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'The Lands Imagination Had Been Satisfied': Celtic Symbolism and the Changing Form of the Poetry of W. B. Yeats.¹

This research is primarily concerned with Celtic symbolism in the poetry of W. B. Yeats. Yeats was, and arguably continues to be, the defining poet of the revival period in Ireland. No other poet so perfectly encapsulates in his work the zeitgeist of the period, not necessarily intentionally, but rather in his changing form and style. Throughout his poetry Yeats can be seen to shift and change his poetic style to better fit the poetic conventions and public mood of the period and as a result the reader can quite easily see in his work the changing political atmosphere in Ireland, particularly as it relates to the Celtic.

This research will be split into three chapters, the first of which will examine the way in which animals were presented in Yeats' work, with a keen eye for the symbolism brought in from Celtic mythology. The second chapter will examine the way in which femininity and womanhood was displayed in Yeats' work, another common theme in his writing, and how that interacts with Celtic mythology. The final chapter will examine the way in which men and masculinity is portrayed in Yeats' work, again looking at the role of Celtic mythology in this depiction. Throughout, attention will be paid to Yeats' changing attitudes towards these themes and to the Celtic as a way to better understand the political and social landscape of Ireland in this period.

'Of The Calves on the Warm Hillside': Animals and Celtic Symbolism in the Poetry of W.B Yeats.²

¹ W.B Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B Yeats* (Ware: Wordsworth Press, 1994) p. 238.

² W.B Yeats, *Collected Works*, p. 15.

The way in which animals feature in Celtic mythology is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, the choice of animals depicted can give us an insight into which animals were deemed important enough for depiction. Secondly, the way in which animals are represented can illustrate how animals were seen within Celtic societies. Finally, the roles that animals play within Celtic mythological narrative can be informative as to the roles of domesticated and wild animals within Celtic culture. This is also true of the way that Yeats' chooses to engage with animal subjects in his poetry. Eliza Lima Abrantes notes that the Celtic Revivalist movement of the 19th Century, within which Yeats' played a defining role, was both an attempt to recapture and reinvent 'The Celtic', contextualizing 'The Celtic' for a modern audience.³ This chapter will explore how Yeats' uses the animal subject, how the animal is negotiated in relation to 'The Celtic', and how this affects the form of 'The Celtic' that Yeats was at least partially responsible for the reinvigoration of.

Animals abound throughout Yeats' poetry, but throughout his work animals are utilised differently as trends in the poetry of that period developed. Zhu and Ren posit the shifts in the way animals were depicted across Yeats' work relate to his wider shift from Romanticism to Modernism and then onto his own distinct writing style.⁴ In order to assess Yeats's depiction of animals in the proper context, this essay will attempt to engage with Yeats' poems chronologically. For the purpose of this essay, we will divide Yeats' work into three sections. The early section will comprise works written between the years 1883-99, the period that Zhu and Ren characterise as Yeats' Romantic period.⁵ The middle section will comprise the works written between the years 1900-1914, the years that Zhu and Ren characterise as Yeats'

³ Eliza Lima Abrantes, 'Contemporary Reflexions on the Irish Celtic Revival of the 19th Century', *Brathair: Grupo de Estudos Celtas e Germanicos*, 18.1 (Rio De Janeiro: Rural Federal University of Rio De Janeiro Press, 2018).

⁴ Zhu Cheng-Shu, Ren Xiao-Fei, 'A Corpus Based Analysis of the Animal Images in *The Wind Among the Reeds*', *Journal of Literature and Arts Studies*, 6.5 (Zhenjiang: David Publishing, 2016) pp. 454-461.

⁵ Zhu, Ren, 'Animal Images', p. 457.

modern period.⁶ Finally, the late section will comprise works written between the years 1914-1939, the period Zhu and Ren characterise as Yeats' most defining period of writing.⁷

In the early period of Yeats' poetry, the subject of animals is used in a way relatively typical of Romantic poets of his time. Chen Hong characterises the Romantic poetic movement's relationship with animals as an expression of "the natural world that is all too wild to be controlled by any power other than divine".⁸ Yeats' early writings are a perfect example of this Romantic vision of the animal. For example, in 'The Madness of King Goll', Yeats' uses animals throughout to suggest to the reader that the subject has lost his mind, with his otherwise rational human nature being supplanted by a wild animalistic one.⁹ Similarly, in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', Yeats uses animal descriptions to impress upon the reader the wildness of nature on the isle, but in a more peaceful subdued way. The choice of subjects in bees, linnets, and crickets give the impression of a calmer, more pastoral natural scene, but still one that fits the wild Romantic vision. Yeats does not write of it as a place that needs taming but as a place beautiful for its wildness.¹⁰ It is also important to note the choice of animals in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' directly calls upon Celtic folklore, which afforded bees a particularly important position with the tradition of "telling the bees".¹¹ Yeats' early work is distinctly romantic in its use and framing of animals, with his writing style, at least as far as the discussion of animals is concerned, being no different from the vast body of Romantic poetry being published in Yeats' time. 'King Goll' is also a perfect example of how Yeats' engaged with the Celtic in this period. He approaches Celtic theming and stories with the

⁶ Zhu, Ren, 'Animal Images', p. 458.

