look at the common indicator for all the occult societies and clubs Yeats attended. Interestingly, they all shared a common doctrine which propounded three distinct theories: One, the understanding that ancient wisdom and traditions contained in specific holy books was once commonly known, but now solely kept by undercover brotherhoods organized by artist; two, the theory of degeneration which sees religion and modern science as something corrupt, controlled by materialists to keep the primal truth from the public; and three, the theory of regeneration, where the artist is seen as the one to reveal the mysteries of the past which in return will open the eyes of the world and cause a power-change induced by the production of a more advanced spiritual-material synthesis (Hutchinson 129).

Through these societies Yeats got drawn into the world of supernatural. Two societies stand out as the most influential out of the many societies Yeats attended. One being the Theosophical Society, founded by the Russian Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) in 1875, and the other, the Dublin Hermetic Society founded in 1885. Yeats interest in

¹¹ Charles Johnston was the son of a Unionist MP who was also a fanatical Orangeman originating from the north of Ireland.

¹²Fin-de-siècle: French term meaning "end of a century". Often used in connection to the 1880s and 1890s.

the supernatural was arguably much due to the fact that Yeats had started reading the literature of Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921), who was one of Madame Blavatsky's closest advocates in Europe. This includes the reading of books such as *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) and *The Occult World* (1881). Common amongst these societies, and revealed through Sinnett's books, was a belief in esoteric knowledge and its ability to reveal an occult reality. Sinnett's literature taught Yeats that there were certain mahatmas or spiritual masters sitting in northern India who was said to possess occult knowledge about the nature of our universe. These masters only shared this knowledge with carefully selected subjects, with whom they were able to communicate from a distance. One of these individuals were Madame Blavatsky, and she had been given the task to spread the word of the occult masters, which consequently affected the young Yates immensely as he imagined the sacred place of the occult masters in India as something similar to his beloved Sligo. Yeats felt drawn to the oral traditions of the mahatmas, which is described in Sinnett's books, because it reminded him of his mother's habit of telling folktales and his relationship to the unwritten tradition of the 'folk' (Brown 33-34).

The important point to take away from this is the relationship between MPB, as Blavatsky's followers called her, and Yeats and his understanding of her doctrines. With regard to this it is definitely worth mentioning that Blavatsky was as under immense criticism by groups such as the Society for Physical Research. Her teachings might have been controversial, yet Yeats chose to associate himself with her and seemed to agree with most of her doctrine, namely what Hough explains as:

The idea of an age-old secret doctrine, passed on by oral tradition from generation to generation. He [Yeats] found a God seen only as the boundless, Absolute, impassible, unknowable, indescribable. He found a world consisting of emanations from this Absolute, and souls who were sparks of separated fragments of the same substance. Their object was to return to the One from which they came, but to accomplish this they have to make a long pilgrimage through many incarnations, live through many lives both in this world and beyond. (Brown 36)

To break this down we need to look at what this means to Yeats poetry and belief. The two main ideas in Hough's explanation is arguably what connects to the otherworld of Celtic mythology and that of the *Anima Mundi*.

The otherworld, also known as *Sídh*, is home to the fairies, known from the *Book of Armagh* as the pagan gods (*side aut deorum terrenorum*).¹³ Yet, Celtic tradition mentions these characters as the Tuatha Dé Danann, who were the ancient gods of Ireland living in mounds throughout Ireland. According to *Lebor Gabála*, the sons of Míl won a battle against the Tuatha Dé Danann at Tailtiu, however the Tuatha Dé Danann used their magical powers to force the sons of Míl to share Ireland.¹⁴ Hence, the Tuatha Dé Danann took to the otherworld (underworld) and the Milesians were given the visible upper world, and it is through the mounds and raths that the Tuatha Dé Danann are able to access the upper world (*OCIL* 523).¹⁵ With regard to Yeats understanding of MPB's doctrine, the otherworld connects to the souls living as sparks, which is arguably represented by the fairies and other otherworldly beings inhabiting the otherworld, and the world lying "beyond" as this might be seen as a direct connection to the otherworld.

The other idea connecting to Yeats' understanding of MPB's doctrine is the *Anima Mundi*. The *Anima Mundi* which is seen as the world-soul, is accessible through a common unconsciousness called the "Great memory" (Gomes 378). Yeats understood, as opposed to the common belief, the content of the *Anima Mundi* to be inaccessible by the vast majority and that the myths kept ahold of the remnants of an imaginative unity which "preexisted its manifestation in different national traditions" (Gomes 378). This great memory is arguably the knowledge Hough explains to have been passed on through generations. Furthermore, this great memory could be understood to be preexistent within the people of a nation, yet in order to access it one must understand and study the universal qualities of myth and as well as the contents of his/her national myths. It is necessary to emphasize that all of this focus on Yeats and his involvement with the occult is vital in order to understand Yeats' poetic career and development, because ultimately it meant that Yeats started to question his father's materialistic and realistic Rembrandt fashioned art, which consequently turned Yeats away from painting and towards poetry (Brown 28).

¹³ The fairies of the otherworld go by a number of names; the aos sí (fairy folk), the slua sí (fairy host), the daoine maithe (good people), and the bunadh na gcnoc (hill people) (*OCIL* 523).

¹⁴ *Lebor Gabála*: Means "book of taking" or "book of settlement". Probably composed in the 11th century. The book covers the successful settlement of Ireland by the Gaels and their origin (*OCIH* 325).

¹⁵ Milesians, also known as the Gaels, is a term deriving from *Milesius* (Latinization of Míl Espáine, who's sons were responsible for the Goidelic conquest of Ireland (according to *Lebor Gabála*) (*OCIH* 377).

2.4 Yeats' Cultural Nationalism: The Influence of John O'Leary

We might argue that Yeats found the connection between cultural nationalism, mythology and folklore through the influence of John O'Leary (1830-1907). When talking about Yeats' poetry and development as a poet, we have to talk about one of the most important figures and arguably the biggest influencer in Yeats' life, John O'Leary. The 20-year-old Yeats met the much older 55-year-old O'Leary in 1885 when Yeats was a student at Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. Yeats had started attending the contemporary club which also served as an introduction to the ongoing cultural debate in Ireland (Thunert 6). The Fenian O'Leary was one of the members of the club and following their acquaintance Yeats began to slowly disregard the beliefs of people like Dowden and his own father John Butler Yeats (Brown 29).¹⁶ Considering the rather big age difference between the two, it is easy to see why O'Leary became such a prominent person in Yeats' early life, yet O'Leary's personality and views are arguably what intrigued Yeats the most.

To Yeats, O'Leary was a fighter, a nationalist, a man who did not break under pressure, and he later even became a sort of substitute father for Yeats. O'Leary seemed rather courageous to the young Yeats, having just been allowed back into Ireland following his exile for treason felony in 1865.¹⁷ Brown says that O'Leary acted as foil, covering whatever Dowden and J.B. Yeats had taught W.B. Yeats, and O'Leary is described as more radical, in comparison to J.B. Yeats' mild form of national feeling (Brown 29). O'Leary was anti-clerical and suspicious of Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) and he believed that "a people who are not prepared to fight in the last resort rather than remain slaves will never be made free by any sort of parliamentary legerdemain whatsoever" (Pierce 87).¹⁸ Clearly, O'Leary represented a form of rather radical nationalism. However, the fight had to be one worth fighting, and in that sense a cultural life had to be present as well as its citizens being a perfect example of moral character (Brown 29).

It is important to discuss how O'Leary's personality rubbed off on Yeats' relationship with cultural nationalism, mythology and folklore and subsequently his poetry. As Yeats was

¹⁶ Fenian: A Fenian was a member of the republican brotherhood (IRB), founded in 1858 by James Stephens, also known to have tried to gain independence for Ireland in 1867 by force (*OCIL* 185).

¹⁷ O'Leary was sentenced to 20 years penal servitude, got released in 1871, and returned to Ireland in 1885 (*OCIH* 429).

¹⁸ Parnell was a nationalist and a politician who represented Ireland in the British House of Commons (*OCIH* 454).

young when he met John O’Leary and he had produced only a few poems and articles before that, he later described their initial friendship in his “A General Introduction for My Work” (1937):

It was through the old Fenian leader John O’Leary I found my theme. His long imprisonment, his longer banishment, his magnificent head, his scholarship, his pride, his integrity [...] had drawn around him a group of young men; I was but eighteen or nineteen and had already, under the influence of *The Faerie Queen* and *The Sad Shepherd*, written a pastoral play, and under that of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* two plays, one staged somewhere in Caucasus, the other in a crater of the moon; and I knew myself to be vague and incoherent. He gave me the poems of Thomas Davis, said they were not good poetry but had changed his life when a young man, spoke of other poets associated with Davis and *The Nation* newspaper, probably lend me their books. (“A General Introduction for My Work” 379-380)¹⁹

By saying this Yeats covers a lot of important points; firstly, he mentions that he found his theme through O’Leary. Obviously, Yeats understood his current style to be both vague and incoherent. Secondly, he mentions some of his main literary influences, being Thomas Davis and the newspaper *The Nation*, which we will discuss later on. Thirdly, he explains how O’Leary introduced Yeats to other poets by lending him their books. This is arguably the most important part of O’Leary’s relationship and influence on Yeats.

As mentioned, the greatest impact that O’Leary had on Yeats was his personal library filled with literature that included numerous texts on Irish myth and legends. Marcus Bourke argues that it was through John O’Leary’s library that Yeats discovered the “great store of Irish legend and fairy love” (Thuente 14). Thuente however, dismisses this partially, claiming that Yeats was already familiar with the topic as a result of his childhood in Sligo and Sligo folklore, but she adds that it might have been O’Leary that made Yeats consider Irish folklore as a genuine scholarly subject matter (14-15). Thuente has a point, yet O’Leary’s influence

¹⁹ “A General Introduction for My Work”, which meant to serve as a complete edition of Yeats’ works, was completed in 1937, however this edition was never published.

should not be underestimated. As mentioned, Yeats did already know a fair bit about folklore and mythology following his childhood in Sligo, however, not on a scholarly level. Furthermore, this knowledge must arguably have served as a foundation for Yeats' personal interest in the subject matter. O'Leary himself noted that the young Yeats was gifted and therefore he lent him several books in addition to serving as a mentor. This event must also be seen as a form of guidance towards a more specific subject matter, seeing that Yeats was reading literature from a wider range of genres. Interestingly, Yeats claimed that after meeting O'Leary, he exclusively read Irish literature (Murphy 80).

This Irish literature, like Yeats mentions, was initially discovered in O'Leary's library. This includes literature written by Ireland's former minor language poets, such as Thomas Davis, James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849), Sir Samuel Ferguson and William Allingham. All of these poets influenced and helped Yeats in his development as a poet. Mangan had showcased the dire misery of the Irish people in a pure form and stood in clear contrast to other contemporary blatantly pessimistic works of art (Brown 65). Yeats considered Mangan's poetry to be very passionate and personal, however this was not an approach which Yeats wanted to adopt in the 1880s, but it did show Yeats yet another possibility of how the oral traditions of the peasantry could be turned into poetry (Thuente 18).²⁰ Ferguson presented Yeats with a decorated collection of Celtic sagas with his peculiar focus on the strangeness of Irish place-names, hence making him a poetic power within the ranks of those producing material written in the English language (Brown 65). Allingham, who wrongfully had been dubbed a non-national poet, had produced powerful poetic literature which focused on the geographical power of Irish places and "He has expressed that curious devotion of the people for the earth under our feet, a devotion that is not national, but local" (Brown 66). This is vital information in order to understand Yeats early poetry. In total, this inspired Yeats to consider cultural nationalism, emotions of the Irish people, Celtic mysticism, and geographical importance, all of which played a part in making Yeats' early poetry powerful and unique.²¹

²⁰ It must be mentioned that Mangan did not fully understand Irish, hence making his translations based on other translators' translations of prose. Even though Yeats did not want to copy Mangan, it made such an impact that features of Mangan's poetry can be found within Yeats' later poetry (Thuente 18).

²¹ Another two important yet less influential figures worth mentioning are J. J. Callanan (1795-1825) and Edward Walsh (1805-1850). Callanan is considered to be the first to successfully translate Irish poetry into English, while at the same time successfully transferring the original Irish spirit and rhythm. He is known for spending the majority of his life on the road in Ireland, traveling the countryside collecting legends and poems of the peasantry. Walsh, a prominent translator of Irish folklore and a scholar, published works focused on the translation of the Irish oral tradition such as *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1844) and *Irish Popular Songs* (1847). Both Walsh and Callanan spoke Irish fluently and had close relations with the peasantry. The translations made by Walsh and Callanan did effect Yeats and his poetic style by exemplifying how the oral tradition of the peasantry could be transformed into poetry (Thuente 17-18).

2.5 Other Influences on Yeats' Cultural Nationalism

At this point, we also need to consider the influence of *the Nation* which Yeats mentions in "A General Introduction for My Work". The newspaper was founded in 1842 as a political tool for the Young Ireland movement. Thus, when talking about Yeats' poetic development and stylistic influences, especially with regard to cultural nationalism, we have to discuss *the Nation*. The poetry they presented in *the Nation* was often written in a bombastic and melodramatic manner and the main purpose of the newspaper was to influence the public by means of their political beliefs (Thuente 11-12). An example of this can be found in the article called "The Prospectus of the Nation" which reads:

The necessity of the country seem to demand a journal able to aid and organize the new movements going on amongst us; to make their growth deeper and their fruit more 'racy of the soil;' and above all, to direct the popular mind and the sympathies of the educated men of all parties to the great end of Nationality. [...] Nationality is the first great object – a Nationality which will not only raise our people from their poverty, by securing them the blessing of a Domestic Legislation, but to infame and purify them with a lofty and heroic love of country. (Davis qtd. in Thuente 11)

This is plain political propaganda, but the main ideas of nationalism, race, identity, and independence are considerably valuable with regard to Yeats' and the environment set around him as he started developing his subject matter. From this excerpt we see that *the Nation* was concerned with several topics that Yeats also found essential. Race, identity and independence are all topics found in Yeats' early poetry. The establishment of a common Irish nationality which purported the uniqueness of the Irish race was important to both cultural and political nationalists, including Yeats. Yet, how to establish this common Irish identity was a heavily disputed question. Violence, politics, poetry or propaganda, all of which were exercised, and *the Nation* had their say by means of propaganda, which is exemplified in this article from the 10th of December 1842 called "Irish Verdict Against England":

The first step to nationality is the open and deliberate recognition of it by People themselves. Once the Irish People declare the disconnexion of themselves, their feeling, and interest from the men, feelings and interests of England, they are in march for freedom. [...] We are not English – let us thank God for it. (*The Nation* qtd. in Thuente 11)

The fact that the most important element in the process of establishing a nationality is the people's recognition of it is something Yeats must have agreed with. However, Yeats did not see eye to eye with *the Nation* in the way they wanted to achieve it. He did not like political propaganda. Additionally, he did not want his poetry to be seen as a form of political propaganda (Thuente 13).²² Out of all the literature given to Yeats by O'Leary, Allingham and Ferguson and their poetry stand out as more influential than the rest and it is important to establish how and why this is.

In order to understand Yeats early poetry, we have to look at both Ferguson and Allingham. Two poets, which Yeats, during the 1880s, considered to be the most successful and most prominent Irish poets. To Yeats, their poetry represented characteristics such as vitality and simplicity which stood in sharp contrast to the obscure egoism and hollow sophistication he saw in the English literary tradition, and the moralization and exhausted rhetoric which he had seen and criticized in the poetry of Young Ireland. From this we might argue that Yeats supported the initial driving force of the Irish Literary Revival, namely the de-anglicizing of Ireland. Yeats argued that Ferguson and Allingham represented two distinct types of Irish literary tradition; the tradition of manuscripts on ancient Irish heroes and the culture of oral folklore which was used amongst the peasantry. Ferguson produced poems which focused on both subjects, while Allingham kept to the culture of oral folklore. However, Yeats saw them as being more prominent in each of their fields and described it in his *Book of Irish Verse* (1895) as “Ferguson selecting his subjects from the traditions of the

²² Yeats produced two poems about England's repression of Ireland, “The two Titans” (1886) and “How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent” (1887), and these were intentionally written as political propaganda. Both of which were written following Yeats' reading of Thomas Moore's (1779-1852) poetry. Moore, who was alongside Davis recognized as the most prominent Irish poet of the 19th century, had written old Irish melodies but in the style of English verse and had published the series of *Irish Melodies* (1807-1834), which became very popular. Seán Lucy says that Moore used metrical patterns found in Irish poetry in several of the lyrics found in *Irish Melodies*. Something he argues Yeats picked up on and started implementing into his own poetry. However, Yeats later dismissed the usage of poetry as political propaganda, calling it pathetic, subsequently trying to define a truer Irish ballad tradition (Thuente 12-13).

Bardic age, and Allingham from those of his native Ballyshannon” (Thuente 19).²³ Evidently, their focus on ancient Irish literature and the Irish oral tradition swayed Yeats and, as Colin Meir and Robert O’Driscoll have both argued, we can find clear traces of Ferguson’s use of rhythm and style from his translations of Irish songs and poems in Yeats’ early poetry (Thuente 19-20).

More importantly, through studying all this literature, Yeats seemed to understand how he could use mythology and occultism in his poems. Supposedly, Yeats told O’Leary in July 1892 that “The mystical life is [at] the centre of all I do and all I think and all I write” (Pierce 31). This “mystical life” arguably connects to both of Yeats’ subject matters, namely mythology and occultism. More specifically, this mystical life and all it denotes for Yeats is connected solely to Ireland and the Irish. The letters and articles published by Yeats throughout the 1880s and 1890s are seen as a clear statement of his intent and Yeats declared himself an exclusively ‘Irish’ national poet by saying “With Irish literature and Irish thought alone have I to do” (Thuente 6). Yet, being a national poet subsequently means that the poet becomes a representative of the culture and identity of his country and people. The problem for Yeats was that his understanding of Irish identity and culture was somewhat different from the general public’s understanding of it.

