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Irish Mythology as a Shaping Agent in the Construction of National Identity in W.B. Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract

*W.B. Yeats, a towering figure in 20th-century literature, harnessed the power of Irish mythology to forge a sense of national identity during a period of Irish resurgence. His poetry became a vessel for the suppressed stories and legends of Ireland, reviving a cultural heritage that had been overshadowed by British rule and religious doctrine. The aim of the study was to understand how Yeats incorporates mythological features to develop a cultural and political vision on Irish identity at a time of major change in Irish history. The present study utilized selected poems from Yeats's later collections, specifically *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, as primary sources of data. Secondary data sources comprised scholarly articles, critical essays, and historical sources related to Irish mythology and nationalism. Through textual analysis, the study explored common mythological symbols, characters, and stories like Cuchulain and the Sidhe, as well as their symbolic function in conveying Yeats's constantly shifting nationalistic ideals. The study finds that Yeats uses mythology not only as a literary instrument but also as an instrument of cultural revival and political discourse. The results further show that Yeats's mythopoeic vision plays a significant role in defining a differentiated Irish identity based on heritage and resistance. The study establishes the poet's role in linking myth with contemporary nationalist discourse, influencing both literary and national consciousness.*

Keywords: *Mythology, shaping agent, construction, national identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

W.B. Yeats, one of the best-known of Irish literary figures, was central to the Irish Literary Revival and the larger nationalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His preoccupation with Irish mythology, especially in his latter poems, was not literary in nature, but a conscious cultural/political move to cultivate and proclaim the Irish nationhood

of the Irish. During this era of political upheaval and change, Yeats looked to ancient Irish myths, legends, and folklore as figurative devices for conveying the message of Irish nationhood and countering the tall tales of colonial British discourse (Kiberd, 1996; Foster, 1997; Mohammed & Patel, 2025). The citing of the myths of Cuchulain, the Sidhe, etc. of the Ulster Cycle was more than narrative inspiration; they represented heroism, spiritual endurance, and cultural rootedness. According to Yeats' definition of what constituted the Irish spirit, these were essential attributes (Jeffares, 1984; Matthews, 2008; O'Neill, 2004). While much criticism has been devoted to Yeats's use of mythology, it is disconcerting to note the absence of studies on how these mythological elements operate in particular to help form the contours of Irish nationhood in the more important work of his later poems (Allison, 2001; Kadiroglu, 2021). The question thus arises: How does W.B. Yeats appeal to the mythology of the Irish in order to establish and advance a national identity in his later poetry? A solution to this problem is necessary to narrow the gap between mythological imagination and the political and cultural expectations for Ireland that Yeats held (Castle, 2011; McCracken, 2016). There are several reasons why this study is of importance. First, it adds to postcolonial literary scholarship by looking at how a colonized nation's literary character seeks to win back cultural autonomy by resorting to myth (Said, 1993; Li-Xiang, 2020). Second, the study deepens the reading of Yeats's double role as a poet and as the builder of the nation, pointing to the fact that literature can be the potent instrument of national consciousness. Third, this research offers perspective about the larger process of myth making in national movements not exclusively limited to Irish literature but relevant to postcolonial identities worldwide (Suess, 2013).

II. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

This paper aims to explore the influence of Irish mythology on national identity in W.B. Yeats's poetry and accentuates its symbolic function in cultural revival and political utterance.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The connection of W.B. Yeats with Irish mythology in his poetry has been extensively celebrated by many scholars as a powerful agent of shaping and articulating national identity (Coleman, 2013; Allison, 2001). This study finds that for Yeats, myth is not decorative but politically and culturally strategic (Kadiroglu, 2021; O'Kane, 1982). Based on postcolonial theory, especially Edward Said's (1978) idea of cultural resistance, Yeats's use of myth can be viewed as a form of challenge to British imperialism. Yeats appeals to ancient legends, heroes, and landscapes not just for poetic inspiration, but to create a counter-history that asserts Ireland's distinctiveness (Mohammed & Patel, 2025; Li-Xiang, 2020). For example, Yeats's use of Cuchulain in *Cuchulain Comforted* represents Ireland's rebirth, combining death and resurrection as a metaphor for national struggle (Jeffares, 1984). Benedict Anderson's (1983) idea of "imagined communities" is also informative here, Yeats's myth-making contributes to the formation of Irish collective memory. By invoking mythic sites like Tara and figures like the Sidhe, he embeds the past into the present to strengthen national identity (Castle, 2011; Suess, 2013). Eagleton (1995) highlights the ambivalence in Yeats's nationalism, torn between Anglo-Irish aristocracy and Gaelic purity. This tension manifests in the merging of the personal, spiritual, and national in Yeats's myths. Unlike Deane's (1991) critique of Yeats's idealization of the past, this study finds Yeats's later poetry more nuanced and adaptive, addressing disillusionment and cultural loss (Foster, 1997; McCracken, 2016). Kiberd (1996) underscores Yeats's role as a cultural nationalist, using mythology to link Ireland's pre-colonial heritage with its nationalist aspirations. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity can be seen in Yeats's

