



## Nationalism In W.B. Yeats' Poetic Drama: Art as Political Expression

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### Abstract

W.B. Yeats, a legendary figure in Irish literature, offered a sophisticated examination of identity, sacrifice, and revolt by fusing his poetry with insightful observations on Irish nationalism. The poetic dramas by Yeats, especially "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916," are examined in depth in this research since they are important pieces that deal directly with the political conflicts in Ireland. Yeats turns his plays into moving commentary on the country's struggle for independence by utilizing allegory, symbolism, and historical context. He does this by capturing the resilience and collective suffering of the Irish people. Yeats's commitment with nationalism goes beyond simple literary expression to become a mobilizing force that promotes unity and shapes the national consciousness.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, W.B. Yeats' Poetic Drama, Political Expression, national identity, Irish Culture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The verses of W.B. Yeats exhibit a profound engagement with the socio-political milieu of Ireland, as evidenced by the enduring effects of Irish nationalism that are woven throughout his poetry. Yeats became a leader of the Irish Literary Revival despite being born during a time of significant cultural change. He channeled the then-dominant collective aspirations for national identity through his profound literary expressions. Yeats uncovered the historical thread that helped to define the country while he explored the complex layers of Irish identity. He incorporates these elements into a narrative that aims to revive and honor the essence of Irishness, transforming his poetry into a storehouse of Irish mythology, legends, and customs. His poetry has an abundance of Irish identity. He invites readers to delve deeper into Ireland's essence through his poetry, exploring the country's struggles, triumphs, and unwavering spirit.

Yeats's lyrical vision, however, transcends mere contemplation. It changes into an intricate response to the political events that shape Ireland's future. Written in the wake of the 1916 Easter Rising, the poem "Easter 1916" pays homage to his affinity for the nationalist spirit of the day. Yeats's poetic brilliance enables him to eloquently convey the complexities of human motivations and political goals, immortalizing the sacrifices made in the fight for Irish freedom. Yeats's poetry is full of powerful weapons, such as nationalist symbolism and depictions of mythological imagery. These symbols transcend the literal and take on deep symbolic meanings that link Ireland's mythological and historical heritage to the current struggle for independence. Three instances of symbols that go beyond the literal are the harp, the rose, and the tower. Using this rhetorical method, Yeats turns his poetry from a mere literary statement into a call to action for a people desperate to declare who they are.

Yeats's commitment to the cause of Irish freedom transcends not only the boundaries of poetry abstraction but also that domain. His poetry reflects a genuine dedication to the patriotic aspirations of his fellow citizens because he was an active participant in politics and a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The fact that his songs serve as a vehicle for his own involvement in the fight demonstrates the conceptual and emotional aspects of his patriotism. Yeats' poetry also contains a strong sense of sorrow and sadness that permeates every line. This is a sincere recognition of the costs paid by people attempting to secure Ireland's future. The poems resonate with the collective suffering and tenacity of a people who have persevered, even as they convey a patriotism rooted in history and aimed towards a bright future.

As Yeats's poetry spreads throughout society, it becomes a force that shapes emotions, inspires solidarity, and fosters a shared vision for Ireland. His poems become potent

instruments for inspiring a feeling of unanimity and rallying support among those who aspire to an independent and free Ireland, even outside the realm of the arts. In the intricate fabric of W.B. Yeats's poetry, the ideas of nationalism and patriotism are not discrete motifs; rather, they are woven throughout each stanza and each line. That they are the beating heart of a country whose rhythmic cadence is a tribute to the eternal power of poetry language in deciding the fate of a people who are pursuing their independence.

