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William Butler Yeats and the Cuchulain Cycle

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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS AND THE CUCHULAIN CYCLE

BY

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THESIS

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William Butler Yeats established a high standard for his works, which always grew out of his personal life and struggles. His work, an act of self-writing, implies his political as well as aesthetic ideals for Ireland. Many of the subjects in his works also reflect his personal experience. He used his drama and poetry to express his viewpoints about life and love. His love of Ireland and Irish people, his aristocratic or heroic ideals, his reflections on love and death are quite obvious in his Cuchulain plays and poetry: “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” (1892), On Baile’s Strand (1904), The Green Helmet (1910), At the Hawk’s Well (1917), The Only Jealousy of Emer (1919), The Death of Cuchulain (1939), and “Cuchulain Comforted” (1939). Cuchulain is a heroic figure in Irish legends. He is a warrior who is famous for his physical might and fighting skills and who accomplishes many great deeds all through his life. He has aristocratic characteristics too. Cuchulain is Yeats’s embodiment of certain ideals he envisioned for the Irish people and the nation, but he was also the poet’s personal mask, his antithetical self. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which Cuchulain emerges as an increasingly more complex and dramatic figure in Yeats’s poetry and particularly his drama. Before considering the specific works, I will first survey those aspects of Yeats’s life that explain why Cuchulain became such a symbolic presence in Yeats’s art.

Yeats’s theory of the mask is that each person has an anti-self, “the antithesis of all that he is in life” (qtd in Jeffares 1). The mask is what makes the antithetical self and its continual struggle with the self possible, which results in artistic creation or poetry: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (Yeats, Mythologies 331). As A. Norman Jeffares argues, “His [Yeats’s] theory

of the Mask is based upon antithesis in characters upon the differences between a natural and a chosen personality, upon contrariety” (The Circus Animals 4). It is also the mask that enables the poet to battle self-deception. As Yeats says, “The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality” (Mythologies 331).

Profound historical reasons make it plausible to think of Cuchulain as one of Yeats’s personal as well as political and artistic masks. Yeats’s experiences as a child and adolescent seem to have fostered a deep sense of insecurity as well as emotional confusion in terms of his oppositions toward his parents and the domestic settings in which he grew up. Yeats was born in a Protestant Anglo-Irish family. In his childhood, he suffered not only of his father but also from the rigid discipline of most male members of both sides of his family.

Obviously, John Butler Yeats had a paternal way of teaching his children and that caused much pain in young Yeats. Yeats referred to his father as “an angry and impatient teacher [who] flung the reading book at my head” (Reveries 29). Once JBY heard young Yeats singing, he “wrote to the old woman [his teacher] that I was never to be taught to sing again, and afterwards other teachers were told the same thing” (Reveries 30). To young Yeats, the image of his father is that of a strict, distant, cold-hearted ruler.

Much of Yeats’s juvenile years was spent in London, and this life experience had great impact on him. The memories of fights, of being bullied by other boys and neglected by his father, made him feel the loneliness of an Irish child in England. So his impression of England was full of hostility and loneliness, providing sharp contrast with those of Sligo, his mother’s ancestral home. This is why after many years when Yeats

was following his poetic career, he would mention: “Years afterwards, when I was ten or twelve years old and in London, I would remember Sligo with tears, and when I began to write, it was there I hoped to find my audience” (Reveries 21). Yeats also found affection and gentleness in Sligo from his mother’s side of the family. For example, he recalls his maternal grandfather as a person who “had a violent temper and kept a hatchet at his bedside for burglars and would knock a man down instead of going to law,” and yet “neither I nor anyone else thought it wrong to outwit his violence or his rigour, and his lack of suspicion and something helpless about him made that easy while it stirred our affection” (Yeats, Reveries 8-9).

Furthermore, the Irish land and especially the sea of Sligo were full of gentleness too. He was enchanted by the beauties of the landscape. Yeats as a boy “saw for the first time the crimson streak of the gladiolus and awaited its blossom with excitement”(Reveries 22). The mysteries of Sligo were free for him to explore too. He could take a yacht and sail it out with some friends and find out when the sea birds woke up in the morning. The pleasant childhood memories of the west of Ireland and the sense of belonging to the people and nature of Sligo nurtured young Yeats and furnished his strong attraction to Ireland as opposed to England.

Perhaps from then on, Yeats started to turn to Ireland emotionally, not only because he was born and raised in Ireland, but also because he loved Ireland. As a member of the Irish people, he was interested in exploring the Irish mysteries and finding glories in Irish history and art.

Beginning from the 90’s, Yeats began to collect the Irish traditional literature, mainly the sagas. One of the most important reasons was certainly the cause of Irish

independence movement. But in his choice of Cuchulain, personal elements were also involved. As Richard Ellmann has noted:

His physical and temperamental weaknesses as a child, his timidity as a young man, encouraged him to nourish his imagination on heroic self-projections until his dreams far exceeded reality. Then with great courage and will, he tried to become the hero of whom he had dreamed and to instill into Ireland a heroic atmosphere. His amazing achievement was to succeed partially in both ambitions.

(The Man and the Masks 287)

Because of uncertainty about himself, Yeats was eager to establish an identity. To do this, he had an inward ideal that he would take as aim but perhaps could never achieve. And that is the unity and opposition between the self and the mask. Cuchulain's physical might is just the opposite of Yeats's weakness. Cuchulain's boldness is also the opposite of Yeats's "circuitous and brilliant strategy" (qtd in Man and Masks 273). However the inward daring of them is the same. Yeats hopes that through the direct portrayal of Cuchulain's courage he could at least draw a symbolic picture of his intention. Cuchulain also represented the strength and bravery Yeats needed in his life-long pursuit of Maud Gonne. The plays in the Cuchulain cycle, as we shall see, often reflect the intensity, conflict, and futility informing Yeats's love for the woman who began "the troubling of [his] life" (Yeats, Memoirs 40).

In Yeats's time, Ireland continued to suffer from the stringent oppression of the British. The rebellions by the Irish people were repeatedly defeated. To make it worse, the famine in the mid-19th century drove many elite members of the Irish nationalist organizations abroad. The hardship caused an extreme sense of fragmentation, a loss of

national and cultural identity on the part of the Irish people. As Alex Zwerdling argues, “One of the basic problems facing Ireland in the eighteen eighties and nineties was the necessity of creating a national consciousness” (29). In the eighties, Yeats, Lady Gregory and many nationalists felt the need to revive the Irish confidence by restoring Irish myths, legends, and heroes. For Yeats, chief among these legendary heroes was Cuchulain.

