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A study on Irish nationalism and its impact upon the growth of W.B. Yeats' poetry

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Abstract

Nationalism, as a phenomenon, is largely recognized as a European development in its desire to assert its superiority vis-à-vis other non-European societies and cultures. However, even within European societies, there are instances of subordination of one culture by another. One such instance is the relationship of Irish culture with the English to which the former had a subservient relationship similar to the colonization of one society by another. Nationalism, in Irish political scenario, procures its twin facets: political and cultural. In a bid to gain political independence Irish intelligentsia collectively rose to the occasion. Irish native literature grounded on Gaelic culture and studies, so long lost in British wilderness, comes to see the day light again. In the Irish context, W.B. Yeats, a great modern English poet, is significant in any study that seeks to examine the circuits of cultural relationships within societies having an unequal relationship as between England and Ireland. It was under the influence of John O'Leary, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, Maud Gonne and some others that Yeats developed an interest in Irish nationalism and went through Irish patriotic literature. This opened up for him an Ireland rich in myths and legends. The poems of Yeats tended to be somewhat moulded by myths and legends. Poetry of Yeats, especially his earlier poetry, appeared to be interested in contemporary political movements. In the process, a sense of nationalism pervaded his poems. Yeats' earlier poetry was the judicious fusion of both political and cultural interests. The growth of his poetry thus embarks upon the spirit of Irish nationalism.



The history of Ireland is marked by successive waves of invasion and colonization. When the Normans came to Ireland in the 12th century after having invaded southern Britain a century earlier, the cycle of invasion gave way to a cycle of British colonization and Ireland remains, at least in the north, in an imperial relationship with Great Britain to this day. This relationship has had political, social, and cultural effects on Ireland and its people that have developed over hundreds of years and created situations, such as, Ireland is still struggling today in its efforts to become a modern state with a distinctive and productive culture. Its long history as a colony and the long-term efforts of that history make the Irish struggle for a subsequent but problematic realization of nationhood, both imaginatively and politically. The nationalist struggle for independence, gathering force in the latter half of the 19th century and culminating success in 1921, is an integral part of the island's recent history and was a core movement around which centered not only political activist but writers, poets, and artists who attempted to give voice to an Irish national spirit.

A close study of Irish history reveals that Ireland has neither successfully assimilated into the British state as Wales and Scotland have nor completely broken with Great Britain in a successful bid for independence as most of Britain's former colonies have. Reasons are somewhat obvious. Since the middle part of the 16th century, the English Crown had directed itself to incorporate Ireland into the domain of

British imperialism and the first step for the desired goal turned out to be the implantation of British settlers into Ireland who would anglicize the natives. There were successive waves of these settlers until the 18th century but the effect was not to legitimize the British rule among the Catholic majority but rather the large settler of populations interrupted the processes of the British co-option of the local elites and the extension of political rights to the native population. In the process, despite political attempts by the central British authority to assimilate Ireland into the British state and corresponding interest on the part of the local Irish elites to form a political alliance with Britain, the English settlers continually opposed and frustrated these efforts. The settlers succeeded in enacting laws in the 18th century that prevented Catholics from political participation and made difficult for the descendents of Catholic landowners to maintain their family estates intact. Restrictions were placed on Catholic land ownership, education, and voting, and the wealth and influence of the Anglo-Irish settlers grew proportionately. At the end of the 18th century, a resurgent Catholic rebellion took place which prompted the British government to offer full and permanent union between Ireland and Britain, and in 1800, the Union was approved. But the long-standing promise of full emancipation for the Catholic majority was never implemented due to the influence of Irish Protestant opponents. Thus the full incorporation of Ireland into the British state sought by Britain for centuries existed in name only due to



the steadfast refusal of the Anglo-Irish settlers to agree to extend the full rights of British citizenship to the Irish Catholic majority.