## 1.1.Objectives of the Study

- To explore W.B. Yeats's engagement with Irish nationalism through an analysis of his poetic dramas.
- To analyze themes of sacrifice, rebellion, and the complexities of national identity in Yeats's poetry.
- To investigate the role of Yeats's poetic expression in shaping Irish cultural and political discourse during his time and its enduring impact.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Kitishat, A. R. (2019)** concluded Famous Anglo-Irish poet and dramatist W.B. Yeats was accused of national apathy. Due to his Anglo-Irish ancestry, his efforts to restore Irish culture to establish a self-sufficient Irish identity were viewed with skepticism. This shows the study's significant achievements in revealing Yeats' nationalism and contribution to Irish culture renaissance. The study also tries to counter Yeats's colonizer charge. The research showed that Yeats presented a sophisticated interpretation of nationalism that most of his contemporaries missed because they only focused on one aspect of Irish identity and ignored the other; when they discussed Ireland, they were politicians or culturalists. However, Yeats showed a greater degree of awareness by believing that both national and cultural elements needed to be merged into one word: "Irishness." His national ideology unites nationalism and culture.

**T. Torshaug (2019)** examined how William Butler Yeats' early sonnets communicate an Irish public identity through Celtic folklore-based cultural nationalism. Late studies of Yeats' earliest verse show that he used extraordinary elements to express his creative mind and sexual discomfort. According to Daniel Gomes, Yeats used Irish folklore as both a declaration of his patriotism and a blank canvas for his own desires. This theory argues that Yeats' early sonnets should only be read for fun. This proposition claims that cultural nationalism rethinks cultural identity using legendary elements. With that in mind, I'll examine three of Yeats' early works and their environments. Yeats' sonnets "The Wanderings of Oisín," "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," and "To Ireland in the Approaching Times" show his passionate and legendary patriotism. This is crucial since it illustrates Ireland's 1880s and 1890s abstract and cultural revival's causes.

**M. Kadiroglu (2021)** stated Yeats was the most famous early 20th-century Irish Literary Revival champion and its originator. In addition, he started it. Since childhood, he's been exposed to Irishness and culture. Irishness is his main theme in his poetry about love and poetry. Modern Irish landscapes and Celtic mythology reinforce this idea. Poetry, love, and poetry craft are his subjects. Yeats uses historical, mythical, and Irish settings in his poetry to connect the past and present in terms of Irishness. This connection is made by historical and mythological elements. His poetry reveals his views and hopes for a romanticized Irish society. This study shows how Yeats defends his ancestry and national identity using ideology. Visits to Irish locations and Celtic and Irish mythology will accomplish this. Because of this, his poetry supports academic and practical Irishness knowledge through performative discourse.

**P. Barraclough (2015)** showed that Yeats' dramatic works had minimal impact on the public because they were mostly about expressing his personal views and desires and developing his career as a theatrical experimenter. The plays depicted a romanticized and "ideal" Ireland that overlooked its residents' real-life experiences and the time's particular cultural, social, and religious background. Yeats also used his plays to express his discontent with his



countrymen's narrow-mindedness and pettiness. Yeats' most ritualistic and symbolic drama, modelled on Japanese Noh theatre, utilised novel theatrical techniques but were priced at an intellectual and "otherworldly" level that rendered them inaccessible to the average people. We'll examine several plays from the mid-1890s to 1916, focusing on subject matter, language, stage design, and acting.

**Demirbaş, L. (2015)** played Ruler's Edge and Demise and the Lord's Horseman show how William Butler Yeats and Wole Soyinka maintained cultural identity during postcolonial upheaval in respective nations. I show how Yeats and Soyinka used theatre to investigate English expansionism's belief systems and to evaluate the establishment of a new public consciousness and cultural identity founded on pre-pilgrim public legacy. The assessment focused on Yeats' *The Lord's Limit* and Soyinka's *The Ruler's Horseman* due of their strong themes and creative qualities. Both plays explore the dilemma of severe royal rule, which would ultimately kill the heroes, and both creators set self-destruction in their own civilizations. Both playwrights use history, shows, and laws to legitimize culture. Western theatre, especially ancient misfortune, is used to tell stories. Yeats and Soyinka accept the criteria of old-style adversity, which underpin European writing, while preserving their own personal successes' customs and folklore.