Yeats joined Lady Gregory’s efforts to collect the ancient legends about Cuchulain, which he used to symbolize the Irish heroic spirit he wished Ireland or the Irish people to have. According to Lady Gregory’s Cuchulain of Muirthemne, Cuchulain is bold and violent, a brave figure who fights with many fierce enemies. However, he is not a calculating strategist. And his lack of tact leads him to fight and kill his own son and later, in an onslaught of madness, fight with the sea. At the end of his life, he knows that his enemy is luring him and that if he fights, he will die. Yet he would rather fight and meet his death than evade it.

There are definitely qualities in Cuchulain that appealed to Yeats, such as his noble characteristics, which are the opposite of those Yeats attributed to the middle-class, business people that he disliked. Yeats highly valued the significance of Cuchulain in the creation of a national consciousness. He argues,

This recognition of our own potential heroism, this momentary emotional identification of ourselves with the ‘something of value’ in the literary work. is a more convincing and powerful form of persuasion than an abstract sermon, for the hero presents to the imagination of the audience a living example of human worth.
(qtd in Zwerdling 2)

Yeats hoped that the Irish people could learn from this figure and regain their past nobility. Cuchulain's physical strength symbolizes the glory that Yeats wanted Ireland to have. Many critics who have examined the role of Cuchulain in Yeats's work consider the legendary figure in the context of myth. However, Cuchulain is also a historical figure in Yeats's drama and poetry. Yeats's relationship to Cuchulain was not one of simple hero worship. Rather, Yeats presented him as a human being with weaknesses. He is a noble warrior but he lacks strategy, and he fights and kills his own son.

The figure of Cuchulain not only appealed to Yeats but also aroused the national dignity of Irish people. For example, Padraic H. Pearse, one of the nationalists, was deeply influenced by Cuchulain. But Pearse's vision of Cuchulain differs from that of Yeats, for Pearse believed that Cuchulain was among those

who had passed from earth to the mystic Tir na n-og, who had become gods, but whose spirits, heroic and immortal, still lived after.... Oh! That men could be brought to realize that they are MEN, not animals.... There is a spark of divinity within them! (qtd in Skene 19)

Yeats's stance, then, is quite different from the nationalistic view. Yeats's mask of Cuchulain is not a mythic or divine figure but a human one which would help him create a literature that "beg[a]n with something of merely national significance, [but] would eventually produc[e] a literature meaningful to the entire world" (Zwerdling 40). The complexity of Cuchulain as Yeats's mask is vital in his efforts to help establish the national dignity of the Irish people.

Yeats's love of Ireland and his anxiety to make Ireland a proud nation was enormous. When he was an adolescent, he read with much emotion about a young patriot

who died for his country. “He had been deeply moved by reading some badly written verses in a newspaper describing the shore of Ireland as seen by a returning, dying emigrant.”(qtd in Jeffares, Man and Poet 38)

Because of Yeats’s love for Ireland, he made efforts to revive Irish culture to help find her identity. He found the folk literature of Ireland a great source for that. And that was why he began collecting Irish stories early in his youth. Also, when Yeats was young, there were powerful nationalist organizations like the Young Ireland, the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Yeats’s involvement in this revival and expanding cultural nationalism began in 1885 when, as a young poet imitating Spenser and Shelley and more aware of family and class than of any national consciousness, he met John O’Leary and decided that he must become an Irish poet. (Archibald 82)

Douglas Archibald also argues:

Celticism involves a belief in racial consciousness and imagination, and in the natural (and pastoral) superiority of the Irish countryman to the more familiar (and Anglicized) products of modern civilization. Studying the Celt means tapping folklore, mythology, and legend. (84)

Loyalty to the Irish culture explains why Yeats was so deeply involved in collecting Irish folklore especially those about the heroic Irish figures like Cuchulain. However, his opinion diverged from the main stream politics in Ireland at his time. What he struggled to establish was an Ireland with peace and harmony, so that there would be no slaughter, no genocide any more. As Archibald argues, Yeats wished to

“Preserve that which is living and help the two Irelands, Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland, so to unite that neither shall shed its pride” (qtd in Archibald 79).

Therefore, Yeats was opposed to the violence which the independence organizations promoted. He thought violence only brought about unnecessary sacrifice of people’s lives and it ruined the unity of Ireland. Yeats took pains to revive the literary tradition of Ireland, a project which did not look political, but in fact his work was aimed at a political purpose: the unity and identity of Ireland. As Thomas O’Neil notes:

As years succeeded year, the Gaelic League grew and sped through Ireland. Branches were formed in which not only the Irish language but Irish history as well were taught.... The doctrine of Irishness was inculcated. All of this was non-political in intent but in practice it could not be divorced from politics. It moulded a new generation whose outlook was fundamentally Irish. It was only a matter of time before that attitude would reflect itself in the political field.... For the most part, however, Douglas Hyde and his associates merely pursued their course, unwittingly creating a revolution.... Writers like Yeats revolted against the tradition of earlier national poets whose aim was political.... Nonetheless the literary revival was political. It inspired the imagination. It created the ancient heroes and it won new admirers for the woman who in tradition personified Ireland-Cathleen Ni Hoolihan. (qtd in Skene19)

Yeats’s efforts in the cultural revival had great influence on the Irish revolution. However, the role in revolution was not his sole purpose because he thought politics was just a transient phenomenon while only art made Ireland last. And in his art, he drew

upon those ancient heroes, such as “Ferghus, Conchubar, Cuchulain, Fion, Oisín, Oscar,” which as Padraic Pearse argued

...were more to the Gael than mere names of great champions and warriors of a former time...And though well-nigh two thousand years have rolled away since those mighty heroes trod this land of ours, yet is their spirit not dead; it lives on in our poetry, in our music, in our language, and, above all, in the vague longings which we feel for a something, we know not what,-our irresistible, overmastering conviction that we, as a nation, are made for higher things. (qtd in Skene 19)

One of Yeats's first efforts to revive Irish literature was “Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea,” originally titled “The Death of Cuchulain” and published in 1892. It was one of the early poems of Yeats, in which he deals with the question of the national identity of Ireland. As Seamus Heaney has argued: “...national regeneration was ... of original and vital importance to him[Yeats]....(Field Day Anthology 785). His ideal of the Irish spirit was a heroic and aristocratic one, a spirit with all resolution and little vulgarity.