One of the adverse effect of the political turmoil in Ireland was that as a colony of England, Ireland, unlike most other European countries, did not have the opportunity of fully experiencing the experiments of individualism, enterprise, collectivity and modernization that are known as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Besides, Ireland was also untouched by the fruits of the agricultural revolution and the Industrial revolution. But the cultural effects of Ireland's isolation were even more dramatic. The native Irish did not have a system of representation in the larger society that could reflect their way of life. However, the Irish Parliamentary Party strove from the 1880s to attain Home Rule self-government through the parliamentary constitutional movement eventually winning the Home Rule Act 1914, though suspended on the outbreak of the World War 1. In 1922, after the Irish War of Independence, the southern twenty six counties of Ireland seceded from the United Kingdom to become the independent Irish Free State and after 1948, the Republic of Ireland. The remaining six north eastern counties, known as Northern Ireland, remained part of the U.K.

In the context of Irish political and freedom movement, along with political nationalism, cultural nationalism played a pivotal role. Cultural nationalism is a distinctive ideological movement. Cultural nationalism has been a continuous

presence in Ireland since the 18th century, particularly after the foundation of the Royal Irish Academy in 1785. The major crystallization of the first cultural revival was the establishment of the Royal Irish Academy in 1785. The crystallization of the second revival, with the Dublin University Magazine [1833] and the scholarly societies founded by Petrie, occurred in the wake of the conflict within Protestant Ireland produced by Britain's concession of Catholic Emancipation in 1829. The third revival began with the formation of the Gaelic League in 1893. In his 'The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism', John Hutchinson discusses that cultural nationalism is a movement quite independent of political nationalism. It possesses its own distinctive aims—the moral regeneration of the national community rather than the achievement of an autonomous state – and a distinctive politics. According to him, the cultural nationalist seeks not to regress into an arcadia but rather to inspire his community to ever higher stages of development; indeed, it is this positive vision that makes cultural nationalism a recurring force even in advanced industrial societies, regularly crystallizing at times of crisis generated by the modernization process with the goal of providing authentic national models of progress.

Two groups are always prominent in cultural nationalist movements: humanist intellectuals and a secular intelligentsia. The intellectuals have been the formulators of the historical ideology of cultural nationalism and established its first cultural



institutions. Although small in number, they play an important role as moral innovators, constructing new matrices of collective identity at times of social crisis. These identities, created from myths and legends, when translated into concrete economic, social and political programmes by journalists and politicians regularly attract a rising but disaffected intelligentsia. This intelligentsia forms the cadres of cultural nationalist movements that seek to build in antagonism to the existing state a regenerated national community. Actually cultural nationalism in the Irish context procures twin ideas of movement—linguistic and literary movements. The aim of the former was the reconstruction of a populist rural Gaelic civilization based on the language and customs of the Irish-speaking peasantry on the western seaboard. That of the latter was the creation of a distinctive Anglo-Irish nation by a literature in English infused with the legends and idioms of these same western peasants. To the linguist nationalist, recognizing that English would remain for the foreseeable future the dominant language, the Gaelic consciousness generated by the literary nationalists in English-speaking Ireland could act as a half-way house in the battle against Anglicization. To the latter, a bilingual Ireland preserved not only a fount of native legends on which they might draw, but also a uniquely expressive English, permeated by Irish speech forms and rhythms, by which they might construct a new united nation synthesizing the Gaelic and English heritages. Both

movements constituted, however, very different kinds, each with its distinctive historical vision, goals, organizations and constituencies.