2.6 Yeats’ Cultural Nationalism and Place

As Yeats understood the Irish national identity to be closely connected to mythology and folklore, his aim to become a national poet was closely connected to his relationship to the rural societies in Ireland. These were societies which he felt needed a spokesman, as the Great Famine of the 1840s had killed 1 million people and left Ireland in shambles with a populace fleeing the country (Hutchinson and Aberbach 504). Being bound by this new love for the folklore of the peasantry and Celtic poetic stylistics and contents he stated:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple minded religion of my childhood, I have made a new religion, almost an

²³ From the bardic age Ireland got a whole lot of information about the mythological age. When this mythological age took place is arguable, but James Standish O’Grady claims that it started before 2400 B.C.E, peaked around 2379 B.C.E and lasted up until 299 B.C.E (O’Grady, *History of Ireland: Cuculain and his Contemporaries* 89-90).

infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation. (Yeats qtd. in Thuente 6)

Despite growing up in a home driven by the Christian beliefs of his mother, Yeats rejected the faith just like his father did. This new religion might be interpreted as Yeats' devotion to Ireland's poetic tradition while simultaneously expressing his subject matter to the Irish nation as their self-proclaimed national poet. In this regard, poetry, for Yeats, becomes the individual's freedom to express himself through art. This is very plausible because Yeats considered the platform, which poetry provided, as more important to the freedom of the individual than that of religion and science. The reason being that he saw it as the only opportunity left for the individual to truly express him/herself in a society ruled by commercialism and corruption (Hutchinson 129). Hence, with Yeats' strong attachment to Ireland and the question of Irish identity, he would treat the matter like a religious fanatic, seemingly letting it preoccupy his mind, and subsequently express himself through art.

2.7 Mythology, Folklore and Cultural Nationalism of the times

Clearly, we see that Yeats fully identified with mythology and folklore, but this did not mean that his nation did. Both ancient Irish literature and the oral legends of the peasantry was fairing rather poorly amongst scholars as well as the with the public during the 19th century. Irish folklore was deemed to be bewildered superstition created by an uneducated peasantry. The act of researching the oral folk tales during the 19th century was often due to personal interest such as nostalgia and a wish to preserve antiquities. This means that, for Yeats to succeed, the Irish nation needed to fully identify with its ancient history. In extent, to merely identify with Irish mythology and folklore on a nostalgic level would not be sufficient.

Luckily for Yeats, there was however somewhat of an international interest in collecting and translating ancient Irish manuscripts and oral folklore, mainly for mythologists and philologists. This was done for comparative reasons and presented in journals such as *the folklore journal* which was produced from the 1878 by the Folklore Society of London (Thuente 6-9). Yet, these studies did not entirely promote the uniqueness of Ireland and its culture. What Yeats needed was a national focus and embracement of the national literature and oral history.

It is particularly important to investigate this nostalgic relationship with Irish mythology and folklore as it might explain what sort of audience Yeats was trying to influence. When something brings about the feeling of nostalgia, it directly connotes something from an earlier phase of one's life, most often one's childhood, and that this something no longer is a prominent part in his or her life or personality. Hence, in Ireland the general public considered the ancient Irish heroes and stories from mythology and folklore as something especially made for children or as simple humor. Several comic caricatures had been made like that of "A Legend of Knockmany" by William Carleton. In his story, both Finn and Cuchulain are in a mocking way portrayed as giants, and the plot of the story revolves around comedy and trickery.²⁴ Clearly, Yeats wanted the Irish subject matter to be seen as a more defining part of the Irish identity. Still, Yeats shared his people's nostalgic relation to these Irish heroes, but he would rather describe the literature, in which they appeared, as the incarnation of heroic energy and tragic passion (Thuente 21-22).

Saying that the "lost knowledge" about Ireland was uninteresting to the Irish would be wrong. The research of Irish mythology and folklore had started becoming significantly more interesting to the Irish people, as it had been gaining ground since the interest in ethnology originating from the 1830s. However, the majority of this interest was mainly coming from certain communities which considered it a highly relevant topic. Nevertheless, the upswing in interest amongst the general public was hugely due to the very talented Douglas Hyde (1860-1949).²⁵ He was both a talented linguistic as well as a folklorist and spoke both Irish and English as a result of him growing up close to the country people. Hyde sought to translate Gaelic folk-tales into English without losing authenticity so that the non-Irish-speaking public could read them, something Yeats deemed a necessity for the renewal of the Irish nation (Brown 68). These translations must be seen as decisive with regard to Yeats success. By

²⁴ Cuchulain is a character which appears many times in Yeats' literature, and the character himself is one that stems from the era before the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. Cuchulain is described as a warrior like superhuman who appears in the stories of the Ulster Cycle. Cuchulain's birth is in itself considered divine and during his upbringing he had several characters assisting in raising him such as Conall Cernach, Ferghus and the king of Ulster, Conchobar. The story has it that Cuchulain defeated 150 of Conchobar's troops when he was making his way to the royal court during his youth, whereupon Cuchulain demanded that the King give him weapons, but to no avail, Cuchulain proceeded to destroy 15 sets of weaponry, so the King had to make a special set of magical arms in order to deal with power. Myth has it that Cuchulain's strength was so undisputed because of his ability to enter a berserk frenzy known as the "wasp spasm" whereupon he would slay anything or anyone around him, be it friend or foe (Bell). Interestingly, Yeats decided to include this story in his initial anthology *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), but it never served as satisfactory to the needs of Yeats' presentation of heroes like Cuchulain (Thuente 22).

²⁵ Hyde was the son of a clergyman who had occupied the position of Rector in County Roscommon, under the Church of Ireland. He became Ireland's first ever president in 1938 and sat until 1945. He was a cultural activist and published several original Irish poems in Irish using the pseudonym An Craoibhín Aioibhinn (The pleasant little branch). He was an advocate for the Irish language and worked hard to preserve it (*OCIL* 255)

giving the English-speaking of Ireland access to their literary history, Yeats would be given a decisively bigger group of potential readers, who would also recognize and feel connected to his poetry. Hence, what Yeats wanted the Irish to see was exactly what Alfred Nutt wrote in *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail with Especial Reference to the Hypothesis of Its Celtic Origin* (1888) that “[...] of all the races of modern Europe the Irish have the most considerable and the most archaic mass of pre-Christian traditions” (Nutt qtd. in Thuente 9).

Importantly, translations were vital to Yeats himself as he never learned Irish and notably did not consider the loss of the language an issue. As a cultural nationalist Yeats saw Irish literature as a platform where Celtic culture should be present, but he stressed the importance of continuity rather than language. Understandably, Yeats’ claim that the Irish language might be disregarded must be seen as a bold move. Other poets and groups, such as the Young Ireland, had been fighting to revive the Irish language for decades (Pierce 71). Hence, Yeats’ opinions must have caused a revolt amongst both friends and foes. One such foe was the radical nationalist David Patrick Moran (1869-1936), who claimed that Yeats came to represent “the English mind in Ireland” (Kiberd 117).²⁶ This is a statement which we must disregard straight away because leading up to Yeats’ time most Irish did not know how to write or read Irish nor English (Kiberd 117). In order to connect to his people, Yeats chose the only reasonable approach which entails writing in the language most Irish would be able to understand.

In connection with the big picture, this choice of language would serve as means for the literary revolt against England. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari defines such a revolt as a ‘minor language’, a technique where literature written in a major language, by a minor group, is used to revolt against their oppressors. Arguably, this approach is closely connected to Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival. Nonetheless, this revolt must be considered one of several factors connected to the revival. Of course, the building of a common Irish national identity would serve as a contributing aspect in the fight for both political and cultural independence. Hence, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a cultural renaissance will always precede the political independence of a country and the instigators of such a renaissance will always be the writers of the oppressed nation (Kiberd 117). With this said, Yeats’ choice of language served as more convenient because, as Murphy states, literacy had expanded across Ireland and the majority of people knew how to read and write English (79). Accordingly, a

²⁶ Yeats’ claim that the Irish folk memory and mythology conveyed in English was heavily detested by David Patrick Moran. Moran worked as the producer of *the Nation* during Yeats’ time.

literary renaissance will only be possible if the people are able to read, and thus create a larger cultural encouragement.

Essentially, what all this talk of language, translations and a literary renaissance in the context of cultural nationalism comes down to is that of identity. We are not only talking about Ireland's identity but the equally as important identity of Yeats as a writer. Understandably, Yeats' mind was filled with questions of how to define this Irish identity during 1880s and 1890s. Furthermore, this was very relevant at the start of Yeats literary career, and so, this question of Irish identity was also a way for Yeats to further concretize his identity as an Irish writer. Hence, the development of Ireland's national identity can be understood as in a dynamic relationship with Yeats' development of a poetic identity. The circumstances of which Yeats tried to develop his style are complex and diverse. On one side we have to understand that Yeats was taking into consideration which type of literature that would secure a financial award, but at the same time be intriguing and meaningful. On the other side, Ireland's question of national identity was far from defined and the task was there for the taking. Yet, the challenge was there considering an Irish literary tradition based upon the limited collection of Irish writing written in English, sources of which were rather scarce following the dissolution of Celtic Ireland and the many lows, both politically and economically, and climax of course which was the Famine of the 1840s (Brown 65). Considering this, we must understand that Yeats was in a position where he was presented with a culture in which its sense of nationality was shattered and fragmented, which ultimately led Yeats to the literary style of Celticism. Yeats believed that Celticism, as a literary tool for culturally nationalistic poets, had the potential to reunite the Irish nation by means of the translated mythological material.

2.8 Importance of Yeats Celticism in his Cultural Nationalism

Celticism, which is the translation of Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic into English (in Ireland's case), entered the public consciousness in the middle of the 18th century. It first became popular in London and Edinburgh while Dublin was following slowly. Direct translations became popular due to writers such as William Collins and Thomas Gray. In the beginning it was a case of wanting authenticity and quality and to figure out which of the two traditions, that is Scottish and Irish, held the greater antiquity. The first major work on Celticism in Ireland came through Joseph Cooper Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (1786). This book served as a source of information as because it covered early Irish

history, culture and language (*OCIL* 567). Essential to this development was also the introduction of bardic poetry into English which came through Theophilus O'Flanagan's (c. 1760-1814) *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin* (1808). This collection included the translated edition of Tadhg mac Dáire Mac Bruaideadha's hortatory ode to Donnchadh Ó Briain, 4th Earl of Thomond. Moreover, the start of the 19th century saw a steady increase in material translated from Irish Gaelic into English, particularly poetry. Writers who started translating material include JJ Callanan, Samuel Ferguson, Edward Walsh, James Clarence Mangan, Standish Hayes O'Grady, George Sigerson, and Douglas Hyde. Later, the second wave of Celticism came through the influence of cultural nationalism during the 1890s. This came as a result of masses of information gathered on Celtic culture, society, literature. This led to the foundation of the Gaelic League which played an active role in translating and editing Irish Gaelic material in an attempt to revive the language. The Irish Literary Revival is somewhat of a result of Celticism movement (*OCIL* 568).

What Yeats saw in Celticism was a double output which provided him with both aesthetically pleasing and powerful culturally nationalistic poetry. In 1890 Yeats had formed the Rhymers Club together with his friend Ernest Rhys (1859-1946), a club based in London which focused on promoting young poets and help them gain ground in an ever so competitive market of constantly growing literary material. These poets isolated themselves from the dominant culture, which included less decorated literature such as newspapers, cheap magazines, sensationalist novels, encyclopedias and self-improvement books, which was in high demand amongst the Victorian middle-class (56-63). The members of the Rhymers Club did however not share Yeats view on Celticism. The majority of the members deemed the style too nationalistic and had an understanding of art as something purely for the sake of art and even more so because of their passion to make art fit in a world ruled by urban impressionism. However, they seemed to encourage the aestheticized use of Celticism in poetry, notably the sort which focused on senses, strange colors and dyes, odors, as opposed to the rather unethical implementation of philosophical exploration of nationalistic matters (Brown 62). Celticism was in a way accepted amongst poets in London, but was mainly an element used by Irish émigrés, both men and women. This was a style which helped define a distinct Irish identity within the literary communities, both within the Rhymers club and the Southwark Irish Literary Club, a club founded in 1883 which aimed to work towards the

“cultivation of Irish history, art, and literature, and the providing of a medium of social and intellectual intercourse for Irish people of both sexes” (Brown 62).²⁷

As a cultural nationalist, Yeats saw Celticism and mythological material as an opportunity to further pursue his intended role as a national poet. Something he started working against when he was working worked as a correspondent for the Boston *Pilot* and the *Providence Sunday Journal* in the years between 1888 and 1892. Here he wrote for an audience of émigrés in America, of whom many were children of people who had fled during the famine years and most likely embarked from Sligo. He presented himself as a more robust and politicized Celt, rather than the dreamy version of the Celt, which was the role he normally stepped into when writing poetry. Therefore, we see that the articles that he published were packed with elements of literary Fenianism, which he had probably picked up from O’Leary. In November 1892, Yeats boldly announced to his unquestionably nationalistic readers, of which many regarded England as the main reason for them being forced to leave Erin, that “Your Celt has written the greater bulk of his letters from the capital of the enemy” (Brown 64). Seemingly, this might be seen as a bald statement, however, considering Yeats’ position as an Irish writer, we must see it as a tactical plea to the people of the Irish nation, both within Ireland and those living in the diaspora. Additionally, earlier in February 1890, when publishing for the same publications he had cemented his position as a cultural nationalist when stating that “Whenever an Irish writer has strayed away from Irish themes and Irish feeling, in almost all cases he has done no more than make alms for oblivion” and “there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature” (Brown 65). This was most definitely a critique of other Irish writers, both in Ireland and London, who were stylistically situated within the popular culture of literature, which included the production of trivial literature such as newspapers and cheap magazines.

Importantly, Celticism represented something truly Irish. It was a style heavily based on the Irish mythical uniqueness preceding the days as an English colony and it had the potential to become Ireland’s new national style. Matthew Arnold says that “Celtic art seems to make up to itself for being unable to master the world and give an adequate interpretation of it, by throwing all its force into style” (Kiberd 116). With this new national style, Yeats sought to reclaim his nation through his poetic style and ultimately break free from England to create a separate Irish nation (Kiberd 117). Cultural nationalists, who utilized this new national style of Celticism, were often those who felt excluded from the social conventions of

²⁷ The Southwark Irish Literary Club was later, 1892, known as the Irish Literary Society in London, under the influence of Yeats among others.

regular nationalists. They felt that their talent was not respected as it should be within the regular nationalist communities and often originated within literary societies. Yeats and the Gaelic league are both examples of people who saw the literary societies as the foundation of a literary movement (*OCIH* 398-399).

Kiberd argues that an occupied country will be more susceptible to the literature produced by its colonial occupiers. Kiberd argues that the occupied are even more influenced than the people from the occupying country itself. In such a situation, the upswing in production of resistance literature will serve as a new genre of literature, produced as an opposition to the existing set of approved texts. Kiberd further explains how national poets, such as Yeats, ached to demonstrate how freedom existed through such literature, not in it (Kiberd 117). Furthermore, Terence Brown makes an important point when he, in his book *The Life of W. B. Yeats* (1999), explains how Yeats decided to maintain his focus on the style of Celticism as a form of self-promotion after moving back to London in 1895. This continuity in stylistics might be explained by Yeats discomfort in London and his longing for the landscape of Sligo and him deeming the two places incomparable. London was never a place Yeats enjoyed living and he explained the city as a place that burdened him because of the “great weight of stone” and the “miles and miles of stone and brick” (Brown 55).

Arguably, Celticism then partially served as a way of self-promotion for Yeats. He was well aware that by implementing the element of Irishness in his poetry would only come to his advantage in the competitive London as he would have less competition, be more original, seem more sincere and most importantly, it would be something close to his heart. It was however more to Yeats’ use of Celticism than just a means of getting up the ladder within the literary communities. Outside of the literary communities, the element of Celticism and Celtic identity could serve as a weapon for nationalists (Brown 64). By not overly romanticizing his work, Yeats managed to stand out amongst his contemporaries, who often fell into that exact trap. This subsequently led to Yeats strengthening of his new style, Celticism, and Bell argues that the development of Celticism was as much a way of fronting his personal national pride by focusing on Irish culture as it was a way of making a name for himself (Bell). It is from this period and focus that Yeats earned the nickname the “Dreamy Celt” in London (Brown 65).²⁸

²⁸ Matthew Arnold used the term “Dreamy Celt” during his lectures in 1866. The term was later, during the 1890s, used to describe Yeats.

2.9 Yeats the Dreamy Cultural Nationalist

The dreamy Celt is a persona which describes Yeats' early poetic style perfectly because it is closely linked with his understanding of occultism and mythology and folklore. The dreamy Celt consists of two sides of Yeats' personal interests, which coexists in close relation to each other, namely the occult interest, which is represented by the dreamy side, and the interest in mythology and folklore, which is represented by the Celtic side.

Terence Brown explains how Yeats regarded the spiritualism of the Victorian middle-class as something ever present in everyday life. Yeats claimed that "The mystical life is [at] the centre of all I do and all I think and all I write" (Brown 33) serves as a statement of how close to the occult Yeats had grown, a close relationship which he kept throughout his life (Brown 33). Furthermore, Irish folklore and mythology was something that haunted and changed individuals, as well as reincarnating the spirits or the dead, it was to be viewed as a living entity (Brown 38). All together this gives us an idea of how Yeats wanted to present his material. By giving the Celtic material a lofty and dreamy touch Yeats managed to stand out amongst his contemporary literary competitors. Moreover, this dreamy and lofty Celticism is arguably what has made Yeats such an influential literary character both within Ireland and outside Ireland.

Interestingly, very early on in his career, Yeats was more drawn to the dreamy than the Celtic side of mythological literature. In the beginning, the setting and subject of his poetry did concern fairy lore and pastoral characters, however these were drawn from India, something which can be seen in his works such as *the Island of Statues* (1885) and *Mosada* (1886).²⁹ The Indian influence is something that came through Yeats' introduction to Indian culture, something he got acquainted with through a number of occult societies. Yet, by focusing on Indian subjects and settings, Yeats did not fully serve the cause of the cultural nationalists. The only thing that might suggest that Yeats was implementing ideas of cultural nationalism is his overall motivation, namely the fact that he decided to implement a setting drawn from far away realities which suggests that he was craving another world, one outside of the one he was living in and despised (Thuente 5). Understandably, his world was ruled by the English and the underlying problem for Yeats was of course that this effected the national identity of the Irish.

²⁹ Neither *the Island of Statues* nor *Mosada* ever came to life for Yeats and his readers (Thuente 5).

In “Heterodox Religions in Ireland: Theosophy, the Hermetic Society, and the Castle of Heroes”, Suzan Johnston Graf argues that Yeats invented a “kind of mystical nationalism” (53). What Graf means by that is that Yeats’ poetic style combined the Irish cultural nationalistic topic of Celticism with occultism. This mystical nationalism, which Graf describes, is essentially the quintessence of Yeats’ early poetry, and arguably the main constituent in Yeats’ development of a common Irish consciousness. We see that this mystical nationalism was subject to the development and change of style which Yeats underwent throughout the 1880s and 1890s. By combining Celticism as a nationalistic subject matter with occultism, Yeats developed an especially intricate style which kept on becoming more and more dreamy. We see that Yeats’ poems from the 1880s were closely connected to both Celticism and occultism and references to nature were highly representative and clearly denoting of characters and elements of Irish literature, but during the 1890s Yeats found himself having to include explanatory notes in his poems. Throughout this time period his poetry became more cryptic and obscure and “the holly tree growing in his lover’s heart” (Cairns and Richards 67) came to serve as a reference to the Sephirothic tree found within the Kabbalah. According to Cairns and Richards, it is important to see these references to occult symbolism as complimentary to Yeats’ Celticism, which we see in the central symbol of the Rose found in his eponymous work published in 1893 (Cairns and Richards 67-68).³⁰ When Yeats, in his poem “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” writes “I would, before my time to go / sing of Old Eire and the ancient ways / red rose, proud rose, sad rose of all my days” (13) he clearly attempts to conjoin the Celtic, cultural nationalism and occultism. This way, Yeats’ intent is to purposefully inject esoteric symbolism into his poetry in order to emphasize his affinity with the people of Ireland by means of otherworldliness found in Celticism.

