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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Folklore and Myth on Stage:

A Comparison of Their Use in Revival and Contemporary Irish Drama

Funkce mýtických a folklorních prvků v irském dramatu

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

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Abstract of the Thesis

The topic of this thesis is the use of mythology and folklore in Irish drama from the era of the Irish National Revival and the contemporary period. It focuses closely just on two plays, *The Countess Cathleen* by William Butler Yeats, representing the Revival period, and *At the Black Pig's Dyke* by Vincent Woods, representing the contemporary era.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The introductory chapter explains how the terms folklore and mythology are defined and used in the thesis. It also provides some basic background to Irish culture and literature.

The second chapter presents the events that conditioned the development in Ireland until the end of the nineteenth century, describing the circumstances that led to the Irish National Revival.

The third chapter is dealing with the life of W. B. Yeats, his involvement in the Revival, and also the sources of his inspiration and motivation for writing. Another focal point of this chapter is *The Countess Cathleen*, its background, origin, reception, and the folklore and mythological elements it contains.

In the fourth chapter, a short account of the changes in Irish drama during the last hundred years is given. It focuses on some of the events that had a direct impact not only on the life in Ireland, but also on the modern Irish literature, including Vincent Woods's *At the Black Pig's Dyke*.

The fifth chapter deals with this play and its author in more detail, attempting to explore these two subjects in a similar way as the third chapter examines Yeats and *The Countess Cathleen*.

Finally the last chapter attempts to briefly compare the above-mentioned plays, and show how they differently approach the vehicle of mythology and folklore in disparate political contexts.

Abstrakt bakalářské práce

Cílem této práce je porovnání užívání mytologických a folklorních prvků v irském dramatu z doby irského národního obrození a současnosti. Jelikož téma je samo o sobě velmi rozsáhlé a jeho podrobné zpracování by vyžadovalo rozsah několikanásobně větší, rozhodl jsem se zaměřit pouze na dvě hry, *The Countess Cathleen* od W. B. Yeatse, která reprezentuje éru obrození a *At the Black Pig's Dyke* od Vincenta Woodse, která reprezentuje současnou dramatickou tvorbu.

Rozhodnutí pro výběr zrovna těchto dvou her má své opodstatnění z několika důvodů. Za prvé, mezi oběma hrami jsou nápadné podobnosti, jako například fakt, že obě jsou dramatickými prvotinami (standardní délky) svých autorů, a nebo že jejich uvedení vyvolalo ostré diskuse. Za druhé, obě hry také mají společný centrální motiv související s černým vepřem z irské mytologie.

Hry jsou předkládány jak v historickém, tak kulturním kontextu, aby se tak usnadnilo pochopení klíčových prvků v nich obsažených a zároveň usnadnilo závěrečné srovnání Yeatsova a Woodsova užití mytologie a folklóru.

Práce je rozdělená na šest kapitol. Hlavním účelem úvodní kapitoly je vysvětlení, jak bude nakládáno s mytologickými a folklorními prvky, a zároveň poskytnout krátký úvod k irské kultuře a literatuře obecně.

V následující kapitole se pokouším krátce představit události, které měly zásadní vliv na vývoj v Irsku a irské společnosti, v rozsahu od 16. až do konce 19. století. Rovněž popisují okolnosti, které přispěly či přímo vedly ke vzniku snah o národní obrození.

Třetí kapitola pojednává o kapitolách ze života W. B. Yeatse, o inspiraci pro jeho uměleckou práci a angažovanosti okolo irského národního obrození. Dalším ústředním bodem této kapitoly je vlastní hra *The Countess Cathleen*, ke které uvádím pozadí jejího vzniku, její přijetí veřejností a především se zabírám popisem folklorních a mytologických prvků v ní obsažených.

Čtvrtá kapitola je jakousi protiváhou ke kapitole druhé. V krátkosti v ní popisují změny které irské drama prodělalo v posledních sto letech a jak se současná dramatická tvorba liší od té obrozenecké. Zároveň také popisují některé události z irských dějin, které

přímo či nepřímo ovlivnily irskou literaturu a hlavně druhou klíčovou hru, *At the Black Pig's Dyke*.

Pátá kapitola se zabývá právě touto hrou a jejím autorem, Vincentem Woodsem. V podstatě se jedná o pojednání obdobné tomu, které je v kapitole třetí, s tím rozdílem, že není kladen takový důraz na životopisné detaily Vincenta Woodse, o kterém oproti Yeatsovi ani není sepsáno tolik kvalitních zdrojů. Důraz na seznámení se s okolnostmi vzniku hry, jejího přijetí veřejností a popis folklorních a mytologických prvků však zůstává zachovaný.

V závěrečné kapitole krátce srovnávám obě hry a snažím se ukázat, v čem spočívají odlišnosti ve využití folklorních a mytologických prvků u obou autorů.

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Chapter One – Introduction

1.1 Outline

The focus of this thesis is the use of mythology and folklore in Irish drama from the era of the Irish National Revival and the contemporary period. As an exhaustive exposition of this topic would require an extent of a book of many hundred pages, I decided to focus closely just on two plays, *The Countess Cathleen* by William Butler Yeats, representing the Revival period, and *At the Black Pig's Dyke* by Vincent Woods, representing the contemporary era. The decision to pick just these two plays is justifiable for a couple of reasons. First, both the plays share some interesting similarities, such as being the first full-length dramatic pieces written by both the authors, as well as causing some controversies. Second, they also share the central motive of the Black Pig's Dyke or the Black Pig's Valley, respectively.

The plays are presented in both historical and cultural context to enable a better understanding of the key elements present in them and facilitate the concluding comparison of Yeats's and Woods's use of folklore and mythology.

1.2 Organization and Methodology

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The main purpose of the introductory chapter is to explain how I will be dealing with folklore and mythology, as well as to provide some basic background to Irish culture and literature.

In the following chapter, I am briefly presenting the events that conditioned the development in Ireland until almost the end of the nineteenth century, and describing the circumstances that led to the Irish National Revival.

The third chapter is dealing with the life of W. B. Yeats, his involvement in the Revival, and also the sources of his inspiration and motivation for writing. Another focal point of the third chapter is *The Countess Cathleen*; I am providing the background for the play, describing how it came to existence, as well as how it was received, and last, but not least, exploring the numerous folklore and mythological elements in the play.

In the fourth chapter, I am trying to supply a counterweight to the second chapter; I am giving a short account of the changes in Irish drama during the last hundred years, as well as focusing on some of the events that had a direct impact not only on the life in Ireland, but

also on the modern Irish literature, including the second play of interest, Vincent Woods's *At the Black Pig's Dyke*.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to this very play and its author, attempting to explore these two subjects in a similar way as the third chapter examines Yeats and *The Countess Cathleen*. There are of course some limitations to this given by the relative scarcity of quality sources on Woods compared to Yeats, but the pattern of making a survey of the background of the play, its origin and reception is preserved.

Finally the last chapter attempts to briefly compare the above-mentioned plays, and show how they differently approach the vehicle of mythology and folklore in disparate political contexts.

1.3 On Folklore and Mythology

Both folklore and mythology have been an inseparable part of the history of the mankind. They have been a source not only of entertainment and wisdom, but also of inspiration for many works of art since the dawn of civilisation. The presence of mythological or folkloric background is obviously seen in various artistic creations, from sculptures and ceramics to songs and dramatic pieces.

However, before we start to occupy ourselves with mythology and folklore in more detail, it must be noted that even though these two are commonly associated together, they are in fact two distinctive subjects and also two separate scholarly disciplines. Interestingly, the terms mythology and folklore are often linked together not only among the general public, but also among academics.¹ Whereas in the eighteenth century, mythology was a separate science and folklore was an interdisciplinary subject, throughout the twentieth century the situation turned around. Folklore has achieved the status of a separate, independent discipline, and mythology has become a complementary subject of anthropology, literature or theology.²

The fact that these two disciplines have been linked together is not without a cause, however. If we take a close look at the definitions of these two subjects, mythology being 'a collection of myths, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition'³, in other words a collection of 'sacred or religious tale[s] whose content is concerned with the

¹ Richard M. Dorson, "Mythology and Folklore", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (1973) 107.

² Dorson, 107.

³ "mythology noun", *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Angus Stevenson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

origins or creation of natural, supernatural, or cultural phenomena'⁴, and folklore being a collection of 'traditions, customs and beliefs of people'⁵ or from a different perspective, 'the cultural products and traditions of peasant or other premodern societies'⁶, we can see that both of them cover some rather large common ground.

As I will be dealing with topics that fall both into the field of study of folklore and mythology, I saw as necessary to specify what approach I am going to use, and from which discipline's perspective I am going to be looking at them. In the end I chose not to separate these two disciplines, mythology and folklore, from each other very strictly in this thesis, even though it is technically not entirely correct to link them together, as I mentioned above. I have taken this decision mainly for simplicity's sake, and in order to avoid unnecessary complexity of some of the topics.

1.4 Briefly on Ireland's History, Literature and Culture

For being rather a small country, Ireland has certainly attired a lot of interest throughout the world. There are many reasons for it being so, but those can be divided into three basic groups. First, there is a group I classify as geographical reasons. The mention of Ireland often evokes a romantic rural image of green pastures and mountains, rough coastlines as well as bleak bogs. Even though the awareness of this ideal is still quite widespread, thanks chiefly to the Irish themselves, who nurtured it for a long time, the image of Ireland as a rural idyll begins to wane slightly. Starting at the end of the twentieth century, the preference shifted towards a different representation. Ireland prefers to be seen as a successful centre of the post-industrial, computer-centric world, a cosmopolitan country that is a melting pot of different cultures and nationalities, leaving the romantic image behind as a kitschy sight for tourists⁷.