The young Yeats turned to Irish legends because it was the best form that combined nationalism and art: “If any generalized statement of his intentions during the early stages of the movement may be made, it is that he wanted art to be dedicated to the service of heroic dreams, and that in Ireland the dreams must be Irish ones” (Ellmann, The Man and the Masks 104-105). Furthermore Yeats saw that the portrayal of a heroic symbol was critical. Cuchulain became for him a symbol of glory, a great warrior who has no fear of going to war with a young man. But as we shall see, such “resolution,” perhaps a requirement for the hero, is at best a double-edged sword. Thus even in this

early portrayal of Cuchulain, Yeats is careful to highlight, also, the flaws in his hero, as if to maintain a distance from the antithetical self or mask.

Cuchulain's heroic qualities include both bravery and alertness. His leadership also shows in the fact that he dares to take up responsibilities. In "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," when the young man approaches the camp, Cuchulain is the first to become aware of his arrival. He displays his high sense of responsibility when he cries: "I am the only man/Of all this host so bound from childhood on" (Collected Poems 35). Because no one dares to challenge his claim, he is admitted as the leader of the group.

But Yeats also shows Cuchulain's tragic flaws as a fallen figure who repents after realizing he has killed his own son. And so in his first version of the poem, Yeats arranges Cuchulain's death by drowning after he kills his own son. Later, to keep his Cuchulain cycle going, he changes the death to a trance. Cuchulain's misfortune is directly related to his being a hero. Although instinct tells him to stop fighting—he notices the young man's resemblance to Aoife; "Your head a while seemed like a woman's head/That I loved once," --yet being a hero, he cannot stand anyone who "ha[s] come and dared [him] to [his] face" (Collected Poems 35). Because he is the leading man, he has to fight his emotional side or at least ignore it. But as a consequence, he has to suffer from the tragic consequences of a hero.

The young man admires his father and his behaviors resemble Cuchulain's. The son has an idealized impression of Cuchulain as a great warrior.

Whether under its daylight or its stars,

My father stands amid his battle cars.

...

Yet somewhere under starlight or the sun

My father stands. (Collected Poems 34)

Cuchulain's blindness is ironically duplicated in his son's behavior. He is just as action oriented as Cuchulain is. He would rather fight and lose his life than give his name. As the guard reports: "He bade me let all know he gives his name/At the sword-point...." (Collected Poems 35). When Cuchulain asks his name, the young man replies: "The dooms of men are in God's hidden place" (Collected Poems 35). One sees that the son is unaware of the fact that he is going to challenge his father. Probably even at the moment of his death, he does not realize that it is his father who has caused his death. The son is only a victim of Emer's revenge.

Two men fighting out of misunderstanding strengthens the tragic effect, which can be attributed to the jealousy of Emer, who has found out that Cuchulain has a new mistress, "one sweet-throated like a bird" (Collected Poems 33). Emer's bitterness, which leads to a senseless death, might be compared to that between the Irish and the English; Yeats was disgusted by the Anglo-Irish war, which did not benefit the Irish but misled them in their pursuit of independence. In his other poems, such as "On a Political Prisoner," Yeats regrets how bitterness turns the mind into "an abstract thing" and thinking into "some popular enmity" causing the "Blind and leader of the blind" to "drink[ing] the foul ditch where they lie" (Collected Poems 184).

Yeats hates the nationalist cause which is merely based on revenge and violence instead of the welfare of the nation, which he sees as "a disillusioned and embittered Ireland turn[ed][away] from parliamentary politics" (qtd in Archibald 82). Thus in

his portrayal of a contrite Cuchulain, a fallen tragic hero, Yeats hopes to show the Irish people the consequences of bitterness and blind action.

On Baile's Strand is Yeats's first attempt to dramatize the story of Cuchulain. The play was completed around 1904, about twelve years after "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea." Although it bears some resemblance to the poem, the play is more complex in theme and structure. Cuchulain is still the central figure. Opposing Cuchulain's heroic quality to the vulgarity of Conchubar, it is often argued, Yeats tries to expand the positive attributes of his heroic figure. Critics favoring this point mention that Cuchulain is many things for Yeats: "a national symbol, the image of the brave and noble man, the man of action he longs to become, a symbol of his struggle for his country's intellectual freedom, and an embodiment of his heroic-aristocratic philosophy. But above all, he is human redeemer-- the chief representative of the heroic age which Yeats hoped Ireland would recreate and relive"(Bushrui 40).

However, more recent viewpoints offer other insights. Focusing on the dualism in Yeats's ideas—the transient versus the eternal, the platonic versus the gnostic—critics such as Bush argue that Yeats is more interested in the clashes of different influences and their outcome than creating a pure perfect figure. In other words, if Yeats intended only to glorify the Irish, Cuchulain should have been a more successful character. Furthermore, the so-called heroic figure, Cuchulain, is forever changing. The development of Cuchulain shows that Yeats tried to create an unstable composition of opposing characteristics, using "profoundly skeptical and dramatic (that is to say, dialectical) procedures" (Bush 162).

In On Baile's Strand, Cuchulain is far from being a perfect hero. And it is

obvious that he is not intended to be one. His weaknesses include unfaithfulness, credulousness, and the lack of a mature view on politics and government. It is his unfaithfulness to Emer that motivates her revenge and her desire to make him suffer. Furthermore, Cuchulain is a character who is more interested in carnal pleasures than his duties as a warrior. "I'll dance or hunt, or quarrel or make love/Wherever and whenever I've a mind to" (CPY 166). Yet he is not aware of the ongoing political maneuvering engineered by Conchubar, who is not even present in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea." Cuchulain has so simple a nature that Conchubar easily sees through him, deceives him, and causes him to kill his own son.

Cuchulain is proud, and he believes that he is the male warrior who should trust reason rather than his good instincts. When the young man comes over, Cuchulain is able to recognize some features of Aoife, his previous lover, and is about to make friends with him. However, Conchubar claims that Cuchulain is cheated by witchcraft: "Some witch of the air has troubled Cuchulain's mind" (CPY 176). Being a hero who is extremely proud of himself, he feels humiliated. He ignores his instincts and fights with the young man. The process begins first with Conchubar's claim "A witch of the air/Can make a leaf confound us with memories..." (176). But Cuchulain still proceeds to make friends with the young man. When Cuchulain challenges Conchubar, the crowd starts to claim witchcraft. Cuchulain is fooled and believes the claim. He yells: "Yes, witchcraft! witchcraft! Witches of the air!.../Why did you? Who was it set you to this work?/ Out, out! I say, for now it's sword on sword!" (177). The tragedy is that Cuchulain has a huge, vulnerable ego that makes him handle things like the fool.