Notably, Yeats manages to circumvent the element of Catholicism and rather directly reach what he considers a deeper underlying part of his people’s spirituality. Both Protestantism and Catholicism were of course important in the Irish culture, but not to Yeats, who was rather devoted to his church of poetic tradition. Clearly, this could have been a cause for conflict (Cairns and Richards 68). When by-passing Catholicism, Yeats tries to reach the nationalistic feeling the Irish people would have felt in connection to their hereditary identity. It could be argued that Yeats intended to diminish the threat of occultism and Celticism by placing them both within the Irish cultural history. The occult is then seen as the paganism of the Celtic society and the Celticism is represented by all the legends and folklore. In total,

³⁰ The Rose had served as the poetic symbol of Ireland and in Yeats’ writing it also carried a connection to Rosicrucianism (Cairns and Richards 68).

Yeats intends to channel a clear interconnection across generations by means of nationalistic feelings felt towards a common adherence to the epic and ballad age of Ireland.

A conflict did occur between religious groupings and Yeats as a result of his position as an occult mage. Yeats had put himself in a vulnerable position as he was exploring occultism and mage interests. From this we understand that Yeats was operating both as a poet and a mage simultaneously. He was known as an expert of the Order of the Golden Dawn whilst also working with Celtic mysteries, consequently making him vulnerable to critics who did not separate his dual role. The criticism that Yeats had to endure came primarily from Catholic Ireland, and their argument was that Yeats' cultural nationalism was contaminated and this opened a debate where Yeats was accused of teaching paganism. It could be argued that the criticism Yeats received was mainly due to ignorance and lack of in-depth understanding of Yeats' person. Mainstream Catholicism, which consisted of many Catholics from rural areas where education was scarce, did not see eye to eye with Yeats and his ideas of a secular high culture based on neo-paganism. Still, Yeats way of treating topics such as patriotism, Catholicism and family in a satirical way did not increase his popularity amongst these communities (Hutchinson and Aberbach 515).³¹

If we separate Yeats' role as a culturally nationalistic mage from his role as a culturally nationalistic poet, we might understand where some of the criticism was coming from. During the latter half of the 1890s, Yeats, as a culturally nationalistic mage, intended to create a Celtic order of mysteries, which would serve as a secret society. Interestingly, Yeats sought to use the location of Castle Rock in Lough Key as the headquarter for his order. This location had a lot of both mythical and magical significance which was substantiated by the its long history. In this manner, it was a fitting place for a cultural nationalist who sought to liberate Ireland through symbolic rites and ritual enactments, combined with a cocktail of spiritual paganism and heterodox Christianity (Brown 92). Of course, Yeats' dealings as a culturally nationalistic mage had an impact on his literary contents, but as a culturally nationalistic poet, his overall goal concerned the creation of a national identity. This way, it is better to understand Yeats' occult beliefs as means to how the Irish would achieve liberation through a common consciousness. Hence, Yeats' idea was that Ireland would ensure a transcendent liberation from the materialistic and commercialized English Empire. This is

³¹ Instead the Catholic mainstream turned to the Gaelic League because, in their eyes, they represented a more authentic Ireland in where Catholic values were protected as Ireland was treated as an *Insula sacra* and this alone would be enough to prevent the domination of English materialism (Hutchinson and Aberbach 515).

exactly why Yeats decided to circumvent the topic of Catholicism and instead turn his attention to the national spirit through occult spiritualism.

Yeats' intended transcendent liberation consisted of one masculine component and one feminine component, both of which drew inspiration from Celticism and occultism. Since Yeats primarily had experience folklore and mythology through women in his upbringing, he understood the relationship between spirit and human to be something connected to femininity. In this relationship the human represented the feminine part and the spirit represented the masculine part. Yeats occult understanding of this relationship as a feminized spirituality, which is explained in the revised version of *the Celtic Twilight* (1902), meant that he saw women as far more susceptible to the ancient knowledge. Yeats regarded this knowledge as something held to be the only truth by ancient peoples, and even his contemporary 'wild peoples', as Brown calls them, saw it as the only true wisdom (Brown 38-41).

In Yeats' Celtic order of mysteries Maud Gonne (1866-1953) was to represent the feminine and Yeats himself would serve as the representation of masculinity. Yeats regarded Gonne as a mythical symbol of womanhood and even compared her to the Fairy Niamh.³² Gonne, who was equally interested in occultism, was English but had lived in both Ireland and France and so had been influenced by contemporary anti-English activists (Brown 49-50). Within the Celtic order of mysteries Gonne was to serve as a clairvoyant woman, a role she embraced, and soon, through intellectual thinking and experimenting, she came to the conclusion that there were four talismans of the Tuatha de Danann (the mythological Celtic conquerors of Ireland), namely they were the sword, the stone, the spear and the cauldron. Each of these items contained mystical powers which would serve as protection for the Irish people and their land. Together Yeats and Gonne would make out a perfect balance of energy, where Gonne would find the content and Yeats would bring it to life through his poetry. However, Yeats was not a rebellious agitator like Gonne, and his goal was to strengthen Ireland's leadership from his position as an elitist magician in his envisioned Celtic mysteries order.³³ To Yeats, this would ensure improvements in both spiritual and political spheres, and

³² In the Fenian cycle Niamh is presented as Oisín's spouse or lover after they spend 300 years together in the otherworld (*OCIL* 593).

³³ On 30 January 1889, Yeats was introduced to Maud Gonne by his mentor at the time, John O'Leary. O'Leary was not necessarily fond of Gonne as she sought to take immediate forceful action to make for the separation of Ireland. Gonne caught Yeats' eye immediately, but as he was a shy young man, he had trouble approaching her and confessing his admiration for the somewhat intimidation young woman. In an attempt to impress Gonne, Yeats made his way into Irish nationalist politics in 1890. As Gonne was rather nationalistic herself, Yeats wanted to impress her through his involvement as a country loving poet. O'Leary was on the other hand not too

eventually help Ireland leave England peacefully, as he saw how England was eating Ireland's soul (Brown 93-100).

2.10 Ballads and Cultural Nationalism

The most important tool for a 19th century culturally nationalistic Irish poet was the ballad and the bardic tradition. The approach of cultural nationalistic bards was to seek out what "kind of history a nation desires to possess" (O'Grady *Selected Essays and Passages* 41). Understandably, the bard and his ballads then become hugely important and it could be argued that they worked to reconstruct the literary tradition of Ireland. With this being said, it is important to note that the 19th century culturally nationalistic bards, such as Yeats, did not seek to achieve historical accuracy.³⁴ Yeats understood his work like the construction of "a new sword on our old traditional anvil for the great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world" ("Poetry and Tradition" 5). By re-investing poetic energy into bardic poetry and ballads, Yeats and his contemporary poets establishes a long-lost connection to Irish cultural history. As a cultural nationalist, Yeats was free to pick and choose whichever parts of this confident and joyous world he wants to re-implement into his imagined national consciousness. Arguably, it is this exact re-establishment of the old, confident and joyous world that intrigues a cultural nationalist like Yeats. Yeats characterized the old world in a way that makes it stand in clear opposition to his contemporary Ireland. During the late 19th century the lack of national confidence was more than evident, and Ireland was not situated in a joyous world either, which could be circumstantially explained by the lack of a common national consciousness and identity.

Both terms bard and ballad are closely related to Irish cultural nationalism because both of them relate to a distinctively Irish literary tradition. The term bard surfaced and is predominantly used in Anglo-Irish and refers to the poetic cast which existed within Celtic Ireland. It is from this poetic cast that we have most of the original mythological stories. Still, it must be noted that the exact meaning of the word bard is unclear, but it commonly relates to

fond of Donne's approach to the nationalist community as he understood her to be merely a young beautiful woman looking for excitement, and even Yeats' father J.B Yeats criticized her excitement for warfare. Yeats, who joined the Irish republican brotherhood sometime after 1885, considered his poetry as an aid in the fight for Irish separation. The Irish Republican Brotherhood claimed to originate from the Fenian Brotherhood. However, Donne did not embrace Yeats' approach as she cherished immediate results rather than what the slow literary approach would contribute (Brown 47-51).

³⁴ A bard is also known as a Druí (Druid) or a Fíli (Áes Dána). They often come across as interchangeable but in old literature, a Fíli, refers to a "seer" which is a person in control of traditional knowledge, such as *Dinnshenchas*, and a Druí is commonly connected to divination. Both terms are used to define a poet (*OCIL* 32).

poetry applying a syllabic rhyming metre used by Scottish and Irish poets starting in the 6th up until the 17th century (*OCIL* 32). It must be said that Yeats found that the “metre and stylistic complexities” (Thuente 18) of traditional Irish poetry was all too challenging to replicate. Hence, Yeats opted to assimilate the subject matter of the traditional Irish literature by focusing on setting, characters, feelings, symbolism and plot.

Explained in a straightforward way, the old Irish poetic style is known as *dán díreach* and it consists of two divisions: the first division is accentual, also known as *rosc* or *roscad*, which uses a systematic number of stressed feet where the number of syllables in each line is irregular. Within the accentual division one can often find the use of alliteration both between and within lines. The second division is syllabic Irish verse and is characterized by having an even number of syllables in each line, additionally, the stress is only placed at the end of the line. Hence, making the final, stressed words, rhyme. A syllabic Irish verse also occurs in a four-line strophe as opposed to *rosc* where the number of lines is unfixed (*OCIL* 364).³⁵ The prosodic systems of poetry produced in the 19th century was a result of a perpetual development, but there were clear differences. The common Irish poetic prosody used by Yeats and his contemporaries was called the slow *amhrán*, which worked better with the English language. Seán Lucy sets out the slow *amhrán* as such:

- (1) Very free accentual stanzas
- (2) Trisyllabic stanzas but with certain flexibility
- (3) Much more regular trisyllabics
- (4) A use of the longer iambic line which is deeply influenced by (1) and (2) and is marked by many of their characteristics, including often a masterly range of trisyllabic substitution and the frequent employment of effects related to “spread stress”. (Lucy 166)³⁶

³⁵ One of the earliest surviving poems of Irish accentual poetry is the *Amra Choluim Cille*. However, early Irish syllabic verse is less known and the earliest finding of such verse is from AD 650, yet, the Syllabic form, which developed out of the accentual verse, became the *núa-chrutha* (new forms) and dictated the literary scene for the next thousand years (*OCIL* 364).

³⁶ “Spread stress” is the act of putting stress on a pair of words and that this pair now counts as one stress. This is often related to noun-plus-adjective or verb-plus-verb. Examples of this can be far off, wild song, past scenes (Lucy 163).

With regard to Yeats, we see that he developed his prosodic style throughout his career and applied much from the slow *amhrán*. Lucy describes Yeats poetry as one of a kind and she argues that few were able to match Yeats' power, range and metrical skill when it came to Irish poetry written in English. Notably, Yeats' flexible freedom is something he developed as he grew older, whereas his flexible freedom only became freer and freer. Yeats way of modifying the Irish *amhrán* has been defined as prosodic "fingering" (Lucy 168).

Hutchinson and Aberbach argue that cultural nationalism in Ireland gave the bardic tradition a much-needed boost. The bardic tradition had solely been kept alive by the artists and the peasantry, and the threat of anglicization and social disturbance was far-reaching. Yet, the tradition of the bard still existed amongst the Irish-speaking peasantry living in the western part of Ireland. This heroic oral culture contained the Irish life force for Yeats, and if reconstructed it could awaken a cultural nationalism within a generation of Irish English-speakers.³⁷ (Hutchinson and Aberbach 510). The Gaelic bardic oral tradition which had almost vanished with the loss of native aristocracy and the tradition of Irish bards had been overthrown by Christian clerics and journalists, preaching the word of the print culture provided by an industrialized England. Yeats intended for literature to have a rather different societal function and "he [Yeats] believed that literature was the natural medium of Irish cultural nationalism, its roots in the Gaelic bardic oral tradition depicting the golden age of gods and heroes and uniting the community of listeners" (Hutchinson and Aberbach 510). It would appear that Yeats was not pleased with how classical learning and Christianity had pushed romance out of the world he was living in. In "the Literary Movement in Ireland" Yeats explains how he experienced the clerical dominance:

Romance fled to more and more remote fairy-lands [...] if she [Ireland] can make us believe that the beautiful things that move us to awe [...] are in truth, and not in phantasy alone the symbols or the dwellings of immortal presence, she will have begun a change that [...] will some day make all lands holy lands again. ("The Literary Movement in Ireland" 865-866)

³⁷ In *Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, Yeats admits that the revival of the mythical tradition and ballad poetry was never his idea and that it all began with the foundation of *the Nation* in 1842 (Pietrzak 17).

This statement is filled with mythological symbolism and mystical occultism. The romance Yeats mentions is arguably a symbol of the lively and romantic national literature lifelessly existing within Ireland, and this stands in clear opposition to the rather “cold” modernized English literature which Yeats sees as flawed considering its close relation to the materialistic and industrial world. In a mystical and spiritual fashion, Yeats describes how this Irish national literature, which has the ability to summon an immortal presence, can make Ireland once again holy. Arguably, this concerns the need for the Irish to embrace the myths existing within their culture and consequently make them a symbol of their national identity. This change, which Yeats mentions, regards the stature of Irish traditional literature and subject matter amongst the Irish populace. It would not be sufficient to accept Ireland’s mythological tradition as fantasy - it would have to become an element of the common Irish consciousness.

By aligning themselves with the Celtic bards, Yeats and the other 19th century bards hailed mythological figures such as Oisín.³⁸ The Fionn cycle, in which Oisín appears, has a focus on mythical warrior-heroes set in an environment based upon mountains, rivers, birdsong, the beauty of nature, and seashores, all of which is described using a lively and delicate language (*OCIL* 193). The poetry and ballads produced in the 19th century should be viewed as a continuation of the traditional bardic tradition. Yeats and his contemporaries produced poetry and ballads which functioned as a delicate concoction where the bards implemented qualities of force and power, which in turn balanced out the qualities of being poetic, traditional, natural, and feminine. Arguably, the introduction of force and power made the poetry all the more culturally nationalistic, and so this played an important part in making the poetry even more influential. To understand how this combination works in the context of poetry we need to look at Yeats’ poem “The Wanderings of Oisín,” which we will do later in the analysis.

2.11 Yeats’ Lecture on Irish Nationality and Literature

It could be argued that Yeats’ most important contribution to the study of Irish literature, national identity, and mythological material, apart from his poetry, came in the form of a lecture given in May 1893. This lecture, which was given the name “Nationality and Literature,” was held upon a visit to Dublin, whereupon Yeats spoke on his beliefs about

³⁸ Oisín appears in the Fionn cycle as a poet, a bard, a warrior, and a hero (*OCIL* 441).

Ireland and literature.³⁹ This lecture is important because Yeats put Irish literature into a developmental context which was essential for the understanding of a common framework amongst cultural nationalists. Furthermore, during his lecture, Yeats hails a literary communion through the powerful culturally nationalistic term “Celt”.

In a tactical fashion, Yeats attempts to inspire other cultural nationalists by reminding them of the fact that greatness of Irish literature is perpetual. He said, “We are a young nation with unexhausted material lying within us in our still unexpressed national character, about us is our scenery, and in the clearly marked outlines of our national life, and behind us in our legends” (Brown 66-67). Here he was clearly stating that although Ireland was yet to be born, the literature had all it needed to become a force to be reckoned with. Such a description of the Irish nation must have intrigued his listeners and hopefully struck a culturally nationalistic heartstring.

It could be argued that the main point of Yeats’ lecture is that which concerns the understanding of the development of Irish literature, which cultural nationalists needed to understand. The fundamentals of literature are complex and can only be seen in relation to a country’s national history. During his lecture Yeats explains how literature develops from unity to multiplicity and from simplicity to complexity. He goes on to explain how national literature grows in an analogous way through the consistent sub-division, such as moods and emotions, of constituent cells. His point becomes clear once he introduces the analogy of literature as a tree. Literature needs to grow and become more complex as it grows. As it becomes bigger and more complex it will start bearing fruits and flowers which will represent a blossoming national literature. Additionally, Yeats stresses the importance of perfection throughout every developmental stage (“Nationality and literature”).

Cultural nationalists needed to understand that every national literature, alike every tree, grows in its own tempo. Yeats explains that it is important not to compare a palm tree to an oak, meaning that Irish literature must look to its own history and not to the literary history of England. English literature, according to Yeats, was complex and mature as opposed to Irish literature which he describes as simple and immature. What Ireland needed in order to develop their national literature was workers, however the workers needed to be skilled and have a clear focus on rhythm, form, style and cadence rather than emphasizing the mere element of inspiration, which would gradually decrease the quality of the work (Brown 67). This lecture is decisive because Yeats puts his finger on important matters such as the need to

³⁹ Materials from the lecture was recorded and published in the *United Irishman* under the heading “Nationality and Literature”.

view Irish literature as a single entity, incomparable to their colonial master's literary development. Furthermore, Yeats calls for quality rather than quantity, and in total, Yeats' lecture could be seen as a guideline for other culturally nationalistic writers.

To assist his contemporary poets and cultural nationalists, Yeats said that he recognized three developmental stages of a national literature. The first developmental stage is called the period of narrative poetry, also known as the epic and ballad period. This stage emphasizes the importance of both national events and race. The second developmental stage is called the dramatic period, and this is a stage where the focus of the writer is on the characters who lived through these national events. The third and final developmental stage is called the period of lyric poetry. This last period shifts the focus towards moods, emotions and feelings. By entering the final stage subtlety poetry vanishes from the marketplace and rather occurs amongst mysterious cults. In turn, the literature becomes harder to grasp and is solely meant for a select few as the literature only gets produced by a handful of writers ("Nationality and Literature"). It is important to understand Yeats' depiction of the development of a national literature, because it sheds some light on the type of literature culturally nationalistic Irish poets were expected to produce.

While giving his lecture, Yeats declares himself "the Celt" in a culturally nationalistic fashion. He stated that "if I were addressing an English audience, I would not venture to even use the word philosophy, for it is only the Celt who cares much for ideas which have no immediate practical bearing" ("Nationality and Literature"). What this meant was that the progressing materialism flowing into Ireland from England might still be halted, but to do so Ireland needed to shift their focus towards literature. Furthermore, it could be argued that Yeats sought to unify Irish writers and, thus the Irish people, by drawing a link to what was characteristically seen as Celtic.