The second group comprises cultural and literary reasons. Ireland has a relatively small population, but both its history and present are full of significant literary figures. The tradition of literature and letters has been sustained for a long time, which can be best shown by mentioning some of the names: Bishop Berkley and Jonathan Swift, Oliver Goldsmith and Edmund Burke, Thomas Moore and Maria Edgeworth, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard

⁴ "myth", *A Dictionary of Sociology*, John Scott and Gordon Marshall, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵ "folklore", *World Encyclopedia*. Philip's, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. 21 June 2011 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t142.e4196>>

⁶ "folklore", *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. Craig Calhoun, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷ Joe Cleary, Claire Connolly, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) xiii.

Shaw, James Joyce and W. B. Yeats, Sean O’Casey and Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice and Seamus Heaney, Elizabeth Bowen, John McGahern and many others. There are of course also other parts of Irish cultural heritage of significance. Ireland and the Irish are well known for their songs and music and also traditions and folklore⁸.

The last but no least is a group of historical and political reasons. Ireland’s history is in many aspects very fascinating and also extremely eventful. Already the pre-Christian historical period draws a lot of attention. This trend appeared notably at the end of the 19th century, when the ancient Ireland and its traditions served as a source of inspiration and national pride for the revivalists. However this interest in the Celts, their traditions and mysticism can be also observed to be revived to a certain degree and gaining on popularity as of late, thanks mainly to different neo-pagan movements and a general desire of people for discovering of the mystical⁹. Despite its great importance, it would be quite wrong to assume that it is mainly the ancient history that made Ireland famous. It is mainly the turbulent events of the late middle ages, the early modern period, and subsequent eras that helped to shape Ireland and the Irish to become the land and the nation that we know today. I am speaking of a colourful history of conquest and wars, repressions and rebellions, of a catastrophic famine and a subsequent diaspora, and last but not least, the lengthy struggle for independence whose aftermath is still evident in the form of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the so-called ‘Troubles’¹⁰, seen as finished by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, but still not resolved in its heart¹¹.

These reasons, that helped to make Ireland famous, are inter-connected to a great extent. Ireland’s geography and history have notably influenced Irish literature and culture, and at the same time Irish culture and literature significantly helped to shape Ireland’s history. For this reason it is not really possible to study Irish literature or culture on its own without the relevant historic context if one wants to understand it correctly and apprehend the background reasons and influences that formed it.

⁸ Cleary, Connolly, xiv.

⁹ A good example would be the book *The Magic of the Celtic Gods and Goddesses* by authors Carl McColman and Kathryn Hinds, published in 2005.

¹⁰ Cleary, Connolly, xiii.

¹¹ "‘Troubles, the’" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Chapter Two – Historical Context

2.1 History of English Domination in Ireland

As I mentioned above, context is crucial for correct understanding of Irish Literature and culture. For that reason I will briefly outline the principal facts and events that conditioned both the historic and the cultural development in Ireland and are relevant to the topic.

The first and extremely important matter concerns the relations between the Irish and the English. Problems between the two said nationalities and their countries have a long history, but became of real importance in the 16th century. It was at that time that Ireland became a security threat for the Tudor kings and queens.¹ England's worries were based on several facts: First, a very prominent one, was the difference in religion. Unlike the two remaining kingdoms of the realm, England and Scotland, most of Ireland remained Catholic after the reformation initiated by Henry VIII. This of course made Ireland a potential ally of England's archenemies of the time, France and Spain. It was therefore a matter of national security for the English to control Ireland.²

The tight grip on Ireland was maintained with the help of colonization and warfare. The afore-mentioned began in the early 17th century as a result of the 1603 defeat of Ulster Gaelic lords. Their lands were declared forfeit to the English Crown, and subsequently colonized, or 'planted', by Protestant settlers from either England or Scotland.³ This so-called Plantation of Ulster helped the English gain control of Ulster, as well as gaining a Protestant majority in the Irish parliament⁴.

As for military actions, probably the most significant event of the 17th century in this respect is the Williamite War, and the resulting defeat of the last Catholic king of England, James II, by his son-in-law William III, also known as William of Orange⁵. The Williamite victory was followed by enactment of anti-Catholic legislation known as Penal Laws, which not only required public figures such as MPs, lawyers and other office-holders to publicly renounce Catholic doctrines, but also prohibited Catholics from keeping weapons or horses

¹ Richard Killeen, *Short history of Modern Ireland* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003) 1.

² Killeen, 1.

³ Killeen, 3.

⁴ Hiram Morgan "Ulster plantation" *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, S. J. Connolly, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ Killeen, 1.

worth more than 5£⁶, among other things. These events confirmed Protestant dominance in Ireland⁷. As a result, Ireland was ruled by a small elite that became later known as the Ascendancy, for almost the whole of 18th century. The Ascendancy consisted of English families of Anglican faith, and made up a very small portion of the population.⁸

The thwarted 1798 rising of the United Irishmen whose aim was establishing of the long wished-for non-sectarian Irish Republic instead led to tightening of the English control over Ireland. The resulting Act of Union effectively ended the existence of Ireland as a separate entity and the English supremacy in Ireland thus remained in existence till the early 20th century⁹.

2.2 Anglicizing of Ireland

Such conditions obviously led to Anglicizing of the Irish population. As the ruling class was English, the English culture and language were gaining bigger and bigger importance, and made the middle class follow suit shortly after. English was necessary for trading, and the British degree that forced schools funded by the government to teach only in English deepened the crisis of the Irish language even more.¹⁰ The Irish culture, customs and language were preserved among the poorest part of the population who held onto the tradition of their ancestors. This situation was however soon to change.

2.3 The Great Hunger and its Aftermath

The Irish language and traditions suffered a heavy blow in the middle of the 19th century. At that time, the poor people depended on potatoes as their chief source of food.¹¹ In 1845, the plants all over the country succumbed to the potato blight fungus¹², which resulted in devastation of the crop and reducing the yields first by one third, and by destructive four fifths the following year. Such a wipeout of the main food supply resulted in a steep elevation

⁶ "Penal Laws" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ "Williamite War" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸ Killeen, 1.

⁹ Killeen, 9, 12, 14.

¹⁰ R. Todd Felton, *Journey into Ireland's Literary Revival* (Berkeley: Roaring Forties Press, 2007) 9.

¹¹ Angela Bourke, "The Baby and the Bathwater: Cultural Loss in Nineteenth-Century Ireland", *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, Tadhg Foley and Sean Ryder, eds. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 79.

¹² Bourke, 79.

of food prices, and also a huge famine that affected about a half of the population. The Famine, also known as the Great Hunger, lasted till 1848.¹³

The immediate outcome of the Famine was obviously starvation, but the lack of proper diet and other conditions related to the situation also resulted in many serious illnesses, scurvy and typhus being the most prominent ones. The death toll brought about by these causes was estimated to be as high as one million people, reducing the population by about one fifth. Many also chose to escape the Famine by emigrating to Britain, America or even Australia.¹⁴

As the people affected the most by the Famine, poor and often illiterate peasants, were for the most part bearers of the Irish traditions and also Irish speakers, their death or exodus had a far-reaching cultural impact. The English-speaking middle class quickly filled in the empty space that emerged as a result of the devastation of the peasant class. The aftermath of this was a decline of usage of the Irish language, and also deterioration and loss of popularity of traditional Irish cultural elements, such as folklore, storytelling or fairy belief¹⁵.

2.4 The Difficult Path to the Revival

Such a disaster, as the Great Hunger undeniably was, had a substantial impact on life in Ireland. It considerably affected the country's demographics, and played a major role in matters of not only culture, but also politics, and changed the way the concepts of Irishness and Irish national identity were seen. Some years later, this situation began to provoke responses from Ireland's politicians, men of letters and intelligentsia in general. The efforts for making changes started to gain momentum in the 1870s with the person of Charles Stewart Parnell. He became a MP in 1875¹⁶, and ranked among the biggest supporters of the Home Rule, an endeavour whose aim was to achieve a political emancipation of Ireland. He soon became one of Ireland's most popular politicians and the leading voice of the movement.¹⁷ However, Parnell's personal as well as political life was toppled by a social scandal of his, an affair with a married woman, Katherine O'Shea. When Mrs. O'Shea got divorced later on, in 1890, Parnell was identified as being involved in breaking the marriage,

¹³ "Famine, the" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ E. Margaret Crawford, "Great Famine" *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, S. J. Connolly, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Bourke, 79, 83-84.

¹⁶ James Loughlin, "Parnell, Charles Stewart" *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, S. J. Connolly, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Felton, 7-8.

which resulted in condemnation by the conservative Catholic society. It also led to the loss of his public authority, and he eventually also lost control of the Irish Parliamentary Party and withdrew from the political and national scene.¹⁸

Even though the departure of Charles Stewart Parnell was a huge loss for Ireland's political scene, it had also some positive consequences. Most notably it caused his earlier supporters to shift the focus of their efforts away from pure politics to more cultural activities, putting the Irish national identity into the middle of the things.¹⁹ This is how the Irish National Revival was born.

2.5 The Importance of Douglas Hyde

One of the most eminent leaders of the Revival was Douglas Hyde, not just a cultural revivalist, but also a scholar and a poet. Later he became a politician as well, and most importantly he was elected the first president of Ireland in 1938²⁰.

For now, however, let us return back to the 1880s and 1890s, to the roots of the Revival and Dr. Hyde's role in it. Douglas Hyde studied at Trinity College in Dublin, where, being an Irish language aficionado, he joined the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language²¹. There he among others met W. B. Yeats, another person crucial to the Revival. In 1892 Hyde became the president of the Irish National Society founded in Dublin by Yeats in the same year²², and on 25 November he delivered his famous lecture "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland" to the society²³. During this speech, Hyde presented an analysis of Ireland's situation, criticised the status quo in the Irish society and attempted to offer a solution to these issues. He spoke strongly against the notion of West Britonism, 'the policy of favouring a close political or cultural connection between Ireland and Great Britain'²⁴, and also emphasized that the tendency of the Irish of adopting the English language and copying their behaviour and culture just for the sake of them being English is extremely foolish. Hyde observed that Ireland didn't prosper under the English rule, and saw its problems mainly in

¹⁸ Felton, 8.