fusion of Celtic myth with modernist form, creating a flexible, evolving Irish identity (Li-Xiang, 2020). Though Yeats's mythological nationalism is sometimes critiqued for inconsistency, these very contradictions render his poetic project dynamic and relevant to the evolving nature of postcolonial identities.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

In the current investigation, main sources of information originated from a selection of poems that were included in Yeats's collections, notably *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. Secondary data sources included scholarly papers, critical essays, and historical texts that were associated with Irish mythology and nationalism. The researcher utilized a technique known as "Textual analysis" during the process of data analysis. This approach is a qualitative research method that is employed to assess and comprehend the content, meaning, and structure of texts. The process entails reading and analyzing texts in great detail in order to recognize recurring themes, patterns, symbols, and meanings, as well as the manner in which language is utilized. This approach is frequently utilized in a variety of academic disciplines, including sociology, communication, cultural studies, media studies, and literature. The historical, social, political, and cultural contexts in which a text was produced and consumed are taken into consideration during the process known as "Textual analysis." The focus of this study approach is on the manner in which meaning is formed and communicated, which encompasses not only the overt material but also the implicit subtext and ideas that lie beneath it. In particular, the researchers utilized the "Content analysis" technique, which is a sort of "Textual analysis," in order to examine information that was either from primary or secondary sources. The objective of this investigation was to recognize patterns, themes, biases, and meanings hidden within the data. The technique involved doing a careful examination of the texts in order to identify recurring themes, patterns, symbols, meanings, and application of language.

V. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

Examining the poetry of W.B. Yeats, this study has showed how his work brings mythology, national history and identity together, and offers a unique mythopoeic viewpoint on Ireland's political, cultural and spiritual disputes. This paper sheds the light on the way it is that Yeats uses the myth as the both mirror of self-consciousness and the impulse for poetic novelty; in this respect, the references to the works such as *Easter 1916*, *Byzantium*, *Sailing to Byzantium*, *Among School Children*, and *The Second Coming* are applicable. In these powerful words "All changed, changed utterly" and in the recitation "The terrible beauty is born" (*Easter*, lines 15, 16), Yeats distils the deep change which would occur because of the Easter Rising. By calling the outcome a "terrible beauty," he names the political rebellion into the mythological category of outcome admiring yet horrified. The words imply that the violence and tragedy of the revolutionaries' sacrifices have borne new and holy identity of the Irishman. Yeats mythologizes the event, presenting the rebels not just as historical figures but as martyrs whose deeds include some of the most important, almost superhuman, events in the Irish national conscience.

In the line "That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented Sea" (*Byzantium*, line 6), Yeats calls forth through the language is mythological and chaotic and sign of destruction as well as rebirth. The "dolphin-torn" image infers a badly torn natural world where beauty goes side by side with meaning of violence. The "gong-tormented" sea adds even to the sense of tumult, creeps out disturbing and changing sounds. This sea as a dividing line between life and myth, represents the tumultuous history of Ireland, from attempts at identity, freedom and self-

reflection. In evoking both the ancient tradition of Ireland and the classical mythologies, Yeats calls attention to the way in which Ireland's past is characterized by cycles of upheaval and transformation. The comparison between mortality decay and myth art is made in the Yeats's lines "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick" (*Sailing to Byzantium*, lines 9–10). The old man he is considered to be "a tattered coat upon a stick" does represent the frailty of the flesh, as compared with the perpetual empire of art and of myth. Ireland's political and social unrests are Yeats's futile attempt to escape the temporal unreality and find solace in a perpetual idealism characterized by art, myth, and soul which is eternal in a timeless cultural identity for Byzantium.