What Yeats was also looking for was other Celts, i.e. writers who would advocate for Ireland's mythological material through literature. Such a quality Yeats saw in a man he recognized as his master in the lecture from 1893, namely William Blake. Yeats believed Blake to be a true Celt, and from 1889 Yeats worked along his father and his friend Edwin John Ellis (1848-1916) when they had been tasked to edit the works of Blake. Blake's work contained stories such as the *Tain Bo Cuilane* and other epics (Brown 67).⁴⁰ This allowed

⁴⁰ *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or "The cattle-raid of Cuailng" is an epic originating from early Irish literature. Even though the story is mainly written in prose as opposed to verse, it is still considered an epic. The story concerns a

Yeats to study Blake's work closely, which provided Yeats with an ideal personification of a contemporary Celt, consequently pushing him in his development as a cultural nationalist.

By using a romantic lyric, Blake seemed to be in connection with the ancient spirits of Celtic Britain and its mythical figures. In Blake, Yeats saw an ideal image of how an Irish literary canon could look like. Blake's works was for Yeats a concoction of mythopoetic imagination which revealed a vision of the Irish racial mystique and the current state of the spiritual world, that essentially mirrored the national character of the Irish country folk (Brown 67). This concoction of mythopoetic imagination was what Yeats wanted the people of Ireland to connect to on a spiritual level. The Irish country folk were to be the intended role model because they represented what was characteristically closest to true Celts.

In Standish James O'Grady (1846-1928), Yeats saw another true Celt and a cultural nationalist. O'Grady's publications on Celtic sagas (the world of Cuchulain or Cuchullin), which were published in English in 1878 and 1880 as *History of Ireland*, provided Yeats and the people of Ireland with a lot of information on the heroic and legendary material, which laid latent within the vast literary tradition of Celtic Ireland (Brown 67). Initially, it was a case of providing the Irish people with information about the heroic and legendary material. After such a foundation had been laid, it might seem as if Yeats intended to further tweak the Irish people's perception of mythological material and its connection to national identity.

As a self-proclaimed Celt, Yeats, the cultural nationalist, thoroughly advocated for the old Irish tradition despite being viewed as a modernist writer for the majority of his career. Yeats never supported the "make it new" of modernism as Mays calls it. Contradictory, as we already know, he supported Ireland's appeal to its past, which does not stand in correlation with a modernist writer. Yeats' glorification of Ireland's romantic tradition was somewhat of a dilemma to other writers such as John Eglinton (1868-1961).⁴¹ Eglinton urged those producing Irish literature to be more "cosmopolitan" while expressing the need for a focus on the present as opposed to the past. Yeats and Eglinton did not see eye to eye on this matter for Yeats did not agree with Eglinton's statement that "Sooner or later [...] Ireland will have to make up its mind that it is no longer the old Gaelic nation of the 5th or 12th or even the 18th century, but one which has been in the making ever since these islands were drawn into the community of nations by the Normans" (Mays Ch. 30). To Yeats, taking the Irish legends and

war between Ulster and the queen of Connacht, Medb and her husband Ailill. In the story we meet the bull Donn Cuailnge and Cú Chulainn (Mac Cana).

⁴¹ John Eglinton, also known as William Kirkpatrick Magee, worked as a writer and a librarian at the National Library of Ireland (*OCIL* 169) Eglinton was also a former classmate of Yeats.

lore out of the picture, regardless of how old they were, would be like removing part of the Irish soul. Yeats answer to Eglinton was that “Our Irish romantic tradition [...] should make Ireland, as Ireland and all other lands were in ancient times, a holy land to her own people” (Mays Ch. 30). Still, when Irish literature was being criticized for being too primitive, Yeats saw it as just. Yeats was not in denial and clearly understood that Irish literature needed developing. During his lecture in May 1893, he described how Ireland must look to other old nations such as Greece and India for inspiration. This is what Ireland’s earlier poets must have already done, claimed Yeats. Yet, events and characters are bound to their nation, but emotions and moods are not. Hence, imitating other great nations would make literature cosmopolitan. Therefore, Yeats looked to these nations solely for inspiration and what he learned was that the Irish legends could exist regardless of time since they had both been adapted and modified over a long period of time, and as a result of this the legends reflected the love and hate (emotions and moods) of the nation (“Nationality and Literature”). Arguably, what Yeats tries to advocate is the importance of such cultural elements because of their ability to represent the emotions and moods of any nation at any given time. Accordingly, literature needs to be the main interest in order to reinvent these legends, not only to understand the literature but to produce it.

Interestingly, Cairns and Richards argue that throughout his pre-1900 writings Yeats intended to turn all Irish into culturally nationalistic Celts. An example of this is found in Yeats’ essay “The Irish National Literary Society”, whereupon he reinforces the need for writers to walk in the footsteps of the Celtic bards. Yet again, in this essay, Yeats visions himself as “the Celt”, however this time around he depicts himself as a hero-alike figure coming home to Ireland, in order to fight for the nation (Cairns and Richards 65). Yet, ethnically, Yeats ancestral heritage resided in England which could potentially weaken his argument, if he was to make it about ethnicity. In spite of this, the argument was made that the Celt was one who valued natural magic, emotion, spirituality, love of color, and quickness of perception. Hence, ethnicity and language were not required for Yeats and his contemporaries to become a Celt (67). Accordingly, this gave Yeats the opportunity to serve as a Celtic bard, and circumstantially a general theme of heroic and mythical elements dominated the literary scene during the 1880s and 1890s, which must have made it easier as Yeats was joining a wave as opposed to being a lone advocate. What is interesting to note from the poetry of the late 19th century bards, is that they did not only dwell in the past, but they also focused on the future. An example of this is Yeats’ poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times” which serves as

a manifesto poem eagerly linking the poet to Ireland's history, as means of a continuum (Campbell 11).

2.12 Yeats' Involvement in the Cultural Nationalism Movement

Yeats was heavily involved in the Irish cultural nationalist movement which lasted from the 1870s to 1914.⁴² The main aim of the cultural nationalist movement was to bring the pre-colonial Celtic culture back to life as a way of opposing the British industrial influence in Ireland. The movement should be seen as a continuation of the work laid down by the literary societies and previous activists such as Standish O'Grady, Samuel Ferguson and Thomas Davis. Notably, in the latter half of the 19th century, when the cultural nationalism movement spread rapidly across Ireland, it was mostly due to its popularity amongst the general public, as opposed to elite activists (Murphy 5). The fact that Ireland's cultural nationalism was mainly driven by the inspiration of the general public is very important with regard to Yeats' cultural nationalism. As we have seen, the main aim and initial driving force of the cultural nationalist movement was the de-Anglicization of Ireland. It is true that Yeats was fully supported the de-Anglicization of Ireland, but his main aim as a cultural nationalist was the creation of a nation identity, by means of a common national consciousness. From this we understand that the general public was Yeats biggest asset. The creation of a national identity does not happen through the work of elite activists; however, it might evolve from their ideas. A national identity needs to be embraced by the majority of people within a nation, and because the cultural nationalist movement had such a high standing within Ireland Yeats, as a representative of the people or as a national poet, had an opportunity to reach a large audience.

Alongside the cultural nationalist movement, an important political nationalist battle was being fought. Fronting this political nationalism was Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) who fought to achieve a Home Rule parliament, one that would see Ireland take one step towards political freedom from Britain. The aim was to improve the power of the Irish parliament by securing the right to manage national affairs. For Yeats, this would seemingly be a positive change, if the political nationalists were to be successful. However, Parnell's career ended abruptly in 1889 following a scandalous affair and so a political battle broke out between clerical nationalists and secular liberals. Following this, nationalists were split

⁴² According to Hutchinson and Aberbach, Yeats was mostly active as a cultural nationalist in the period of 1885-1913 (511).

following a conflict of interest. Both cultural nationalists and political nationalists worked to define a national identity based on pre-colonial communitarian values, but the two parties could not agree on a common approach. Understandably, a conflict like this depended on people siding with the two respective parties, but unfortunately for the cultural nationalists, their mass of followers amounted to far less than those supporting the Home Rule movement (Hutchinson and Aberbach 507). As a poet and a liberal, Yeats naturally sided with the cultural nationalists, but politics as such was never something Yeats intended to get involved with at this point in his career. Yeats expressed his opinion on the matter when trying to explain the body of his work in 1937 by stating “I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons” (Mays Ch. 30).

The problem for both political nationalists and cultural nationalists was that they lacked leadership. After the death of Parnell in 1891 and the failure of the Home Rule Act, Ireland was in dire need of a front figure. The political turbulence gave Yeats and his fellow cultural nationalists the opportunity to draw the attention away from politics and towards the movement of cultural nationalists. Yeats saw Ireland as a country that had still not been born, and the situation made Ireland up for shaping, like a piece of soft wax. The public was easily malleable and the paucity of cultural resources available in Ireland were limited, which made Ireland open to anyone willing to claim leadership (Brown 84).⁴³ From this we might understand the circumstances of how and why Yeats and the cultural nationalist movement grew in popularity. In the book *Four Years*, Yeats proclaimed that now he saw “that for a time the imagination of young men would turn from politics” (91). Despite his young age, Yeats now found himself in a position where the public started turning their ears towards the cultural advocates, which in turn created a platform where Yeats could step forward as prominent national influencer.

In the book *Yeats in context* (2010), Holdeman and Levitas explain that once the cultural nationalist gained the upper hand, Yeats, comparable to other late 19th and early 20th century writers, sought to salvage and revitalize the public’s knowledge of Celtic folklore and mythology. Through educating the public, the cultural naturalists sought to gather support in an attempt to claim independence for Ireland. This claim was not only based on mere right to be independent, rather, the claim was made and rested on Ireland’s unique historical and

⁴³ It must be noted that Ireland was not in such a shattered state as Yeats had imagined, and the ranks of nationalists still stood strong. Thus, the conflict did not end but Yeats and the other cultural nationalists gained the upper hand for some time. Additionally, this conflict must solely be seen as a conflict of interest, as both parties ultimately fought the same battle (Brown 84).

cultural presence. Of course, it was this unique historical and cultural presence that cultural nationalists attempted to prove, and a national consensus was needed in order to revitalize the importance of this uniqueness. The key words here are education and inspiration, which is what Yeats and his contemporary cultural nationalists focused on in their work. Yeats argued that the “soul of eternal and ancient Ireland” was in clear opposition to “modern Ireland” (Holdeman and Levitas 170). What Yeats means is that the biggest issue was arguably to convince the general public that knowledge of Celtic folklore and mythology was still relevant. Understandably, ancient knowledge like this might have seemed farfetched for a lot of people in Ireland, but the potential to make the Irish people take it to heart was definitely there.

Yeats saw that the cultural nationalism he was fronting needed to be inclusive in order to act as a spiritual resource, meaning that no distinction would be made between nationalist and unionist, Catholic and Protestant and Parnellite and anti-Parnellite. It might be argued that the spiritual resource, which could help ascertain a common national consciousness, needed to come across as unifying, regardless of one’s political or nationalistic point of view. A spiritual resource works if the conscious minds of the people of a nation allows the said resource to work as an identifier, which consequently leads to a common idea of what identifies a person culturally through a mass consensus. In a letter from September 1894 to Alice Milligan, an Ulster poet and nationalist, Yeats explains:

My experience of Ireland, during the last three years, has changed my views very greatly, & now I feel that the work of an Irish man of letters must not be so much to awaken or quicken or preserve the national idea among the mass of the people but to convert the educated classes to it. (Yeats qtd. in Brown 89)

As mentioned before, the general public seemed to be very malleable, thus making it easier for Yeats and other cultural nationalists to spiritually guide them. The educated classes on the other hand, were not as easily malleable. Understandably, people who were very opinionated, with regard to nationalism and politics, needed more convincing, but they would also work as valuable assets once convinced. Yeats must have realized that in order to succeed he needed to team up with influential characters from all parties.

Yeats' cultural nationalism was inevitable going to be both socially and politically charged. During Yeats' early years, socialism and imperialism battled the "Victorian liberal consensus of benignly inevitable social progress" (Brown 65). At the same time, the provincial Victorian world developed a cultural nationalism which focused on social and cultural distinctiveness as a revolt against the growing wave of the homogenous culture of modernity. Yeats played an active role in this debate, thus drawing him into a bigger political and social discussion. A homogenized culture is arguably the result of both industrialization and globalization. Seeing that Ireland was part of the British empire, a naturally homogenizing process must have taken place. Yet, it was the development of such a homogenization which cultural nationalists such as Yeats wanted to halt. Explained in a straightforward way, unionists would then be the ones identifying with the British Empire and a homogenous culture as such. Nationalists, which included Yeats, identified with Ireland and the distinctiveness of its culture. From this we see how a debate like this becomes both socially and politically charged. The work of cultural nationalists and political nationalists become micro-revolts which springs from social and political intent.⁴⁴

The cultural nationalist's claim that Ireland was culturally unique sprung from several distinctive indicators such as Ireland's geography. As mentioned, the culturally nationalistic attempt to create an Irish national identity solely based on the statement of being "not English" was not enough. Cultural nationalists had to dig deeper and unravel what this non-Englishness called Irish consisted of. One such group was the Irish protestant imagination, which had a strong foothold in the northern parts of Ireland. This group sought to hail an Irish identity by insisting on the value of Irish geography. The landscape of one's country is often something that is close to the heart, be it locally or nationally, which was the case for Yeats as well. Landscape and geography are something perpetual and everlasting and so it might have been more relatable for the Irish people. Geography and landscape would then be seen as a steppingstone for culturally nationalistic writers such as Yeats because of its mythical connotations within Ireland. Written on George Bernard Shaw's cottage in Dalkey are the words "The men of Ireland are mortal and temporal, but her hills are eternal" (Kiberd 107). These hills are important to mythology because of the beforementioned fact that they worked

⁴⁴ Yeats did not merely see it as a Celtic revolt against the authoritarianism which controlled factual information, but more so as a necessity to challenge the political and moral materialism. The main subject of Yeats' revolt was to be the peasant who, in this context, was seen as the living Celtic remnant of primitive pre-modern Ireland (Holdeman and Levitas 170).

as portals between the human world and the otherworld. What makes them eternal is the fact that they are inhabited by the ancient gods of Ireland and the fairy folk.

The relationship between geography and mythology was always pertinent for Yeats. Declan Kiberd claims that Yeats, who spent most of this childhood outside of Ireland, developed a “romantic” relationship with Ireland as a consequence of not living there. It might be argued that Yeats’ childhood memories from Sligo played a major part in his “romantic” relationship with Ireland as a whole. Similar to the Irish protestant imagination movement, Yeats also emphasized the importance of Ireland’s geography, but he introduced another area of importance, namely locality, hence aligning himself with the Gaelic bardic tradition also known as *dinnshenchas*. The *dinnshenchas* tradition stresses the importance of being acquainted with the lore of places, which was something that interested Yeats from a very early age (Kiberd 107-108).⁴⁵ To connect mythology and folklore to objects and places within Ireland is arguably something which brings energy and power to poetry. We see here that Yeats must have sought to make mythology and folklore tangible, and thus relatable, through reference points existing within his contemporary Ireland. This culturally nationalistic approach is something we find in a poem such as “the Lake Isle of Innisfree” which we will look further into at a later stage.

In order to give essence and firepower to the cultural nationalist movement a set of dichotomies were set out. These include dichotomies such as natural versus industrial, artistic versus practical, emotional versus intellectual, traditional versus modern. The most influential one being the dichotomy of masculine versus feminine, whereas England represents the masculine dominant power and Ireland becomes the feminine and dominated (Cairns, Richards 44-50; Kiberd 31-32). The act of aligning Ireland with the feminine might explain why Yeats and other Irish writers referred to Ireland as a woman. By using the feminizing of Ireland as a culturally nationalistic literary tool, Yeats might have intended to further influence the emotional side of his countrymen. Interestingly, we might argue that the “romantic” relationship Yeats had with his country might have been affected by his understanding of “her” (read: Ireland) as a woman.⁴⁶ Consequently, by asserting an emotional bond between country and countrymen, Yeats intended to make use of the dichotomy of feminine versus masculine because no one would like to see something or someone they

⁴⁵ Meaning the lore of places. In modern Irish the word translates to topography (*OCIL* 149).

⁴⁶ Yeats constantly referred to Ireland as a female, which was common at the time. Names used in literature to describe Ireland includes; poor old woman, Hag of Beare, the Shan von Vocht of revolutionary ballad, Kathleen the daughter of Houlihan or Róisín Dubh (Little black Rose, who occurs in a famous poem by Mangan) (Brown 80).

loved get hurt. Furthermore, it might be argued that all these dichotomies helped show the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Irish and ultimately gave reason to the claim of being non-English.

An important part of the said dichotomies was that they were both racially and mythologically loaded. Cultural nationalists, such as Yeats, argued that what separated the Irish from the English was a set of qualities which originated from the Irish mythological past. Qualities of which could only be found within the Irish race. These qualities include an eye for charm, spirituality and beauty, all of which were incorporated in the character of the Celtic genius who was represented in their ancient Irish legends. Yeats saw these qualities as racially defining and not compatible with the people of England. He expressed his opinion on the matter by saying:

I do not think it is a national prejudice that makes me believe we are a harder, a more masterful race than the comfortable English of our time and that this comes from an *essential nearness to reality* of those few scattered people who have a right to call themselves the Irish race. (Yeats qtd. in Shaw 267)

This statement might come across as rather aggressive depending on the reader. To an Englishman, a statement like this would surely be seen as offensive and even rebellious at the time. However, an Irishman fueled with nationalistic feelings might perceive this statement in a rather joyous way, but whether or not this was Yeats' intention is arguable. What Yeats probably indicates is that the Irish race has something characteristically distinctive, which is not found within the English. This distinctiveness relates to the said qualities which originates from the characteristics of the Celt and ultimately resides within the Irish literary tradition. Moreover, Yeats mentions that the Irish has a nearness to reality. Yeats detested the materialistically minded England which reflected a world outside of reality. According to Yeats, Reality existed amongst the Irish peasantry and their legends (Thunete 6). This puts Ireland in clear opposition to England, since England and its cultural life to a large extent did not emphasize origin stories. This connection to Irish legends and literature led Ireland to embrace the mythical and mystical, whereupon England became the secular, eventually leading to the idea of Irishness as something channeled through the scope of Irish mythology, their heroic past and the supernatural.