¹⁹ Felton, 8.

²⁰ "Hyde, Douglas" *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, S. J. Connolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²¹ "Hyde, Douglas" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²² "literary revival" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²³ David Pierce, ed., *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 2.

²⁴ "West Briton, n." *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

not picking up the threads of the legacy left by their ancestors. He reminded his audience of Ireland's great past, and tried to appeal to the feeling of Irish national identity, praising the Gaelic and Celtic mythology, traditions and folklore and literature. 'The greatest stroke of all in our Anglicization'²⁵, as he described it, was however the loss of the national language, Irish Gaelic. Hyde saw this as the root of all problems, and believed that stopping of rotting of the language would be the first step in reversing the problems the Irish were experiencing.

This speech of Hyde's had an immense impact on the society and, as David Pierce describes it, '[it] acted as a clarion call which prompted some to join the Gaelic League [...] and learn Irish, and which prompted others such as Patrick Pearse into rethinking Hyde's message in political terms.'²⁶

Another important contribution of Dr. Hyde to the Revival was the co-founding of the aforementioned Gaelic League in 1893 together with Eoin MacNeill and Thomas O'Neill Russell among others²⁷. The main commitment of the league was to get the Irish language back to the Irish people, in line with the appeal Hyde made in his speech.

Restoration of the national language certainly became a crucial part of the revivalists' efforts. Another important component was the rebuilding of the national identity and self-awareness. The foundations to this endeavour were laid by the re-discovery of the Irish legends and folklore by the English-speaking part of the population. Most folklore and mythological writings were not translated from Gaelic into Irish until the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This enabled many of the Revival writers, most of whom did not have a good command of Gaelic, to use these themes.²⁸

²⁵ Douglas Hyde, "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland", *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, David Pierce, ed. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 6.

²⁶ Pierce, 2.

²⁷ "Gaelic League" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Russell K. Alspach, "The Use by Yeats and Other Irish Writers of the Folklore of Patrick Kennedy", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol 59 (Columbus: American Folklore Society, 1946) 404.

Chapter Three – W. B. Yeats and *The Countess Cathleen*

3.1 Yeats and his Diverse Life

The use of folklore and mythology in literature brings us back to the person of William Butler Yeats, one of the leaders of the Revival, and arguably the greatest artist of the movement¹. Yeats was a multifaceted person, a man of many faces. Perhaps the best description of his life and its nature is given by Richard Ellmann, who speaks of the disconnected images of

the nervous romantic sighing through the reeds of ‘eighties and ‘nineties and the worldly realist plain-speaking in the ‘twenties; the business man founding and directing Abbey Theatre by day, the wan young Celt haunting the twilight, and the occultist performing nocturnal incantations; [...] the dignified Nobel winner and Senator of the Irish Free State and their successors, the libidinous old man and the translator of the Upanishads².

I do not want to present a biographical recount of Yeats’s life any more than necessary; I will therefore focus mainly on those parts that made an impact on his work and writings the most.

Even though W. B. Yeats’s family was Protestant, his father, John Butler Yeats was better characterized as a sceptic and agnostic. Thanks to this influence, but also his own experience of narrow conventionality that he encountered in mainstream religion, Protestantism and Catholicism, young William rejected the traditional beliefs that were common in his era, both Christianity and scientific materialism.³ That does not however mean that he became an agnostic as his father did; instead, he sought fulfilment in more unorthodox beliefs.

During his studies, Yeats encountered many people who held similar opinions, and began to join various hermetical societies. He was also very interested in Theosophy, then popular mystical movement, and was not even afraid to experiment with magic, and participated regularly in spiritist séances. These spiritual impulses not only induced Yeats to start writing, but also affected his work to a high degree.⁴

¹ Alspach, 404.

² Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978) 1-2.

³ David Holdeman, *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

5.

⁴ Holdeman, 4-5.

Yeats also became more and more interested in Irish traditions and folklore, and began to look for answers to his spiritual and political questions in them. He felt, as David Holdeman describes it, that ‘the folk beliefs of Ireland’s western country people and [...] heroic myths of [Ireland’s] ancient Gaelic culture [...] preserved satisfying ways of life and eternal spiritual truths that had been threatened in modernized places like England.’⁵ This is very much reflected in Yeats’s writings, in his early works in particular.

3.2 Yeats’s Motivation

In his early years, Yeats felt that Ireland had been wronged by the British who often used depreciation of the Irish population as a form of justification for ruling over Ireland, a strategy they often used even in other parts of their empire. This lay mainly in the written representation of the Irish, either in newspapers or books, as well as their visual representation in pictures and cartoons, using the crudest of stereotypes. The Irish would usually be portrayed as either irrational or drunk and in many cases both. The purpose was to create an image of the Irish being simple savages who are not able to govern themselves, thus putting Britain into a position of a glorified saviour that is basically doing them a favour by ruling over them.⁶

Yeats attempted to make a stand against these unjust stereotypes by introducing his readers to ancient Celtic myths and legends, and also portraying Ireland as poetic and beautiful⁷. By this presentation of ancient and rural features of Ireland, Yeats was trying to give his homeland a new ground on which its new national identity could be based⁸. This trend can be very well seen in both Yeats’s poetry as well as dramatic works.

3.3 The ‘Celtic’ Element

As I mentioned above, as a youth, Yeats became interested in Celtic myths and legends in literature and besides using them as a source of inspiration he also wanted to pass them onto his readers, the best example of which would be his collection of writings of supernatural character, *The Celtic Twilight*. The collection was based on Yeats’s own field research of folklore and oral culture predominantly in county Sligo. R. F. Foster describes Yeats’s

⁵ Holdeman, 7.

⁶ Holdeman, 7.

⁷ Felton, 10.

⁸ Holdeman, 7.

conception as being ‘non-English, anti-materialist, anti-bourgeois, and connected to Theosophical and Rosicrucian symbolism, via Blake and Swedenborg’⁹.

Yeats endeavoured to redefine the question of the Irish identity, and often dealt with the idea of ‘Celticism’, and attempted to define the ‘Celtic’. This effort also led to this topic becoming the subject of several of Yeats’s lectures. The first one of these was the lecture “Nationality and Literature”, which he delivered on 19 May 1893. In this lecture, Yeats attempted to describe the relationship between literature and nationalist efforts, as well as ‘stressed the philosophical and anti-materialist side of ‘Celticism’’¹⁰, as Foster describes it. Another of his lectures was called ‘The Celtic Movement’, and was delivered on 4 December 1895. This talk was building directly on Dr. Hyde’s lecture “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland”, combining it with ideas of Ernest Renan. The resulting product was rationalizing the necessity of being Irish in Ireland, and emphasizing the Celtic ideals and devotion. This lecture later became the basis for Yeats’s important essay called “The Celtic Element in Literature”¹¹, published in the magazine *Cosmopolis*. In this essay, Yeats introduces the reader to the definitions provided by Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnolds, which bear notable similarities. Renan’s description of the Celtic race deals predominantly with ‘a realistic naturalism’, and ‘a love of nature for herself, a vivid feeling for her magic, commingled with the melancholy a man knows when he is face to face with her, and thinks he hears her communing with him about his origin and his destiny’. Arnold accepts this notion of passion for nature, imaginativeness and melancholy, but elaborates on them in more detail¹². Yeats on the other hand does not want to simply adopt these definitions, his view is engaged more with the influence of the Celtic element on literature and investigation of old literatures in general. He claims that ‘all folk literature has indeed a passion whose like is not in modern literature and music and art, except where it has come by some straight or crooked way out of ancient times’¹³. On the other hand, he notes that the Celtic tradition has had a special position among other ancient cultures: ‘[among] all the fountains of the passions and beliefs of ancient times in Europe, the Slavonic, the Finnish, the Scandinavian, and the Celtic, the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature’; he intensifies this notion even more by saying that ‘a more abundant fountain than any in

⁹ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life I*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 129.

¹⁰ Foster, 131.

¹¹ Foster, 187.

¹² W. B. Yeats, “The Celtic Element in Literature”, *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* (London: Penguin Group, 1993) 189.

¹³ Yeats, “The Celtic Element in Literature”, 194.

Europe, is being opened, the great fountain of Gaelic legends.’¹⁴ It is this ‘opening of the fountain’ which Yeats sees as the purpose of ‘The Celtic movement’.

3.4 The Countess Cathleen

There is one play that has a privileged position among Yeats’s early literary output. I am naturally speaking of *The Countess Cathleen*. It is Yeats’s first play, published in 1892 for the first time¹⁵. There are a number of things that make this play special. The fact that it is Yeats’s first theatrical play is certainly one of them. Even though one could probably quite successfully argue that every debut is of significance to the author, Yeats’s playwriting debut exceeds the usual expectations of the sort. Yeats was not quite satisfied with the first version, later on, in his own words, he described it as ‘ill-constructed, the dialogue turning aside at the lure of word of metaphor, very different, I hope, from the play as it is today after many alterations, every alteration tested by performance’¹⁶. These words already suggest that the play went through a very long evolution, and had to accommodate many changes. Jeffares and Knowland note that ‘his constant reworkings of it [...] demonstrate not only his painstaking apprenticeship to the craft of the playwright but also the special affection of a parent for the first-born’¹⁷. Speaking of a special affection is certainly to the point as Yeats himself confirmed that it gave him ‘more pleasure in the memory than any of [his] plays’¹⁸.

This pleasure Yeats is speaking of was probably based partly on the writing itself and the process of origin of the play. It was also partly anchored in the theme, which was very close to Yeats and to a certain degree reflected his own life, concerns and feelings.