Cultural nationalism, according to many scholars, is a regressive force; it is a product of intellectuals from backward societies, who, when confronted by more scientifically advanced cultures, compensate for feelings of inferiority by retreating into history to claim descent from a once great civilization. Hans Kohn, a pioneering historian of nationalism, points out that cultural nationalism is functional for the formation of nations in such backward cultures, but in itself can not shape their path to socio-political modernization. But there are other scholars who observe otherwise in this regard. John Hutchinson emphasizes that cultural nationalism must be accorded a much more positive role in the modernization process; it puts forward not a primitivist but an evolutionary vision of the community. According to Hutchinson, cultural nationalists act as moral innovators, establishing ideological movements at times of social crisis in order to transform the belief-systems of communities and provide models of socio-political development that guide their modernizing strategies. Moreover, cultural nationalists attempt to bring about a dynamic vision of the nation as a high civilization with a unique place in the development of humanity and, secondly, a corresponding drive to recreate this nation which, integrating the traditional and the modern on a higher level, will again rise to the forefront of world



progress. Cultural nationalists regard the nation as a spontaneous solidarity that, from its foundations, is continuously evolving through cycles of achievement and decline. They call on the rising educated generation to break with traditionalism and to restore their country to its former standing in the world by constructing a modern scientific culture on the ethnic remains of the folk. The return to the folk, in short, is not a flight from the world but rather a means to catapult the nation from present backwardness and divisions to the most advanced stage of social development. The recovery of national pride is a prerequisite for successful participation in the wider world. In the process, cultural nationalists turn out to be moral innovators who seek by reviving an ethnic historicist vision of the nation to redirect traditionalists and modernists away from conflict and instead to unite them in the task of constructing an integrated distinctive and autonomous community, capable of competing in the modern world.

Cultural and political nationalism represent very different ideas of the nation and form quite distinct movements. The goal of cultural nationalism is integrative by harmonizing the conflicting conceptions of the moral and social order proposed by traditional religions and modern science in an evolutionary vision of community that represents a higher synthesis of the two. In contrast, political nationalists begin with an explicit rejection of the traditional status order in favour of a rational political community of equal citizens. Again,

while political nationalism often expands into a centralized mass organization, cultural nationalism is normally a decentralized educational movement. Of course, cultural nationalism is transient; but it is also a recurring movement, re-emerging at times of crisis even in the advanced industrial societies. It arises like political nationalism in response to a deep-seated conflict of identities between the worlds of religion and science.

The difference between political and cultural nationalism in Irish context was intensified and highlighted in the issue regarding the status of the Irish language in the Irish educational system. Two Irish leaders clashed in 1909 at the National Convention of the United Irish League. One was Douglas Hyde, President of the Gaelic League, who, first as a folklorist and poet, and then as a propagandist, had devoted his life to the revival of Ireland's fading Gaelic heritage, now preserved only by the western peasantry. The other was John Dillon, a future leader of the Irish parliamentary party, who for more than forty years had fought to regain Ireland's parliamentary independence from Britain. Dillon, although sympathetic to the language, thought it should not. For him the index of full nationality was national self government, and he feared that an overzealous promotion of the Irish language would, by dividing Protestants and Catholics, Irish and English speakers, detract from a united political campaign to wrest this from the British government. Hyde, in contrast, although in private supporter of Irish self government,



saw the Irish language as the life-line of that ancient Gaelic civilization that alone justified Irish claims to a historic nationality. Thus it was a classic confrontation between the cultural and the political nationalist in the history of national movements. The aim of Hyde as a cultural nationalist was to preserve the cultural individuality of the Irish nation, now threatened with anglicization. Only by returning to the unique history and culture could Irish men and women realize their human potential and contribute to the wider European civilization. Hyde accordingly founded the Gaelic League as a countrywide educational movement that would permeate all sections of Irish life and rebuild a modern Gaelic civilization within. Without such a distinctive native culture Hyde regarded political independence as meaningless. Dillon, on the other hand, as a political nationalist imbued with the secular liberal ideology of the day, believed that only through the exercise of self-determination as citizens of an independent state could individuals find dignity. Since he believed that the English, because of the historical conflicts between the two nationalities, would never allow the Irish equal citizenship within the British state, he campaigned for Irish political autonomy. His was a legal-rational concept of the nation, and to achieve his goal he and his allies built a centralized political machine that would mobilize the diverse constituents of the nation into a mass movement. He took up many causes—the reform of land tenures, Catholic education, and so forth—but

all were subordinated to this single goal.

