

Youssef Al-Youssef

National Identity in Irish Drama. A Study of Selected Plays by Yeats, Synge and O'Casey

Extended Version with Ten Plays And Broad Discussion

YOUR KNOWLEDGE HAS VALUE



- We will publish your bachelor's and master's thesis, essays and papers
- Your own eBook and book - sold worldwide in all relevant shops
- Earn money with each sale

Upload your text at www.GRIN.com
and publish for free



Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

This book is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorized distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author s and publisher s rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Imprint:

Copyright © 2015 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783656910121

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/293141>

Youssef Al-Youssef

National Identity in Irish Drama. A Study of Selected Plays by Yeats, Synge and O'Casey

Extended Version with Ten Plays And Broad Discussion

GRIN - Your knowledge has value

Since its foundation in 1998, GRIN has specialized in publishing academic texts by students, college teachers and other academics as e-book and printed book. The website www.grin.com is an ideal platform for presenting term papers, final papers, scientific essays, dissertations and specialist books.

Visit us on the internet:

<http://www.grin.com/>

<http://www.facebook.com/grincom>

http://www.twitter.com/grin_com

Table of contents

I-Acknowledgement	3
II- Introduction	4
III- <u>The Countess Cathleen</u>	7
IV- <u>Cathleen Ni Houlihan</u>	44
V- <u>Purgatory</u>	69
VI- <u>Riders to the Sea</u>	85
VII- <u>The Playboy of the Western World</u>	105
VIII- <u>The Well of the Saints</u>	144
IX- <u>Juno and the Paycock</u>	162
X- <u>The Plough and the Stars</u>	181

XI- <u>The Shadow of a Gunman</u>	208
XII- <u>The Silver Tassie</u>	217
XIII- Conclusion	232
XIV- Works cited	236

Acknowledgement

This book comes as a continuation to the previous book with the same title, but this time, with ten plays and a broader discussion of the previously discussed ones. In this book, many specialised people have worked hard in order to answer the ongoing debates in the literary field. My deepest thanks go to all these people, to our friends, families and acquaintances. Thanks for them all, and again, thanks for those who made the composition and publication an event and not only a dream.

Introduction

The Irish national identity as portrayed in the dramatic works of the most prominent figures in Irish drama is the main theme of the following pages. The plays have been analysed while taking the national aspect as the main theme without avoiding the general line of argument. However, sometimes the general line of argument is suspended for a while in order to explain a branching theme but returns to converge with the main theme(s) of the play. What is to be taken into consideration during this analysis is the main theme(s). Certain national aspects are shown but not necessarily linked to the heart of the main theme. However, being themes about national identity aspects, make them go by their accord to the general theme of this dissertation. Moreover, in fear of repetition, some themes are used in order to substantiate a certain theme, but the supporting theme was mentioned earlier. This leads one to refer to the fact that each play cannot be understood unless looked at while taking the whole analysis of it into consideration. An example of this is The Playboy of the Western World; where historical facts converge with myth, language with psychoanalysis and all to be associated with the riots as something intended by the dramatist. In this dissertation, historical facts referred to in each play are mentioned, but loosely for reasons of being loosely selected. General theme of the play is analysed, followed by language use in each play. Psychoanalysis is also used and the whole analysis is associated to the general line of the play.

Most of the time, the least number of words is used in order to convey the most possible meaning. Therefore, sometimes the theme might not seem clear to the honoured reader, so one can refer back to the main source or continue reading; sometimes fuller explanations are used but in a more proper place. All this is used due to the lengthy information in the main sources and the complexity of the subject being discussed and above all not to go very far from the main line of the play to avoid confusing the reader. An example of this is Theosophy, where one source is about 500 pages, and the main themes of this religion are kept secret.

The dramatic works discussed are Yeats's Countess Cathleen, Cathleen Ni Houlihan and Purgatory, Synge's The Playboy of the Western World, Riders to the Sea and The Well of the Saints and Sean O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars, Juno and the Paycock, The Shadow of a Gunman and The Silver Tassie. Analysis starts with the title, the setting, historical events mentioned, the main source, symbolism, general theme, psychoanalysis, language, and finishing with associating the whole with the main theme of the play. Here are the main themes in these plays.

Countess Cathleen is mainly concerned with the return to Celtic-Buddhism through selling souls and language is poetic. Cathleen Ni Houlihan is mainly concerned with unifying the whole country by associating the wedding day with the day of independence. Purgatory is about political nationalism and cultural nationalism. The Playboy of the Western World uses the theme of

changing the world by word and the control of Christianity over the Irish id.