One important impulse for writing the play was Yeats’s relationship with Maud Gonne. Gonne was a political activist who was not only rich, but also young and beautiful. When she, impressed by his poetry collection *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, decided to meet Yeats in 1889, he fell in love instantly.¹⁹ He decided to write *The Countess Cathleen* for her, hoping that she would play the title role.²⁰ Similarly like his affection towards Gonne, work on *The Countess Cathleen* was a lengthy matter. Yeats continued to

¹⁴ Yeats, “The Celtic Element in Literature”, 198-199.

¹⁵ “Countess Cathleen, The” *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Dramatis Personae* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1936) 186-7.

¹⁷ Norman A. Jeffares, A. S. Knowland, *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) 1.

¹⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1924) vi.

¹⁹ Holdeman, 12.

²⁰ Holdeman, 15.

seek Gonne's love as well as making changes to the play at intervals for well over next twenty years of his life^{21 22}.

3.4.1 Reception of the Play

It should be noted that the play received praise, mainly due to reviewers that were charmed by its style and Yeats's imagination, opposed to those that were dismayed by too many obscure references it included. *The Countess Cathleen* also managed to stir many controversies when it was produced in 1899.²³ Some went as far as calling it heretical and blasphemous. These were mainly people connected to the Catholic Church who did not approve of Yeats letting a woman who sold her soul to the devil escape the eternal damnation, and did not like the impious nature of language of the demons or of Shemus Rua²⁴.

The Countess Cathleen was one of the plays that were part of the first production of the Irish Literary Theatre²⁵, and its objectionability could by no means come as a surprise to Yeats, as the controversial nature was deliberately built up with a generous amount of help from George Russell and Yeats himself. Both gentlemen triggered a provocative debate on the nature of national drama in *Express*, a Dublin newspaper, which induced a man who had unsettled accounts with Yeats (by the name of Frank Hugh O'Donnell) to write a letter to the *Freeman's Journal*, and to start spreading it as a pamphlet against the play later on. The main argument used by the pamphlet (called "Souls for Gold") was an assertion that *The Countess Cathleen* was not only immoral, but also full of 'wild incoherencies... revolting blasphemies and idiotic impulses which sicken and astonish'²⁶; this was complemented by an accusation of misrepresenting the Irish peasant. Soon, a group of Catholic students followed suit and sent an open letter condemning the play for its immorality. The audience attending the opening was therefore largely influenced before they even had the chance to see the play; moreover, many spectators came with a clear purpose, either to defend the Catholic stance or to support the play and artistic freedom. The result was a performance accompanied by both cheering and expressions of disapproval, rendering the actual play very hard to hear. Even more fuel

²¹ Holdeman, 13.

²² Peter Ure, "The Evolution of Yeats's 'The Countess Cathleen'", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 57 No. 1 (1962) 14-15.

²³ Holdeman, 22.

²⁴ Jeffares, Knowland, 2, 4.

²⁵ Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Literaria Pragensia, 2006) 18.

²⁶ Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601 – 2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 118.

was added to the flame two days later by Cardinal Logue, who not only without hesitation, but also without seeing or reading it, condemned the play.²⁷

Some of the critics were more specific than the Cardinal. Catholic nationalists were especially disgruntled at the fact that the play depicted the aristocracy in the person of the Countess to be better than ordinary farmers. The notion of the nobility, associated with the Ascendancy and Protestantism, being superior was politically absolutely unacceptable for the Catholics; moreover, it opposed the Catholic doctrine that all people were equal in God's eyes. The objectionability of the play was made even stronger in the Catholic's eyes by evoking the memories of the Great Hunger and at the same time turning around the Ascendancy's failure to help the poor people.²⁸ The landlord (represented by the Countess), a figure traditionally hated in the standard version of the events, was thus becoming the saviour of her people, instead of being the villain. This was seen as particularly blasphemous from the point of view of the nationalist Irish history.²⁹ Last but not least, Yeats's decision to hire English actors for the opening night turned out to be a serious mistake, as they were not able to pronounce most of the Irish names correctly.³⁰

Yeats was forced to defend the depiction of Irish history that he presented in *The Countess Cathleen*, but he cleverly eluded it by claiming that his play was not relevant to the real life as it was intended to be purely symbolic³¹. Even though Yeats eventually won the battle by applying his witty strategy of shifting the debate to his own field, he realized that the 'correct' representation had become the preoccupation of both the critics and the audiences.³²

All the controversies and denouncing nevertheless proved to be very good advertising for the play. The protests have not done much harm, and the condemnation by the clergy had the effect of the proverbial forbidden fruit – people went to see it in great numbers. With time, the audience also learnt to tolerate the play, and so when it was revived in 1911, it did not cause any controversies any more.³³

²⁷ Pilný, 28.

²⁸ Pilný, 28-29.

²⁹ Morash, 119.

³⁰ Pilný, 31.

³¹ Pilný, 18, 29.

³² Pilný, 29.

³³ Pilný, 30.

3.4.2 Origins of the Play

Even though *The Countess Cathleen* and the changes made in it reflect parts of Yeats's life and his affection for Maud Gonne, the theme is not Yeats's original invention. It was derived from a story that Yeats came across in a London-Irish newspaper, and which he intended for one of his folklore anthologies³⁴. At first, Yeats mistakenly regarded the story 'to be indigenous west-of-Ireland folklore'³⁵. This exposed him to a severe criticism, and eventually brought him to learning the truth.³⁶ Yeats published the newly discovered information and gave a full account of how he came across the story in a note in the 1927 version of *Poems*³⁷:

I found the story of the Countess Cathleen in what professed to be a collection of Irish folklore in an Irish newspaper some years ago. I wrote to the compiler, asking about its source, but got no answer, but have since heard that it was translated from *Les Matinées de Timothé Trimm* a good many years ago, and has been drifting about the Irish press ever since.³⁸

Even though the French story is simpler and more straightforward than Yeats's version, the main motive of the countess (called Kathleen O'Shea in the Irish translation and Kitty O'Connor or even O'Donnor in the French version³⁹) saving starving people from merchants who are trading souls is fully present in it. But let us back to the origin of the story, because its roots reach much deeper than the French version.

The story, which Yeats refers to as a folk tale, legend, or even a parable, is reported to be actually Irish in the French version, and to be well known both in Dublin and Limerick, among Catholic girls preparing for the Communion as well as shepherds on the bank of the Blackwater⁴⁰. Birgit Bramsbäck notes that even though the story seems to be well rooted in Ireland, there are certain indices that point to it being originally a religious tale that was spread among poor Catholics. But as the matter has not been definitely resolved according to her, the primal origin of the story must remain only a subject of speculation⁴¹.

³⁴ Holdeman, 15.

³⁵ Birgit Bramsbäck, *Folklore and W.B. Yeats* (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1984) 15.

³⁶ Bramsbäck, 16.

³⁷ Jeffares, Knowland, 3.

³⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Poems* (London : T.F. Unwin (Ernest Benn), 1927).

³⁹ Bramsbäck, 16, 18.

⁴⁰ *The Countess Cathleen* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd.) 108.

⁴¹ Bramsbäck, 18.

3.4.3 Continuing Rewriting

As I have already mentioned, *The Countess Cathleen* had been subject to constant rewriting. Some scholars claim that there are as many as eleven versions of the play – 1892, 1895, 1899, 1901, 1907, 1908, 1912, 1913, 1921, 1923 and 1934; some of these versions are however disregarded when making comparisons, because after 1913 there are only small differences⁴². Let us finally have a closer look at these changes, which topics and themes they make more prominent, and how they reflect Yeats's sentiments and his life in general.

At the beginning, the play was supposed to be dramatic, rather than epic-lyric, and was to be Christian, not Pagan, dealing with moral emotions and personal feelings. It was intended to contrast with *The Wanderings of Oisín* that was inspired by the Pre-Christian cycle of legends. The contrast is probably to be seen best on the resolution of the inner conflict of both protagonists. Whereas Oisín refuses St. Patrick and his Christianity and instead chooses the Fenians, symbolising the pagan religion, the Countess's choice is reverse.⁴³

With later versions, however, the Pre-Christian elements are given more importance in the play. This is most notable on the role of the pagan poet Aleel, whose profile seems higher and higher with every version. In the 1892 version, the poet is not called Aleel, but Kevin, and does not make appearance until almost the end of the play.⁴⁴ He appears already in two acts in the 1895 version (which has three acts), in 1901 he is present in three acts. In the 1912 version Yeats restored the five-scene structure, and Aleel appeared in four of them. In the final version, he is present in every scene.⁴⁵ Such enlargement of his role not only brings the pagan elements he represents to the forefront, but also complicates the relatively simplistic original story by adding another dimension to it – 'the internal dilemma within her soul of the choice between responsibility on the one hand and on the other escape to the land of dreams,'⁴⁶ as Jeffares and Knowles put it.

Before we examine the development of Aleel's role in more detail, let us first have a brief look at the character of the Countess. In her character Yeats in a way depicts his own inner dilemma of choosing between leading a life of spiritual reverie or accepting

⁴² Bramsbäck, 18.

⁴³ Ure, 18.

⁴⁴ Holdeman, 16.

⁴⁵ Bramsbäck, 20.

⁴⁶ Jeffares, Knowland, 3.

responsibility and leading an active life⁴⁷. The role of the Countess also bears influence of Gonne on Yeats and his love for her. It is appropriate to mention that Yeats both read the unpublished version of *The Countess Cathleen* and dedicated the play to her⁴⁸.

Later on, with on-going changes in the play, the nature of the Countess seems to be changing from an image of Yeats himself towards a heroic portrayal of Maud Gonne⁴⁹. Even though this seems more than plausible, the claim being strengthened by a strange likeness of the Countess saving the starving peasants by selling her soul, and Gonne, campaigning on behalf of poor and hungry people living on the west coast of Ireland⁵⁰, Jeffares and Knowland warn us that we should be careful with strictly identifying Maud Gonne with the Countess, and that we should not limit ourselves only to that view. They claim it is more appropriate to regard her mainly as the antithesis to Oisín in *The Wanderings of Oisín*⁵¹.