Yeats's treatment of Cuchulain is not like Shakespeare's portrayal of his tragic figures. Instead of a solemn closing, Yeats ends the play with the dialog between the fool and the blind man, a conversation with heavily ironical and comic overtones. On Baile's Strand shows the personality of Cuchulain, which is on the one hand glorious and heroic, while on the other, ridiculously simple, innocent and even foolish. As Denis Donoghue remarks, "[Yeats's] sense of consciousness as conflict is the most important article in [his] faith as a poet" (qtd in Bush 5). During his conversation with Conchubar on whether he should take the oath, although Cuchulain tries to refuse, he never questions Conchubar's intention. He lets Conchubar use different excuses. When at last Conchubar describes Cuchulain as an uncontrollable figure who poses danger to the other kings, Cuchulain cannot remain unmoved. At first Conchubar reminds him that in the impending danger posed by the young man, Cuchulain is "somewhere out of sight and hearing/Hunting and dancing with your [his] wild companies" (CPY 166). When Cuchulain points out that the young man is no big worry, Conchubar shifts focus: "I would leave/A strong and settled country to my children" (167). Then Cuchulain argues that he has already voluntarily done Conchubar a favor to help him get onto the throne, and therefore, he does not need to be ruled by Conchubar's sons. Conchubar again shifts the question; do his sons rule over Cuchulain or does Cuchulain threaten his sons? Finally, Conchubar forces Cuchulain to take the oath with this argument, which seems to parallel the one between the fool and the blind man, which ends with the more sly one getting the chicken.

As an imperfect figure, Cuchulain is a realistic symbol of Yeats's personal struggle. Cuchulain is portrayed not as a legendary figure, but as a person, who has

weaknesses, and makes mistakes, and yet he struggles on. In On Baile's Strand, Cuchulain foolishly misjudges his son as the bearer of witchcraft and kills him before finding out the truth, which drives him to madness. His agitated state is described by the fool: "He is going up to King Conchubar.... Now he is running down to the sea....he is fighting the waves. ...He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have mastered him...."(CPY 181-182).

Clearly Yeats does not make Cuchulain into a perfect character that people can emulate. As James W. Flannery explains: "The tragic paradox inherent in a quest for personal fulfillment and freedom at all costs is selfishness and insensitivity. Yeats's Cuchulain is ultimately an anti-hero who stands as a symbol of betrayal and failure in modern Ireland" (7). As to why he chooses the traditional legend of Cuchulain, J.P. Riquelme offers a different explanation: "Yeats holds up as an ideal a style of 'impersonal meditation' that packs the personal 'in ice or salt' to keep it from rotting. Apparently to avoid being personal in a trivial, sentimental, or ephemeral way, he says he 'must choose a traditional stanza,' for 'ancient salt is best packing'" (102). Although one cannot deny Yeats's intention and efforts to revive the Irish culture, yet in the Cuchulain plays, especially in On Baile's Strand he was trying to use his "ancient salt" mostly to "cure" his present society.

Implying either Yeats's personal or political aspects, the symbols in this play are abundant and multifunctional and they interact among themselves. The most essential ones are the parallels between Cuchulain and Conchubar and the fool and the blind man. The fool is a simplified, ironical version of Cuchulain. Both value the process of pursuit instead of what they pursue and both are easily distracted and dissuaded. The fool easily

forgets the chicken when the blind man tells him: “No hurry, no hurry. I know whose son it is. I wouldn’t tell anybody else, but I will tell you,—a secret is better to you than your dinner” (CPY 164). Cuchulain, too, is easily dissuaded from making friends with his son.

Cuchulain, although imperfect, is the personal symbol of Yeats, his personal mask. As Seamus Deane explains, “In Yeats’s imagination, Cuchulain develops from being a powerful example of the imaginative riches of Celtic tradition into a personal symbolic resource” (791). In his personal life, Yeats would rather use evasions than make a distinct approval or refusal to other people’s requests. Also his literary life looks quite different from the wild life of Cuchulain. However, Yeats admires the strength, aristocracy, and the straight-forwardness of Cuchulain’s character. Ronald Bush again argues: “[Yeats’s] task was ... to affirm an aristocratic romanticism against a crude but still vital Irish middle class” (7). Such is what Yeats terms as his personal masks, the voice that he can use to express the equivalent of his “self” in an artistic world. The masks bear much similarity to Yeats himself spiritually, and yet, the masks are also the opposite of him in many ways. For instance, the physical strength and the boldness are opposite to what Yeats deemed himself. The gap between the masks and the real “self” is the ultimate goal that Yeats wished to achieve although it is ultimately impossible to do so. Therefore, the masks are Yeats’s efforts for self-fulfillment.

Cuchulain also reflects his awareness of the social responsibilities. As many critics have noticed, On Baile’s Strand reflects Yeats’s opinion on Irish nationalism. But for Yeats, questions of politics cannot be separated from those of the self. Yeats explains

how he perceives the relationship between the individual and the collection in his dedication to “The Secret Rose”:

My friends in Ireland sometimes ask me when I am going to write a really national poem or romance, and by a national poem or romance I understand them to mean a poem or romance founded upon some moment of famous Irish history, and built up out of the thoughts and feelings which move the greater number of patriotic Irishmen. I on the other hand believe that poetry and romance cannot be made..., but only by looking into that little, infinite, faltering, eternal flame that one calls one’s self. (qtd in Longenbach 87)

Thus we can argue that for Yeats the personal and the political –if not in its commonplace sense—always merge into one. In other words, nationalism is based on the individualism of each Irishman. In On Baile’s Strand, the conflict between Cuchulain and Conchubar is caused by Conchubar’s decision to eradicate Cuchulain’s individuality and freedom. Cuchulain will enjoy life whenever and wherever it is possible. However, Conchubar intends to harness Cuchulain’s individualism. When Cuchulain sees the familiar facial features of the young man, instinct tells him to avoid fighting and make friends with him. “Put up your sword...I’d have you for my friend...His head is like a woman’s head/I had a fancy for” (CPY 174). Yet Conchubar insists that Cuchulain kill the young man, because otherwise, his power will be threatened.