⁷ Zhu, Ren, 'Animal Images', p. 459.

⁸ Chen Hong, 'To Set The Wild Free: Changing Images of Animals in English Poetry of the Pre-Romantic and Romantic Periods', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 13.2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 129-149.

⁹ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 31.

¹¹ Eimhear Chaomhánach, *The Bee, It's Keeper and Produce, in Irish and Other Folk Traditions* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002).

techniques of his time and context. He writes stories featuring Celtic subjects, but the treatment of these subjects is distinctly Romantic.¹² Other examples of this Romanticising of the Celtic with animal symbolism in Yeats can be seen in the "wild ducks" in 'The Host of the Air', itself a translation of a poem in the Irish bardic tradition, and "the deer and the hound" in 'The Wanderings of Oisín', an epic poem written about the mythological figure Oisín.¹³ Yeats uses the image of animals in poems of this period in a way that is inseparable from the Romantic trend of his time, while also occasionally calling upon Celtic mythology in his choice of animals. Yeats certainly engaged with 'The Celtic', but he did so in such a way that he is inventing a Romantic Celticism, a concept that would have been wholly foreign to the original creators of the Celtic mythology that Yeats draws upon. Yeats in this period was certainly interested in the Celtic subject, but the treatment Yeats brings to these subjects is distinctly Romantic, and in particular his treatment of animals is overtly Romantic.

Yeats' middle period of work is both Modernist and transitional in his depiction of animals. The reader can certainly see some aspects of Yeats' Romanticism, a holdover from his earlier works, but there is a much greater sense that Yeats is attempting to create something wholly new in his writing. The first example of this turn seems to come from 'In the Seven Woods' where the wild animals of his previous poetry have been domesticated and urbanised. The bees previously seen in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', set in a pastoral scene, are now "garden bees" in an urban setting complete with "paper flowers". Similarly, the linnets of Innisfree are now urban pigeons. Yeats has turned away from the celebration of the rural that so often featured in his earlier romantic work, seemingly signalling a break with past forms in search of a new mode by which to engage with poetry. That is not to say that Yeats does not grieve

¹² John R. Moore, 'Yeats as a Last Romantic', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 37.3 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1961) pp. 432-449.

¹³ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 44.

the past. He writes of "old bitterness that empties the heart", a phrase that seems to speak to Yeats mourning the gradual urbanisation of Ireland and his sense of loss in moving past old Romanticisms.¹⁴ Yeats appears both interested in literary Modernism, and reluctant to let go of past forms, perhaps because he associates so much of 'The Celtic' with the Romantic, a connection he himself helped to foster. Later poetry of this period, however, shows Yeats growing comfort with inventive Modernist poetic writing. In 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' Yeats draws upon the Celtic mythological figure of Lugh or Lleu Llaw Gyffes with the image of a personified "sweet laughing eagle".¹⁵ In contrast to his previous use of the animal image, Yeats uses the eagle here to properly illustrate the scene after the tumult of the Land War, a violent period of socio-economic upheaval and an event contemporary to the writing of this poem.¹⁶ This is a distinctly Modernist use of the animal in his poetry, but also a distinctly modern representation of 'The Celtic'. With it Yeats attempts to foster a new form of 'The Celtic', or at least attempts to use 'The Celtic' in a new way, as allegory in elucidating the events occurring around Yeats in his contemporary Ireland. A similar Modern form of animal representation, and of 'The Celtic', is seen in 'At Galway Races'. In it, Yeats writes about the scene at a horse race in Galway but calls back to previous expressions of Irish culture. Using the description of "the riders upon the galloping horses" he calls back to Epona and Rhiannon, referencing the importance of the horse and its rider in Celtic culture over time.¹⁷ Alongside this however, Yeats conjures the image of "the merchant and the clerk", now important figures in the horseracing industry, to cement the long history of the horse in Irish culture.¹⁸ Yeats writes this poem essentially examining the

¹⁴ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 61.

¹⁵ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 77.

¹⁶ Eoin Mclaughin, 'Competing Forms of Co-operation? Land League, Land War and Cooperation in Ireland, 1879 to 1914', *Agricultural History Review*, 3 (Newport: Agricultural History Society Press, 2015) pp. 81-112.

¹⁷ Jessica Hemming, 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in Pwyll', *Western Folklore*, 57.1 (Berkley: California Folk Press, 1998) pp. 19-40.

¹⁸ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 78.

unbroken hold that the horse has had in Irish public imagination over the whole of Irish history, suggesting, intentionally or unintentionally, the potential for a modern Celtic. In this period of Yeats' writing there is clearly an interest in 'The Celtic' still, but he moves away from the Romantic to an altogether different, Modernist depiction of Celticism. While at first Yeats appears hesitant to embrace this new form, lamenting the decline in popularity of the Romantic, his turn towards the Modern becomes much more positive as he continued into the 20th century. Throughout this period the animal subject becomes more modern, domesticated, and urban to some extent. All call back to the Celtic symbology that Yeats was so fond of but find themselves more at home in the city street or horseracing track than in wild glens and mythical islands. Yeats uses the animal subject in this period to conjure a modern Celticism, attempting to break the link between the Celtic and the wild Romantic imagery of the Celtic past.