What makes Yeats such an influential cultural nationalist is arguably his ability to express his cultural nationalism through mythology and occultism. We find several examples of this in his many lectures and works produced during the 1880s and 1890s, whereupon Yeats sought to present himself as an enthusiastic Irish cultural nationalist. During this time period, Yeats was adamant to disclose his version of Irishness, which he made clear within the Southwark Irish Literary Club shortly after he started attending the club in 1888. During a lecture he held there on Irish fairies, William Patrick Ryan (1867-1942) describes Yeats in an ostentatiously Celtic mode:⁴⁷

He was tall, slight, and mystic of the mystical. His face was not so much dreamy as haunting: a little weird – so that really if one were to meet him on an Irish mountain in the moonlight he would assuredly hasten away to the nearest fireside with a story of a new and genial ghost which had crossed his path. He spoke in a hushed, musical, eerie tone: a tone which had constant suggestions of the faery world, of somebody ‘in em’ [that is, in the councils of the faeries], as we say in Ireland. (Ryan qtd. in Brown 63)

Ryan’s description of Yeats is interesting because it might give us an idea of how others perceived Yeats, which is interesting when compared to how Yeats wanted to be perceived. This description gives the impression of somebody who is deeply in touch with the mystical and the mythical. From this we might argue that Yeats was not only presenting his ideas and beliefs through his poetry, but also through his character. Yeats comes across as someone who is in direct contact with the mystical and mythological fairy folk, and through this contact he is able to receive information firsthand. To some mortals this direct contact might have been seen as affection of a poseur rather than a direct access to the land of fairy.

2.13 Yeats’ Involvement in the Irish Literary Revival

⁴⁷ William Patrick Ryan was an Irish journalist and poet who produced for the revival journal called *Irish Peasant*. Ryan wanted a secular Gaelic nation and supported the idea of decentralization. Furthermore, Ryan advocated for a modern Irish literature based on the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen (Hutchinson 139).

More importantly, what sprung from the cultural nationalist movement was the Irish Literary Revival.⁴⁸ As mentioned, the Irish Literary Revival lasted from 1890 to 1922 and Yeats must be considered one of the main, if not most, influential poet of the revival. What Yeats and his contemporary revivalists wanted to accomplish was to create an Irish ‘self’, which in the end would allude to a nation. By studying the Irish literary tradition and adapting it to a new Irish literary environment, Yeats wanted to create literature which ultimately would live and think for the Irish people (Kiberd 120). In the book *The Political Aesthetics of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound* by Michael North we find a fitting description of the revival as a whole:

This study of Gaelic antiquity proved more potent and more divisive than those who encouraged it could have foreseen. The popular imagination was caught by the picture of a glorious past, of an Ireland with a distinctive culture of its own, untouched by English influence; and the very vagueness of the outline left the imagination free to shape the picture as it would. From this cloudy but exciting concept of a golden and heroic age sprang the idea of a [Celtic] nationality. (North 33)

One of the main points in North’s description of the revival is the idea of an easily shaped nationality. Yeats and the other revivalists had the opportunity to pick and choose which parts of their mythological past they wanted to include in the “new” Irish national identity. Moreover, it is vital to understand that the “new” Irish nationality was to be a Celtic nationality. This does not mean that 19th century Ireland had to imitate the Celtic way of living, but rather that they needed embrace their Celtic heritage as opposed to English and other cosmopolitan influences.

John Hutchinson argues that the unification of Ireland by means of a synthesized Irish national literature was essential for the revival to succeed. The Ireland which Yeats was born into was a nation divided by provinces and their distinctive cultures, and the gap between people in the cities and the peasantry of the countryside might be the most

⁴⁸ The Irish Literary Revival is the most common name, but it is often referred to as the Irish Literary Renaissance or the the Celtic Twilight. Additionally, one might call it the Anglo-Irish Literary revival, but this name only refers to the revitalization and production of Irish literature written in English.

noticeable division. As a prominent revivalist, Yeats was one of the figures who tried to unify Ireland, and to do so Yeats argued for the abandonment of the language movement, a movement which saw the usage of the Irish language as way to separate the Irish self from the English. Yeats saw the creation of an Irish self as a necessity, but he was aware of the problem that the Irish language posed for a potentially unified Ireland. Language wise, Ireland was split between the Gaelic-speaking peasantry who were mostly Catholics and the English-speaking people living in the cities, of which many were protestants. Thus, Yeats set out to create a separate Anglo-Irish culture based on a model which merged the English language with Irish rhythms and idioms (Hutchinson 128).⁴⁹

In order to make literature a unifying constituent Yeats needed to make mythological material available to everyone. The lack of in-depth writings and research on Irish literature pushed Yeats to cling to a mere few books and reference points. One of these books, which can be argued to be one of the more eye-opening books for Yeats, was the *Grammatica Celtica* (1853), produced by Johann Kaspar Zeuss (1806-1856). Zeuss provided Yeats with information about how Irish and Welsh were part of a bigger Indo-European language tree, and that they in essence could be linked with both Latin and Greek. This gave more value to the ancient Irish manuscripts and provided more reason to have them translated, yet only a handful of them had been translated by the end of 1880. It was the angle of approach that was the issue for Yeats, as many ancient Irish manuscripts had been considered interesting simply because of their challenging semantics and not because of their imaginative style (literature). Additionally, ancient Irish literature was also studied as historical and archeological artifacts, rather than as literature whereas the story would be the part of interest (Thuente 20). It is safe to say that Yeats depended on the educated scholars to realize his ideas of an Irish Literary Revival. Even though Yeats got ahold of significant amounts of material without the help of translators, he still depended on translators to make such material available to other revivalist and subsequently the non-Gaelic-speaking people of Ireland.

In order to be successful, writers of the revival needed not only to distribute literature concerning Celtic myths and folklore but also to acknowledge and correspond with the development of their own national literature. Yeats was eagerly attempting to guide his contemporary national poets by studying Ireland's literary development. Yeats

⁴⁹ According to Pierce, Yeats worked with both the peasantry and the general public in the cities. It was through the stories collected from the peasantry that Yeats got to learn how to "write in the Irish way" (Pierce 41).

claimed to recognize what Irish literature was lacking and how to assess the developmental stage Irish literature was situated in. In order to explain the development of Irish literature, Yeats says one must understand the development of other well-known literary traditions such as the Greek and the English. Both Greek and English literature have been an important part of the cultural life of their respective countries for centuries, which was not the case in Ireland, thus making it impossible to compare the development of Irish literature to the likes of English and Greek literature. In order to produce completely Irish literature, Yeats would have argued that poets of the revival needed to disregard poetry from other great nations of literature, and subsequently look at the literature existing within Ireland.

The confusing state of the Irish literary scene could arguably hinder Ireland from achieving both cultural and national unity. If the Irish national literature, which should have served as the glue of the society, did not properly correlate with Ireland's past, a national unity and even more so a national identity, seemed farfetched. Of course, this was Yeats' understanding of the matter and he eagerly urged other revivalists to see that "it was by looking to the past that the poet served the present" (Cairns and Richards 69). Essentially, Yeats is claiming that the unity of the Irish people exists within their common cultural and historical heritage, which had been somewhat disregarded for years. Yeats claimed that Ireland possessed the material needed to develop a flourishing national literature, but it was of the utmost importance that each and every poet of the revival realized that Ireland was situated within the epic and ballad period. Yeats could not stress this enough because he saw how the Irish literature had gone astray and drifted into obscurities. To solve the problem, Yeats insists on the need to turn Irish literature back to its old simplicity. This would mainly take Irish literature to a state where ballads described grass to be green and the ocean to be blue, as Yeats says, and away from a state where the language is in such a complex state that the standard language will resemble what Alfred Tennyson (1817-1904) describes as "A roaring moon of daffodils" ("Nationality and Literature").

Yeats' motivation for his verse was to make it as simple as possible. He must have understood that the public needed literature which was easy to read, relatable and including. This is somewhat different from what Yeats' influencers attempted to do. Both Ferguson and O'Grady sought to bring ancient Irish history back to a respectable level as well as wanting to portray the Irish heroes and heroines in a manner similar to the lofty Homeric epics. Yeats agreed to the fact that both the history and its heroic subjects needed

to obtain a more respectable status, but he decided to omit the lofty style arguing that “the landscape of familiar nature substituted for the landscapes of art” (Thuente 23).

In his article “Yeats, Eliot, and the mythical method”, Denis Donoghue argues that Yeats set out what he considers “the mythical method”. This is a method which includes proving the perpetuating significance between past and present. According to Donoghue, myths act as guidelines on how a community should live, and it does so on the basis that these myths are produced and based on experiences, perspectives and events such as poverty, need, and hope, all of which are connected to certain events. As these are aspects that are forever present in a community, they are presented as something fundamentally incorporated in the cultural identity of the said community. Yeats sought to apply myths to alter the public’s feelings towards their Irish self, and in doing so, remind Ireland of its glorious past. It could be argued that this mythical method is closely related to Yeats’ understanding of the first developmental stage of a national literature, namely the epic and ballad period. By focusing on national events and the myths and stories covering these events, Yeats attempts to guide his people to the core of Irish nationality.

Cultural nationalism pushed Yeats to strongly oppose those who wanted to produce literature inspired by cosmopolitanism or what was cut from the same cloth as literature from England. As mentioned, England and Ireland were situated in two entirely different developmental stages with regard to their national literature. Even though Yeats respected parts of the English literary tradition he would still argue that English literature was at its swan song:

England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables [...] [and] no lack of subjects, for the literature of Ireland is still young, and on all sides of this road is Celtic tradition and Celtic passion crying for singers to give them voice. (Yeats qtd. in Thuente 6)

Yeats reminds his contemporaries of the important fact that the literature of Ireland is still young. England’s literature had lived and even though it was still very much alive, it had reached a point where literature came to allude a disconnection from the general populace. It is almost as if Yeats envisions working in a literary vacuum where the objective is to “create the Ireland in the heart for, in Ireland, as once in Egypt and Greece of antiquity, there were

writers who had as their main objective the creation of a soul for their people” (Cairns and Richards 70). Notably, Yeats also says that the Celtic tradition was crying for singers which hints at a fundamental difference between 19th century Irish and English poetry. Yeats stated that “Irish poetry and Irish stories were made to be spoken or sung, while English literature has all but completely shaped itself in the printing press” (Bell).⁵⁰ The act of singing poetry is something closely related to the bardic tradition and their ballads, which again is seen as a part of the first developmental stage of a national literature, namely the epic and ballad period.⁵¹

While insisting on producing poetry that was based entirely on Ireland, Yeats intended to connect to his people on a metaphysical level. The idea was that through mythology he could get in touch with their subconsciousness in order to re-establish a sense of unity through their feeling of Irishness (Yeats, “Poetry and Tradition” 3). This is what the great writers of Irish literary history such as Ferguson, De Vere, Allingham, Davis, Mangan and O’Grady had done.⁵² According to Yeats, all the beforementioned men had been writers within the epic and ballad period and their stories were those of the people and to the people (“Nationality and Literature”). However, Yeats was up against a popular poetic trend used by several of his contemporaries. This trend sought to influence the reader in a superficial way by encouraging them to embrace nationalism and national pride, but without connecting it to their past (“Nationality and Literature”). Hence, Yeats saw the weakness in simply appealing to the readers intellect without including their passions and imagination. In this sense the Irish culture and history becomes the foundation of which the Irish identity would be built. Without this cornerstone, the identity of the Irish people would go astray without any common denotation.

Yeats depended on a national commitment which could only be realized by means of influential cultural nationalists and revivalists. With regard to Yeats development as a cultural nationalist, we could argue that by the early 1890s he had gained prominence in the literary communities due to the publication of poems such as “To Ireland in the coming times” and “the Wanderings of Oisín” (Pierce 66). As a cultural nationalist, Yeats had provided the Irish people with the material he believed would elevate the national community. With that being

⁵⁰ English versions of ballad verses had been produced as broadside prints since the 18th century (Brown 68). However, Yeats had an ambivalent relationship to whatever came from the printing press as it could be made to seem too characteristically English (Bell).

⁵¹ Interestingly, Yeats opted to perform the poem “the Lake Isle of Innisfree” in a bardic manner which makes it sound very much like a song.

⁵² Aubrey De Vere (1814-1902) was a poet whose poetry focused on freedom, courage, religious awe and patriotism (*OCIL* 144).

said, he also stressed the importance of the reader. “I hold it the duty of every Irish reader to study those [legends] of his own country till they are familiar as his own hands, for in them is the Celtic heart.” (Yeats qtd. in Murphy 82).

3 Analysis of the Poems

“Literature becomes an act of mythic recovery”

(Hirsch “And I Myself Created Hanrahan” 882).

Hirsch’s quote perfectly explains how we should approach Yeats’ poetry. Accordingly, this thesis investigates how Yeats uses his poems as a platform which will ultimately hail a national community that identifies with its mythological and cultural heritage. Furthermore, this thesis focuses on the manner of which Yeats presents this mythology. With regard to this, three of Yeats early poems will be analyzed. The poems “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), “The lake Isle of Innisfree” (1890) and “The Wanderings of Oisín” (1889) have been chosen with regard to their symbolism, style and potential to showcase Yeats’ cultural nationalism. It will be argued that Yeats uses both mythological and occult symbols to hail a national identity.

The three poems have been chosen because they demonstrate distinctive qualities of Yeats’ early poetry. For the purpose of this analysis we will consider relating topics within the poems, but the poems will primarily be analyzed separately. Because the poems are different with regard to length and style, this thesis will omit certain parts.

The three poems are important because of their stature within the collection of Yeats early works. The publication of the poems “To Ireland in the Coming Times”, “The lake Isle of Innisfree” and “The Wanderings of Oisín” gave rise to titles such as “the Dreamy Celt” and “the Poet of National Liberty” (Pierce 66). This is arguably because the poems express the experiences, visions, imagination, emotions, and aspirations of the Irish people.

More importantly, these poems have been chosen because they illustrate Yeats’ cultural nationalism. Accordingly, Yeats speaks on behalf of the tradition which stretched from United Irishmen during the 1790s to the Young Ireland movement which started in the 1840s and had kept gaining ground up until the 1890s (Brown 52). Hence, we will discuss how these poems elevate the idea that “Ireland was appealing to the past to escape the confusions of the present” (Yeats qtd. in Brown 101).

3.1 To Ireland in the Coming Times (1892)

“To Ireland in the Coming Times” was first published under the title “Apologia Addressed to Ireland in the Coming Days” when it appeared in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892). The poem has a peculiar mood which draws the reader in and provides a feeling of urgency and importance. Furthermore, the poem contains heavy reference to past (mythology), present (cultural nationalism and revivalism) and future (national identity). For Yeats, the poem was to function as an explanation and inspiration to why and how literature should be important in Ireland’s chase for independence and a national identity. Because Yeats poses as the speaker in the poem, he catches the reader’s attention straight away by means of his direct approach.

3.1.1 Cultural nationalism and Identity

“To Ireland in the Coming Times” serves as a plea to the people of Ireland so that they might also see the unifying element that mythology could provide. Obviously, Yeats was passionate about the potential national identity mythology could help construct, and thus he understood his work as a culturally nationalistic poet to be decisive. The third stanza of the poem deals with Yeats understanding of mythology, identity and unification:

I cast my heart into my rhymes,

That you, in the dim coming times,

May know how my heart went with them

After the red-rose-bordered-hem. (“To Ireland in the Coming Times” 26)

The first word we need to look at from this part of the poem is word “cast” (26). To cast something means to throw it forcefully. This indicates that Yeats wanted to tell his readers that he was fully dedicated. More importantly, this dedication is further reinforced when we see the word “heart”(26). This adds another dimension to Yeats’ dedication because the heart signifies something that is dear to him. By using the word “heart” (26) he adds an emotional dimension to his poem. Not only is he dedicated, but he declares his emotional dedication.

The last word of the first line, which is “rhymes” (26), denotes all the poetry Yeats was producing, and thus, how he was emotionally dedicated to write for the Irish people.

The second line starts with a strong culturally nationalistic and poetic tool, namely the word “you” (26). By using the word “you” (26), Yeats is addressing the Irish people directly. Additionally, by adding a comma after the word “you” (26), Yeats encapsulates this part of the poem, which signifies importance. This is powerful because it indirectly makes the Irish reader a part of the poem, and arguably, the cause as a whole. Now that Yeats has made the reader a part of his poem, he can address his concerns. The word “dim” sets the tone for the situation that, both Yeats and the reader now, find themselves in. The situation which Yeats is referring to is the future or, as he writes, “coming times” (26). The word “dim” (26) indicates caution, uncertainty and importance. It might be argued that, Yeats means to address the importance of the situation, which ultimately refers to the loss of national identity.

In the third line Yeats repeats the word “heart” which further cements his emotional devotion to the cultural nationalism of the Irish Literary Revival. This time his heart, and thus his emotional dedication, is connected to “them”. In order to understand who Yeats refers to when he writes “them” (26) we must understand Yeats’ subject matter of mythology. Hence, we might argue that “them” (26) could refer to two things. Accordingly, we can read “them” as a direct reference to the fairies and characters of the otherworld or as an indirect reference to these fairies and otherworldly character by means of the traditions kept alive by the peasantry and country-folk. This indicates that Yeats wants to portray himself as a spokesperson for the world of Irish mythology and those who still advocates for it. The last line mentions the Rose, of which significance and meaning we have mentioned before, and this symbol will be analyzed separately at a later stage

3.1.2 Symbolism

For Yeats, symbols allowed Yeats to give words both occult and mythological meaning and thus create a vivid poetic language. There are symbols which appear more frequently throughout Yeats career. These symbols include the Rose, birds, trees, and the sea (Unterecker 36). Other symbols tend to appear in certain settings or simply within a collection of poems. According to Grene, Yeats was convinced that the symbols within his poetry had the ability to nourish the Irish people’s imagination on a profound level (199).

Color

Apart from the color red, “To Ireland in the Coming Times” only contains one other symbolic reference to color which might carry mythological meaning, namely white. According to Monaghan, the color white has an important meaning in Celtic mythology. In Celtic Mythology the color white often relates to the names of divinities and it is likely to be seen as a quality of light i.e. radiant or shining (471). Interestingly, we find the word “white” (26) mentioned in the third stanza of the poem and it is arguably closely connected to the preceding line. The lines read “No place for love and dream at all; / For God goes by with white footfall.” (“To Ireland in the Coming Times” 26). Upon reading the lines for the first time, one might understand their meaning as related to the religious conflict between paganism and Christianity. If it was to be read in such a way, “love” (26) and “dream” (26) would represent Celtic paganism, as they are seen as characteristics of the Celt or the Celtic, and the God mentioned in the following line would be the Christian God. However, we could argue that these lines carry a more symbolic and occult meaning related to mythology.