The conflict between the Cuchulain’s freedom and the interests of his political group implies Yeats’s ambivalence toward nationalism, Edward Engelberg notes: “[Yeats]discovered that any commitment to nationalism was dangerous. To the politically minded, nationalism—of any stripe—turned into a surrender to public taste, to the mob”

(qtd in Longenbach 87). This idea is clearly expressed in the plays. The major cause of Cuchulain's tragedy is that he is forced by the crowd to take Conchubar's oath and coerced by them to kill his son. James Longenbach explains the major reason for Yeats's discomfort with extreme nationalists is that they are "a mob held together not by what is interior, delicate and haughty, but by law and force which they obey because they must" (86).

Therefore, On Baile's Strand addresses concurrent political events than those in the distant past. The symbolism carried by the characters is used by Yeats to express his belief in individualism, which is the basis of his nationalist ideal. The figures of On Baile's Strand are not intended to serve as a set of perfect examples but as flawed natural figures seeking the opposite of themselves.

The Green Helmet marks a new phase in Yeats's use of Cuchulain. The focus of this drama is Cuchulain as a public figure. According to Yeats, the play was based upon an Irish story, "The Feast of Bricriu" in Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirtheme (qtd in Jeffares and Knowland, Commentary 221) It was meant as an introduction to On Baile's Strand. This play was first published in The Green Helmet and other Poems, Dundrum, 1910.

Yeats adopts the middle English story to ridicule the farcical reaction of the audience of John Synge's Playboy of the Western World. And he tries to express his view of nationalism and to convince people that the national cause does not endorse jealousy or quarrel. The Green Helmet was inspired by the riot in the Abbey Theatre when John Synge's Playboy of the Western World was performed. The audience, especially those

with narrow nationalist tendencies, condemned this play as defiling the image of the Irish nation.

Yeats understood Synge's play was originally meant to establish an art form that was more related with Irish cultural achievement rather than with fundamental nationalism. As John Synge explains in his preface: "In countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form" (qtd in Castle, online). However, some of the audience was so concerned about the liberation of Ireland that they could not allow anything they considered inharmonious to the revolutionary cause, even though in the long run it benefited Ireland more.

They resented what many considered negative portrayals of the Irish peasantry, preferring instead to see plays that dramatized political sentiments and that represented myth and legend as revolutionary and patriotic allegory. Indeed, nationalist pressures sometimes led to self-censorship on the part of the Abbey Theatre directors, with the resultof the kind of violent public reaction that eventually greeted ... The Playboy of the Western World. (Castle, online)

And so as a response to defend art, Yeats wrote The Green Helmet.

In The Green Helmet, Cuchulain represents a hero who is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of Ireland and does so without bitterness. He has

The laughing lip

That shall not turn from laughing whatever rise or fall,

The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed by all,

The hand that loves to scatter, the life like a gambler's throw....

(CPY 159)

As for the bitterness and split, Ronan McDonald notices: "It is sometimes quipped that 'the first item on every Irish agenda is the split.' This adage originates...in the hoary old stereotype of the Irish as intrinsically quarrelsome and factional....one might expect Irish critics and historians to debunk the stereotype of the fighting Irish, to expose it as the patrician imagining of a colonial mindset" (Deane online). The heroic symbol is, therefore, necessary at the time when people are split and fighting against themselves. Out of his dislike of the jealousy and bickering among Irish people, Yeats portrays the heroic qualities of Cuchulain with two challenges; one is the Red man who comes back to "whip off" someone's head, and the other is the quarrel among the heroes themselves.

After having won the helmet by his courage, Cuchulain displays self-sacrifice when he tries to pacify Laegaire and Conall. At first, no one person can have it, for others will complain "that Helmet is mine, for what did you find in the bag/But the straw and the broken delf and the bits of dirty rag/You'd taken for good money?" (CPY 153) Cuchulain tries to make everyone happy by offering them to drink from the helmet and own it together because he is accused "By drinking the first he took/The whole of the honours himself....If Laegaire drink from it now, he claims to be last and worst" (155). Cuchulain at last throws the helmet into the sea and this only causes more complaint: "It was not for your head/And so you would let none wear it, but fling it away instead." Cuchulain makes the efforts to unite the people because he is perhaps the only one who realizes that on the one hand, "That juggler from the sea, that old red herring it is/Who has set us all by the ears—he brought the helmet for this[the quarrel]." On the other

hand, if they keep fighting each other, their common cause will be hurt. The quarrel in the play indicates Yeats's critique of the trivial struggles within the nationalist groups.

Furthermore, The Green Helmet is also a personal explanation of Synge's artistic goal which was misunderstood by the rioters in the Abbey theatre. Yeats intends to explain that the artistic form is not merely a derivative of revolution. For him, art is self-contained and long lasting. As Gregory Castle notices:

Playwrights like Synge, Yeats, and Lady Gregory produced dramatic works under constraints that led them to the creation of a national style that avoided explicitly nationalist sentiments, a style that was recognizably Irish, drawing on folklore, myth, and legend, but that avoided the partisan, polemical, and propagandistic tendencies of the various nationalist factions. (online)

The purpose of consolidation is, as explained in the play, to face the challenge of the Red Man. Cuchulain is the only person who stands out to face his revenge. The Red Man represents the many causes of disputes among the people who care about Ireland. And Cuchulain symbolizes the remedy of the troubles in Ireland, which is the literary cause. As The Green Helmet's relation to The Playboy of the Western World, David Holdeman comments:

It for the most part reacted against characteristics of the Irish middle class that, many of us would agree, genuinely deserved to be satirized, exposing narrow-minded contentiousness rather than mocking the democratic aspiration to bring all things to one common level. It ...amusingly excoriat[es] the young nationalists who had similarly interrupted the original performances of Synge's

play and contrast[s] such bickering with Cuchulain's heroic willingness to sacrifice himself. (127)

However, the values of The Green Helmet as agreed upon by Holdeman are attacked by many others, including Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, and Richard Kearney, who blame Yeats as writing for a "noble stage" which is beyond the "pack of hounds." Because Yeats in this particular play idealizes Cuchulain as a hero virtually without flaws, they argue that Yeats helps turn Ireland into "a kind of tourist's film set"(North online). However, if one checks the cultural context, one may find why Yeats makes so much effort to emphasize the admirable qualities of Cuchulain. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford notes:

Although Ireland suffered dislocations of culture, language, and identity analogous to those experienced by colonized peoples in India and Africa, the Irish could not be distinguished from their imperial rulers by the color of their skin. They were 'proximate' rather than 'absolute.' Others, a disturbing mixture of sameness and difference, geographical closeness and cultural distance. English dramatists therefore indicated Irish inferiority and need for governance by emphasizing those character traits that signaled political incompetence. (Online)

Opposing the history of distorted Irish figures on the stage, Yeats is therefore right to stage noble and unselfish characters to show that his countrymen are so different from the "Irish" as stereotyped by the British.