Yeats in his later period took on an interesting tone, utilising Modernist imagery while also drawing on other influences and literary styles. This period was not one of sharp divergence in the same way as his previous shift in tone. Where his shift from Romanticism to Modernism can be seen as quite a traumatic rupture for Yeats, his shift towards his own unique style has a quality more like a continuity, drawing on past influences and inventing new forms without disavowing his previous style. This continuity can be seen in his presentation of animals in particular. The first hints of this new style developing comes in 'Easter, 1916', where "the horse that comes from the road" and "the birds that range from cloud to tumbling cloud" are presented in contrast to each other.¹⁹ As discussed before, the horse is a significant image to Celtic mythology, though in this instance its usage is both urbanised by reference to its surroundings and takes on a marshal quality given the context of the poem. The birds however are framed in a more Romantic, wistful context, more reflective

¹⁹ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 152.

of the earlier work of Yeats and with it a more common view of the Celtic as an older, naturalistic, Romantic idea. This contrast is used to great effect in the poem, giving form to the ideas of military might and control on the one hand, and the more abstract will for freedom on the other. Similar imagery can be seen 'On a Political Prisoner', where a sea bird is again used to represent the promise of freedom.²⁰ This recurring, relatively Romantic imagery, gives indication to the development of Yeats' new style of writing. This altogether new synthesis of Romantic and Modernist themes, often used to detail political events of the period, all of which calls back to a Celtic past, came to define Yeats' later work, and is certainly what makes up the vast majority of his poetry after the creation of the Irish Free State. This description would fit collections of poems like 'Supernatural Songs', with its "serpent tails" and deep grounding in Celtic imagery.²¹ Yeats, in defining this new style, a fusion of Modern and Romantic, is almost reinforcing the links between 'The Celtic' and the Romantic. He returns to the form that 'The Celtic' takes in popular imagination, while utilising Modern techniques. This Yeats has little time for pigeons, and far more for moorhens and herons. His interest in defining a new Celtic style seems to have ebbed away after the events of the Easter Rising, and while his interest in politics is still alive in his writing, he seems cautious to try to invent anything new. This may have been due to the atmosphere at the time, one that Fearghal McGarry identifies as intensely reactionary, as is common after attempted revolutions.²² It may have been due to Yeats' own fear that he may have been in some way responsible for the death and destruction that resulted from the rising itself.²³ Whatever the reason, Yeats seems to retreat somewhat towards an older form, while maintaining some Modern aspects in his writings. This settling into a distinct style towards

²⁰ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 155.

²¹ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, pp. 244-248

²² Fearghal McGarry, 'The Easter Rising', *Irish History Live* (2014) <
<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/irishhistorylive/IrishHistoryResources/Articlesandlecturesbyourteachingstaff/TheEasterRising/>> [18/04/2022].

²³ W.B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 298.

the end of his life represents a shift away from the radical Modernism of his pre-1916 works, but not an outright rupture. His representation of animals in this period becomes more reserved, Romantic, old fashioned, much like the image of the Celtic was becoming in post-independence Ireland. In many ways, we can see the national conservatism of De Valera's Ireland in Yeats' writing. If Yeats' middle period was emblematic of Connolly's radicalism, his later period is symbolic of a deeply Free State view of 'The Celtic'.

Yeats' relationship to 'The Celtic' has shifted considerably throughout his career, and this can be seen in the way in which animals are represented in his poetry. His early writings are Romantic, wistful, filled with wild animals of old Ireland living in a place outside of time. These poems are emblematic of the traditional Romanticism of the time, and the traditional Romantic view of 'The Celtic'. His middle period is a radical rupture, a modern, urban Celtic, filled with pigeons and racehorses. It holds within it the potential of a new Celtic, something that could exist in the modern day, a promise of an Irish modernity free of both British rule and of conservative backward Romanticism. Yet, with the failure of the Irish revolution to bring about this modern Celticism, in much the same way it failed to free the Irish people from imperialism and British rule, Yeats retreats into a conservative style. He cannot completely eschew the Modern, as it has become so much part of his writing style, but he returns to a much more conservative Romantic style and subject matter. He creates a wholly new synthesis of the Romantic and the Modern but does so at the expense of all the promise of his Modernist middle period. Yeats' representation of animals and how they relate to the Celtic is a fascinating insight not only into the Celtic world the poet was interested in, but also the politics of Ireland at the time, with all the high promises of the Irish revolution giving way to a period of intense reaction, never quite delivering all that was struggled for.

'What Voice More Sweet Than Hers': The Feminine and Celtic Symbolism in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats.²⁴

This chapter will follow a similar structure to the previous, breaking down Yeats' work into early, middle and late with an eye for the primary style and themes of those eras and how they manifest in his representation of women and femininity. Through this process it will be possible to understand Yeats' view of the relationship between the feminine and the Celtic, arrive at a deeper knowledge of how Yeats' form developed overtime in relation to the feminine and develop a well-rounded view of how Yeats in his work influenced our modern view of the Celtic's relationship to the concept of the feminine.