Riders to the Sea portrays the rejection of Christianity for a place as small as a nail in Bartley's coffin. The Well of the Saints is about the ridge between romanticism and realism. The Plough and the Stars depicts the anti-nationalist as the most nationalist and the alleged nationalist to reveal his true self. And in Juno and the Paycock, the rejection of Christian control over the sexual power of the Irish. The Shadow of a Gunman is about romantic nationalism and realistic nationalism. Finally, The Silver Tassie is about political nationalism and cultural nationalism. Whenever words lose all their necessity, the argument stops, taking into consideration the highly experienced reader's ability to get the meaning in the least words possible. Moreover, the whole dissertation can be looked at as a kind of initiation; according to Victor Turner's theory, a developing character goes through three main stages: separation (Yeats's plays), transition (Synge's) and reincorporation (O'Casey's). Another thing is that the three dramatists represent another theory; romanticism can be turned into realism but one should cross the boundaries between them. Thus, Yeats represented romanticism Synge crossed the borderlines of romanticism (especially in The Playboy of the Western World) and O'Casey represented realism.

Countess Cathleen

The story of this play is old to a degree which makes it impossible to define the first source of it. However, it is most likely from the Druid times (Monaghan109). It is best, then, to take the story as a myth and deal with it as a well-known aspect of national identity. The story was altered by Christian influence, and Yeats added some details.

The play, set in the time of the Famine is highly national; the Irish blamed the British for the Famine. The Protestants' exploitation of the starving peasants' urgent need for sustenance, made them start their crusade for converting the Catholics into Protestants (Schulze 45, Howes 48, Harris 36). Moreover, the Irish looked at the British as the main cause of the Famine; God sent the blight and the British caused the Famine (Cusack 54). All these elements are loaded in the setting. The place is as in the real story, a peasant's cottage, which is the essence of Irishness. The characters are mostly the same as in the original story, except Aleel; he is Yeats, and before Yeats, he is the king of "Connaught" and his wife Maeve—who, assign Cuchulain as champion, and are well-known for judgments—are related to the mythical world of pagan gods (Monaghan128). The other elements of the play are the same as in the first version of the story. Therefore, it will not be needed to repeat the story, but it should be highlighted when the dramatist charges a new meaning into the general line of the play. The mentioning of an owl in the very beginning of the

play, which does not exist in the main source, has a symbolic meaning; fairies.

It was believed that they had the privilege of shape shifting (Monaghan 373).

Moir goes to investigate Bridget's search for the meaning of the owl and comes to the conclusion that Bridget overlooked the behavior of owls; they hunt from the land but are aero creatures. In other words, the devils are unearthly (114).

Shemus going to find work, and being expelled by the beggars are historical facts; during the famine, it was usual to see many beggars, but unusual to find work (McGreevy 65). After returning home, he mentions the death of all wild animals, in reference to the Famine, and labels the "badger" as one of the extinct animals. The badger is thought to be related to shape shifting while rats were thought to foretell death when they left a house, and related to prophecy and "precognitive power" (33, 391).

Aleel says to Shemus:

Shut to the door before the night has fallen,

For who can say what walks, or in what shape

Some devilish creature flies in the air, but now

Two grey-horned owls hooted above our heads (Yeats).

The poet was believed to tell prophecies. This is a foreshadowing to the coming of the two devils into the cottage.

Later on, Mary wonders why the devils do not give money to the starving people, they say that they know the "evil of mere charity". This is an allusion to the fact that Britain was reluctant to relieve the starving people in Ireland under the same pretext; the British Treasure Secretary was convinced that raising the income level of the poor would cause population increase, making the problem worse (McGreevy 12).

Cathleen.

A learned theologian has laid down

That starving men may take what's necessary,

And yet be sinless.

The learned theologian is Thomas Aquinas, who legislated for peasants taking food in order not to starve, and be sinless (Armstrong18).

Cathleen orders her servants to bring all the peasants into her house and feed them until the house collapses. This is related to the fact that during the Famine, churches and houses were used to provide shelter and food (McGreevy 20). Moreover, she and the devils mention the coming of ships loaded with food. In fact, food was imported to Ireland from India. This is one of the reasons, though farfetched, which explains why the merchants wear Eastern clothes and sit in an Eastern manner. Moreover, the play mentions the theft of

Cathleen's property in addition to the devils' conversation about the expected arrival of oxen and grain in three days. Number three is mostly used due to the belief of being lucky. However, the historical fact is the export of cattle and grain from Ireland during the Famine (McGreevy 45, Harris 20, and Cusack 108). These were the historical details mentioned in the play. Now one can move on to the general analysis.