In Ireland, unlike in other countries, cultural nationalism took more significant role in the nation-building. It was the followers of Hyde rather than of Dillon who constructed the modern nation state in Ireland. Indeed, the struggle for nationhood in the modern world has everywhere been preceded by emerging cultural nationalist movements. These movements have formed recurrently in post-18th century societies as historico-cultural revivals, in order to propound the idea of the nation as a moral community, and have inspired rising social groups to collective political action.

Since pre-Christian times down to the 17th century, Ireland had been the home of a self-conscious clan-based Celtic culture united by common laws, language, customs and an aristocratic literature. But its modern character was shaped by the interstate wars of religion in the 16th and the 17th centuries. During these wars the English Protestant state, fearful of the strategic dangers posed by neighbouring Catholic Ireland, overthrew Ireland's native aristocracy and social institutions, planted an English Protestant colony on the island and created for the first time a centralized polity that persecuted the native religion. The result was that the native Irish, reduced largely to a peasant status, rallied round their Church as the last native bastion against an alien state. On the other hand, the conquering settlers, establishing Anglicanism as the official religion of Ireland, used a religious test to exclude the native



Irish from power, status and landed property. Residual memories of the old aristocratic culture lingered on in the folklore of the peasantry. But without an educated class to sustain it, the Irish language culture began steadily to retreat before the march of English. However, luckily for Ireland, both the Gaelic-linguistic and the Anglo-Irish literary revivals rose to the occasion to revive an authentic Irish culture.

The English Protestants settled in Ireland down the ages were the pioneers in the Anglo-Irish literary revival. Some way or the other, Protestants in Ireland, like other settlers, were forced into some identification with their adopted country by intermarriage and the continuous pressure to subordinate their interests to those of the metropolitan power. They started, since the 17th century, to earn an Anglo-Irish identity. They re-asserted Ireland's distinctive contribution to European civilization and its links with the other Celtic cultures of Scotland, Wales, Brittany and Gallic France. Protestants happened to be the chief supporters for most of the modern period of antiquarian, archaeological and philological research into the Celtic past, notably through the Royal Irish Academy. However, because of the barriers of religion, language and the recent history of spoliation, they could not fully identify with the native Irish. Hence the Protestant Irish identity was elitist, unhistoric and cosmopolitan. As the cultured elite they naturally assumed an Irish identity in their own image that would resume a distinctive Celtic

contribution to European culture, through the English language. The Anglo-Irish literary revival projected a quite different idea of the Irish nation. Like the language movement, its mission was to restore an Ireland, now reduced to a demoralized provincialism, to its former status among the nations of Europe. But whereas the language movement returned to the historic language of the country in order to radically separate Ireland from English influence, the literary movement chose the vernacular now emerging from the bilingual peasantry, an English rich with Irish idioms and rhythm.

W.B. Yeats, a great Irish poet from the Protestant background, is a significant name in a synthetic Anglo-Irish nation. He sought to build an Irish nation by creating a heroic Anglo-Irish literary culture based on ancient Irish legends he was treading a familiar path. Yeats found in the imaginative folk life materials for an emergent rural civilization combining the heroic virtues of the Gaelic with the cosmopolitan outlook of English. He was not only a poet, but was mystic, philosopher, dramatist, folklore collector and journalist. He almost single-handedly created a modern Irish literary school in English. To establish a genuine Anglo-Irish nation, unlike his predecessors, Yeats would appeal to the common people. Yeats was a nationalist. He was both political and cultural nationalist. He participated in Irish politics for some time in his earlier part of life and later became the senator. The turning point for Yeats to become a nationalist was