When examining features of Celtic feminine symbology in the poems of William Butler Yeats, it is impossible to separate these symbols of femininity from the natural world and an understanding of how Yeats portrays this with elements of Celtic spirituality. In context, the reason why depictions of nature and its beauty are so prominent in Yeats' poetry, and so punctuated with feminine language and symbols is because of the influence of Yeats' Victorian understanding of Celtic mysticism, particularly in his early poetry. In *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*, Patricia Monaghan claims that the Celts believed that the gods, descendants of mother goddess Danu were not living in the sky much like a Christian God, but they lived among us in the mountains and rivers of the land.²⁵ It is this intrinsic link between the natural world and femininity in Celtic symbolism that is conducive to the entrenchment of feminine imagery throughout his poetry.

During this period until around 1890, Yeats's work is deeply rooted in a romantic style, focusing on the beauty of an untouched natural world that existed pre-industrialisation.

²⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 152.

²⁵ Patricia Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, 2004) p. xiii

Much of the landscape in the South and West of Ireland, particularly at this time in history, was mostly agricultural. It is through this, that we can see how Yeats was able to associate Ireland with this natural beauty, and how the land acted as a muse for much of his poetry. As a spearhead of the Celtic revival, it is also fitting that Yeats was able to use Celtic folk imagery throughout his poetry. Through his poetry, Yeats was reclaiming a world from the modern era, for a world that was shaped by a Victorian understanding of Irish folk tales and Celtic symbolism, one that he puts on a pedestal in much of his Romantic poetry. In his work *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* Gregory Castle describes this period as not just a 'nostalgia for tradition' but a 'redemptive ethnography'.²⁶ Yeats, through returning to an imagined past was in a sense reinforcing a standard image of the Celtic as a historical, ancient thing divorced from the modern world, a conception that was not so much historical as it was contemporary. Of course, the peoples with whom Celtic mythology originates would not see themselves as historical and ancient but at the cutting edge of development, as they were for their time. The romanticisation of the past created a present day understanding of the Celtic in Yeats' time; an understanding less to do with the actual time which was being idolised but more to do with creating a specific kind of present, establishing the relationship between the people of Yeats' time and the Celtic. While there is not the scope in this research for an exploration of this theme in depth, we can see in Yeats' the development of the distinctive political traditions that would come to shape Ireland over the following century and into the present day; a conflict between the notion of a Romantic Celticism and a Modernist Celticism, which has been used as a lens by which major events like the Easter Rising and Irish Civil War may be understood.²⁷

²⁶ Gregory Castle, *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 41.

²⁷ John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921 – 1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (London: Gill, 2000).

Celtic symbols of the feminine can be found throughout the poems of Yeats. This is particularly interesting in his earlier poems, where his poems are entrenched in the Romantic style. In his early poem *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*, Yeats mourns the loss of the rural. Yeats laments the death of Arcady, equating the beauty of the world with a time past, and mourning that this is a beauty that is now dead. Yeats' understanding of earth's beauty in this period is very influenced by the Victorian understanding of an old, pastoral beauty of nature untouched by industrialisation. A notable example of this romanticism follows;

"The woods of Arcady are dead,
And over is their antique joy;
Of the old world on dreaming fed;
Grey Truth is now her painted toy;
Yet she still turns her restless head:"

Here Yeats references the Romantic concept of the unspoiled natural beauty that exists in history. Descriptions of the earth in this poem is one that is gendered. Yeats' refers to the earth and the natural world as a female being, using feminine pronouns to address it. This is interesting, as there is a feminine image to nature in Celtic mythology. Firstly, the image of Danu could be an influence on Yeats' female personification of nature, particularly in a rural Irish context. A Victorian understanding of Danu was one that associated her with the land, an understanding that resonates with Yeats' portrayal of nature as female. Yeats's association of the pastoral being associated with the feminine is rooted in the Celtic imagery of Danu.²⁸ In myth Danu (also referred to as Anu or Don) was a mother goddess whose generosity and

²⁸ Charles Squire, *Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Forgotten Books, 2005).

fecundity made life possible.²⁹ Much like his early work's relationship to animals and the figures of the natural world, Yeats' relationship with the feminine is evidently Romanticist, focussing on the gentle, natural beauty that the feminine can embody coupled with the lack of boundaries and trappings that surrounded the fictionalised character of the woman in Celtic mythology. Yeats' vision of the feminine in this period is entwined with the Celtic concept of femininity but it is also influenced by the contemporary views of the feminine coming out of the Romantic artistic movement.³⁰ It would not be until his middle period, wherein Yeats began experimenting with more radical, modernist visions of what the women in the Celtic world could be, that we see a truly innovative approach to Celtic mythological view of the woman.³¹