While The Green Helmet shows Cuchulain as a public figure, At the Hawk's Well deals mostly with him as a private, lonely figure, a young man struggling with issues of existence and sexuality. This play also deals with the mystical influence of fortune, which

is superior to human struggle, and sterility, procreation, and the opposition of the young and old.

The background is a desolate island where there are only wind, trees and an old man seated by a well that is supposed to hold the water of immortality. Every time the well fills up, he is bewitched by the guardian of the well and falls asleep. Therefore the old man never has the chance to drink from the well. The young Cuchulain, who believes in his luck, comes to look for the well. Though the old man warns Cuchulain of the Guardian of the well, and asks him to leave, Cuchulain insists on staying. When the well bubbles up, the guardian begins to dance, and Cuchulain is distracted and walks away from the well. In the final scene, thinking that the host of Aoife will attack him, Cuchulain runs off to fight her.

Traditionally, At the Hawk's Well has been discussed in terms of sexuality. Indeed, there are many scenes and arrangements in this play that imply sexuality. The well usually symbolizes female sexuality. The water of immortality is a commonly accepted symbol of carnal enjoyment. The old man has more to do with sterility; he is weary of his fate and asks why the guardian does not respond to him: "Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you say/'Are you not weary gathering those sticks?/Are not your fingers cold?" (CPY 138). Cuchulain does not do any better. He too fails in his pursuit of sexual powers and fertility; when the well fills up, the guardian begins to dance and makes Cuchulain leave the well.

As William M. Northcutt argues:

If we understand the men's quest to be partly sexual in nature, then we see that their efforts to dominate the scene sexually have been futile. The guardian's

pantomime of their character traits is a way of mocking their feeble attempts at sexual domination and of asserting the hawk's actual domination of the males.
(160)

The hawk is one manifestation of the Sidhe as explained in the play, as well as a symbol of woman as a destroyer. Even though Cuchulain does not actually drink from the well, because he looks directly into the hawk's eyes, he is doomed to suffer from the curse of the hawk. The old man warns him:

Never to win a woman's love and keep it;
Or always to mix hatred in the love;
Or it may be that she will kill your children,
That you will find them, their throats torn and bloody,
Or you will be so maddened that you kill them
With your own hand. (CPY 141)

The consequence is shown in the play On Baile's Strand, in which Cuchulain mistakenly kills his son.

However, the difference between the old man and the young man is that after Cuchulain sees that the well is filled up and again dried, he will not listen to the old man and stays around the well to wait for its next filling up. His resolution is shown in that when he hears that Aoife's host is aroused, he is ready to fight them and live a mortal life instead of becoming immortal.

What William Northcutt does not mention is that Cuchulain's pursuit symbolizes human efforts in fulfilling themselves, which is always a process of fighting and failure. Although people cannot attain immortality, and they suffer the punishment while they

pursue it, they are rewarded with enlightenment. This process is circular too, because enlightenment on the other hand brings about the knowledge of human limitations, which is explained by the musicians at the end of the play: “folly alone I cherish/I choose it for my share/Being but a mouthful of air” (CPY 144).

Some critics relate the sexual aspects of At the Hawk's Well to Yeats's personal life. They contend that the young man is intended to reflect Yeats's pursuit of Maud Gonne, for their relationship tormented Yeats for decades. When Yeats wrote At the Hawk's Well, he was fifty-two years old. For a better part of his life, he had devoted his love to Maud Gonne. But he had got no reciprocation. The futile efforts of the old man symbolize Yeats's fruitless love; he was attracted to her and proposed to her countless times, and ended up with nothing.

In At the Hawk's Well, the old man and Cuchulain represent the different positions of the same life cycle. The old man is who Cuchulain is going to be, and the young Cuchulain is the old man in his youth. While the old man, fifty years of age, about the same age as Yeats when he wrote the play, was full of disappointment, the young Cuchulain was courageous, straightforward just like the young Yeats when he met Maud Gonne in 1888. There is no doubt that he fell in love at first sight. However, because they disagreed in politics and arts, they had constant quarrels.

Many critics have pointed out “an identity between the length of time the Old Man has been waiting at the well and Yeats's age at the writing of this play. Yeats's life is reflected in his work, but it seems ... as true that the thinking that went into his work changed his life. In the two years following the writing of the play, Yeats proposed again to Maud Gonne” (Schmitt 510). The quest can be seen in terms of Cuchulain's pursuit

of mortality: “It would seem that Yeats had indeed learned to express the idea that life was for the living and that whatever there was of paradise was here and now for those who chose to achieve it” (510). Many critics have pointed out “an identity between the length of time the Old Man has been waiting at the well and Yeats’s age at the writing of this play. Yeats’s life is reflected in his work, but it seems ... as true that the thinking that went into his work changed his life. In the two years following the writing of the play, Yeats proposed again to Maud Gonne” (Schmitt 510). The quest can be seen in terms of Cuchulain’s pursuit of mortality: “It would seem that Yeats had indeed learned to express the idea that life was for the living and that whatever there was of paradise was here and now for those who chose to achieve it” (510).

The young Yeats’s infatuation is represented by Cuchulain’s being entranced by the hawk. Like young Yeats, who did not listen to his father’s disapproval of Maud Gonne, Cuchulain refuses the old man’s warning not to look into the hawk’s eyes. He says:

I will stand here and wait. Why should the luck
Of Sualtim’s son desert him? For never
Have I had long to wait for anything....
My luck is strong.... (CPY 140)

The old man’s warning foretells Cuchulain’s killing his own son and being revenged by his lover. The warning also implies Yeat’s own misfortune in his love experience.

While one can clearly find repercussions of Yeats’s own problems with sexuality and specifically his relationships with Maud Gonne in this play, it seems possible too that

Yeats is also interested in experimenting with visual art in the context of his personal life.