Let us get back to the character of Aleel now. Similarly to the Countess becoming a stronger character that does not pray as much, but spends more time by giving orders, Aleel also becomes a much stronger persona in later editions. He functions as a counter-balance to Cathleen's protagonist, and strengthens the contrast between Christianity and the pagan values⁵², as I have already pointed out above. In later editions, Aleel does not meet the Countess and Oona in the woods, but travels with them from the beginning⁵³, and he also appears in a love scene between him and Cathleen, which highlights her dual loyalty, on one side to Christianity, represented by her servant Oona, and on the flip side to Aleel, who represents the pagan spirituality⁵⁴. In the strengthened character of Aleel, the play also gains more references and allusions to ancient Irish mythology, mainly in his visions⁵⁵, which I will look at in greater detail in the following passage.

⁴⁷ Holdeman, 15.

⁴⁸ Ure, 16.

⁴⁹ Ure, 18.

⁵⁰ Holdeman, 15.

⁵¹ Jeffares, Knowland, 6.

⁵² Holdeman, 16.

⁵³ Holdeman, 16.

⁵⁴ Holdeman, 15.

⁵⁵ Mary Helen Thuente, *W. B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1980) 240.

3.5 Folklore and Mythological Elements in *The Countess Cathleen*

3.5.1 The Poet

As we already know, the character of Aleel is not only a poet, but also a visionary. Probably the best example is to be found in scene III, where Aleel has a vision of the Irish pagan god of love Aengus⁵⁶:

Aleel. They who have sent me walk invisible.
Cathleen. So it is true what I have heard men say,
 That you have seen and heard what others cannot.
Aleel. I was asleep in my bed, and while I slept
 My dream became a fire; and in the fire
 One walked and he had birds about his head.
Cathleen. I have heard that one of the old gods walked so.⁵⁷

We can therefore understand him to be a reference to the Irish tradition of poets, but also to filid. Filid, the poets, played a very important role in early Ireland. They held the highest rank among ‘áes dána’, men of art in English, which was a collective term for practitioners of trades, crafts and arts.⁵⁸ If we want to be exact, the translation of ‘fili’ as ‘poet’ is not completely correct. Filid were except for being poets also diviners and seers, unlike probably better-known bards, whose status was lower.⁵⁹ This definition fits Aleel extremely well and underlines the character’s importance even more.

3.5.2 The Poet’s Visions and the Otherworld

The visions that the poet, Aleel, has in *The Countess Cathleen* all share a common denominator – they concern the Otherworld. Speaking of just one Otherworld is not exact though, because Yeats combines elements present in Irish pagan religion and Christianity to

⁵⁶ Bramsbäck, 50.

⁵⁷ Yeats, W. B., *The Countess Cathleen. The Collected Plays* (London: Papermac, 1982) 25.

⁵⁸ "áes dána" *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Robert Welch, ed. (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ "fili" *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James McKillop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

The second otherworld in the play is represented by spirits and angels. Their function probably did not seem as important to Yeats, as he reduced their appearances in later versions by a significant amount – the seven angelic spirits carrying the soul of the Countess were removed completely, as well as the mentions of fairies building a coffin under the ground and thus foreseeing the death of the Countess (and revealing it to the poet). With the exception of the angels making appearance at the very end of the play, spirits are present just in one scene, in connection with the robbery of Cathleen’s treasury,⁶⁶ where they are referred to as the dancers.

The demons are easily identified as delegates of Hell. They are the very opposite of the angels, and their final clash at the end of the play is to be seen as an encounter of the good and evil Otherworld. This battle over the Countess’s soul is according to Yeats’s notes also reminiscent of the ‘battle of the dying’ carried out by the Sidhe, the fairy folk⁶⁷. The actual appearance of the demons and angels is however substantially reduced in later versions of the play, and in the final version it is reduced to a description of another vision of Aleel.

3.5.3 Bird Lore

The writings of William Butler Yeats are among scholars known to be rich in bird symbolism. Thanks to their abundance, the bird occurrences in Yeats’s works are better understood if classified into patterns and groups.⁶⁸ As this passage treats only the bird lore present in *The Countess Cathleen*, I will limit myself exclusively to one of these groups, which is adequately represented in the play, and could be characterised as the birds that symbolize spirits or disembodied souls.

To begin with the obvious, birds are a suitable symbol for spirits or souls mainly thanks to their ability to fly above the earth. This notion is far from being unique to Yeats – it is quite the opposite: very ancient and practically universal⁶⁹. Popular beliefs about birds are therefore present plentifully even in the Irish folklore. Yeats was aware of this, as he found the evidence both in Irish literature and oral lore of his contemporaries⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ Bramsbäck, 56-58.

⁶⁷ Bramsbäck, 52.

⁶⁸ James L. Allen, “Yeats’s Bird-Soul Symbolism”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 6 No. 3 (New York: Hofstra University, 1960) 117.

⁶⁹ Allen, 117.

⁷⁰ Bramsbäck, 85.

The first occurrence of birds in *The Countess Cathleen* is based on an Irish folk belief that birds can be demons in disguise⁷¹. Indeed, the two horned owls that are mentioned in the conversation between Mary Rua and her son Teigue are evil spirits that assumed their bird shape:

Teigue. Mother!

Mary. What is it?

Teigue. In the bush beyond,
There are two birds-if you can call them birds-
I could not see them rightly for the leaves –
But they have the shape and colour of horned owls,
And I'm Half certain they've a human face.

Mary. Mother of God, defend us!⁷²

The evil nature of the horned owls is partially given by the context, but according to Yeats's note it is also anchored in popular belief; the horned owls are reportedly associated with evil faeries.⁷³ The sinister atmosphere is further intensified by Teigue mentioning two strange beings, a man with bat-like ears and a man with no mouth, that two of the (presumably) local people met earlier. We cannot be quite sure if these are supposed spirits, undead or just monsters, but judging from the description we can assume they are evil without much doubt. Similarly, the frightful air of the first scene is emphasized by the nervous animals, the barking dog (only in the earlier versions) and the fluttering hen⁷⁴.

Even though there are many instances of birds being mentioned in *The Countess Cathleen*, the horned owls are probably the most important ones. They are mentioned on several occasions in the play, and the demons' ability to transform plays a very important role, because it helps them in their scheming against Cathleen – to perform the robbery of the Countess's treasury⁷⁵.

⁷¹ Bramsbäck, 90.

⁷² *The Countess Cathleen*, 4.

⁷³ Bramsbäck, 92.

⁷⁴ Bramsbäck, 91.

⁷⁵ Bramsbäck, 93.

3.5.4 The Final Scene and the Valley of the Black Pig

The final scene of the play, the moment where Aleel in his vision witnesses the clash between the powers of good and evil includes subtle hints and allusions to Irish mythology. Let us have a closer look at the following excerpt:

Aleel. Angels and devils clash in the middle air,
And brazen swords clang upon brazen helms.
[A flash of lightning followed immediately by thunder.]
Yonder a bright spear, cast out of a sling,
Has torn through Balor's eye, and the dark clans
Fly screaming as they fled the Moytura of old.⁷⁶

The preceding passage is clearly an allusion to the battle of the so-called 'Valley of the Black Pig', a subject to which Yeats himself devoted two textual notes. In the shorter of the two, Yeats notes that it is a battle where all the enemies of the Irish people will be defeated, and that peasants had been awaiting the battle, and comforting themselves in difficult situations with the hope of its arrival.⁷⁷ In the second note, Yeats asserts that prophecies about the coming of the battle can be heard all around Ireland, but he himself heard about it from a man in Sligo. He describes the battle to be a mythological one, claiming that the black pig is the same pig that can be found in different mythological tales, such as the stories about Dearmod or Adonis being killed by a boar.⁷⁸ Yeats also notes that the battle should be in his opinion also compared with other battles; he lists three of them: 'a battle the sidhe are said to fight when a person is being taken away by them; a battle they are said to fight in November for the harvest; the great battle the Tribes of the goddess Danu fought, according to the Gaelic chroniclers, with the Fomor at Moytirra, or the Towery Plain.'⁷⁹ The last named battle of Moytirra, or also spelt as Moytura, is of the biggest significance to us, as Yeats directly mentions it in the above quotation from *The Countess Cathleen*. This battle mentioned by Yeats comes from an old Irish text, *Cath Maige Tuired*, from the ninth century. The tale

⁷⁶ *The Countess Cathleen*, 49.

⁷⁷ Jeffares, Knowland, 18.

⁷⁸ W. B. Yeats, "A Note on 'The Valley of the Black Pig'", *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth* (London: Penguin Group, 1993) 216.

⁷⁹ W. B. Yeats, "A Note on 'The Valley of the Black Pig'", 217.

recounts the struggle of the Tuatha Dé Danann, a nation said to have occupied Ireland before the Celts, and the Fómhoire, their undersea opponents.⁸⁰

Here we can see that Yeats has no problem with combining different sources and providing distinctive interpretations in order to reach the desired artistic effect. The allusion to the apocalyptic battle in the 'Valley of the Black Pig' is mixed with Christian religious concept and pagan deities at the same time.

⁸⁰ "Notes", *Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, Robert Welch, ed. (London: Penguin Group, 1993) 430, 455.

Chapter Four – Context for the Contemporary Period

4.1 Contemporary Irish Drama

The Revival drama had to find its path from ‘the phase of Ibsen-inspired realism which every theatre in Europe [had] to experience’¹, as Katherine Worth describes it, to modernism. This was started already by Yeats, who reportedly hated realism², and began steering the Irish Literary Theatre more towards symbolism and mysticism. Despite Yeats’s influence, Irish theatre was predominantly realistic throughout the twentieth century; the definitive change comes with authors such as Samuel Beckett, with the absurd and symbolic elements of his plays³, or Brendan Behan and the Brechtian influence in his works⁴. The diversion from the realistic influences is therefore clearly to be seen in Irish drama of the second half of the twentieth century and the contemporary period. It has undergone many changes, and is using different vehicles to convey the message to the audience. In comparison with the Revival drama, the departure from naturalism and the linear plot can be noted in many plays; the plot ceases to be the central point, which the play relies upon. Circular and repetitious, rather than straightforward, unfolding of the theme is seen as being more appropriate to a post-colonial society such as contemporary Ireland⁵.