when he came across John O'Leary, an old Fenian who had returned to Dublin after imprisonment and exile for youthful conspiracies; and another turning point was Maude Gonne, a beautiful revolutionary nationalist who channelled Yeats' youthful ardour towards the more heroic and mystic side of the Nationalist movement. He even joined the secret extremist Irish Republic Brotherhood in 1896. But he, like a true cultural nationalist, believed in the regeneration of contemporary nation, sunk in demoralization, by a return to its creative source in the evolving Gaelic civilization of its recent past through the medium of English language. Yeats' road to cultural nationalism was eventful. He befriended a young mystic, George Russell, with whom he founded the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1885 to study esoteric Eastern scriptures. But, like other young Protestant romantics of the period Yeats was driven outward from his mystical cell to wider national identities by his sympathy for the Irish peasantry in its passionate struggle for the land, waged against British Imperial power. Then it was his discovery of a corpus of pagan myths and legends preserved in the folk literature of the Western peasantry, and untapped except by the poet Sir Samuel Ferguson, that converted Yeats to a crusading literary revivalist. Out of the intimacy of the works of Celtic scholars and apologists such as Petrie, Arnold, de Jubainville, Renan and Rhys, Yeats discovered an ancient Ireland corresponding to the esoteric findings of occultism. Henceforth Yeats encountered two

formative influences on his road to discovery: John O'Leary, a Fenian returned from exile with the revivalist goal of restoring Irish self-respect, and the young Douglas Hyde, just beginning his public campaign to save the disappearing Irish folk culture from extinction. It was O'Leary who embodied an ideal of heroism in his integration of ideals and action for the young Yeats, who was converted by him to an advanced nationalist and was directed to the study of Irish literature and folklore. On the other hand, it was Hyde who gave him access to the oral folk tradition, and even more for revealing its possibilities for the creation of a national literature through his translations of Irish folk songs.

From the mid-1880s until 1914, Yeats was at the hub of the Irish literary revival. In engagement with literary-mystical politics in Irish centres in Dublin, London and Paris, Yeats produced a stream of poems, plays, manifestos, collaborated with Hyde, Russell and others in expeditions into the Irish interior and established literary societies, promoted Irish publishing projects, artistic presence and finally an Irish theatre in order to create a national school of literature. Indeed, Ireland had retained the full imaginative vision of the folk over the generations. But unlike Greece or Germany, no great poet in Ireland till Yeats had yet formed its fantastic legends into a national epic. So Yeats, with his greater poetic vision and imagination, came forward to make literary use of Irish myths and folklores to the furthest possible extent. Besides, he strove to purify



Irish literature from decadent English middle-class values and to base it instead on the ancient idealism of the Gael. 'Literature,' he wrote, 'is to my mind the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values'. Along with Moore, Martyn and Synge who gave Irish culture a new status within and without Ireland, Yeats made a deep impression on the developing Irish national consciousness. Of course, at times, he turned for his literary models for an Irish heroic verse, like Ferguson before him, not to the native Gaelic tradition but to the European romantic movement. Acknowledging Ferguson as his precursor in this regard, Yeats argued his enterprise had come to nothing because he had been failed by his own Protestant community. He would instead appeal to the educated strata of the native nationalist community. He conceived of the theatre as the medium of regeneration and the only modern equivalent of the oral communalist tradition in art. In order to transform this idea into action, Yeats joined hands with Lady Gregory, Moore and Martyn to found the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 with the aim of creating an integrated Anglo-Irish nation. Then the same group along with J.M.Synge was responsible for the establishment of the famous Abbey Theatre in 1904. Indeed, for Yeats the Irish theatre would be a national shrine in which a unified cycle of plays based on Irish legend, focusing in particular on the warrior hero Cuchulain. For Yeats, as for Ferguson, Irish culture was seen in essentially passive role as material to be moulded by an artistic elite who