A particularly interesting image of femininity rooted in Celtic symbolism is Yeats's multiple uses of a rose throughout his poetry and is significant as *The Rose* is a group of poems, named by Yeats himself. This image of the rose is one that evokes images of femininity even in the modern era, but it also holds a greater significance in Celtic symbolism, particularly in an Irish context. While A. Norman Jeffares states that in Yeats's earlier poems the image of a rose is used decoratively, Jeffares highlights that by 1891 Yeats began using the symbol of the Rose as a more complex symbol in his poetry.³² This period coincides with his transition away from his romantic poetry. The rose after this period is not just used decoratively in love poetry, but it is steeped in Irish patriotism and femininity. The symbol of the rose is significant in Irish patriotic poetry, with the most significant example being that of Roisin Dubh, or Dark Rosalyn, a personification of Ireland. The land of Ireland is often personified and feminised, with Erin being a feminine name, an anglicised form of

²⁹ Patricia Monaghan, *Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, 2004) p. xiv

³⁰ Elizabeth Fay, Duncan Wu eds., 'Romanticism and Feminism' in *A Companion to Romanticism* (London: Wiley, 2017).

³¹ Deirdre Toomey, *Yeats and Women* (Springer: Hoboken, 1997).

³² A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of WB Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968) p. 22

Éire, the Irish word for Ireland. It is perhaps this tendency in Irish patriotic circles to personify Ireland as a feminine being that influences Yeats to refer to nature and its beauty with feminine pronouns and using feminine symbols. We can see in this period of Yeats' growing political interest that his metamorphosis from an excellent but stifled romantic poet into a far more revolutionary modernist poet, unconstrained either by traditional notions of what his work should be or what Ireland should be. This is a fascinating period of time in Yeats' work that deserved far deeper study than can be afforded to it in this text, but time will be given to discuss Yeats' transformation into a modernist poet and his relationship with femininity later in this chapter. Yeats's use of the symbol of the rose for the feminine becomes somewhat deeper, and much more complex in his later works, and it is said that Maud Gonne claimed that the symbol of the rose was Yeats's way of alluding to her.³³

Maud Gonne was famously Yeats's muse in much of his poetry and plays alike. Gonne herself was an English-born Irish nationalist, and it was this interest in Irish nationalism that would make her a perfect muse for Yeats. As part of her interest in Irish nationalism, Gonne was famous as one of the founders of the Women's Prisoners Defence League, also known as 'The Mothers'.³⁴ Yeats even identified Gonne with 'Mother Ireland' with the idea of the 'mother' in an Irish context being a loaded image. If we can take a brief detour from Yeats' poetry to examine his plays we can see the influence of this image throughout his broader work. From the idea of Danu or Anu as the mother goddess, to the mother in Yeats's play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* the mother as a symbol in an Irish context is one of sacrifice. In her article *The Powerful Role of the Mother in Irish Culture*, Lisa Fitzpatrick claims that 'mothers symbolise the nation, the struggle for independence and the religious devotions that have often been closely intertwined with conceptions of nationalism

³³ A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of WB Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968) p. 42

³⁴ Elizabeth B. Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats' Love Poetry* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996) p. 180

and patriotism'.³⁵ In this context it is easy to see how Yeats associates Maud Gonne with a 'Mother Ireland' image, so much so that when Gonne was pursuing an acting career, Yeats used Gonne inspiration for his play *The Countess Cathleen*, though Gonne declined to star in the original role, later playing the lead in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. *The Countess Cathleen* is another significant work of Yeats which displays femininity in an Irish context. The play is set during a famine (a tragedy from which Ireland was still suffering and would continue to suffer the aftermath of) and follows a countess who sells her soul to the devil to save the farmers who are tenants on her land.³⁶ From the outset the central figure embodies a very Romantic figure of the woman, with the rural setting and motherly caring nature. However, there are some aspects of this play that reveal the transition that Yeats was going through in this period. The relatively contemporary and politically charged subject matter make for reading that strikes the audience as far more a 20th century tale than a 19th century one. This is a transitional play to say the least but within it we can see the elements of the Romantic and Modernist Yeats, with the nurturing figure of the woman on one hand and the politically minded modern Irish woman on the other. Yeats in this period is at a time of transition and contradiction, finding his artistic feet in an Ireland that is changing rapidly. This shift can be seen in the way his work interacts with Celtic femininity.

During the period that can be firmly considered Yeats' at his most Modernist, the representation of femininity and its relationship to the Celtic shows a clear interest in and ambition to represent entirely new forms of femininity and Celticism. Yeats writes the Celtic woman as an independent agent, capable of charting her own course. He draws on Celtic mythology to colour these characters, but fundamentally places them in contemporary