Contemporary Irish drama also reflects the developments in Irish society, as well as the home affairs and political changes. This is particularly notable in the North of Ireland, where the turbulent events in the past decades offered a challenge both to the authors and audiences.⁶ However before we explore the Northern Irish drama in more detail, let us have a look at some other, more general, tendencies that influenced contemporary Irish drama and theatre.

Economic progress and overall growth, connected with increase of urbanization of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, along with a much better educated population, have gradually made it more and more difficult to represent Ireland with once-favoured means: rural settings and poor peasants, often complemented by extreme behaviour of drunkenness and violence (mainly in

¹ Katherine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978) 1.

² Morash, 118.

³ “Beckett, Samuel”, *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ “Behan, Brendan”, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 3-4.

⁶ Roche, 8.

the case of stage Irish characters). Such elements have become grossly unrepresentative of the modern vibrant cities full of shopping malls and business centres. There are of course exceptions to this tendency, such as emblematic plays of Martin McDonagh, which however represent a rather small minority in comparison.⁷

Another way of seeing this is to realize that the picture of contemporary Ireland has split up to such a degree that ‘there [is] no longer a single Ireland to represent’⁸, as Anthony Roche puts it. Whereas in the era of the Revival and the Irish Dramatic Movement the representation was relatively unitary, predominantly Catholic, building on nationalist ideals and ancient Irish and Celtic roots, the contemporary situation could be characterized by these words of Christopher Morash: ‘There is no such thing as *the* Irish theatre; there are Irish *theatres*, whose forms continue to multiply as they leave behind the fantasy of a single unifying image, origin or destiny.’⁹ In general, we can see the tendency of moving away from nationalistic topics towards other subject matters, more typical for the contemporary society, such as immigration and the resulting multi-ethnic population, and gender issues¹⁰.

4.2 Situation in Northern Ireland

The development of drama and theatre in the North is a little more specific. When we say Northern Ireland, many people will recall ‘The Troubles’, a violent political-sectarian conflict that lasted about 30 years from the late 1960s to the late 1990s¹¹. As Tom Maguire claims, ‘Northern Ireland’ and ‘The Troubles’ have become synonymous. The residual image is of cars burning on street corners: bonfires at the crossroads.’¹² Assuming that conflict, either outer or inner, forms the heart of all drama, it is fairly logical that many dramatic pieces drew inspiration from the unsettled situation in the area. The politically unstable structure of Northern Ireland, with conflict of the Catholic versus Protestant, British versus Irish or republican versus loyalists is therefore inherent to the Northern drama.¹³

Drama from and about Northern Ireland begins to gain on importance already in the early 1970s, and we can follow two trends in its development. On the one hand there is a process of reflection of the events, often violent ones, happening in the North in the form of

⁷ Roche, 10-11.

⁸ Roche, 11.

⁹ Morash, 271.

¹⁰ Roche, 11.

¹¹ Roche, 158.

¹² Tom Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006) 1.

¹³ Roche, 158.

so-called 'Trouble' play. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to generate room for meaningful dialogue, however with an inclination to also show the limitations of language; this scepticism towards language and the notion of language's insufficiency is shown by a wide usage of theatrical language in its full width: gesture, mime, dance, song, music, symbolism and stage imagery. Another important feature of the North Irish drama is its anti-hierarchism of characters – no character dominates on its own, and they are often presented out of their original context. From the structural point of view, emphasis is put on discontinuity, fragmentation and juxtaposition.¹⁴

4.3 The Troubles

The conflict in Northern Ireland is deeply rooted in history. It dates back to the second half of the sixteenth century, when the Plantation of Ulster took place, as I have mentioned earlier. The actual Troubles started some four hundred years later, in 1968 to be precise¹⁵.

Even though most people did not realize it at the time, The Troubles were foreshadowed some two years earlier when the Ulster Voluntary Force, a Protestant paramilitary body¹⁶, was re-formed, and soon took action in the form of a bombing that killed two Catholic men (and also a Protestant woman by accident).¹⁷

The situation became really tense only when the Royal Ulster Constabulary brutally dispersed the protest march organized by Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in Derry on 5 October 1968.

The NICRA was formed by the unionists in 1967, and its aim was to abolish sectarian discrimination, and achieve equalization of rights for all citizens in the United Kingdom.¹⁸ The march they called was supposed to support this cause, but it was banned by the Belfast authorities; NICRA however decided to proceed in spite of the ban. The violence that the Constabulary used to stop the march was recorded on television cameras, and made the issue front-page news. This unfortunate action of the Constabulary provoked a reaction that culminated by sectarian battles in both Derry and Belfast during the summer of the same year.¹⁹

¹⁴ Roche, 158-159.

¹⁵ Killeen, 110.

¹⁶ Michael Hopkinson "Ulster Volunteer Force" *The Oxford Companion to British History*, John Cannon, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Killeen, 109.

¹⁸ Killeen, 110.

¹⁹ Killeen, 110-111.

The escalating violence put the Irish Republican Army in a difficult position; then a left-wing oriented movement with rather moderate views and focus on social action, was accused of failing to take action against attacks of loyalist mobs on the Catholic minority. The inevitable consequence was the split of the IRA into the Official IRA, comprising the left-wingers, and the Provisional IRA, who decided to take the matter into their own hands, focusing on community defence at first, and later moving on to trying to force the British out of Ireland with the help of bombings and shooting.²⁰

The Provisional IRA's wars against the British could not be really won, on the other hand, the British were not able to defeat them either, and so the Troubles lasted for thirty years. The conflict became extremely violent, full of atrocities on the part of both the rival sectarian groups. The peace process was enabled by political talks that began in the late 1980s, and continued throughout the 1990s, until the Belfast Agreement of 1998²¹; the definitive ceasefire was eventually reached on 28 July 2005, with the Provisional IRA's announcement of finishing their armed campaign²².

Even though the conflict was extinguished and the ceasefire is in effect, its causes are still present, unsolved. As Richard Killeen describes it, 'the inter-communal hatred that divides Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland is not [over]. The province is as much a voluntary apartheid society as ever: different housing areas, different schools, different sports, different loyalties'.²³

4.4 Depiction of The Troubles

There is some discussion concerning the depiction of causes and development of this unrest; Tom Maguire claims that the '[i]mages of bonfires and street riots contribute to a hegemonic narrative strife between two equally entrenched tribal communities separated by religious and ethnic identity'²⁴. Such portrayal is however unjustly treating everybody alike, failing to distinguish varied levels of involvement based on peoples' social class, gender and location.²⁵ The causes of the conflict are often also presented to be predominantly cultural, as by Ruane and Todd for example:

²⁰ Killeen, 113-114.

²¹ Killeen, 115-116,118-119.

²² Maguire, 2.

²³ Killeen, 120.

²⁴ Maguire, 1-2.

²⁵ Maguire, 2.

The roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland lie in a cluster of abnormal and problematic values, beliefs and attitudes. These include: an obsession with the past conceived in mythical terms, extreme nationalism, religious intolerance, an unwillingness to compromise and a willingness to use or condone political violence. Each side is said to be in a timewarp, out of touch with present-day reality, entrapped in a mythical view of the past which leads to an endless repetition of old tribal conflicts.²⁶

Such views have nonetheless been criticized for misrepresenting the involvement of politicians and governments in Northern Ireland, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the United States²⁷.

²⁶ J. Ruane, and J. Todd, “‘Why Can’t You Get along with Each Other?’: Culture, Structure and the Northern Ireland Conflict”, *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland*, E. Hughes, ed. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1999) 29.

²⁷ Maguire, 2.

Chapter Five - Vincent Woods and His *At the Black Pig's Dyke*

5.1 Vincent Woods's Short Biography

Vincent Woods is a member of the generation of Irish playwrights that emerged at the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. Christopher Murray lists Woods together with Sebastian Barry, Ken Bourke, Marina Carr, Anne Devlin, Michael Harding, Declan Hughes, Marie Jones, Gavin Kostik, Gina Moxley, Jimmy, Murphy, Jim Nolan, Donal O'Kelly, Christina Reid, Billy Roche, Gerard Stembridge, Colin Teevan and Michael West as the most notable of the contemporary Irish theatrical authors¹. Woods's path to theatre was rather untypical, however. Before 1989, he worked as a full-time journalist with RTÉ², as a presenter for the *Morning Ireland* programme. In 1989 he decided to leave this position in order to be able to travel and write poetry, or in his own words, 'cashed in his pension to buy a round-the-world ticket'.³ This proved to be vital to his playwriting career, as it was during his travels that Woods met Maeliosa Stafford, the then-newly appointed director of the Druid Theatre Company. The two men encountered each other in Sydney, Australia, at the local Gaelic Club. Woods was reading some of his poems at the time, and one of them, *She Replies to the Fat Crimson Bishop*, filled a part of the audience with indignation. Stafford argued in Woods's defence, and so the two became friends. The couple soon began to collaborate on theatrical projects, and eventually became one of the most important Irish writer-director teams of the 1990s.⁴

Woods gradually became a significant new Irish dramatist, and besides winning the public's and critics' acclaim he also won several awards, The Stewart Parker for Drama and the P. J. O'Connor Award for Radio Drama among others⁵.

¹ Christopher Murray, "The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties", *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties*, Eberhard Bort, ed. (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1996) 14.

² *Far from the Land: New Irish Plays*, ed. Farleigh, John (London: Methuen Drama, 1998) 61.

³ Luke Clancy, "Out of the Druid into the Woods", *The Irish Times*, 15 Feb. 1994: 10.