would create the authentic Irish nation, neither Catholic nor Protestant but reconciling both partial visions in the pagan Celtic archetype. However, Yeats was, at times, to come into conflict with the Gaelic Catholic revivalists, who regarded this elitist dismissal of most of their heritage as an alien intrusion. At the inception of his Irish theatre, Yeats had sought an aristocracy of talent, prepared in pursuit of the heroic Celtic ideal to confront the vulgar prejudices of urban middle class opinion. For Yeats the Celtic ideal was personified, above all, by the pagan aristocratic warrior Cuchulain, a man of passions and ungovernable will. But Yeats' ideals and practice were incoherent. His individualistic concept of the artist made it impossible to create a unified heroic school of drama. In the nature of things the individual voices he sought were heterogeneous and often writers, such as George Moore and Edward Martyn, left after disagreements. His very cult of the artist and the delight in controversy eventually detached the theatre from nationalism altogether to make a romantic citadel of art. W.B.Yeats provided thereby a focus for Protestants seeking purpose and identity. By creating a distinctive Anglo-Irish literature, he, along with others, exercised an important nationalizing effect on English-speaking Ireland to whom he diffused, to more extent, models of Gaelic heroism and self-sacrifice.

Irish nationalism constitutes core of much of Yeats' earlier poetry and then later poetry in fragments in diverse ways that grounded his growth of poet. His nationalism –



both political and cultural—is well reflected in his poems. His nationalism was first grounded on his growing affinity towards Irish myths, folklores and legends based on Gaelic tradition which formed some major themes of Yeats. He fully exploited the saga of Ireland and the Celtic legends. His desire for Ireland's independence was a product of emotion rather than politics. As an Irishman, passionately attached to his country by ties of ancestors and pride in his country's history and legends, he gradually became disillusioned when he felt that the violence and hatred by the Irish political leaders and journalists was a meanness of spirit, a selfishness and lack of breeding which was poisoning the heroic Irish nobility. However, he was a great poet. His poems such as 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea', 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death', 'Easter 1916' and so on are based on Irish mythology and Irish politics. In his volume, entitled 'The Rose', he made ample use of the Gaelic legends, the Cuchulian saga and the tales of the Fianna. His nationalism calls forth the nostalgia for the old Ireland, which is evident in his poem, 'September: 1913'. Even his poem 'The Tower' conjures images of people from Ireland's rich past:

'Before that ruin came, for centuries,
Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered
to the knees
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow
stairs'

Myth and history form an integral part of Yeats' poetry. He made Irish legends and history a source of inspiration for his earlier poems in

particular. The mythology of Ireland left the Irish imagination for the young Yeats a fascination which Greek and Roman mythologies had for the poets of the Renaissance. It was his firm belief that a literature not imbued with passion of ancient belief was always in the danger of degenerating into a mere chronicle of circumstances and passionless fantasies. The tale of the love of Cuchulain for an immortal goddess and his coming home to a mortal woman, the tale of Deidre, one of tragic heroines in Irish myth, the tale of Oisín coming out of the fairyland of his memories and lamentations etc. fascinated Yeats. Characters like Aengus, Cassandra, Helen, Deidre, Oisín, Cuchulain and the like figured occasionally in his poetry. His long poem 'The Wanderings of Oisín' shows Oisín coming into contact with mythological figures like Niamh. 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' records the romantic zeal in the mythical Ireland:

'I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;

'The Rose' poems exhibit the working of the rose in the legends of Celtic mythology. In 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea', the poem enacts the familiar Oedipal struggle. Instead of the son slaying his father as is the case in the Oedipus myth, the father Cuchulain slays his son in ignorance. Madness ensues:

'Cuchulain stirred,
Stared on the horses of the sea, and
heard



The cars of battle and his own name
cried;
And fought with the invulnerable
tide.'

The image of Cuchulain awaiting his death, fighting off the "invulnerable tide" reflects the idea of a centuries-long battle with the "invulnerable tide" of British imperialism, which pervaded nationalist spirit. The proud image of Cuchulain in battle turns out to be themes that rallied Irish nationalists. Thus folklore provided for Yeats an impetus to the poetic imagination and vision of Irish nationalism.