As Kathleen M. Vogt argues:

Yeats took a bold step in At the Hawk's Well. He built the center of his new play out of tangible images. A thorn tree, a gesticulating warrior, and a dancer represented his major characters. And their situation, the situation of the play, was similarly expressed through the medium of look and gesture. No wonder critics came to hunt allegories! But sights, presences, tangible representations of conditions, rather than disguised meanings, seem to have been what Yeats had in Mind.(320)

At the Hawk's Well also touches such themes as immortality and the turning away from it to embrace life and its "tragic ecstasy" (507). As Natalie Crohn Schmitt points out: "The significance of the play lies not in its style alone, but in the fact that with it, for the first time, Yeats finds a suitable means for the representation of the experience of immortality..." (501)

The Only Jealousy of Emer immediately follows At the Hawk's Well, which was written in 1918, and first published in 1919 in Two Plays for Dancers. According to Birgit Bjersby, the story is based on the old saga "The sickbed of Cuchulain and the only Jealousy of Emer" (45).

One focus of the play is Cuchulain's loss of consciousness. In the saga, Cuchulain tries to catch two chained birds but fails, goes to sleep and is transported to the other world where he meets the immortal Siddhe. In the play, however, the story is dramatized in a totally different context. After he realizes that he has killed his own son, Cuchulain

fights with the deathless sea, and wades out and is drowned. In this play, Emer actually gives an account of this event:

Towards noon in the assembly of the kings,

He met with one who seemed a while most dear.

...

He drove him out and killed him on the shore.

At Baile's tree, and he who was so killed

Was his own son begot on some wild woman

...

he fought with deathless sea. (CPY 186)

Sad that he is unconscious and yet sure that he is not dead, Emer calls over Cuchulain's mistress Eithne Inguba, hoping she could awaken Cuchulain. She says: "Of all the people in the world we two/And we alone, may watch together here/Because we have loved him best" (CPY 186).

In The Only Jealousy of Emer, Emer is a positive figure who attracts much sympathy. On the one hand, she is more human, and specifically more caring than Fand of the Sidhe; she loves Cuchulain and she still remembers the night when they got married, while Fand needs Cuchulain because she wants to be complete. On the other hand, Emer is more modest, and less pretentious than Eithne Inguba. That is why she knows that she will save Cuchulain's life by disclaiming her love for him, and yet she says nothing about it, and lets Eithne Inguba brag about her power to restore Cuchulain to life.

Emer's resolution to save Cuchulain comes from her fear of the other world. As Rosalind E. Clark explains: "the whole Otherworld has become less familiar and more alien" as compared to that in the original version of the story, "Serglige Con Culainn." And therefore, the otherworld is "the place Cuchulain must avoid at all costs, since if he went there he would lose his humanity and never return" (44-45). No doubt the otherworld is full of danger and uncertainty in Emer's mind. This explains why Emer would sacrifice her love in return for his life. Moved by Emer's sacrifice, Clark notes, "the play becomes her play. We are overwhelmed with sympathy for her, as she makes the decision to renounce Cuchulain's love"(45).

Aside from the caring and the good nature of Emer, she comes across in this play as more noble than Eithne Inguba and Fand. As Clark points out, "She (Fand) is referred to as a 'statue' and her appearance is metallic. She longs for Cuchulainn's love but only because without it she is 'not complete'" (45). Clark also notes that Eithne Inguba is a minor figure. Complementary to Clark's views are those of Sister Aloyse Scanlon, who emphasizes the contrast between Emer and Eithne Inguba.

The frail beauty of the lone sea-bird suggests the loveliness of the noble tragic heroine, Emer, tossed and turned between the decision to yield her Cuchulain to death, or forever to renounce his love.... In sharp contrast to the fragile beauty of the "white bird" soaring above the sea... this [the] unserviceable thing, the brittle pale shell is symbolic of Eithne Inguba.... [She] is linked with all that is ominous in the sea, the "vast troubled waters," the "loud sands," "the storm in the black of night." All that is contrary to the nobility of Emer is revealed of Eithne Inguba in the Musicians' cry.... (275)

The story, however, would be too simple if it only glorified the noble sacrifice of Emer. In fact, the figures both merge and oppose one another. Emer is the life in Cuchulain because he could not survive without her. Although they are one, they cannot be together because they are opposites. One has to be isolated from the other so that both can remain alive. Taking an alchemical view, Bettina L. Knapp notes,

Terrestrial love incarnated in Emer fluctuates and is subject to change...

Emer is the brutal light of reality. It is she who feels the bitterness of consciousness, the tears of sorrow, the disappointment of loss....It is she, as a projection of Cuchulain's anima—the life force within him—who struggles to choose the best course to follow, who is made lucid by the dichotomy Bricriu makes visible to her. Emer has gained insight into Cuchulain's psyche through opposition in life. (464)

While Emer's positive role should be emphasized, Cuchulain's struggle should not be neglected. In the context of the story, Cuchulain has to choose between the earthly plain love offered by Emer and Eithne Inguba, and the immortal love of Fand. The temptation is rejected with the help of Emer, and yet if considered from the previous perspective, it is he who makes the hard choice. As Knapp argues,

The ghost of Cuchulain must choose between the atemporal realm of bliss and the temporal realm of suffering. He is no longer the young man of past glories—the youthful dreamer, the idealist, the poet. His misdeeds have wrought havoc upon his soul.... (459)

Therefore, this play combines and contrasts the love that is temporary with that which is immortal, and yet Yeats does not simplify things. He further points out the

falsity of the immortal love and the desirability of the earthly love. Portraying Cuchulain in this confusing situation, Yeats endows him with the power to tell and to choose.

The Death of Cuchulain is Yeats's last play. It was written in late 1938 and early 1939, and was published in 1939. On the surface, this story describes how Cuchulain bravely faces his death. Yet the major focus of the play is the Irish rebellion for independence, especially the Easter Rebellion of 1914. In this play Yeats explores and compares the significance of the success with the failure of the uprising.

According to Birgit Bjersby, "The play is a rather free variation on the theme of the old saga, called 'The Great Fall of Mag Muirthemne of the Death of Cuchulain'"(52). In the legend, Maeve commands a huge army, and with the help of the three daughters of Calatin, a man killed by Cuchulain, finally defeats and kills Cuchulain. The situation seems very unfavorable to Cuchulain because the forces with him are small. Yet despite the fact that Cuchulain realizes that the message Eithne Inguba sends him that he should go out and fight is false, he does not change his mind and so at last he fights and is defeated and mortally wounded.