⁴ Clancy, 10.

⁵ Farleigh, 61.

5.2 At the Black Pig's Dyke

5.2.1 How the Play Came to Existence

At the Black Pig's Dyke is Woods's third play, and similarly like his two preceding pieces, it was created in co-operation with Maeliosa Stafford, who also commissioned the play for the Druid⁶. Woods himself admits that the play was born of theatrical trial and error⁷ – after all it is his first full-length play, both *John Hughdy* and *Tom John* (his earlier plays) are just one-act pieces⁸. Woods collaborated with Stafford very closely on the script, using his help to edit it on the fly⁹ for the best stage effect.

5.2.2 Subject Matter of the Play

At the Black Pig's Dyke deals mainly with the hatred between Catholics and Protestants living in counties Leitrim and Fermanagh. However, it focuses not only on sectarianism and the violence connected with it, but also the issue of mixed marriages between Protestants and Catholics, and examines the influence of the past on the present life. To elaborate a little bit more, it follows the destiny of three generations of a mixed-marriage family, Catholic Lizzie Flynn and Protestant Jack Boles, her husband, their daughter Sarah and her husband Hugh Brolly, and finally Elizabeth, their grandchild. Even though the family tries to stay out of trouble, and so they leave Leitrim for Fermanagh, but the sectarian animosity catches up with them even there and has fatal consequences.¹⁰

5.2.3 Source of the Subject Matter

The play builds on Woods's own background, he is native to county Leitrim, and therefore has a direct experience of living near the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, counties Leitrim and Fermanagh. The play was also a response to the Provisional IRA bombing of a Remembrance Day commemoration service in Enniskillen in 1987, which

⁶ Robert O' Byrne, "A Druid's Gathering in Galway", *The Irish Times*, 3 Oct. 1992: 28.

⁷ Clancy, 10.

⁸ Farleigh, 61.

⁹ Clancy, 10.

¹⁰ Maguire, 32.

resulted in the death of eleven Protestants. Woods's increasing loss of illusions about republican violence also partly served as a motivation for creating the play.¹¹

5.2.4 Reception of the Play and the Controversies

Even though the play received a tumultuous applause on the opening night¹², 30 September 1992, in Galway, and later in 1993 received the Stuart Parker Award¹³, some of the critical reviews were rather mixed, mainly after its arrival to Dublin in 1994. The play also managed to stir some controversies, similarly like Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. The critique aimed mainly at the play's over-complexity and its demanding nature, which was seen as a potential problem for the average spectator. A good example of this line of thought would be David Nowlan's review for *The Irish Times*. While Mr. Nowlan in general praises Stafford's production and calls it 'complex, vibrant and imaginative', he is not as positive about the play itself. He claims that it is 'less dramatically focused than it needs to be', and criticizes that 'too much [is] asked of the audience in terms of sorting out the various symbolisms of generation changes, traditions and wilful murders'¹⁴.

As far as controversies are concerned, the play caused some rather strong reactions. The main source of these strong feelings was the fact that the play was seen as very directly political intervention by many of the reviewers despite Wood's efforts to assure everyone that there was not any agenda or political motivation behind the play.¹⁵ As one of the reviewers, Ian Hill, notes, 'there has been little written in the Irish theatre which tackles the reality of the Troubles head on... this harrowing examination of two women's lives in the killing fields of the Fermanagh borders, where ethnic cleansing has been a sour and cold reality for 200 years, has put the record uncomfortably straight'¹⁶. What some saw as 'setting the record straight' was seen by others as misrepresentation of the situation in Northern Ireland.¹⁷ Even though Woods claims that he had tendencies to rather support the Republican cause as a teenager, he was nonetheless labelled a Unionist and a revisionist¹⁸, thanks chiefly to 'the multiple

¹¹ Maguire, 31

¹² O' Byrne, 28.

¹³ "Writers Share Parker Award", *The Irish Times*, 30 Apr. 1993: 4.

¹⁴ David Nowlan, "A Play of Power, Terror and Despair", *The Irish Times*, 15 Feb. 1994: 10.

¹⁵ Maguire, 31.

¹⁶ Ian Hill, 'Staging the Troubles', *Theatre Ireland 31* (Summer, 1993) 46.

¹⁷ Maguire, 31.

¹⁸ Helen Meany, "Long Shadows from the Past", *The Irish Times*, 21 Sep. 1994: 10.

perspectives of [the] play and its avoidance of shibboleths and easy solutions,'¹⁹ as Helen Meaney describes it. This deemed misleading characterization of republicans as well as the lack of depiction of British involvement in the conflict constituted the reasons behind the probably strongest form of opposition to the play, a protest at a performance in Derry's Rialto Theatre in July 1993²⁰. That night, almost at the very end of the play, a group of protesters went on stage to produce an alternative ending, by which they attempted to provide (in their eyes) a closer depiction of the issues in question. In the original version of the play, the main antagonist is Frank Beirne, a Catholic terrorist who hates the Protestants and their descendants, and does not hesitate to give vent to his hatred and use harsh violence. In their alternative version, the protesters suggested that the British are the real culprits behind the conflict.²¹

Understandably, some of the actors felt threatened by these actions and decided to flee the stage. The disorder in the theatre however was not the only result of this protest. It brought on a series of discussions in media about the relationship between theatre and politics. Many letters were also sent to editors of various newspapers, where people voiced their opinions. Among these was also a letter sent to the editor of *Derry Journal* by the members of Derry Frontline, a group that organized the protest against the play, to give the reasons that led them to the intervention and explain their stance²²:

We are asked to collude with the author's view that it is disturbed psychology rather than social injustice that fuelled and still fuels the conflict. Any reference to the British involvement was peripheral and ultimately obscured by the main focus of the play.

The danger of such sophisticated Irish theatre offering tabloid representations of the present situation contributes to a manufactured consensus and debate that marginalizes the rational voices of opposition and produces endless talks about talks which ultimately talk about nothing.²³

Despite all the above-mentioned controversies and criticism, both the production and the play itself proved to be a success from the long-term view. The play was performed not only all

¹⁹ Meaney, 10.

²⁰ Maguire, 32.

²¹ Maguire, 32.

²² Maguire, 32-33.

²³ S. Gargan, et al., "Theatre Protest", *Derry Journal*, 9 Jul. 1993: 4.

around Ireland, but also on foreign stages such as London and Toronto²⁴. Besides that, the play was also translated to Irish under the title *Ag Clai na Muice Duibhe* and successfully produced for the first time in 2001, again in Maeliosa Stafford's direction²⁵.

5.3 Folklore and Mythological Elements in the Play

Both folklore and mythological elements play a very important role in *At the Black Pig's Dyke*. The mythological component is to be encountered already during the first contact with the play, as it is present in its name. It provides firstly a sense of location, and for those who are more familiar with Irish mythology it provides a contextual framework on whose basis the play can be interpreted. The folklore component is also very visible, and if I may say so even more important, because it basically constitutes the structure of the whole play. However, it is important to note that the folklore element's function is not limited only to creating structural patterns, and that it has a significant symbolic meaning.

Both the main folkloric elements in the play relate to the time of either Christmas preparations or Christmas time itself. The first element I will explore is the tradition of hunting the wren. The second area of focus will be the custom of mumming, a type of folk theatre.

5.3.1 The Black Pig's Dyke

The Black Pig's Dyke in the title of the play can refer to two different things. The first would be an allusion to the apocalyptic battle in which the enemies of Ireland are vanquished, a usage similar to Yeats's. We can be almost completely sure that when writing the play, Woods was fully aware of the legends and prophecies concerning the battle of the Valley of the Black Pig. If we accept this assertion, we can think of the title as being a hint of the Troubles, and the violence between Catholics and Protestants.

The second use of the name would be a reference to the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, in the case of the play between counties Leitrim and Fermanagh. The Black Pig's Dyke, or also the 'Worm Ditch' is the name that people gave the series of linear earthworks on the southern border of Ulster. Although the purpose of the dyke

²⁴ Meany, 10.

²⁵ Brendán Delap, "Reviews: *Ag Clai na Muice Duibhe*", *The Irish Times*, 19 Jul. 2001: 12.

was probably to offer defence against cattle raiding,²⁶ the folk stories offer much more fantastic explanations how and why it was created. According to which name is used, there are different legends about the origin of the dyke, one claiming it was carved out by the snout of a giant work worm, the other that it was dug out by a boar²⁷. The latter legend describes the dyke to be created by a schoolmaster – magician who was tricked into transforming himself into a pig and subsequently ‘being driven across the south border of Ulster where it rooted up the ground, leaving the ditch and banks that one can still see today’.²⁸

5.3.2 Hunting of the Wren and its Symbolism

The folklore traditions that involve hunting down and killing of the wren are numerous in many parts of Western Europe, particularly in the British Isles and France, even though the roots of this custom became rather obscure. In most areas the ceremony is limited to the time of the Christmas festival season.²⁹ As far as Ireland is concerned, St. Stephen’s Day is still remembered as the day for ‘Hunting the Wren’. The custom is still observed, but it has died out in many areas. According to an account from the 19th century, the preparations for the ceremony started some weeks before Christmas, when groups of boys would go around searching the bushes for the little bird. Once they found it, they pursued it until they managed to kill it.³⁰ As Karl P. Wentersdorf notes, in practice this was ‘a sorry business’, during which many young men took pleasure in killing any wren they could find with stones or sticks³¹.

These violent preparations were necessary for the actual ceremony to be able to take place. The traditional day of this celebration was and still is St. Steven’s Day, 26 December. On that day the bodies of the previously killed wrens are attached to a big holly bush fixed on a pole and carried around in a procession, while the Wren song is sung³². The Wren song appears a couple of times in *At the Black Pig’s Dyke*, first time already in the prologue, when Lizzie is making straw wrens, a substitute for the actual wren that the custom required originally. As Kevin Danaher mentions several versions of the song, based on the locality

²⁶ P. Mallory "Black Pig's Dyke" *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*. S. J. Connolly, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Lorna Siggins, “As the Crow Flies”, *The Irish Times*, 28 Dec. 1991: 25.