Firstly, Shemus and Teig are pouring blasphemous words on God, and all the characters are reading bad omens in the general atmosphere in the play; owls with human faces, death of badgers, thunder and hen's fluttering. Mary is concerned about Shemus's safety because supernatural spirits haunt the woods. When the devils enter, Mary's prayers avail her nothing. Even worse, she faints in front of the devils. They remind her that she will be starving in no time, and that they will be to her side in order to buy her soul. The comparison of God and devil is depicted as if devil is more generous than God! To understand this seemingly blasphemous comparison, one has to remember that the pagan gods were demonized in the Christian religion. Therefore, the whole thing is turned upside down; the devils are the pagan gods who came to reclaim the Irish's souls. If Yeats did not intend this, then it is meant to be in the same line of traveler drama, where a traveler comes to the community, alters some features in them, and leaves. By looking into the two above ideas at the same time with the fact that a devil is a representative of paganism opposing Christianity, one

can return to the general line of argument. The devils buy the soul not for being a normal one, but for being religious. This means that buying the souls is buying Christianity in them more than mere buying of souls. This can be clarified in reference to the way the price of the peasant's soul is determined; the more religious the soul is, the more price it is offered to be bought.

The merchants, in order to oblige more peasants, and Countess Cathleen with them, to sell their souls, they go and steal Cathleen's treasure houses. The devils do not carry the bags, but use spirits to carry them. These spirits dance and sing. This is related to the world of the fairies; where it is believed that the fairies always danced and sang (Monaghan 300). Aleel the pagan poet speaks of such heavenly-like place during his unavailing attempts to relieve the Countess from her burdens. These burdens are held by Cathleen due to her Christian belief in her commitment to help the poor. The clearest manifestation of this argument is when Aleel comes to the devils in order to take his soul for nothing. They declare their inability to take Aleel's soul; he mocks their weak powers (compared to his) and even he puts fear in the devils' hearts. The devil kisses the circlet where his master's lips touched the circlet to pacify his frightened soul. However, when Oona and Cathleen come, the devils are at their work and their souls are calm. Countess Cathleen sells her soul and her soul quickly leaves her body, while the other peasants' sold souls are still within their bodies. This means, the more one is religious, the more they are vulnerable to devils. This

idea is well established in the play I suppose. However, in Christian belief, the more one is religious, the more they are protected from the devil. While the case is the opposite in Yeats's play. This means that Christianity is what made the Irish soul and even body, so weak. Cathleen sells her soul, but this is a violation of Catholic belief (Schulze 40). This means that the general line of the play is meant to show, though dimly, that Christianity is vulnerable in Ireland compared to pagan culture. That is why Yeats added Aleel to the early version of the story. Countess Cathleen being saved by God depending on Christian belief is meant to be a violation of Catholic belief and not to validate Catholic belief. Moreover, it was thought that sacrificing one's soul for a general cause during a famine was applauded and national in Celtic myth: "...the Celts believed in **reincarnation**, the ritual offering of a human life to attain a community good, such as relief from plague or famine, might have been seen as a noble way to die"(Monaghan 464). When one follows the word in bold in the Celtic myth, he finds its relatedness into the Hindu belief; the dead person is given a new body when his body is dead (410). This might explain why the merchants are dressed in an Eastern manner and sit in an Indian method; on a carpet with crossed legs. This might be associated with the fact that Yeats was well aware of Eastern beliefs. Therefore, the merchants/devils influenced the community, and left them more pagan than before.

As for God saving Cathleen, it is noted earlier, that the Catholics who attacked the blasphemy in the play, wanted Cathleen to be sent to hell. Hence, it is her pagan belief which was responsible for saving her soul; she sold Christian belief. To stop a while in this point, it is well established that the buying of souls is connected to the degree of religious devotion; buying souls parallels buying Catholic religion/belief. If Countess Cathleen sold her belief in Catholicism, she would be left with paganism. Selling Catholic belief, and being rescued by the same religion she had sold, is unacceptable even if one left the decision to God; Teig, then, was right to indicate very early that there is no use in praying. God, nullifying the first side of the contract, devils would nullify the second. No money, then. Therefore, Countess Cathleen followed Aleel's advice to run to the world of pagan gods away from poverty and Christianity, by selling her soul to the devils, who were gods in the eyes of pagan Ireland. If it is not the case, Cathleen is in heaven as a reward for her sacrifice. This is again Aleel's advice in an altered way. Moreover, Cathleen's last words about a storm taking her away is related to Celtic myth: Bramsbäck argues that "...the last line that she utters 'The storm is in my hair and I must go' incorporates the belief that whirlwinds are associated with fairy troops and demons in the air" (Pamukova 44). Cathleen's foster mother— foster mothers mostly are linked with prophecy— Oona also "resorts to folklore imagery as well. Bramsbäck suggests that she, upon uttering 'crouch down, old heron, out of the blind storm', is depicted as if she were an ancient druidess"(Pamukova 43). Moreover, herons