Certain poems such as 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', 'September 1913' and 'Easter 1916' give expression to Yeats' sense of history. 'Easter 1916' deals with the contemporary history of Ireland. The Easter Rising of 1916 had taken Yeats by surprise. Those very revolutionaries he had come to despise attained heroic status and he felt that a terrible beauty had been born:

'All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.'

He realized that these Irishmen had stopped 'burning damp faggots' and had achieved a permanence which he set down to celebrate in the poem:

'That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,'

The heroic intensity had transcended the cycle of ordinary life, and achieved permanence in the midst of flux. The poem, in some ways, shows that Yeats' Protestant heritage added an element to his

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fascination with the nationalist movement. 'Easter 1916', the seminal work of Irish nationalism, was written by a Protestant seems at first ironic, but the fact only enhances Yeats' contribution to the establishment of an Irish identity. The poem gave not only Yeats, but Irish Protestants a place in the history of Irish nationalism. Historically, the initial popular response to the Uprising was one of antagonism; this mood changed to anger after the leaders were executed and a military regime was imposed. Because of the tragic events of Easter 1916, Political nationalism and Cultural Revival Movement became one and the same. With the cultural and political nationalists now working together, albeit dominated by middle class urban revivalists, they capitalizing on the popular mood and taking into account the combined factors of the failure to implement Home Rule and the threat of British conscription in 1918 were able to revive nationalist fervour. 'Nineteen Hundred Nineteen' is a product of Yeats' reflections upon the changes brought about by the violence which followed the Easter Rising. His attitude in search of composure in the face of the destruction is at once social and romantic:

'But is there any comfort to be found?

Man is in love, and love's what vanishes,

What more is there to say?'

The brutality and horror of the contemporary war was evident in the line, 'Now days are dragon-ridden...'. Yeats' handling of myths and history



speaks volume of his remarkable vision and imagination coupled together. His 'To A Shade' is a significant poem addressed to Charles Parnell, the Irish leader of the 1880s who was the hero of Yeats' youth before the reactionaries of the church and business brought him down with the despicable slanders which were the political weapons in Ireland at that time :

'If you have revisited the town, thin
Shade,
Whether to look upon your monument
(I wonder if the builder has been paid)
... ..
Let these content you and be gone
again ;
For they are at their old tricks yet.'

Yeats' 'An Irish Airman Foresees His Death 'was composed in 1919 during the First World War when many Irishmen fought on the side of the English. The poem pertains to Major Robert Gregory who was killed in action in the course of the First World War. The contemporary history leading to frustration on the part of an Irishman is pinpointed:

'My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
Nor likely end could bring them
loss
Or leave them happier than before.'

His love for Ireland with its surroundings and locations too stirs up and makes up his sense of nationalism in him. Some beautiful poems like 'The Stolen Child', 'A Prayer for My Daughter' 'The Tower' etc. capture the characteristic cadence of Ireland, and the Sligo country where he lived as a child

comes alive in many other poems. The fascination for the beautiful Irish landscape is highlighted in 'The Stolen Child':

'Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth
Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water-rats;'

The two other poems, characteristically Irish in setting are 'Coole Park' and 'Coole Park and Ballyllye'. In both poems Yeats remembered a type of life gone by which evoked the poet's nostalgia for the past because Coole Park represented, for Yeats, a former Ireland that offered serenity and tranquility as is recorded in 'Coole Park' :

'Here, traveler, scholar, poet, take
your stand
When all those rooms and passages
are gone,
When nettles wave upon a shapeless
Mound
And sapling root among the broken
stone, ...'

In all fairness, Irish myths, for that matter, Gaelic myths, legends, folklores, its contemporary history combine together for Yeats to enable him to catch the imagination and psyche of an Irish nationalist. He delves deep into the genesis of Irish cosmic force. His poetry testifies to his sense of belonging to and assimilation with Ireland at large. And his growth as a poet ensues from it.



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