### 3. YEATS'S POETICAL EXPRESSION

W.B. Yeats had a significant influence on Irish politics. Through his artistic endeavors, he sought to bridge the perceived political void and empower the Irish people, molding their sense of identity as a nation. Yeats felt that by presenting ancient, mythical, and mystical Ireland in his poetry, he could increase the sense of belonging among the populace. Poems like "The Druid," "Fergus," and "Cuchulain" illustrate this cultural custom. The solidarity that the ancient Celtic culture instilled in his emerging nation was essential. Yeats sought to create an identity that was both Irish and English, driven by his deep conviction that Ireland was spiritually better to godless, industrialized Britain. He believed that uniting Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish, Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Unionists, throughout Ireland would be possible by incorporating old Celtic customs into his poetry.

"The Wandering of Oisín and Other Poems," Yeats's debut major work, portrayed Ireland as "full of beauty, wisdom, and passionate heroism." His later works, which pay homage to Maude Gonne and his unfulfilled love for her, echo his nationalistic themes by portraying Gonne as a "heroic symbol of an idealized Ireland." One of Yeats's most famous theatrical pieces, "The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics," was released in 1892. It is a "anti-materialistic, national fable" that honors indigenous spiritual traditions as the country's greatest line of defence against mercenary strangers. His 1895 publication, "The Rose," featured recurring themes of femininity, beauty, and love that Yeats projected not only onto his lover but also into Ireland.

Yeats's manifesto-like poetry "To Ireland in the Coming Times" unites his nationalist and occultist energies in a statement about the country's literary heritage and his aspirations for the future. The poem declares its loyalty to the Young Irish ballad tradition with its tetrameters and rhyming couplets. While most of Yeats's compositions have a repeating theme of nationalistic loyalty to Ireland, "Easter 1916" is regarded as one of his best. One of the many reasons this poem is noteworthy is that Yeats acknowledged he was mistaken about the revolutionaries three years prior when he declared in "September 1913" that "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" and accused the Irish middle classes of being "cautious selfishness and lack of vision." He was mostly demoralized by Irish people in "Easter 1916," since he desired to perceive them as being more fervent in their fight for freedom. Yeats admits that he was mistaken about the Irish in "Easter 1916" in the critically acclaimed documentary "No Country For Old Men," as the people from Ireland are capable of feeling intense emotion for their homeland.

Many more of Yeats's poems regarding Ireland's engagement in World War I, such as "A Meditation in Time of War" and "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," also demonstrate his



political stance. He also explores themes of violence and bitterness in the sequences "Meditations in Time of Civil War," where he combines political and personal themes, and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." These poems about Irish nationalists and political activists include "On a Political Prisoner," where he reflects bitterly on Markiewicz's path to socialism, and "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz."

Following World War I, Yeats was horrified by the atrocities he had witnessed, and his famous thoughts about "the gyres" and his later discoveries about the history of world events gave rise to one of his finest masterpieces, "The Second Coming." In contrast to the apocalyptic premise of "The Second Coming," his lyrical expression and the meticulous attention to form and rhythm in his poems remain highly esteemed and relevant in contemporary times.

## **4. NATIONALISM AND PATRIOTISM IN W.B. YEATS' POETRIES**

### **4.1. The plays "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916" address current political issues**

Yeats' works, such as "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916," show his direct involvement in Ireland's political conflicts. In these plays, Yeats becomes a commentator, witness, and active participant in the turbulent events that shaped the nation.

Yeats' myth-politics poem "Cathleen ni Houlihan" is a classic. The drama, written with Lady Gregory, personifies Ireland, notably Catherine ni Houlihan, through allegory. The novel is set amid Ireland's political unrest, the Rebellion of 1798. Yeats depicts the nation's struggle for independence and its sacrifices via Cathleen. The play is both a historical drama and a provocative political statement. It makes viewers think about Ireland's freedom struggle. In "Easter, 1916," Yeats peaks in his political activism. This drama, made after the Easter Rising, an armed revolt against British rule in Ireland, captures the events and feelings surrounding them. As the insurrection unfolds, Yeats' concerns about it change.