are thought to be linked with the other world power (Monaghan 262). Even Mary is associated with the Celtic myth by her hen; "On farms in the Scottish Highlands, a woman who kept chickens was believed to have magical powers and thus to be associated with witchcraft" (261). Hence, the play is about a pagan poet and his symbolic wife, (Aleel is a pagan king whose wife is Maeve, whom he mentions in the play), and a pagan foster mother, metaphorically speaking, living in a pagan community, with Christianity as a surface reality. The Protestant crusade and the intended Famine made the Irish go out of the crises as more pagan; more national.

Holding this in mind, one can return to the play. When Aleel is ordered by Cathleen to bring the devils, they attack him with a knife, but it hardly affects him. This is Christianity assassinating pagan world and culture in Ireland. Aleel is almost a pagan god; he is a poet—poets occupied a high social level in Celtic myth—being a poet means he is able to change the world by his words, prophesy the future, in addition to being a king. Moreover, he prophesied the future many times in the play: firstly warning Shemus from the danger of leaving the door open, then he curses the house which hindered him from prophesying about Maeve. Later on, he advises the Countess "But the dance changes. Lift up the gown, all that sorrow is trodden down."

The song literally 'invites both Aleel and Cathleen to join in the dance' that 'symbolizes the cycle of rebirth going on eternally', and which expresses his

'spiritual and physical longing for Cathleen [...] as well as the esoteric dance of death in which mortals join with immortals', thus representing the immortality and the endurance of the Celtic, and the ephemerality of the Christian world (Pamukova 42).

Finally, Aleel sees visions of hell after Cathleen has signed the contract. Before one moves to interpret Cathleen's speeches and their relations to pagan belief, it is best to quote "Cathleen's acknowledgment of Aleel's dedication and his greatness over hers stand as the most powerful recognition of Celticism":

God's procreant waters flowing about your mind

Have made you more than kings and queens; and not you

But I am the empty pitcher.

The "empty pitcher" is associated with Celtic myth; it was believed that a certain cauldron was used for revitalizing/ resurrecting dead warriors. Even more, her assimilation of herself to an empty pitcher is thought to be associated with the myth that a certain goddess impregnated the dead warrior to give him rebirth again. The goddess' name was Cymidei, who was regarded as a cauldron herself (Monaghan 308). The cauldron was also offered as a gift to the otherworld power (96). What can be taken from the lines in the play is that Aleel is wisdom and Cathleen is the cauldron. The wise god will fill the cauldron and the cauldron will multiply this wisdom. This is a beautiful image

of wisdom kitchen, to counterpart soup kitchens run by the Protestants, in order to convert the Catholics into Protestants. This time, all the Irish can eat pagan wisdom, and convert into pagan belief. Even the relationship of a cauldron and wisdom has its roots in Celtic myth; a goddess used a cauldron to cook food and all those who ate her food were filled with wisdom (96).

George Cusack clarifies the reliance on pagan and Christian beliefs by the most religious characters to justify their immunity against the devils (56). However, Mary and the Countess are not away from the devils' hands. Even worse, the characters needed the pagan wisdom in order to prophesy the future, while Christianity is seen helpless in front of the devils. Moreover, Cusack mentions the breaking of Virgin Mary's shrine (which was deleted in this version of the play) and the falling of the shrine when the devils come. If this is found in an earlier version of the play, it goes with the general argument that Christianity is vulnerable in front of the devils' power, whereas it proved its weakness in front of pagan belief. Virgin Mary's statue, which is supposed to be a devil repellent, was broken due to the presence of a devil. The pagan poet, Aleel, who is supposed to be the most vulnerable character in front of the devils, is almost immortal and puts fear in the devils. Thanks to Cusack; this comparison was sparked by his analysis. Maybe in a previous version, Harris comments on the devil's speech reporting how he killed the priest. The devil, disguised as a pig, goes and knocks the priest dead (38). The priest being killed

by a symbol of corpse eater, is something related to animal instinct; the priest is about to die. Therefore, the pig/devil killed him. The priest, as a representative of Catholic belief or Christian belief in general, is very weak in front of the pig/devil. Christianity is spiritually and physically vulnerable. It is reported during the famine, however, the death of some people by animals (Harris 38).