³⁵ RTÉ, *The Powerful Role of the Mother in Irish Culture*, (2018)
<[³⁶ W. B. Yeats, *The Countess Cathleen* \(Dublin: Book Jungle, 1892\).](https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/0823/986996-the-powerful-role-of-the-mother-in-irish-culture/#:~:text=The%20mother%20is%20a%20powerful,conceptions%20of%20nationalism%20and%20patriotism.> [22/09/22].</p></div><div data-bbox=)

contexts, gives them agency and political ideology and writes them as entirely independent, while not entirely abandoning his Romantic conception of the woman as a nurturing mother figure. In *The Folly of Being Comforted* Yeats' seems to write his traditional feminine character to begin with, highlighting her nurturing nature as she grows older with hair that has "threads of grey" and "little shadows" about her eyes. However, this section of the poem is written as though a third person were speaking to the narrator of his partner. The narrator rails against this conception, praising her "great nobleness" and "fire that stirs about her". The poem when spoken by the narrator feels hurried and frantic, like a powerful political speech espousing the traditionally male virtues being ascribed to the female subject of the poem.³⁷ We can see in this work Yeats putting to rest the tired clichés of the Romantics and instead charting a new course, giving his female subjects agency, purpose and determination. He eschews the opportunity to cast his aging lover in the figure of the mother and instead writes her as a passionate revolutionary, driven by the fire he so vividly describes. *The Folly of Being Comforted* could be seen to be a less than friendly eulogy for the Romantic poems of the past, with even its title suggesting the comfort of nostalgic Romanticism should be done away with and instead the exciting opportunities of modernity embraced. There is far more of the figure of Macha, the warrior goddess in this poem than there is of Danu, Mother Ireland.³⁸ This solidification of Modernist themes in Yeats' work can be seen throughout his poems in this period. In *Under the Moon*, Yeats writes of the ancient princesses of Celtic mythology but does not dwell on their beauty or nurturing nature, instead discussing pseudo-pagan rituals undertaken by these characters. Yeats is far more concerned here with weaving a narrative about the cultures of these women than he is in obsessing over their beauty. They are given a place in the story other than as the objects of male affection, playing a part in the

³⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 62.

³⁸ Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopedia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991) pp. 284 – 285.

invented rituals Yeats has created.³⁹ In this period, we can see Yeats' wholehearted adoption of Modernist forms through his depiction of Celtic femininity. Yeats' femininity in this period was less defined by the traditional Romantic Celtic notions of gentle, nurturing women, belonging to nature. Yeats' was far more interested in inventing new forms, giving his female characters agency while still rooting them in Celticism. Yeats' changing view of women in this period mirrors his changing view of Ireland. New opportunities were opening themselves up and Yeats appears excited by the possibilities they raised.

In stark contrast, we see the same pseudo-regression in Yeats' work after the failure of 1916 and the pro-treatyite counterrevolution of the 1920s. Not only does Yeats' view on Celticism seem to become more romantic, historicised and pessimistic, so do his views of women and the way he places them in his work. For example, in *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz* great emphasis is placed upon the femininity of "the two girls in silk kimonos". Yeats' writes of these women in naturalistic terms, making reference to animals in his description of Markievicz as a "gazelle", drawing to mind specifically Romantic themes. He decries the damage that age has brought to the women, describing them as "skeleton gaunt"; a deeply superficial and Victorian way to think about femininity that Yeats three decades prior in *The Folly of Being Comforted* was eschewing.⁴⁰ Further, this poem draws little from Celtic folklore and mythology, which is at first simply a sign of Yeats' loss of faith in the revivalist republican project but becomes even more damning when you consider the women he is describing are republican revolutionaries. If Yeats' does not feel it is appropriate to draw comparisons between the warrior goddesses of Celtic mythology and these independent, self-driven, politically minded revolutionaries, what does that tell the audience about the effects of the violent counter-revolutionary reaction on Yeats' mind?

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 66.

⁴⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 197
W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 62.

Yeats reads as a jaded man in this poem, dispossessed of his previous revolutionary optimism. In a similar way we see that Yeats' has almost divorced the Celtic from the feminine in *On Woman* where he opines at length on the virtues of a woman's "tenderness and care" drawing far more from biblical texts than he does Celtic mythology in the process. The result is a poem that is far more concerned with the value of a woman to men and in particular the comfort they can bring, than it is with the determined women of Yeats' middle period.⁴¹ The poems in Yeats' later canon pose the question "what happened to the vibrant revolutionary poet who saw the Celtic in strong-willed women exercising their self-determination". The likely answer is that this Yeats died with the opportunity of a new Ireland. What we are left with is a poet who sees women as objects to be admired, to comfort men, and as little else. An apt comparison could be drawn with the newly formed Free State's abysmal treatment of women.⁴²

In his early period, Yeats was aping the typical forms of the era; an old-fashioned Celtic Romanticism that portrayed the Celtic as some ancient thing, dying in much the same way as nature was in the wake of industrial development. Women in this world were part of nature, gentle and under the sway of men. As the political settlement in Ireland developed however, Modernist ideas of Celticism and womanhood began to take hold and with them Yeats' forms shifted, highlighting the agency, politics and bravery of the women in his stories. While all still took on traditional Celtic mythological archetypes, they charted their own course in the narrative and were not simply thrown on the tide of the story. Yeats' new vision for Ireland seemed to be developing in a similar direction where, rather than being cast as a hopeless nurturing motherly character cast about on the sea of history, Ireland could assert herself as an independent, defiant state capable of arranging her own affairs in

⁴¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 122.