A full examination of the Rising's causes, ideals, and repercussions unfolds in the drama. Yeats uses Padraic Pearse, Thomas McDonagh, and others to explore political dedication, personal sacrifice, and Irish identity. It is a cathartic expression of Yeats's increasing nationalist sentiments and a platform for introspection and national discourse. "Easter, 1916" was written. Both plays contain a primary topic that addresses political conflicts of their eras. They use drama to make social and political statements. Yeats captures Ireland's zeitgeist through metaphor, symbolism, and delicate characterizations. Audiences might reflect on their past, goals, and pursuit of political liberty via him.

In essence, "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916" demonstrate Yeats's commitment to using drama to examine, criticize, and expose Ireland's political struggles. Both were composed in 1916. His works show his maturation as a dramatist and as a cultural and political commentator who grapples with national identity and sovereignty.

### **4.2. Explores themes of sacrifice, rebellion, and national identity complications**

Yeats writes on sacrifice, resistance, and national identity problems. His contribution to Irish literature and drama becomes more sophisticated and nuanced. Yeats uses poems, plays, and essays to examine Irish history and independence. These subjects allow him to contemplate deeper human experiences.

#### **1. Sacrifice**

The theme of sacrifice appears throughout Yeats's work as a metaphor for the deep commitment people make to a greater purpose, particularly in Irish nationalism. Personal and magical depictions show people sacrificing themselves for their country. In poems like "Easter, 1916," the author elevates the sacrifices of Easter Rising participants to mythological heroism. The question of sacrifice becomes a deep exploration of political ambitions' costs and consequences, emphasizing the importance of personal sacrifices in national independence.

#### **2. Rebellion**

Yeats' compositions center on revolt, reflecting the turbulent period he lived in. Yeats was



inspired by the Irish uprisings against British rule, including the Easter Rising, to study revolt, its aims, and its effects. "Easter, 1916" captures the defiance of its characters and explores political activism and the struggle between personal beliefs and social norms. Yeats uses the play to explore the causes of rebellion and inspire audiences to consider the morality of political unrest.

### 3. National Identity Complexities

Yeats's exploration of national identity extends beyond celebrating Irishness. Instead, he explores the term's intricacies and acknowledges the many narratives that make up Irish identity. His characters often battle with allegiance, cultural legacy, and forming a common identity during historical and political upheavals. The protagonists in "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916" navigate the complicated web of personal and national identities, illustrating the conflicts that arise in the search for a unified Irish identity. Both of these works illustrate this inquiry.

Yeats' poems represent Irish experience and universal ideas on sacrifice, resistance, and identity—reaching nations and times. These themes make Yeats's writings powerful. Yeats goes beyond political commentary by exploring these themes' intricacy. Doing so makes his texts immortal reflections on the human condition and the desire for freedom and self-determination.

### 5. YEATS'S PUBLIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The global political climate influenced Yeats's nationalism. Irish nationality should be intellectual or spiritual, said Yeats. National identity cannot be perpetuated without intellectual vitality, he believed. Living Ireland needs living literature". He supported Irish unity and culture. He wanted to create an Irish culture to gain independence from England. Poetry, theatre, politics, and mystical concerns demonstrated Yeats' originality. This chapter chronologically presents Yeats's public and political activity by life events. Yeats joined the Golden Dawn, a secret ceremonial magic group, in 1890 at 25 and led it for 32 years, becoming a leader about 1900. Georgiana Hyde-Lees, his future wife, joined the society in 1914. Symbols were important to him because they may add enchantment to his poems. In 1890, he encountered English decadent poet Lionel Johnson and helped found the Rhymers' organization, a London poets' organization that read and discussed their work. Yeats' 1899 poem *The Wind among the Reeds* describes the club's influence.