In order to understand the purport of this occult and mythological symbolism we must look at Yeats’ own relationship to the color white. Yeats says that the color carries “innumerable, meanings, which are held to ‘white’[...] by bonds of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before” (*The Symbolism of Poetry* 363). If we then look at the word “dream” from the first line, we might argue that it connects to Yeats’ explanation of how white moves beyond the thresholds of sleep. Furthermore, as Monaghan explains, Celtic mythology understood white as something divine and connected to light. From this we might argue that the two lines are loaded with cultural nationalism. This is because the “peace” and “dream” from the first line connects to the “white” (26) in the second line, and thus it symbolizes a sleeping radiant force, namely the Celtic literary traditions. The word “God” (26) could then be seen as the stories of all the Celtic heroes and legends, and despite their radiant and divine light, they pass through the minds of the Irish people without being heard or noticed.

The Rose

In “To Ireland in the Coming Times” we find the line “the red-rose-bordered-hem” which alludes to the Rose and ultimately Ireland. The line occurs three times, once within

each stanza. Regardless of when the poem is read, the Rose will always carry the characteristics of something that is out of our time, effectively belonging to the mystic past. Yeats believed that the Rose was the spirit of Ireland and what originally brought her to life (Greene 139). The Rose was one of Yeats' most repeated symbols, especially at the start of his career. Additionally, it is a powerful symbol which unites occultism and mythology. The mystic symbolism that the Rose provides the reader with a feeling of eternal mysticism connected to Ireland's past, present and future.

The Moon

It could be argued that the moon is closely connected to Irish mythology. In "To Ireland in the Coming Times" we find that the moon is mentioned once in the second stanza. Yeats writes "Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon, / A Druid land, a Druid tune!" ("To Ireland in the Coming Times 25). The moon alludes both Irish fairy lore and old Celtic traditions. According to Monaghan, the Celts in ancient Ireland used to gather at the crossroads where they would dance under the pearly moonlight (336). Adding to this, Yeats explained his feelings towards the moon by expressing that:

If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotions at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margins [...] but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken of our morality. (Yeats the Symbolism of Poetry 363)

Yeats is directly addressing the Celtic tradition and understanding of the moon because the man seen ploughing is a reference to the moon's agricultural meaning within Celtic Ireland. However, Yeats also writes that the moon and its connection to the Irish fairies. The understanding of the moon as something connected to the fairy world is an understanding Yeats shared with the Celts. Hence, we might argue that the lines "Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon, / A Druid land, a Druid tune!" ("To Ireland in the Coming Times 25) forwards Yeats cultural nationalism. This is because the important component in cultural nationalism is historical memory, and thus because the moon was an important part of Celtic culture, Yeats

would argue that this historical memory lives on in the Irish people by means of the moon's fairy connection.

The two words which tie this historical memory together are the "moon" and "tune". They are closely related, and one might argue that Yeats made a rhyme out of them because of their connection. According to Monaghan, fairy music was often heard at night, hence under the moon. The music often came from the many mounds where the fairies resided (176). The "tune" is then understood as the fairy music which was believed appear under the moon along with the fairy folk. This "tune" (25) is still playing within Ireland, and in a metaphorical way, Yeats is addressing the Irish public as a cultural nationalist, telling them to believe in and relate to this historical memory.

Time

Time in Yeats' poetry works in mysterious ways. Yeats creates an allegory of a Celtic mythology which preexists time. Time is something related to the mortal world and people live their lives according to time. Yeats creates a contrasting image of time and timelessness:

The love I lived, the dream I knew.

From our birthday, until we die,

Is but the winking of an eye;

And we, our singing and our love,

What measurer Time has lit above,. ("To Ireland in the Coming Times" 26)

The "dream" (26) is arguably a symbol of Celtic mythology because of the dreamy realm Yeats has created within his imagination. Time does not run in a normal tempo in a dream, if it even runs at all. According to Monaghan, time works differently in the otherworld as it is endless. An example of this is when Oisín goes with Niamh to the otherworld and in suddenly 300 years has passed in the mortal world. The most interesting element of this excerpt is that the word "Time" (26) is written with a capital T. This increases the significance of the word. Bell says that this is a theme which repeats itself in the poem. The capitalized T also appears in the line "When Time began to rant and rage" ("The Wanderings of Oisín" 25). Bell argues that the word time represents industrialism and modernity. With regard to this we could argue

that the “birthday” (26) and “die” (26) alludes to the detachment from nature, and thus a detachment from the *Anima Mundi*. As we have already discussed, one of the qualities of the Celt was natural or to be connected to nature. By means of time, Industrialism and modernity is disturbing the connection between Ireland’s population and their connection to the Irish soul.

3.1.3 Cultural Nationalism and the Bardic Tradition - Ballads

Yeats understood the importance of connecting his poetry to the traditional Irish ballad tradition. As we have already discussed earlier, the 19th century revival poetry, of both Yeats and other cultural nationalists, should be seen as a continuation of the Irish ballad tradition. It could be argued that this continuation of the ballad tradition was very important to Yeats because it linked Irish 19th century poetry directly to the Irish mythological past. Moreover, it was even more important that the Irish people saw this connection.

“To Ireland in the Coming Times” is arguably an example of how the connection between Ireland’s past and present literature is used as a poetic tool in a culturally nationalistic manner. In furtherance of this claim, we should explore the meanings behind the first four lines of the first stanza:

Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song;. (“To Ireland in the Coming Times” 25)

Yeats starts of his poem with the introductory word “know” followed by a comma. This is a powerful poetic tool because it partially encapsulates the word “know” (25) which increases its importance. With this word, Yeats is talking directly to the Irish reader. He stresses the importance that they know and understand what he is about to convey. What he wants the reader to know is that he should be “accounted” (25), in other words belonging or a member of something. The words “true brother” (25) gives power to his claimed membership. “A true brother of a company” (25) indicates that Yeats was more than a mere supporter of the said company. He wishes to align himself with the other forebearers of this company.

Accordingly, we must understand who Yeats is referring to when he writes “company”. In my opinion, this “company” (25) could refer to the revivalists and cultural nationalists of the mid-19th century or the warrior poets of the Fianna. Regardless, by aligning himself with either of these groups, Yeats would put himself in direct or indirect alignment with the ancient Irish literary tradition.

Because the first two lines are enjambed, they allow the third line to give significant meaning to the preceding verse. The first word we must look at is the word “sang” (25). Traditionally, Irish bards performed their ballads by means of prosodic speech which resembles singing. Hence, solidifying the connection to the bardic company. Performatively, the singing is done to ease a situation. The word “sweeten” (25) is used in an aesthetic way to enhance the dichotomy of bitter versus sweet, and thus the word sweet will connote positive impact. Nicholas Grene argues that the dichotomy of bitter versus sweet is closely connected to Yeats’ love for his cultural context and the resentment of his political context. Grene says that to “sweeten” the situation or make up for what has been done “wrong” is related to the political situation of Yeats’ “blind bitter land” (195). With that being said, it could be argued that the word “wrong” (25) reflects the political turbulence leading up to 1892 when Yeats wrote this poem. After the failure of the Home Rule Act and the death of Parnell, Ireland could no longer depend on politicians to improve Ireland’s situation. It is in this instance that cultural nationalists step in to “sweeten” (25) or improve the said situation.

The last line becomes indicative of the means used by cultural nationalists to “sweeten Ireland’s wrong” (25). Once again Yeats is affirming the continuation of an Irish literary tradition. Ballad, story, rann, and song are all vital pieces of the traditional Irish bardic tradition, hence making them considerably more effective for an Irish cultural nationalist when adapted to Irish 19th century poetry.⁵³

3.1.4 England Versus Ireland Cultural Nationalism

In “To Ireland in the Coming Times” Yeats addresses Ireland’s problematic relationship with England in a subtle way. We have talked about the focus of de-Anglicizing Ireland and how this was used as a literary focus for Irish cultural nationalists. Even though the literary revival was founded on the ideas of an Ireland separated from England, both culturally and politically, it was not Yeats primary focus. Still, Yeats manages to tie the

⁵³ Rann: A stanza of Irish poetry.

relationship between Ireland and England to Ireland's mythological past. In the first stanza of "To Ireland in the Coming Times" we find one example of this:

Because the red-rose-bordered hem

Of her, whose history began

Before God made the angelic clan,

Trails all about the written page. (Yeats "To Ireland in the Coming Times" 25)

"The red-rose-bordered-hem" is a symbol Yeats used extensively with regard to Ireland and it alludes to a mystical femininity. Hence, by referring to Ireland as "her" (25) in the next line, we see that the poem gives Ireland the qualities of a living entity. This is important because Yeats understood Ireland's mythological tradition to be something solely connected to Ireland and her spirit. Once Ireland is given human qualities, her past becomes more than just the topic of academic research. It might be argued that Yeats employs what Denis Donoghue calls the "the mythical method" (n.p), and thus by connecting to Ireland as a nation, the Irish people would also connect to all the events, experiences and feelings of the Celtic past. Accordingly, the word "her" creates a mood which arguably tries to interconnect both Ireland and her people.

The reference to England appears through the usage of the word "God" (25). The word "God" (25) is arguably a direct reference to Christianity, but it is not necessarily a direct reference to England but rather a comparison between England and Christianity, which are both understood as intruding forces. Furthermore, Yeats maintained a problematic relationship with both England and Christianity throughout his life, therefore we might argue that the significance of God creating an angelic clan represents Yeats' resentment towards how England and Christianity ultimately affected Ireland's cultural relationship with their mythological past. It seems as if Yeats wishes to remind his reader that Ireland's history, which is founded in its mythological past, pre-exists that of Christian and English influences.

By using the word "trails" (25) in the last line, we see how Yeats once again reminds the reader of a vivid Celtic past. The word "trails" (25) signifies proof of something. Accordingly, this proof is presented to the reader by means of "the written page" (25). The word "written" (25) is the past tense of the word write and thus it stands for something which happened in the past. In my opinion, "the written page" (25) signifies the Irish literary

tradition darting back to the time of the bards, and it is within this literary tradition that we find the proof of Ireland's mythological past.

3.1.5 The National Poet

With "To Ireland in the Coming Times" Yeats wanted to manifest his eagerness to become Ireland's national bard or *magus*. By looking at the title, it appears that Yeats has already stepped into this role. He is addressing Ireland or the Irish people with a message of intent. Yeats claims his position by means of these lines:

Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
Because, to him who ponders well,
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell. ("To Ireland in the Coming Times" 25)

With the word "less" (25) Yeats claims that his poetry was of no less importance or quality than the respected cultural nationalists Davis, Mangan and Ferguson. As we have already discussed, these poets belong to a wave of cultural nationalism which preceded Yeats' revival. Accordingly, they were already considered prominent literary figures in Ireland. To understand Yeats' claim, we must consider Yeats' devotion to cultural nationalism. He had studied all these Irish national poets intensively and in 1889 he announced that "[I have] worked my way through most, if not all, recorded Irish folk tales" (Bell). Yeats addresses his Irish readers in an indirect fashion with the word "him" (25). Yeats circumvents the direct approach and instead he convincingly induces his readers. The word "ponders" (25) is seemingly very persuasive and makes it hard to disagree. We could argue that Yeats chose his words carefully, because in the next line he makes a bold claim. The word "rhymes" (25) is clearly an allegory of Yeats' aesthetic qualities as a poet, and thus he claims that his poetry is better than the poetry of Davis, Mangan and Ferguson. If we look at the word "tell" (25) we could argue that Yeats claims that his poetry is more profound. This is likely due to Yeats' dualism in subject matter. What separates Yeats' poetry from Davis, Mangan and Ferguson's is the mystic undertone effectuated by occultism.

3.1.6 Occultism

In “The Celtic Twilight: Part II – The Celtic element in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats”, Francis Shaw credits two main figures for having the most influence on Yeats early poetry. Standish O’Grady was the most important with regard to Yeats’ themes and Madam Blavatsky provided Yeats with inspiration. Consequently, this meant that Yeats was reading both Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* and O’Grady’s *History of Ireland* (268).⁵⁴ This gave rise to Yeats’ urge to achieve a spiritual connection with the people of Ireland by means of a common hereditary connection. The occult dimension conjoined with that of folk and mythology opens of a whole new dimension of his poetry. This combination is what Yeats’ poetry of the 1890s, including “To Ireland in the Coming Times”, adhere to. One foot in the spiritual realm of occultism and the other foot firmly placed within the culturally nationalistic themes of folklore and mythology.

The Spiritual Connection

It is through the *Anima Mundi* that Yeats wishes to realize the mythological realm of his imagination. In “To Ireland in the Coming Times” Yeats’ indicates that he wants to make this realm spiritually available solely for the Irish people. Campbell says that because art in itself functions as transcendental the culture of Ireland is transcending though the artforms, such as literature (10). Regarding Campbell’s view of literature as transcendental, we could argue that this poem exemplifies this by linking Ireland’s past to its present and future. Because art transcends reality it has the ability to awaken the supernatural. Yeats started introducing supernatural figures in order to connect to the images and mythical symbols found in the repository of the *Anima Mundi*. In “To Ireland in the Coming Times” Yeats connects Celtic mythology to the *Anima Mundi* in the second stanza:

My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of things discovered in the deep,
Where only body's laid asleep.

⁵⁴ Yeats considered Standish O’Grady’s *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period* one of the books laying the foundation for the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats reposed trust in the edification of his country through by means of their intrinsic legendary tradition (Pietrzak 9).

For the elemental creatures go

About my table to and fro,. (“To Ireland in the Coming Times” 25)

With regard to Campbell’s claim that culture is transcending by means literature, we could argue that the word “deep” (25) is Yeats’ hailing of the *Anima Mundi* and the Celtic mythological memory situated within its repository. Accordingly, this mythological memory transcends by means of Yeats’ “rhyming” (25). We could argue that the elemental creatures walking about on Yeats’ table is an allegory of the spiritual connection to the Celtic cultural heritage, which is realized by means of a connection to the world soul. The word “elemental” (25) enhances the antiquity of the mythological heritage and alludes to something timeless. In essence it could be argued that Yeats’ poetry changes “the quotidian social world [...] into a higher invisible or supernatural realm” (Hirsch “A War Between the Orders: Yeats’s Fiction and the Transcendental moment” 56).

3.2 The Lake Isle of Innisfree (1890)

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” was written in London when Yeats was walking down Fleet Street, however this is debated as other sources mention The Strand. It is whilst walking that Yeats hears “a little tinkle of water” (Jeffares *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 33) something in his imagination that makes him think of a lake isle, namely the Isle of Innisfree located close to the southern shore of Lough Gill in the western parts of Ireland in the county of Sligo.⁵⁵ The poem was initially written in 1888 but it was officially published in the *National Observer* on the 13th of December 1890 (Jeffares *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 33). When the poem first arrived, it must have struck English speaking readers as something purely Celtic even if they did not know the meaning of the initial “Innis”. Presumably, just from the title, English speaking readers must have been drawn into a distant world faraway from urban life. Furthermore, we might assume that the word “free”, which is an English word, could have made English speaking readers think the poem was a direct punch in the direction of national liberation. Although several scholars such as Raymond Cowell claims that Yeats got his inspiration for the poem from Henry David Thoreau’s (1817-1862) poem *Walden* (1854) it is still highly debated (Cowell 20). One could argue that the poem is written in a Thoreauesque spirit, yet, apart from that the two poems does not have much in common, seeing that Thoreau actually built his cabin close to the pond somewhere outside Boston (Felstiner 105).

3.2.1 Cultural Nationalism and Geography

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” builds up a strong connection between pagan Ireland and contemporary Ireland by means of geography. The poem takes the reader to a remote Island called Innisfree, which is only mentioned once within the poem, apart from within the title. The name “Innisfree”, placed within the first line of the poem, works as a hook which catches the attention of the reader. This is because it is a direct reference to a geographical location within Ireland, and thus the Irish reader is instantly given a relatable and tangible point of reference. It could be argued that Kiberd’s description of the “romantic” relationship Yeats has with Innisfree creates a peaceful but yet mystical mood within the poem. The poems would have made the Irish reader wonder what was so special about this quiet and mystical

⁵⁵ Innisfree is pronounced “innishfree” and is also, however rarely, known as Inis Fraoigh or Inis Fraoch, meaning “Island of Heather or Heather Island” (Larrissy 179; Felstiner 104-105).

isle. According to this, we could argue that the name “Innisfree” touches upon several topics including cultural nationalism, emotions of the Irish people, Celtic mysticism, and geographical importance. This makes Yeats’ poem very powerful because he manages to create a perfect bond between the bard’s traditional and poetic focus on nature and the emotional attachment provided through cultural nationalism.

The mythological story connected to the Innisfree might explain the poem’s mystical mood. According to Irish folklore and legend, the island was guarded by a monster (some sources say a dragon) and upon the island there was a tree bearing fruits of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*.⁵⁶ A young girl, who was the daughter of a local chieftain, once urged her lover, a warrior whose name was Free, to kill off the monster so she could take the fruit, and the boy did so but he also decided to taste the fruit because he was wounded, and so as he reached the mainland, where the young girl stood waiting, he fell over and died because of the power placed in the fruit by the gods. The girl could not bear be without her lover and she also ate the fruit. According to the local tale, they were both buried on the island (Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 34; Grene 84).⁵⁷ This indicates that the isle is directly connected to the fairies, which might explain both Yeats’ attraction to the location and the mystical mood of the poem. It is very plausible that Yeats’ mother told her son the tales of Innisfree, which would have intrigued a young Yeats.

More importantly, what the poem does do is that it expresses Yeats’ cultural nationalism, his homesickness and his emotions. The poem takes the reader on a journey where Yeats’ romantic longing for this mythic place is foregrounded while Yeats simultaneously showcases his knowledge of Innisfree’s *dinnshenchas*. Yeats did have a nostalgic attachment to the island because of its location within county Sligo, yet what initially drew him to the island is still unknown as he himself said “I do not remember whether I chose the island because of its beauty or for the story’s sake” (Jeffares *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 34). Innisfree is a direct expression of Yeats’ cultural nationalism because it is a point of supply for Irish nation’s imagination, which subsequently provides both energy and unity. A location like Innisfree fuels Yeats’ of home and nation. By using Innisfree in his poem, Yeats puts his emotions into his poem and so the Island becomes a sign of his

⁵⁶ Tuatha Dé Danann is described in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Book of Invasion) as deities who came to Ireland and defeated the people of Fir Bolg (*OCIL* 304, 386).