²⁸ “The Black Pig Reappears”, *The Irish Times*, 16 Mar. 1992: 11.

²⁹ Karl P. Wentersdorf, “The Folkloristic Significance of the Wren”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 90, No. 356 (Apr. – Jun. , 1977) 192.

³⁰ Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1972) 243.

³¹ Wentersdorf, 192.

³² Danaher, 243.

they come from, I decided to choose the one, which resembles the version in the play most closely:

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
On St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze;
Though his body is small, his family is great,
So, if you please, your honour, give us a treat.
On Christmas Day I turned a spit;
I burned my finger: I feel it yet,
Up with the kettle, and down with the pan:
Give us some money to bury the wren.³³

The lyrics of the song rather openly reveal what follows in the ceremony – the so-called wren-bush is carried around people's houses by groups of boys or men, trying to get some coins from the inhabitants, so they can at the end of the day bury each of the wrens with a penny. The wren-boys would be usually welcome in the house, in the opposite case there would be a danger they would bury one of the wrens opposite the inhospitable people's door, and bringing thus ill luck upon them. Wentersdorf argues that this part of the custom gives evidence of its origin as an old pagan ritual, probably connected with the celebration of winter solstice. He speculates that the wren could have represented a divinity, and the purpose of carrying it around houses was to receive a blessing for the upcoming season. The hunt itself could have been a symbol for the fight between the dark powers and the powers of light and life connected with the New Year that everyone hoped would eventually win.³⁴

Be it as it may, Vincent Woods in the play offers a completely different sort of symbolism of the wren hunt, accompanied also by a different explanation of the custom's origin. The wren is presented as a traitor, based on who is speaking, once betraying a Catholic saint:

Captain Mummer Well, way I heard it, it was the
wren betrayed St Stephen and him hidin' on the Roman
soldiers in a field of corn ... The bird flew up and gave away
his hidin' place and ever after he was hunted and killed for a

³³ Danaher, 246.

³⁴ Wentersdorf, 192.

traitor.³⁵

or the other time a group of Protestant soldiers:

Tom Fool It was the wren betrayed a regiment of Billy's
men at the Battle of the Boyne ...³⁶

This presentation serves a very specific purpose – to create a parallel with Jack Bole's and Hugh Brolly's death. The way both these men are hunted down and eventually killed by the villains hidden behind the straw masks strikingly resembles the way a group of boys kills the little wren. To avoid any speculation, the text of the wren-song also changes accordingly to make this connection practically obvious:

Tom Fool and Miss Funny (*singing, but speaking the last two words*)

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds
On St Stephen's night was caught in the furze.
Up with the kettle and down with the pan
And give us a penny to bury – *the man*.³⁷

First, the word wren is substituted by the word man; furthermore, there is also an emphasis on the latter word to make it really stand out even for those who might not be familiar with the difference from the original version.

Once we know about the connection, this symbolic simile helps to build up the dark atmosphere of the play by introducing a premonition of what is going to happen, what evil fate awaits the Protestant men.

5.3.3 The Mummings' Play

Another important folklore element in the play is the mumming. Saying that this element is important might be even considered to be an understatement; it would be more exact to call it

³⁵ Vincent Woods, *At the Black Pig's Dyke, Far From the Land: New Irish Plays*, John Fairleigh, ed. (London: Methuen Drama, 1998) 45.

³⁶ *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, 46.

³⁷ *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, 49.

crucial to the play. The structure of the play is largely given by the mumming, and it is central not only to the plot, but also to the atmosphere of the whole play, and its effect on the audience.

Similarly like the hunting of the wren, mumming is also associated with the time around Christmas. Mumming can be characterized as quite a wide combination of different aspects. Roger deV. Renwick provides a fitting description when he calls it ‘that seasonal part-celebration, part-drama, part-ritual, part-display of aggression, part-seeking for a handout’³⁸. The custom is still fairly popular in quite many parts of Ireland, namely in the following counties: Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry, Donegal, Down, Dublin, Fermanagh, Kilkenny, Leitrim, Lough, Mayo, Tyrone and Wexford³⁹. Despite its popularity in Ireland, and its long tradition there, it is not strictly Irish; it is more a general British Isles tradition (but can also be found for example in Denmark or in Newfoundland⁴⁰), with the origin being Anglo-Saxon, not Celtic⁴¹.

In Ireland, the mumming is done by groups of amateur actors that go around the houses to perform the mummers’ play and also to collect some money. They are usually led by the Captain mummer, who is in charge, and asks for admission to the houses. The rest of the group is traditionally made up by a variety of figures, among which we can find historical and mythological figures, as well as stock folk figures. The actors usually go in the house one by one, coming on a cue from the previous actor, in order to be able to introduce themselves and shortly present their characteristics.⁴² This can be very well seen throughout the play, the example is chosen from Scene Eleven of Act One:

Captain Mummer

Here come I, Captain Mummer and all me men.

Butcher

Here come I, the Butcher with me steel.

Beelzebub

Here come I, Beelzebub

Second Hero

³⁸ Roger deV Renwick, “The Mummers’ Play and *The Old Wives Tale*”, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 94, No. 374, Folk Drama (Oct. - Dec., 1981) 433.

³⁹ Danaher, 256.

⁴⁰ Melvil Firestone, “Christmas Mumming and Symbolic interactionism”, *Ethos*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Summer, 1978) 95.

⁴¹ deV. Renwick, 433.

⁴² Firestone, 103.

Here come I, a Hero bold.

Doctor

Here come I, a Doctor pure.⁴³

The actors are usually disguised or wear some sort of a mask; people would sometimes attempt to guess the identity of the mummers, who would remove their masks if discovered, and accept some refreshments.

The central part of the mummers' play is formed by the battle between two heroes. The characters are not firmly given; they tend to vary according to the place where the play is performed.⁴⁴ A rather exhaustive example of this is given in the play itself, in the first scene:

And then, the Heroes, now they'd differ.
From Antrim down to Drumaliffer:
Copper-nosed Cromwell might be in,
Sir Patrick the foe to strike his chin;
The Turkey Champion and Prince George
Might come to blows – the cause?
[...]
The Tsar, Lord Nelson, Dan O'Connell,
Impostors, Red Coats, Hugh O'Donell,
Wellington, Napoleon, Grand Signors,
Fought their corners, evened scores.⁴⁵

However in the mummers' play itself, Woods chose to use characters of a Green Knight and an Orange Knight in his version of the play to emphasize the Catholic – Protestant nature of the fight.

But no matter which of the heroes is fighting whom, the scenario is always the same – one of the heroes is 'killed', and later brought back to life by the Doctor figure⁴⁶.

Woods is building mainly on two of the aspects described above. The first one is the fact that the actors are masked – in *At the Black Pig's Dyke* they wear masks made of straw – which brings a sinister element to the play after we find out that some of the mummers do not

⁴³ *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, 32.

⁴⁴ Danaher, 256.

⁴⁵ *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, 5.

⁴⁶ Firestone, 103.

have good intentions. Unfortunately, it is not possible to distinguish between the ‘good’ mummers and the ‘bad’ mummers until it is too late. The straw masks can be also seen as a metaphor for sectarian terrorists wearing balaclavas. In the outcome, there is no difference between what kind of mask the villains wear, they both provide the same sort of anonymity. As one of the characters, Tom Fool, notes, ‘who knows what’s behind a straw man.’⁴⁷

The second element Woods is building upon is the fact that the mummer’s play includes the mock killing. When the real killings take place, they are sharply contrasted with the theatrical ones. When the ‘good’ mummers discover the dead bodies, the twenty-pound doctor is of no use. Unfortunately, there is not any other doctor that would be able to bring them back to life.

⁴⁷ *At the Black Pig’s Dyke*, 16.

Chapter Six – Comparison of the Plays

6.1 The Difference in Use of the Folklore and Mythological Elements

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are many affinities between *The Countess Cathleen* and *At the Black Pig's Dyke*. Their use of folklore and mythological elements is however very different. We can start with taking a look at how they work with the material from the legend about the Black Pig and the notions connected with it. Whereas Yeats uses the legend to enrich his final scene with it in a very subtle way (so subtle that an unfamiliar spectator did not need to notice the reference being present at all), Woods is much more direct in this respect. Obviously, by putting the 'Black Pig' in the title, he drew much more attention to it, and at the same time creating some expectations what the play might be dealing with. Given the fact that the two associations with the Black Pig are an apocalyptical battle and the border between Ulster and the Irish Republic, it rather strongly suggest that it might have something to do with the conflict between the Protestants and Catholics.

In general we could say that the fundamental difference between the way Yeats and Woods use folklore and mythology lies in the fact that Yeats uses them in order add an extra level to *The Countess Cathleen*. Simply said, by appending the additional mythological or folkloric references, he attempts to make the story more interesting and mystical. Woods on the other hand uses the folklore elements as a device with which he builds the whole play. Yeats's references are not indispensable to the text; one would make it much drier and probably also less aesthetically pleasing if they took them away, but the overall impression would largely be the same, and if not the same, then very similar. Contrary to this, in Woods's case the removal of the folklore and mythological structure would result in a downfall of the whole play. In *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, the mummies' play within a play is forming the structural framework connected with telling the story, and besides that also has the function of an allegoric device representing 'The Troubles'.

6.2 Conclusion

The differences in the use of the above-mentioned elements are clearly related to the substantially unlike political context the plays originated in. Yeats used the 'Irish' mythological and folklore elements also to appeal to the Irish national pride and to strengthen

the feeling of national identity, which the era of the Revival demanded to a large extent. The contemporary epoch allowed Woods to have more freedom in this respect, and he instead opted to use the folkloric components in a more symbolic way, as an allegory for the violent conflicts between Catholics and Protestants.

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