In the lines, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (*Among School Children*, lines 63–64), Yeats attempts to explain the continuity between myth and history (art and life). The dancer and the dance are united into one; the idea that in the end, identity is a performance is an important one; it is based upon, by, and in culture and memory and myth. For Ireland, this implies that national identity is not fixed foreign object, but rather living construct, affected by historical events and mythical stories. The direction implies that Irish identity is always moving, just as the prostitute is, and a combination of artistic release and cross-cultural memory. In the lines "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?" (*Leda and the Swan*, lines 11–12), Yeats uses the violent myth around the Zeus raping of Leda in the form of a swan, symbolizing the brutal act of power and knowledge imposition, Yeats draws from Leda and the Swan. The moment of violence that occurs sets a big change of history and how Ireland, like Leda, has been under the control of the others to form its history and future. In invoking this myth, Yeats situates the mythological events as lenses in which to observe political convulsions, like Ireland colonized and only to arise met conquest and revolution, as cyclical, violent times of transmutation.

In the lines "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (*The Second Coming*, lines 5–6), Yeats creates pungently apocalyptic image, a moment of chaos and revolution. It is universal, but at the same time profoundly resonates with Irish history where times of blood and strife have frequently been linked with national change. Yeats places this mythic chaos in relation to the Irish experience implying that Ireland's rebirth, like in many other mythic cycles, might only be possible through breakdown and revolution. The drowning of innocence signifies that the previous world is no longer present and is replaced by a new one that is turbulent and brought about by the beginning. In the lines "great hatred, little space, / maimed us to the start" (*Remorse for Intemperate Speech*, lines 1–2), Yeats looks back at the history of Ireland's struggle and suffering and exile. The saying epitomizes the profound marks of centuries of political and social era, where great hatred, and little room mean the tyrant environment of the country. Yeats indirectly refers to how Irish myth, tales of betrayals, exile and resurrection formed an explanatory mold to the Irish people in terms of their historical wounds. These myths cultivated accepting a resilient state of mind which allowed Ireland to create this joint identity from out of the story from which it suffered and in the end came to out of the story renewed.

In line "The horseman passes by" (*He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, line 8), Yeats calls up briefly the presence of a mythic figure who is often read as a symbol of the mythical hero of Irish mythology. The image reflects a relationship to Ireland's heroic past figures that ride through legend, moulding the nation's imagination and identity. However with the fact that he only "passes by" suggests that this mythic Ireland is just beyond reach and just an elusive ideal that continues to animate both the national longings and poetic vision. In this

symbol, Yeats meditates on the way that the mythology stalks and fashions Irish cultural consciousness. In the words “The drunken soldiery / Can leave the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood”, (*Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*, lines 34–36), he portrays a very harsh image of current political violence and moral crisis. Nevertheless, there is a deeper mythic layer under this horror, the killed mother corresponds to the suffering image of Éira the personified goddess of Ireland. Consequent to its murderous excavation of the past, this violent field therefore moves beyond historical realism and serves as a symbol of the martyrdom of today, with the contemporary horrors being linked to the mythic tradition of a wounded, sacrificial Ireland. Yeats relies on that mythic resonance to stress how national identity is shaped in bursts and troughs of trauma and endurance.

In the verse, “We Irish, born into that ancient sect / But thrown upon this filthy modern tide” (*The Statues*, lines 1–2), Yeats gives more meaning to culture dislocation, and compares the grandeur of Ireland’s mythological and heroic past with the corruption and degradation of the modern world. The “ancient sect” represents the noble traditions and mythological bedrock of Irish identity, the “filthy modern tide” is the loss of that in the current world. By deploying this contrast, Yeats, uses mythology as a form of defiance, resistance, to maintain and exalt the cultural heritage of Ireland against the background of the contemporary trends of moral and political decline. Yeats creates in the line “Oisín, who was old when Finn was young” (*The Wanderings of Oisín*, line 39), the legendary character of Oisín, the poet and warrior who existed in the stories of the Irish mythology. Shining a light on Oisín’s age, this is Yeats’s way of reminding readers that Oisín is a time-cultural icon of the Irish sense of national identity and an iris of cultural endurance in the Irish popular consciousness. Yeats engages these desires through Oisín as an Irish people yearns for a heroic, archaic past, while also accepting a modern sense of the pain of cultural dislocation and the search for a sense of belonging in a present world subject to colonization