One has to return to the reasons given by the angles to justify Cathleen's deed. The angle says that God "looks always on the motive, not the deed" the motive is the sacrifice for the peasants in order to have a better life. This is related to Christianity and need not go to further the point as it is well-known. However, the Celts believed that the sacrifice for the general cause, especially during "plague and famine" is regarded as a noble death. The Celts also believed in the otherworld as being a Christian-heaven-like place. This is a motive for sacrifice too. Therefore, it is very little left for Christianity in Countess Cathleen's death and redemption. What is left for Christianity in this death and salvation is— that Countess Cathleen did not sacrifice her soul on Christian principles, or by following Christ's example, but— the similarity between the two beliefs concerning this sacrifice. Being national/ heroic and noble in both beliefs, it was accepted in Ireland. This gives the upper hand to pagan belief since it is older and the deed is pagan while the motive is both pagan and Christian. The third is left for Christianity, if calculated, and two thirds for paganism. The female figure sacrificing herself is a pre-Christian theme, too.

Concerning language, though it can be elaborated, it is better to be satisfied with one example and generalize the idea all over the play: Joyce was deeply impressed by the chanting of the lyrics, "Impetuous Heart" by Farr as Aleel, and especially "Who will go drive with Fergus now," chanted "with the thin voice of age" by Anna Mather as Oona:

Who will go drive with Fergus now

And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,

And dance upon the level shore?

Young man, lift up your russet brow,

And lift your tender eyelids, maid,

And brood on hopes and fears no more.

"As Richard Ellmann describes the effect of the lyric on Joyce, 'its feverish discontent and promise of carefree exile were to enter his own thought, and not long afterwards he set the poem to music and praised it as the best lyric in the world.' " (Schuchard 4)

As for the poem, it represents one of the most fantastic poems in the world. It mentions the unity of two lovers' souls in a spiritual world, where there

is no need for fear or hope; it is heaven. When one remembers these lines, it comes to his mind the essence of life; knowledge. In uniting the two souls together, this means uniting the religion and exchanging wisdom. Uniting the religion cannot be achieved until the Countess converts into paganism; in other words, this is a Buddhist belief. More precisely, a Buddhist-Celtic belief. To substantiate this argument, one has to quote that 'in that island [Britain], the Druid priests and Buddhists spread teachings concerning the oneness of God, and for that reason the inhabitants are already inclined toward it [Christianity]' in the same line, here is a supporting theme for the previous quotation "Origen asserted in his mid-third century commentary on Ezekiel how that land had 'long been predisposed to' the tenets of Christianity, 'through the doctrines of the Druids and the Buddhists, who had already inculcated the Unity of the Godhead' "(Murphy 12, 13). If this is not enough to substantiate the argument, one can quote Yeats's students' comments during the play "we want no Buddhing Buddhists!"(Murphy 14). Then, one can return to the final lines of the play, where he finds Aleel seizing an angel to confirm that Cathleen is in heaven. As if Aleel is saying, if God did not send Cathleen to Heaven, we would not recognize God's authority on us; the Irish. In other words, if Cathleen was not sent to Heaven even though she is now Celtic-Buddhist, we would not embrace Christianity as a religion adopted by the Irish. That is why Aleel kneels in the end of the play; now, after Celtic-Buddhism is recognized by God as an acceptable religion, we, Celtic-Buddhists, can tolerate Christianity.

Yeats, therefore, went very far into the deep roots of history to bring the real land on which Christianity flourished. In doing so, he made clear that the Christianity is newer than what was known in Ireland, and that Christianity based its principles on older ones which dated back to Celtic-Buddhism in Ireland. Therefore, the selling of one's soul is not a betrayal of the country, as it was recognized by my first encounter with two books quoting each other (Schulze 40); otherwise Cathleen would not sell her soul even to relieve her people and be treacherous to the country she had sacrificed for. Selling the souls in this play is a return to pre-Christianity, which, for Yeats, is a revival of national identity.

Moreover, some go to distinguish between Cathleen's selling and the peasants'. It cannot be that a peasant selling his soul is condemned to be a treachery, and celebrate the leader's selling of her soul as a national deed. Some others argue that Cathleen sells her soul for the peasants, while they sell their souls to get money. In selling her soul, Cathleen has sold Ireland's soul to pre-Christianity, and in doing so, the peasants need not sell their souls to anybody after that. That is why the devils need Cathleen to sell her soul and are not interested in individual selling of souls, and when they get her soul back to pre-Christianity, they free the already sold souls. In other words, this is an individual identity, versus national identity. When one buys the national identity, he does not need an individual's soul. However, to make it clearer,