⁴² M. E. Daly, 'Women in the Irish Free State: The Interaction Between Economics and Ideology', *Journal of Women's History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) pp. 99 – 116.

whatever way she saw fit. However, Yeats' writings would take a stark turn in its relationship to the Celtic and to women in the period following the failed Easter Rising, shifting from poetry that held up women's self-determination as a virtue to be admired, comparable to the mythological Celtic warrior goddesses, towards poetry that objectifies women, holds their value in the comfort they afford men, and removes a great many references to the Celtic in relation to women altogether. In much the same way the promises of the revolutionary period were not realised, the promises of Yeats' ambitious revivalist, modernist, and arguably feminist poetry collapsed into a half-hearted romanticism delivering a bleak nostalgic tone and a view of women that fit with the culture of 'Dev's Ireland'.

'A Man Violent and Famous, Strode Among the Dead': The Masculine and Celtic Symbolism in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats.⁴³

Yeats' portrayal of men and masculinity in his poetry shifted wildly throughout his work, often lining up with the political shifts happening in the Ireland of his day. While often drawing comparisons between the masculine figures in his work and the mythological Irish heroes like Cú Chulainn and Fionn mac Cumhaill, the way he drew on this mythology to represent his characters shifted and changed based on the contemporary events of his time. As has been echoed throughout this research, the Celticism that Yeats' was reviving was as much a product of his time as it was an ancient culture to be drawn from. This chapter will again be broken into the early, middle and late periods of Yeats' work to see what can be gleaned from an in-depth investigation into Yeats' representation of the male and masculine within Celticism.

In Yeats' early period, his representation of masculinity has traditional romantic fair, with the added usage of Celtic mythology for reference, comparison and setting. A perfect

⁴³ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 299.

example of this kind of writing in Yeats' early work comes in *The Madness of King Goll*, itself based on a king from Irish mythology. Within it we see showcased "battle-breaking men" who through violent battle against pirates "won many a torque of gold".⁴⁴ It would be simplistic to condemn this depiction as typical historicised masculine flair, but it is clear how Yeats' views mythological masculinity and violence in this poem. It is unrestrained, violent and fundamentally good. He writes of these figures in simple terms as heroes, uncomplicated by any moral baggage or political concerns, simply fulfilling their violent task safe in the knowledge it is correct. This is a common depiction in Yeats' Romantic period, drawing on the Romantic tropes of unrestrained nature, these men are depicted as unrestrained and fundamentally natural as historicised beings not complicated by an existence in the urban present. Similarly, in *Cú Chulainn's Fight with the Sea* we see the titular mythological character fawned over by adoring women, lashing out in "war-rages" uncontrollably "raving"; A similar theme seems to emerge of an uncontrolled, historicised man of nature, drawn from Celtic mythology but imbued with characteristics invented in the 19th century to characterise the natural: Its uncontrollable nature, its fundamental goodness. Yeats, at least Romantic Yeats, sees the Celtic man as an uncomplicated animal. Born of nature, unrestrained, and always instinctively good without need for thought.

Yeats' middle period is defined by a much more Modernist, inventive flair in his representation of men and how they can be related back to the revivalist Celticism of the time. In *The Happy Townland* for example Yeats' writes of a "strong farmer", a traditionally stoic male figure, who upon learning he is travelling to the Celtic otherworld would become overcome by deep emotion. The use of the character of a farmer is poignant as the ties between the Celtic and the rural are still visible in this, but in contrast to the traditional unbridled masculine men of Yeats' past this character is a strong, rural man, cast as a Celtic

⁴⁴ W. B Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 12.

character within a Celtic setting, whose purpose in that setting is to become overcome by emotion. This is a stark departure away from both the idea of the Celtic man as masculine and motivated only by passion and rage, but also from the historical position of the Celtic. Yeats does not historicise the subject of the farmer, rather he states that there is a strong farmer. He has in this poem used a Celtic male subject in the present tense and his purpose in the narrative is to be emotionally vulnerable.⁴⁵ A clearly modernist departure in Yeats' writing. Similar male characterisation can be seen in *Brown Penny*. Yeats is central to this poem, based around his own emotions during the performance of a ritual to determine if his affections are reciprocated. Throughout he is written as vulnerable and emotional. He writes that he feels that "love is a crooked thing" and that "he would be thinking of love until the stars ran away". A far more sensitive and emotional description than he would have written in his early period. Though this characterisation does not draw comparison between Yeats' and Celtic mythology, it does mirror Yeats' characterisation of the farmer in the otherworld. He is emotional and vulnerable, set as a new model of what masculinity could be; A new Celtic man. Throughout Yeats' middle period he opened new avenues for masculine depictions within the Celtic. Gone is his insistence that man is a natural, passion-driven animal built only for violence. In this period Yeats uses the backdrop of the Celtic to question long-held assumptions about masculinity left over from romanticism and offers a new perspective on what masculinity could mean.