Yeats reflects in a very sobering way on the consequences of Romantic Nationalism in the lines: “We had fed the heart on fantasies, / The heart’s grown brutal from the fare” (*Meditations in Time of Civil War*, lines 25–26). He mocks mythic fantasizing that romanticized heroism and rebellion, art that, when taken too far or too seriously, politically or literally, could be disruptive and dispiriting. Yet in this critique as well, Yeats makes mention of the all-powerful effect that mythology is in defining Irish identity. These “fantasies”, it should not be ignored, were not empty, they were the very axis of national hopes and imaginative national sensibility, which shows how myth can, simultaneously, both inspire and distort national consciousness. In the lines, “those masterful images because complete / Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?” (*The Statues, Yeats*, lines 9–10), the writer reflects on the origin of myth, and cultural symbolism. He appreciates the perfection of mythic forms—those “masterful images”—as the works of imagination, but he also wonders over the origin of them. This inquiry is a manifestation of Yeats’ interest in understanding how national identity builds up from myth, art, and collective memory. By reflecting upon the origins of such cultural archetypes, Yeats is implying that Irish national consciousness is not simply passed down to new generations but literally inculcated, to be continually transformed by an ongoing imaginative process into myth made out of history.

In the lines “And therefore I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium” (*Sailing to Byzantium*, lines 21–22), Yeats describes Byzantium as a realm of the mythic, of transcendence in which art and spirit will survive amid the decay of body-life. This sacred city is a public representation of withdrawal of the withering, decrepit body, and temporal decay of Ireland into country of eternal form & cultural immortality. By this trauma

turns into an allegory for the poet's quest to find a purified, timeless, Irish identity, not based around political strife or physical decline but the eternal myth and artistic spirit of the nation. Yeats finds a mythic worldview in Lapis Lazuli even in the lines, "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay" (*Lapis Lazuli*, lines 19–20). Such cyclical vision can be compared to ancient Irish mythological structures where decay and resurrection existed simultaneously. The joyful builders who rebuild are cultural resisters especially to Ireland's history of colonial oppression followed by resuscitation. Yeats employs this positive mythic scheme as a way of saying that after all suffering, the spirit of Ireland survives and flourishes through its ability to recreate itself, just as with phoenix-like regeneration at the center of its cultural identity.

In the line "I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful" (*The Cold Heaven*, line 10), Yeats is attempting a mystical invocation that reverts to the spiritual, symbolic, actions of the mythology of the Celts. Darkness traditionally leads to revelation in Irish myth and the void consists of potential creation and insight. This sentence indicates a path away from despair or spiritual emptiness, leading towards illumination and renewal; a mythic cycle that is vividly present in the mural. In relation to Yeats such a transformation represents the very process of Irish identity development, which is influenced by suffering and loss to be transfigured by an epic memory, a cultural depth, and spiritual resiliency.

Yeats invokes in the line "Cuchulain, the strong young man of the naked sword" (*The Death of Cuchulain*, from first 10 lines), the magical Irish hero as a terrestrial icon of ethnic self-definition. The heroes' courage, young power and tragic ending, defines the idea of heroism, sacrifice, and nobility at the very heart of Irish mythology. With Cuchulain borne to mythic grandeur, Yeats gives crane Ireland a cultural model which is a super temporal and authoritarian exemplar of Ireland's spiritual and moral footprint. Using this figure, Yeats links the present to that heroic past building a national identity with a deep mythic, an epic valor, and poetic grandeur. Yeats imagines the mythic hero, in a moment of posthumous peace he calls on "Cuchulain comforted, I too, await the hour of transformation" (*Cuchulain Comforted*, line 16). There is here a gesture of reconciliation and transcendence. This vision reveals the faith of Yeats that for Irish identity comfort and continuity are found in the mythic past, even in the presence of death or political desperation. Yeats calls upon the hero's transformation to suggest that national identity changes, it grows, takes root in myth and rises above mortality. This transformative process is comfort, which allows Ireland to find in the mythos a sense and a courage of its mythological heritage even when it suffers.