⁵⁷ The island of Innisfree is also mentioned in the last entry of the *Annals of the Four Masters*. In this book Farrel Mac Tagadain is slain on the island of Innisfree by the treacherous Conor Mac Tiernan (Grene 84). The *Annals of the Four Masters* (*Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* or *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*) is a compilation of annals written by Míchéal Ó Cléirigh (?1590-1643) and it covers events in Ireland from the beginning of time up until 1616 (*OCIL* 17).

homesickness and his need for a homecoming. This is because, Innisfree as a physical place and the poem represents a homecoming in three separate ways. Innisfree was a way to represent his beloved Sligo, which for Yeats meant the Irish heartland but also his mother family (Pollexfen). Furthermore, by using Innisfree, Yeats hailed the Irish nation through locality and belonging, and lastly, the poem represented a personal homecoming, which Yeats so desperately was longing for.⁵⁸

3.2.2 Ireland versus England

We could argue that “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” symbolizes both a personal escape and a national escape from England. In the second stanza of the poem there are two lines which arguably symbolizes this escape. “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, / Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings” (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” 20). The word “peace” is mentioned twice within these lines. The word “peace” indicates that Yeats wants peace from something, which in my opinion represents a peace from England. England and its modern industrialized society was interfering with the life and culture of people in Ireland, and thus it could be argued that Yeats wishes to escape from these interferences and live separately, closer to nature, and thus closer to his cultural roots. To understand this escape we must have a look at the word “veils”. A veil is something that covers and could possibly hide something. According to Monaghan, Celtic Druids had the ability of shapeshifting which enabled them to turn into a veil or a mist in order to evade their enemies (Monaghan 139). This is interesting because the druid’s veil becomes the protector of the lake isle, or even Ireland. We could argue that Yeats wanted Ireland’s culture based on mythology to be their escape from England. This makes the veil a metaphor which indicates a peace and escape, and ultimately a unique identity, which the Irish people would only find behind the veils of Irish mythology.

The word “morning” ultimately ties the escape and the veils together. A morning is the start of a new day and or a new dawn. This indicates a new start which will occur once Ireland has escaped and found their peace behind the veil of their new Celtic identity. However, as the word “slow” indicates, this is not something that will happen overnight, and in this sense the word morning becomes an indication of a new start over a period of time. The word

⁵⁸ The celebration of Irish places is found in a number of Yeats’ early poems. Places such as Coole, Sligo, Innisfree, Glencar, and Knocknarea (found in “the Wanderings of Oisín). These places commonly have a peculiar relationship to the “spirit of the nation” (Allison 62).

“dropping” means something that is falling, and when it is falling from the humid veils of the morning, we must read them as a visual sound which replicates dripping drops. Interestingly, veil, mist and fog are often seen close to water and on islands because of the humidity surrounding them. In my opinion we must see the lake isle of Innisfree as an image of Ireland as an island. The humid weather surrounding the small lake isle can be related to the humid weather found all along the coast of Ireland. This provides more evidence to the claim that the veils of mythology would slowly cover the humid Ireland and ultimately separate the Irish identity from other cosmopolitan influences.

3.2.3 Symbolism

If we read the lake isle of Innisfree as symbol of Ireland, we might begin to understand Yeats’ symbolism and reference to mythology. The inclusion of islands in Yeats poetry is strikingly often in correlation to the otherworld. Islands stand as units detached from the mainland and so one could say that they represent what is outside the real world, and if Yeats wanted to create a unique national identity by means of Celtic mythology and cultural nationalism, Ireland as an island, understood in a mythological way, would represent this separation from the outside world. Yeats perception of islands is, as is seen in the poem, connected to his understanding of them as a place to seek refuge, thus giving islands more of an otherworldly atmosphere. This is because the otherworld is a place where one can achieve the absolute form of retreat. The ones chosen to go there are able to fly there before being struck by change, sickness or death (Stock 40). Out of the three, retreat from change probably sticks out the most in “the Lake Isle of Innisfree” because, as we have discussed, Yeats wanted a personal and national escape from the modern and industrialized world.

Light

If we have a look at the line “There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,” (20), we might understand the otherworldly and mythological aspects of the poem. The first two words we need to discuss are “glimmer” and “glow”. These two words are connected because they are both qualities of light. Strange lights of differing colors are an essential aesthetical part of Yeats’ poetry. In *Autobiographies* Yeats says that as a young boy he was fascinated by light, and once he had seen a glimmer of light going over the hill, however “in five minutes it reached the summit, and I [Yeats], who had often climbed the

mountain, knew that no human footstep was so speedy” (96). This is interesting because according to Monaghan, lights are seen as a folkloric motif and appeared whenever the fairies were moving from one otherworldly dancehall to the next. The fairies moved through the mortal world but managed to go unseen and mortals could only spot their lights for a short amount of time (174). Yeats’ gives us reason to believe that the words “glimmer” and “glow” are symbolic references to the fairy people of the otherworld.

Water

Yeats uses water in any shape or form as an aesthetic weapon, and the word “purple” (20) is arguably a reference to water. While the midnight makes the water on the horizon “glimmer” (20), the noon gives the water on the horizon a “purple glow” (20). In Celtic mythology, water is seen as something which divides the otherworld from the mortal world (Monaghan 469). Therefore, we could read this symbolism as Yeats’ depiction of Ireland’s correlation with the otherworld. This is because Innisfree, if read as a reference to Ireland, is located within Ireland, and it is a physical place reachable by mortals. Yeats explicitly says that “the water of the seas and of lakes and of mist and rain, has all but made the Irish after its image” (Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight* 135). Yeats argument is then that the Irish have been shaped by their surroundings, which includes both mythological and natural aspects of water, which underlines the intent behind “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” which is to tap into the imagination of the Irish people in order to make Ireland “beautiful in the memory” (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 126).

Contrast as a poetic device

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” allows the reader to enter Yeats’ imagination, and thus experience his thoughts and feelings. We get to experience this poetic intimacy in the last quatrain where Yeats writes:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” 20)

Instantly we notice a change in the mood from the quatrain which appears before this one. While the previous quatrain creates a dreamy and mythic mood because of words such as “veils”, “glimmer” and “glow” (20), this quatrain makes the reader feel a sense of urgency and dire emotions. It is from poems such as “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” that Yeats earned himself the nickname “the Dreamy Celt”. In the first line we see that Yeats repeats the first line of the poem “I will arise and go now” (20). It seems as if Yeats is pulling both himself and the reader out of a daydream, of which he was the narrator. We are drawn out of Innisfree (Ireland) and suddenly find ourselves back in London, where Yeats was living when he wrote the poem. This contrast between the two stanzas is symbolized in the contrasting words “night” (20) and “day” (20). With these two words, Yeats is reminding the Irish reader of the different emotional moods found within the two contrasting cultures. The word “always” (20) is also a symbol of Yeats’ constant daydreaming. As we have already discussed, Yeats was constantly thinking of Ireland and Sligo whilst living in London, and the two places were, as Brown describes it, incomparable according to Yeats (55).

In the second line of the excerpt, the words “low” and “sounds” (20) creates a feeling of something distant or fading. It is the sound of “water” (20) that is fading. Jeffares explains that Yeats heard “a little tinkle of water” (*A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* 33) which made him dream of Innisfree and the dreamy within Ireland. The “lapping” (20) water further enhances the notion of something fading in the distance. In my opinion, this is Yeats way of telling the reader that his mind and soul is in Ireland, but his body is physically still in London. In a way, this signifies the cultural nationalism of Yeats because he reassures the Irish reader that he is still fully devoted to Ireland and the creation of a unity through national identity. This reassurance is also given in the poem “To Ireland in the Coming Times”.

The contrast between the Celtic identity and the modernized English identity becomes evident through the words “roadway” and “pavements”. These words are arguably symbolizing of the industrialized and materialistic English society which Yeats resented. This is heavily contrasted by the natural elements, such as birds, water, bees, and agriculture, which Yeats uses to describe Innisfree. Yeats uses the word “grey” (20) to describe his surroundings in London. This gives the quatrain a tone which alludes to something emotionless, dirty or lifeless.

Yeats manages to erase all borders between reality and imagination by means of poetic aesthetics. The words “I hear” (20) are repeated in the last line of the poem. What Yeats hears

is the low sound of lapping water against the shore. This is a very dreamy and soothing image which is clearly contrasted by the “grey” (20) environment Yeats describes next. The line “I hear it in the deep heart’s core” (20) is a continuation of Yeats’ description of his daydream. The important word here is “heart’s”. Yeats hears this tinkle of water which instantly makes him dream of a place far away. This creates an image of instant bliss which touches something “deep” (20) inside Yeats’ heart. Yeats keeps the image of this mystical place at the “core” (20) of his heart. Because this image of Innisfree and ultimately Ireland is so dear to Yeats, he seems to wander off into his imagined world whenever he senses anything that could remind him of this world. In my opinion, it is this deep connection that Yeats wanted to realize for the Irish people. The image Yeats creates is not only a personal dream, but an awakening of something “in the deep heart’s core” of the Irish people. It is arguably a culturally nationalistic awakening that would ultimately allude to a common national consciousness.

Birds

Yeats’ symbolism regarding birds is essential for us to understand Innisfree as a symbol of the Ireland and the otherworld. As we have already discussed, Yeats did, quite frequently, involve birds in his poetry, and in this poem birds or characteristics of a bird are mentioned twice. To understand the meaning behind the Yeats’ symbolic birds, we need to discuss the lines “Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings; // And evening full of the linnet’s wings.” (20). Birds held an important role in Celtic Ireland and a flock of birds in flight were understood to be a sign of a specific system of divination. Moreover, singing birds were said to surround certain goddesses and their song had a healing effect on the sick and ill (46). If we take a closer look at the latter line, we might read it as if the birds are in flight. In my opinion, Yeats is signifying that there is a flock of birds because of the word “full” (20). Yeats wants the reader to imagine a mystic evening where birds are seen covering the sky. We could argue that this flock of birds is a direct reference to Celtic mythology because of the symbolism between Innisfree and Ireland, which we have already discussed.

The word “sing” (20) is arguably used in a culturally nationalistic way to symbolize Yeats’ vision of a common Irish nationality. To explain this claim, we have to look at the word “where” (20). The word “where” (20) is rather ambiguous because it does not actually tell the reader where the cricket sings, however if we connect it to the previous discussion of

the word “veil” (20) as a symbol of a mythological Ireland and the word “morning” as a symbol of a new beginning, we could argue that the cricket is actually singing in Ireland, but the singing done by the cricket is not a mere tune during the morning hours. In my opinion, the bird singing is a symbol of the healing effect of birdsong which stems from Celtic mythology. In this regard, the “morning” (20), which symbolizes the new beginning or completion of a common Irish consciousness, would only come once the cricket sings, which ultimately symbolizes the healing of Ireland. Ireland’s illness is more of a contamination of the Irish cultural identity.

3.3 The Wanderings of Oisín (1889)

“The Wanderings of Oisín” first appeared in the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisín and other poems* (1889). Yeats was not earning a whole lot of money from his poetry and decided to study new subjects to further enhance his writing. These included both Celtic legends and the topic of occultism (Stock 17). The most recognized source of Yeats’ poem “The Wanderings of Oisín” is Brian O’Looney’s translated version of Micheal Comyn’s “The Lay of Oisín in the Land of Youth” (1750), which Yeats found in the fourth volume of the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* (Gomes 378). Yeats’ version of the story is quite different from Comyn’s because Yeats allows himself to carefully deconstruct the story in order to rebuild it in accordance to his own imagination.

Interestingly, it was not long after getting acquainted with O’Leary that Yeats started producing “The Wandering of Oisín”. The poem has later been recognized as Yeats’ first Irish poem with regard to theme. Murphy argues that “The Wanderings of Oisín”, under the influence of O’Leary, can be read as a cultural initiative that served as an opposition to whatever came from England (Murphy 80). In my opinion, this is a rather interesting claim which we will discuss later.

“The Wanderings of Oisín” was written at a time when Yeats was exploring several poetic topics. As we have already discussed, Yeats did not speak Gaelic, and therefore had to rely on translations of Irish poetry and Celtic Legends, which had started surfacing during the 19th century. Many of these translations had been produced by the Ossianic Society and were easily accessible to Yeats through the British Museum. Additionally, Yeats was exploring oral tales collected from the Irish peasantry (Stock 17).

Boyd claims that Yeats tried to encapsulate the psychological and mythical core of the Celtic legends by means of a narrative filled with dense and vivid imagery and sensuous sounds (128). By doing so, Yeats calls upon the reader’s senses to evoke the imaginary presence of the otherworld. Yeats did something that no one had done before and according to Boyd, this opened a whole new poetic world to the Irish, which in the long run would create a whole new Irish national literature. Moreover, in the ten years that followed the 1889 publication, a new category of literature, which came to be known as Celtic literature, surfaced, and its writers were those of the “Celtic school” (Boyd 128, 188). Considering this, there might be a reason why Yeats, looking back at it at the end of his literary career, considered the poem to contain the epitome of his work (Unterecker 47).

3.3.1 Force and Power

“The Wanderings of Oisín” is prolonging the tradition of the bardic tradition. Oisín is traditionally seen as a powerful character as he was both bard and a warrior hero, and thus Oisín becomes a suitable representative of both aesthetic art and culturally nationalistic power. However, Marcus says that Oisín presents himself as weak in the poem, as opposed to powerful (42):

OISIN. Ah me! to be shaken with coughing and broken with old age and pain,
Without laughter, a show unto children, alone with remembrance and fear;
All emptied of purple hours as a beggar's cloak in the rain,
As a hay-cock out on the flood, or a wolf sucked under a weir. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 63)

Marcus is right about the fact that Oisín presents himself as weak in this excerpt, but from this the question of why he is weak arises. It could be argued that Oisín is one of many symbols of an Irish mythology which had fallen out of grace. As an advocate for cultural nationalism, Yeats strove to revitalize the defining component of the Irish identity, which he believed to be Irish myths. With regard to the excerpt we could argue that Oisín embodies the idea of a long-lost tradition. By using words such as shaken, coughing, broken, old, and pain, Yeats conveys a feeling of weakness and decay. If we take a look at the words “A show unto children” (63), we could argue that Yeats is addressing an issue he had with his contemporaries and their relationship with the Irish myths. This “show” (63) could be a direct criticism of how people perceived Irish myths as something made for children. As we have already discussed, this was a common perception in Ireland during the 19th century. With symbolism such as this, Yeats manages to merge the qualities of the old bardic tradition with the power and force of the new bardic tradition. Yeats shows how he is able to combine color and natural elements, such as “purple” (63) and “the wandering moon” (3), with powerful symbolism, which give rise to an aesthetically pleasing poem foregrounded by cultural nationalism.

Even though Oisín is weak, he is not defeated. If Oisín is seen as the allegory of a weak Irish mythological tradition, we must discuss what has made him weak. There are several instances of which Oisín mentions the battling of a demon or demons within the

poem. One such instance is when Oisín attempts to rescue the enchained maiden from a demon. The line “And she with a wave-rusted chain was tied” (34) is filled with symbolism connected to both England and Ireland. The “chain” (34) could be read as the way England and English cultural influence were suppressing the tradition of Irish mythology. In this regard, the maiden becomes a symbol of Ireland because of Yeats tendency to feminize Ireland. The interesting word in this line is “wave-rusted” (34). Because Irish mythology was connected to the ocean or what lay within the ocean, we could argue that this chain had suppressed the Irish mythology to the point where it had grown rusty. When something is left untreated over a long period of time it tends to get rusty, which is what had happened with the Irish mythological tradition. If the demon is keeping Ireland enchained, we could argue that the demon is a symbol of England, and Oisín decides to face the demon:

‘This demon shall be battered till he die,
And his loose bulk be thrown in the loud tide.’
‘Flee from him,’ pearl-pale Niamh weeping cried,
‘For all men flee the demons’. (“The wanderings of Oisín” 35-36)

Oisín decides to face the demon and considering Niamh’s concerns it looks like an uneven match. The word “flee” (35) could be Yeats’ way of criticizing the those who did not stand up and opposed the English cultural influence. Still, Oisín utters that the demon shall be “battered” (35). In my opinion, this is a symbol of powerful cultural nationalism. Yeats wishes to get rid of the polluting English influence, and thus his poetry provided a platform for his resistance. Furthermore, the words “loose” (35) and “bulk” (35) are symbols of this part of England situated within Ireland. Yeats did not wish to attack England, instead he intended to fight England’s influence on Ireland. Interestingly, Oisín says the loose bulk will be thrown in the loud “tide” (35). If the tide is understood as the ocean rising, we could argue that this loud tide is a symbol of Irish mythology, and thus we might interpret it as English culture being washed away by a powerful and revitalized Irish mythological tradition.

Oisín’s weak demeanor could just be a single symbol within Yeats’ imagined poetic landscape. Even though Oisín is described as weak several times within the poem, there are signs of him resisting still putting up a fight. The dialogue between Oisín and Saint Patrick is

an example of how Oisín is resisting to stay weak. In book III, Saint Patrick urges Oisín to repent and to become baptized, but Oisín refuses:

OISIN. Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians, O cleric, to chaunt
The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise, making clouds with their Breath,
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath them shall pant,
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled beneath them in death.
And demons afraid in their darkness; deep horror of eyes and of wings,. (“The
wanderings of Oisín” 61-62)

If Saint Patrick is the symbol of England who wants to take away the Oisín’s, who is the symbol of Ireland, pagan relation, we could argue that this is a symbol of the resistance of cultural nationalists. The Fenians were known to be warrior bards, and thus we get a clear connection to the 19th century bards. If Oisín, and thus Ireland, does not give in to the foreign influence, the bards will “chaunt” (61) the war-songs. To chaunt or chant is often done in a rhythmic manner and performed by larger groups. With that being said, we would argue that Yeats is hailing the 19th century Irish bards and subsequently that success depended on unification. These war-songs which “roused” (61) them of “old” (61) are symbols of the old bardic tradition and their ballads being revitalized through the culturally nationalistic revivalists of 19th century Ireland. Through Oisín, Yeats makes a clear statement. “They” (61) are arguably a reference to the Irish Literary Revival, and with a direct and authoritative tone Oisín proclaims that they will rise.

Interestingly, the words “clouds” (61) and “Breath” (61) plays with the readers imagination. With these two words, Yeats justifies his poetic personae of the Dreamy Celt. Clouds are a beautiful natural element and they are known to play with one’s imagination. Hence, we might argue that the clouds are the imagination of the revivalists, and thus the Irish reader is presented with the images of a mythical realm. This otherworldly realm becomes tangible through literature and transpires through the Irish reader. With regard to this, the word “Breath” (61) is arguably connected to the poet’s words or singing in a bardic fashion.

Yeats convincingly forecasts a glorious and triumphant success for the culturally nationalistic revivalists. They will be “innumerable” (61), which alludes to a common Irish nationality. Yeats was reliant on the support of the Irish people. If they did not embrace their

cultural heritage, Yeats' intended Irish identity would wither away. However, if the Irish myths came to be the basis of their cultural identity, the "demons" (61), which is England or English cultural influence, would perish in Ireland.