Critics' opinions differ on the characters and their relationship in this play. Phillip L. Marcus points out, "The early Irish tales do not form a single unified work, and what happens in one is not necessarily consistent with the events of others"(135). This point is valid when you consider that the Irish folk literature is kind of salvaged from the ruins. There are different versions of the same story, and Yeats is perhaps free to take and revise them while writing his own play, and in fact that is what he does.

For example, the figure of Morigue is quite a complex one. Marcus argues that Morigue does not intend to kill Cuchulain, and in fact she is not one of the conspirators.

Marcus thinks that the words from Morigue, “Certainly I can [harm you].... I am guarding your deathbed, and I shall be guarding it henceforth...” can be understood as saying “It is protecting thee I was, am and will be” (qtd in “Myth and Meaning” 135). Marcus also perceives Morigue’s appearance in front of Eithne Inguba as meant not to harm Cuchulain, but instead, to warn him not to fight. Another argument Marcus uses is: “...Lady Gregory’s account says that when Cuchulain’s charioteer went to get his master’s chariot he found it unyoked, ‘and it was the Morrigue had unyoked it and had broken it the night before, for she did not like Cuchulain to go out and to get his death in the battle” (137).

Marcus’s views are interesting in that he offers a unique perspective on the hatred of Cuchulain’s enemies. Yet he may need to pay more close attention to the social context which Yeats emphasizes. The singer refers directly to events of the 1916 rebellion: “What stood in the Post Office/With Pearse and Connolly?” Yeats compares the rebellion to the death fight of Cuchulain. When we look into the event and the play, we see many similarities between the two. The Easter Rebellion was started by a small group and for lack of strength, it was doomed to fail. That is one of the reasons why Yeats does not quite approve of the violence. However, Yeats sees that despite the failure, the bloodshed, the uprising is an outburst of the Irish national spirit.

In The Death of Cuchulain, Yeats expresses his personal opinion when he compares Cuchulain, the harlot, and the beggerman. Carmel Jordan explains the significance of the word “harlot”: “...Yeats is using a term that has been used by other Irish poets before him to symbolize the defilement of Ireland under British rule.....Yeats uses the image of the Harlot in the play to suggest the tendency of some of the modern

Irish to betray the spiritual ideals for which the Rebellion was fought” (62). In fact, the figure of the harlot at the end of the story is used to represent the servile mental state which is based on calculation and is considered by Yeats to be vulgar.

For most part of the story, Yeats describes Cuchulain’s lack of strategy. The last scene of the blind man cutting Cuchulain’s head emphasizes that in earthly value, Cuchulain’s death is worthless. Yet despite the unworthiness, there is a positive side to the fight; it is probably nobler to die that way than to live a meager life like a beggar or a harlot. Thus we might say that although Yeats strongly disagrees with the violent rebellion of Easter 1916, he appreciates the bravery and so he writes this play and his poem “Easter 1916.”

Compared to Cuchulain, who fights fortune to achieve his noble ending, the other characters seem like more earthly beings because they are the ones who calculate, and try to win Cuchulain through tricks. Yeats does not give them credit because they represent the vulgarity that he thinks Ireland should throw away.

Cuchulain’s life after death is the focus of the poem “Cuchulain Comforted.” Having being a hero in his lifetime, Cuchulain has to share the world after death with the spirits of cowards. They have to do the same thing together. Dorothy Wellesley gives an account of Yeats’s motivation in composing this poem. Yeats had a dream about a wounded warrior and his conversation with the shrouds. “This dream of January the 7th, 1939, gives exactly the content of the poem ‘Cuchulain Comforted’” (Interpretation 51).

This poem best illustrates Yeats’s use of the masks in his plays. Cuchulain is a great warrior when he lives. He would rather die than compromise. He would rather do something by himself and fail than to ask someone else to do it for him. However, when

he dies, he becomes like the shrouds. The shrouds are collective beings; “We thread the needles’ eyes and all we do/All must together do” (Collected Poems 332). Also Cuchulain is a man of arms when he is alive, but he has to use the needle when he dies. This shows that the hero is changing from himself to his opposite.

The shrouds are all “Convicted cowards all by kindred slain/’or driven from home and left to die in fear” (332). Cuchulain’s being among them not only shows that cowards and heroes have the same ending, but also points out what is lacking in a hero. Being a hero, Cuchulain has to kill his own son, fight the invulnerable sea, and suffer a worthless death, and yet as one of the shrouds reminds him, “Your life can grow much sweeter if you will/Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud” (332).

Being one of the last poems Yeats wrote, “Cuchulain Comforted” unavoidably relates to the poet’s evaluation of his own activities in his life. To show that in the face of the immense power of fortune, his own struggle is meaningless.

Yeats's self-writing is obvious in the Cuchulain cycle. The Cuchulain he creates is a human figure rather than a perfect hero with supernatural power. There are times that Cuchulain achieves great successes, and yet, there are also times that he suffers agonizing losses. He is a fighting figure who, despite failure or even death, will continue his struggle. Cuchulain is intended to explain the different choices of people, and thus the different outcomes. Cuchulain could have chosen to live peacefully and yield whenever he needed to, but he despised living like one with "speckled shin." Instead, he chose to struggle although he suffered extreme torture and a terrible death.

In the specific social context, Yeats endowed Cuchulain with great symbolic significance because he was trying to inspire the Irish people with a heroic spirit.

However, as I just discussed, he did not intend to tell explicitly what the people should do, because to do so is not a poet's role. He uses Cuchulain's life and death to explain the gain and loss a hero will experience, and implies that the Irish nation may face similar choices too.

The figure of Cuchulain has philosophical significance too. He is not unaware of the troubles he will encounter while being a hero. He is clear about his death before his last fight. He has already been warned of the ensuing danger before he looks into the hawk's eyes. However he still does not give up his struggle. He would rather fight on and accept what fate has for him. On the one hand, Cuchulain seems unwise, while on the other, he is a natural being. When he dies, he sews his shroud and becomes indistinguishable from the cowards and deserters. He is hence resigned to his fate. This ironical ending seems in keeping with Buddhist thought, which claims that we come from the void and return to the void. But in giving the "comforted" Cuchulain the "throat" of a singing bird, Yeats also emphasizes the immortality of his hero and the artist's continued struggle to sing, a singing which endures long after the gap between the self and the mask has closed in death.

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