VI. DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

This study has examined W.B. Yeats's use of Irish mythology especially in his late poetry as a means of reshaping and restating national identity within Irish colonial history. Drawing from the literature review that stresses Yeats's use of myth to undermine British imperialism is not merely poetic decoration, but as necessary pieces of the creation of Irish cultural resistance and identity. As Captain Clive L. Hill (1995) acknowledges, a reading of Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889) as the representation of the old Ireland paradigm or, rather, of the new Ireland paradigm shows that Yeats's use of Irish myth also acts as a counter-narrative to colonial discourse (Edward Said's concept of "cultural resistance"). This is evident in his poems of Ireland's mythic heroes and landscapes, in ones which rather than romanticize the past prescribe instead myth as a powerful cultural weapon against British colonization. For example, in *Cuchulain Comforted*, the portrait of Cuchulain by Yeats turns the legendary painting into a symbol for the strength of the Irish, and compares the death and resurrection of the hero with the political and cultural reawakening of

Ireland (Jeffares, 1984). This combination of myth with political activism fits with the postcolonial characterization of cultural identity as a form of resistance, articulated by Said, and then further articulated by Bhabha (1994) as hybridity as a mode of subversion of colonial discourses.

Nevertheless, Yeats's use of mythology, critics like Foster (1997) have alleged sometimes become mystic and this makes it sepearalize from the tangible political action. Yeats's other poems, including *The Statues* and *Lapis Lazuli*, provide for a more subtle use of myth. These works are both designed by Yeats to reflect both the disillusionment that the new world had brought as well as the continuing struggle for Irish sovereignty. In *The Statues*, for instance, Yeats condemns the concept of eternal values while he invokes the grandeur of Irish myth. This implies a sophisticated interrelationship between mythic nostalgia and nationalism itself which Eagleton (1995) observes has an ambivalent streak in Yeats's sensitivity to its fixation of the imagination. In addition, Anderson's (1983) theory of "imagined communities" contribute another dimension of insight into Yeats's myth-making. Yeats uses Irish myths to create a common form of consciousness so that the common identity can be formed, which is based on the common cultural elements. Yeats's callouts to places like Tara and characters like the Sidhe help romanticize the past of Ireland, and to incorporate these figures into consciousness now. This is consistent with Kiberd's opinion of Yeats as a cultural nationalist using the mythology to link Ireland's ancient past with its hopes of a nationhood. Engagement with myth makes Yeats sustain the cultural history of Ireland; at the same time, it enables it to assert a different identity in the confrontation of the colonial power.

The tension in Yeats's nationalism criticized by Deane (1991) is also important to discuss for the Russian past in the poetic project. Yeats shifts between an idealism for Anglo-Irish nobility and a yearning for a more Gaelic tradition. This ambivalence is evident in his mythological references, which, in many cases, are connected with the personal, with the spiritual, with the national. This tension enhances his work because the mythic structure permits the resolution of these clash into a unified vision of Irishness. The latter statement is supported by later poetry of such an origin as Yeats', which reveals the potential of mythology, that is, its capacity to serve as a site for negotiation and transformation with an inherent link with nationalistic aspirations. The myths he invokes are not dead relics of some or other past, but living, living symbols that have adjusted themselves to Ireland's current efforts to define an identity and promulgated sovereignty. Using myth in a dynamic way, Yeats reconstructs Ireland's cultural history, as well as contests colonial structures, providing the picture of the Irish identity that is resistant and progressive.

VII. CONCLUSION

The mythopoeic vision of W.B. Yeats in his later poetry is an Ireland of the ancient past still breathed back to life not merely as the stuff of folk lore, but as real passions of national identity. Yeats builds this poetic landscape of myth and nation from hints at Celtic figures and imagery (Cuchulain, Oisín) or violent mythological scenes (Leda and the Swan) or idealized destinations (Byzantium). Yeats does not simply romanticize myth in his remoulding of the national identity. He reveals how its dangers are fed ("fed the heart on fantasies") and how it's powerful ("a terrible beauty is born") Myth becomes both a source of cultural continuation and a mirror to see Ireland's growing soul in. Yeats's poetic legacy reminds us that, in addition to imagining, remembering and mythologizing, Irish identity is also made in politics and history. These quotations are an insight into how he visualized Ireland, not as a geographic but an endless story retold in every generation.

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