3.3.2 Aestheticized Cultural Nationalism

With Oisín being the means to what Yeats used to transpire both cultural nationalism and aesthetic meaning, it subsequently means that the poem showcases how Celtic mythology provided Yeats with a culturally nationalistic double-output; on the one side Celtic mythology gave Yeats a basis for a cultural nationalism based on cultural, linguistic, and ethnic features, and on the other side, Yeats got a cultural nationalism predicated on an archetypal imagery which hailed the *anima mundi*, which was understood to preexist the features mentioned above. With regard to this, the poem can be separated into two part; the first part being the one in which the cultural and ethnic aspect of Irish mythology is emphasized, and the last part whereas aesthetic symbolism, which is predicated on Yeats' imagination, is fronted. This dual perspective came as a result of Yeats combined interest in the esoteric and the mythological during the 1880s and the 1890s. The more Yeats got into his esoteric studies, the more his focus shifted from place, time and criteria of color to eclectically symbolism drawn from theosophy, philosophy and ritual magic. In the long run, this would result in color and time being replaced by spirituality and melancholy (Gomes 392). Dora M. Jones, wrote in her review of *The Celtic Twilight* in 1900:

His verse has the thrilling melancholy of a violin, [...] the mystical power of the hour
'twixt gloaming and the mirk, when the elemental spirits have power and the hills and
the trees seem to brood with half conscious life as they grow dark against the sky'.

(Jones qtd. in Cairns and Richards 67-68)

Thus, giving the Celt in "the Wanderings of Oisín" an artistic and sentimental temperament. However, this is not because the Celt is characteristically seen to possess these traits but rather because the Celt has been able to transcend the draining consequences of modernity and materialism, and therefore, the Celt is better suited to enter the world of eternal knowledge. Interestingly, as mentioned before, Yeats declared himself "the Celt" in his

lecture “Nationality and Literature” from 1893. In this sense, Yeats would have seen the Celt as someone with the inclination for imaginative superfluity. Furthermore, Yeats claims that this ability is inherent in all cultures and that by means of the imaginative works, produced by “those most capable of connecting with the ancient religion of the world” (Gomes 385) i.e. Yeats, this ability would be reawakened (Gomes 385).

3.3.3 Symbolism

In *W. B. Yeats: The poems*, Jeffares argues that up until 1889, Yeats did not feel that any of his poems had been fully satisfactory of his imagination, thus wanting to alternate his style and technique in order to make better use of symbolism. “The Wanderings of Oisín”, being Yeats’ first long poem, served as the introductory chapter to Yeats’ extensive usage of symbols (9). Yet, what meaning lays behind these symbols is rather difficult to decipher. As Yeats wrote in a letter to Katharine Tynan in 1888:

The whole poem is full of symbols. [...] In the second part of ‘Oisín’ under the disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did it would spoil the art. (Yeats qtd. in Unterecker 49)

What Yeats is writing here gives the reader no clarification, but regardless of the ambiguity we understand that “The Wanderings of Oisín” is full of symbols. As a cultural nationalist, Yeats was aware that the story of Oisín was known throughout Ireland, but where the original story originates from is still unclear. However, that the story is an ancient tale is evidently proven by the fact that it was translated from Gaelic to English by Edmund Campion as early as 1571 (Alspach 850).⁵⁹ Having said that, let us take a closer look at the key word in the excerpt from Yeats letter, namely the word “romance”. What makes Yeats’ version of the story different from the original is that it lacks the toughness and directness which is more commonly found in Sir Samuel Ferguson’s works on Gaelic material. Ferguson composed his

⁵⁹ The original story of Oisín and Saint Patrick stems from a 12th century single composition in Gaelic. This frame-story, called *Agallamh na Seanórach* (The Colloquy of the Old Men), is described by Mac Cana as a “nostalgic *recherche du temps perdu*”, and depicts the meeting between Oisín, Caolite and Saint Patrick. Moreover, this story is considered to be the most important work of the Fionn Cycle (Mac Cana 104). Caolite, also known as Caolte, was a member of the Fenians (Larrissy 172).

stories to resemble that of an epic whereas Yeats emphasizes a more romantic and mystic style (Jeffares, *W. B Yeats: The Poems* 9). Nonetheless, Yeats maintains most of the original storyline, but instead of directly depicting the events as in an epic he paints a picture of a world with sunsets and mists colored by his personal imagination. The language Yeats makes use of in the poem is eclectic as he did not want it to maintain any resemblance to contemporary life. From this we might argue that Yeats manages to reinvent the mythological world while simultaneously keeping the Celtic details, thus turning the traditional Celtic story into a “dreamy, cloudy beauty” (Jeffares, *W. B Yeats: The Poems* 9). According to Boyd, Yeats’ approach from the start was to emphasize an intimate relationship between himself and his subject matter. And so, simply through his imagination, he could access the realm of Celtic legend and romance with the freedom to do as he pleased (129).

Colors

In “The Wanderings of Oisín” Yeats creates a vivid mood which becomes both romantic and mystic by means of colors. The colors function as an aesthetic tool which reveals the symbols hidden in Oisín’s surroundings. The repetition of colors and natural qualities evoke moods which at times comes off as almost didactic e.g. when Oisín first meets Niamh by a sea:

And found on the dove-grey edge of the sea

A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode

On a horse with bridle of findrinny;

And like a sunset were her lips,

A stormy sunset on doomed ships;

A citron colour gloomed in her hair,. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 3)

Interestingly, every line of this verse contains either a color or a quality which alludes to a color. Oisín encounters Niamh on the “dove-grey” (3) edge of the sea. Yeats choice of color is very interesting because it provides us with a double output. Because a dove is a bird, we might argue that there is a sense of divination around the edge of this sea. Yet, as we have already discussed, the color grey is associated with something emotionless and lifeless. This is interesting, because the sea is either seen as a part of the otherworld or the border between the

otherworld and the mortal world. From this we could argue that Yeats is using the “dove-grey” (3) sea as an allegory of a mighty and divine mythological tradition which had faded into oblivion, but still laid potent within the unconscious cultural soul of 19th century Ireland.

It could be argued that Yeats elevates the poem by means of mysterious and mythical symbolism. The word “pearl-pale” (3) connotes something mystical, and it is interesting how this connects to the color white. The color pearl is actually a pale tint of the color off-white. When Yeats connects the two words pearl and pale, we could argue that he underlines the divinity of Niamh, but there might be a reason to why he does not just describe her as white. As we have already discussed, the color white was connected to divinities in Celtic Ireland. In my opinion, Yeats makes a conscious choice when he describes Niamh as pearl-pale because it symbolizes that her divinity has faded. The paleness emphasizes this fading of color, either through the symbolism connected to the color white or simply because Niamh appears as pale. In this regard, we could propound the idea of Niamh as a symbol of Ireland’s mythological tradition which had also dwindled from the public memory in Ireland.

Interestingly, the description of Niamh as pearl-pale is consistent throughout the poem, and we find this description five times (3, 16, 34, 35, 52). Yeats draws further attention to the color white by means of the word “findrinny” (3). Findrinny is Irish and translates to a type of white bronze or a method of fusion welding where silver and white gold is mixed. Niamh’s horse is decorated with this findrinny which alludes to a grand appearance. This is arguably a symbol of how glorious and divine the Irish mythological tradition still was.

Niamh’s is continuously described as a mystical figure who is fading away. Niamh’s hair is described as “citron” (3) colored. Citrons have a bright yellow color and according to Monaghan, Niamh is known for her bright golden hair (358). With regard to this, it is interesting to discuss why Yeats uses the word “gloomed” (3). The word gloomed alludes to a dark and somber appearance which contradicts the traditional image of a divine woman with radiant golden locks. In my opinion, this is just another symbol which indicates that Niamh is Yeats’ symbol of a faded Irish mythological tradition.

Birds

“The Wanderings of Oisín” contains extensive symbolism connected to birds of numerous types. As a result of Yeats’ interest and study of Irish folklore, myth and Gaelic literature, he was well aware of the cultural importance of birds (Bramsäck 85). Yet, it is not the birds alone that give meaning, it is how Yeats decides to have birds interact with other elements in

the poem which makes this poem “a type of high-art” (Unterecker 50). In Celtic tradition birds are commonly connected to divinity and often serve as messengers and servants of gods.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the killing of birds was forbidden by the legendary high king Conaire Mór. Traditionally, Irish goddesses such as Badb, Mórrígan and Macha are sometimes understood as crows and numerous Irish characters had the ability to transform into birds such as Children of Lir, Angus Óg and Cáer (MacKillop 42).⁶¹ Yeats’ obsession with birds and the renewal of ancient mythology is seen the symbol of the “two old eagles” (34). They signify a rebirth, “Few feathers were on their dishevelled wings, / For their dim minds were with the ancient things” (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 34). Oisín spots these eagles as he is about to rescue the enchained maiden and as he does so:

I burst the chain: still earless, nerveless, blind,
Wrapped in the things of the unhuman mind,
In some dim memory or ancient mood,
Still earless, nerveless, blind, the eagles stood. (“Wanderings of Oisín” 35-36)

These eagles are a part of the ancient times and one might argue that they even represent these ancient times. Considering their deteriorating appearance and their carelessness to the events taking place right before their “blind” (56) eyes. Since the maiden, as mentioned, is seen as a symbol of Ireland, these eagles could be seen as Ireland’s ancient past situated in an ongoing stagnancy and Yeats, through Oisín, the architect of their restoration. The fact that Irish tradition considers eagles as one of the world’s oldest animals might help shine light on this symbolism (MacKillop 166).

Yeats almost starts the poem off with a reference to birds when Finn asks Niamh why she has decided to go to the land of the living and if it was because an immortal had wandered away “from where the birds of Aengus wing?” (6). Yet, the reason why Niamh is going to the land of the living is because of Oisín, Finn’s son, and she describes Oisín’s stories “like coloured Asian birds / At evening in their rainless lands.” (7). Interestingly, before Oisín and Niamh reach the first island, birds are mentioned as Oisín hears them “a wandering land

⁶⁰ An example of this is Medb, who is often pictured with a bird on her shoulder (MacKillop 326). Additionally, as mentioned before, Aengus is often ascribed four birds which work for him.

⁶¹ The most important birds within Celtic tradition are the boobrie, cock, goose, duck, hawk, jackdaw, swan, raven, owl, eagle, egret, ousel, cornu, chough, crow, and crane (MacKillop 42).

breeze came / And a far sound of feathery quires;” (13). Furthermore, as Oisín and Niamh are riding towards the otherworld they see “Round every branch the song-birds flew,” (14). Furthermore, these “Asian” birds might be a result of Yeats esoteric influence. Yet, Yeats usage of the birds in this poem often carry an intricate symbolism which in turn connects to the otherworld, as is seen in “I saw a foam-white seagull drift and float / Under the roof, and with a straining throat / Shouted, and hailed him: he hung there a star” (36). The foam-white seagull is a symbol of fulfillment for Yeats, like any other bird of prey and gulls is in his poetry. According to Unterecker, this part about the star is a reoccurring theme in Yeats poetry. Unterecker suggests that it is a symbol of what is up there, invisible to man. The spirit world, compared to the world of the living and this is the communication between the two worlds e.g. world of living and otherworld. The communication between the two worlds and if the world hears man’s cry might fulfillment happen (Unterecker 58). Other birds of prey mentioned in the poem is that of ravens. When saint Patrick speaks of gods thunder, which symbolizes Christian triumph, Oisín hears the sound of the Fianian horses trampling and “The armies clash and shock, / And now the daylight-darkening ravens flock.” (43).⁶² So, when this fight is over and both civilizations destroyed, the daylight darkening ravens will turn the sky dark and a “raven-covered plain”, which symbolizes a new start, will be the end of a cycle and a new light will shine through, like new dawn. Another time birds are mentioned are within book III, when the sleeping giants of the valley are described as “the tops of their ears were feathered, their hands were the claws of birds” (49). This is a reference to the seven sleepers’ legends which Yeats read as preparation for the poem. The giants are surrounded by owls “And over the limbs and the valley the slow owls wandered and came,” (49). Here Yeats is referencing the birds of Aengus, which also served as companions (Unterecker 61-62).

Time

In *Yeats's Poetic Codes*, Nicholas Grene says that Yeats was a heterodox believer, yet his poetry often contained a God. In Yeats’ poetry, this God is seen as the one who created the world and in turn will be the one to end it. Hence, in “The Wanderings of Oisín” the Dananns are singing of their ability to withstand the changes that trouble all mortal beings; “We are apart in the grassy places, / Where care cannot trouble the least of our days, / Or the softness

⁶² Interestingly, according to oral tradition, a Cornu, which is seen as a legendary black bird, resided in Saint Patrick’s purgatory on Lough Derg. It is said that this Cornu had been a demon which Saint Patrick transformed into a bird (MacKillop 107).

of youth be gone from our faces” (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 27). However, their infinite youth has a theoretical termination:

But the love-dew dims our eyes till the day

When God shall come from the sea with a sigh

And bid the stars drop down from the sky,

And the moon like a pale rose wither away. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 28)

The God which Yeats seeks to realize, who is tired of his creation yet mysteriously artistic in his behavior, is nowhere near the original apocalyptic story of the vicious “boar without bristles” taken from Celtic mythology, which Yeats addresses in his poem “He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World” (Greene 138). This excerpt alludes to a supernatural and apocalyptic change of events. The “God” (28) coming from the sea could be argued to reflect Yeats’ relationship to the Christian God and the withering of Celtic paganism. Yet, Yeats’ occult influence might play a part in the aesthetic description of such a devastating event. This aesthetically pleasing imagery is emphasized by Saint Patrick’s passive role. Regardless of how and if the world is ending, Yeats was well aware that he existed within the afterglow of whatever existed during the heroic times. Because there is no definite ending Yeats turns to his imagination in order to tap into this eternal beauty of a world which in reality becomes perpetual.

3.3.4 Paganism and Catholicism

John O’Leary was one of Yeats’ most prominent influencers at the time of writing “The Wanderings of Oisín”, and so Gomes argues that Yeats made O’Leary part of Oisín. This reference appears at the end of the poem “And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast.” (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 63). This is arguably a direct reference to O’Leary’s “Fenian” standoff with the Catholic church. This event took place during a sermon in 1867, whereas the Catholic bishop of Kerry damned O’Leary and his Fenian companions and uttered that “eternity is not long enough nor hell hot enough” (Gomes 389) to make up for their sins. Interestingly, the words “flames” (63) and “feast” (63) infuses a sense of irony, because they appear as polar opposites. Yet, if we pay attention to the penultimate line of the

poem, we might understand Yeats' message. "I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan, Lomair" ("The Wanderings of Oisín" 63) is a declaration of allegiance. Yeats uses the "I" (63) as a way of speaking directly through Oisín. Yeats is declaring his allegiance to the pagan gods and O'Leary. The 19th century Fenians might have been too extreme for Yeats, but this part of the poem reflects the influence O'Leary had on Yeats. Interestingly, O'Leary was very supportive of Yeats and urged him to produce the poem and it was initially only supposed to serve as a eulogy of the heroic age in Ireland. Yeats' objective, like other romantic cultural nationalists of the time, was to work against tradition by placing the artist as a cultural spokesman before the cleric. By means of the material of the "golden age" Yeats aimed to create a humanist universalist culture. Moreover, in this poem Saint Patrick and his fellowship was to stand in strong contrast to the heroic age by the fact that they brought caution and restriction to Ireland (Hutchinson and Aberbach 502; Cowell 15-16).

3.3.5 Cultural Nationalism – Celticism

If read in a critical way, the poem can be read as one of Yeats' first statements of his devotion to the cause of the cultural nationalists. Martin McKinsey understands the poem's "Celtic swerve" as Yeats' keenness "to showcase the possibilities of a distinctly Irish alternative" (Gomes 376) which would stand in opposition to the culture and poetry of the English soul, which had been contaminated by scientific calculation and materialism. Yeats' poem is written in such a way that the cultural nationalism of the Irish reader is called upon, which is done by Yeats' ability to provide the reader with a form of closeness and comfort, and so the reader is kept at bay throughout the poem. Larrissy explains that Yeats' ability to connect Celticism and Irish cultural nationalism worked wonders because of Oisín's connection to Ossian. In the Gaelic originals of the vastly popular James Macpherson (1736-1796) Ossian played a major role and Macpherson's poems were widely respected for containing what was the quintessential Gaelic and Celtic sensibility (171).⁶³ Hence, in Yeats' poem the culturally nationalistic thought is provoked within the reader, by means of legendary material, because Yeats successfully manages to build an otherworldly presence of which he connects to the

⁶³ The Scottish writer James Macpherson translated many Gaelic poems, of which *Poems of Ossian* (1760-1763) was one of the most popular. Macpherson presented this book as a "lost epic of the Celtic people" and it was to serve as an equivalent to Homer's "Iliad" (MacKillop xxii). *Poems of Ossian* became a huge success within the British Isles, America and all across Europe, which saw it being translated into most of the major European languages (Larrissy 171). Notably, Macpherson's writings were read and enjoyed by figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon and Goethe (MacKillop xxii).

present. This clearly differs from Ferguson's work which instead is considered timebound and thus, too deliberate (Boyd 129). Later in his career, Yeats addressed his style in *Early Poems and Stories* (1925) by saying "From the moment I began *The Wanderings of Oisín*...my' subject matter became Irish". This statement further backs his intentions of unifying the Irish under one cultural identity, and at the same time it helped improve Yeats' relationship with political nationalists (Gomes 376). Thus, Yeats' landscape built upon Irish mythology in the poem "The wanderings of Oisín" could then, as mentioned, be seen not only as his statement of loyalty to the cause of the cultural nationalists, but above all, from a macro perspective, the national cause.

4 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to explore how Yeats used mythological elements in his poetry to hail an Irish national identity. Furthermore, this thesis claimed that Yeats wrote his early poems with an intent to reinvent a Celtic mythology by means of cultural nationalism. By studying Yeats' development as a transpiring poet, cultural nationalist and occult *magus*, this thesis attempted to showcase how Yeats managed to make use of two subject matter simultaneously. These subject matters were occultism and Celtic mythology. This gave rise to the discussion of Yeats involvement with the Cultural Nationalism Movement and the Irish Literary Revival. by studying these movements, we highlighted some of the key features of the poetry connected to the movements. Furthermore, this thesis argued that Yeats wrote poetry with a culturally nationalistic intent. Subsequently, this led to the discussion of how mythology and folklore would hail a spiritual connection between the people of Ireland. this thesis argued that the *Anima Mundi* provided Yeats with an output based in occultism, which would hail a common national consciousness based in the historic memory of Ireland. Through the analysis of the three poems "To Ireland in the Coming Times", "The lake Isle of Innisfree" and "The Wanderings of Oisín" we discussed the culturally nationalistic, mythological and occult symbolism. The analysis gave rise to the claim that Yeats filled his early poems with culturally nationalistic symbolism. Yeats' combination of aesthetics and cultural nationalism revealed a powerful continuation of the traditional and natural bardic tradition. Furthermore, the analysis showcased how Yeats used natural elements, colors and wordplay to symbolize contemporary events, resistance, emotions and intent.

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