Yeats supported Irish nationalism and Gaelic heritage in the Irish Literary Revival. He created the Irish Literary Society in London in 1892 with T. W. Rolleston and Charles Gavan Duffy. In Dublin, he founded the National Literary Society with Douglas Hyde as its first president the same year. Remember John O'Leary's impact on the young poet. O'Leary, a prominent patriot, poet, journalist, novelist, and activist who returned to Ireland after 20 years in incarceration and exile for revolutionary patriotic efforts, loved Irish books, music, and ballads and encouraged young writers to write about Ireland.

Yeats loved theatre around 1900. In the summer of 1897, he, Lady Gregory, and her neighbor Edward Martyn planned to promote Irish drama. The first of three annual Dublin shows included Yeats's *Countess Kathleen* in 1899, and in 1902, they supported a cast of amateur Irish actors in George Russell's *"Deirdre"* and Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The plays focused on changing Ireland and young Irish independence seekers from Britain. On *Baile's Strand* and *At the Hawk's Well* followed.

Following these plays' success, Yeats created the Irish National Theatre Society as president. The company's three directors, Lady Gregory, John M. Synge, and Yeats, performed *On Baile's Strand*, the first of his numerous plays about Cuchulain, in Dublin's Abbey Theatre on December 27, 1904. A generous patron funded its reconstruction. My Irish-loving friend Maud Gonne moved to Paris with her husband, exiled Irish revolutionary John MacBride. Disillusioned, Yeats lost support. Despite remaining Abbey Theatre president, his nationalism waned. Yeats was in London in 1926 when he heard Dublin youths had marched out and begun the Easter Monday insurrection. Oh, Yeats was inspired. Rebel leaders



surrendered and were executed by the British after a week of fighting. Gonne's wife MacBride was executed after the insurrection. At Easter 1916, Yeats wrote one of his best poems about the insurrection.

Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees at 52 a year after Easter Rising. During automatic writing sessions, his wife Georgie produced almost four thousand pages that Yeats later studied on mystic and esoteric topics. These discussions inspired his life and history views, but Ireland was divided. The young Irish Free State battled about Northern Ireland's separation and a British Crown oath in 1921. The Irish civil war lasted from June 1922 to May 1923 over these issues. After joining the new Irish government, Yeats was appointed to the Irish Free State senate for six years in December 1922. This choice showed his lifetime commitment to Irish nationhood. He preserved ancient monuments, Irish manuscripts, and other treasures at the National Museum. Because "it would be imposed" and not "spoken naturally" to adopt Irish as the national language, he proposed talks on strengthening schools.

His 1923 Nobel Prize for Literature was "for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation". Due to his aristocratic ideas of "the few over the many" in leadership, many opponents call Yeats a fascist. Increasing middle class ignorance and idiocy worried him. Yeats wrote to his communist friend Ethel Mannin in 1936 about his growing dismay at government cruelty, despite many accusations. Communists, Fascists, Nationalists, Clerical, and Anti-clerical are guilty by victim count. Verses were my only form of communication. These statements demonstrate his humanity despite allegations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Poetic expression by W.B. Yeats has a close affinity with Irish nationalism. It transcends the domain of just intellectual reflection to emerge as a dynamic that both shapes and mirrors Ireland's socio-political environment. Yeats weaves myth and history together in works of historical significance such as "Cathleen ni Houlihan" and "Easter, 1916," emphasizing themes of resistance, sacrifice, and the complexities of national identity. His poetry commemorates important moments in Ireland's struggle for independence and serves as a catalyst for reflection and unity among the country's citizens. Yeats was not just a major figure in the literary world but also a prominent participant in the Irish Literary Revival and an active participant in political activities. His commitment to creating an authentic Irish identity based on spiritual rejuvenation and cultural inheritance is evident in these endeavors. That his reputation will endure across time is a testament to the enduring power of art in shaping national awareness and aspirations.

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