In Yeats' later period, his characterisation of masculinity shifts again with the shifting cultural climate in Ireland, retaining elements of his previous work but ultimately failing to live up to the forward-thinking masculinity of his modernist period. *Politics* for example presents an educated man, a character not at home in the backwards Romantic Celticism of Yeats' early period, but who is primarily fixated on winning the affections of a woman. The

⁴⁵ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 68.

role of the narrator as this character is to act as a new model man, educated and civil, but whose real motivations are simply to get the attention of women. Yeats' has defaulted to a different kind of simplistic writing in this period. His references to the Celtic are scant, to his male characters knowledge common, and always driven for the affections of a woman.⁴⁶ He writes again of Cú Chulainn in *Cú Chulainn Comforted* but has reverted to the violent characterisations of previous poems. He writes him meditating, but only as a result of his wounds. The violent Celtic masculinity has returned again to Yeats' writing as though the failure of the revolution to produce a new nation had also failed to validate Yeats' vision of a new Celtic man. All that Celtic masculinity can be now is violent and anger-driven.⁴⁷ Yeats' has reverted to historic romanticist forms but severed from their historical context there is no excusing the reactionary nature of these poems. They may have been a comfort to the man who had seen a progressive revolution attempted and fail but beyond offering that nostalgia for an art-form that was itself nostalgic these poems offer little, certainly in the way of furthering the revivalist agenda. They read as a man broken, reliving his historic glories.

Masculinity and its interactions with the Celtic abound in Yeats' early work where he draws upon mythology entwined with Victorian Romantic sensibility to conjure men violent, good and driven by anger and passion. They create a sense of the place that the poems were written in, a stifling conservative environment yearning for a different kind of violent conservatism. Yeats' middle period represents a true shift, an adoption of modernism and the promise that presents. Yeats' writes the way revolutionaries write of the future beyond the present state of affairs. He begins to craft a new masculinity to fit within the state to be. With the crushing of the 1916 revolution and the violent counter-revolution of the 1920s however that promise ebbs away and we are left with a rose-tinted nostalgic body of poetry filled with

⁴⁶ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 297.

⁴⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 299.

men of promise who are only driven by the attentions of women and care little for their broader society. Yeats' later period comprises of inward looking, reactionary romanticism; a comfort for a man whom the world had not lived up to the aspirations of.

Conclusion

Throughout his writing career, Yeats was primarily interested in the Celtic and how it could be used to draw comparisons between his subjects or used as a setting for his narrative. The shifts and changes in Yeats' relationship with the Celtic can be seen throughout his work and used to chart the political changes happening both in his own work and in Ireland as a whole.

In our first chapter we explored Yeats' relationship with animals and how they played a role in the Celticism of his poetry. In his earlier, Romantic period Yeats used animals in a very traditionally Romantic way, using them as placeholders for the concept of wildness and ancient historic Celticism that was all but dead and gone. He mourns their loss as though the devastation that the industrial revolution was reeking on the natural world was also in turn destroying the Celtic character of Ireland itself. In his middle, Modernist period Yeats' appears to have changed his position entirely, instead seeing new possibilities for the Celtic in a rapidly urbanising setting. He uses urban animals to demonstrate the role that Celtic Ireland still plays in urban Dublin and that neither the natural world nor the Celtic was destroyed by industrialisation, that they live on throughout Ireland. Finally, with the failure of the revolution of 1916 and the rapid Collins lead counter-revolution the optimism and opportunity that defined Yeats' middle period slips away, and Yeats returns to a hollow shell of his old Romantic forms, the cold comfort that the historicised Ireland he used to write of can offer.

A similar process can be seen in Yeats' writing of women. In his earliest period, Romantic themes of a nurturing 'Mother Ireland' prevail. Women are either mothers or lovers, belonging to nature, soft and gentle and in need of protection. By Yeats' middle period women gain agency. They are placed in the figure of the Celtic warrior goddess, brave and political and ready to dominate the narrative, not happy to be thrown from plot point to plot point. In a way these women could be seen as allegorical for Ireland itself, with Yeats' view shifting from Ireland as a helpless victim cast on the sea of history to a dominant self-determined character ready to chart her own course. However, with the counterrevolution Yeats' entered his forlorn later period in which women become objectified, removed of agency and written of in far more reactionary terms than was the case in the middle period.

Finally, we examined the masculine figure in Yeats' work. In his early period, the influence of romanticism on Yeats' men is clear. They are all violent, passionate and fundamentally good. They have no need to concern themselves with morality as they are forces of nature whose energies can only be applied to good works. In Yeats' middle period, clearly influenced by the revolutionary atmosphere of his time he begins writing a new Celtic man; emotional, vulnerable, and deeply entwined with the present-day Celtic world. While rurality still played a role in the Celtic it was not the defining feature of the men of Yeats' poetry who would often be overcome by emotion, having active internal lives. Yeats' later period itself became emblematic of the broader cultural reaction happening in Irish society in this period. He retains the emotional, intelligent male subject but their entire focus is now women's affections whom they in turn objectify. Their internal life has no interaction with the Celtic or the state of their country. They are islands of men whose only interest is capturing women.

In this research we have explored how Yeats' relationship with the Celtic can be seen as a microcosm of the political shifts happening in Ireland at the time. Through this study we

can establish what the prevailing zeitgeist within the revivalist community and within Ireland as a whole was at any given time, and a better understanding of Yeats' mindset and the cultural backdrop to his work can be established, from the early romanticism of the late 19th century, through to the ambitious modernism of the early 20th century, onto the bleak collapse of opportunity during the counter-revolutionary free-state period.

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