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C-level Essay

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Blood-Sacrifice and Nationalism in Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan

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Introduction

**They shall be remember forever,
They shall be alive forever,
They shall be speaking forever,
The people shall hear them forever,
*“Cathleen ni Houlihan”***

W. B. Yeats

In the play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a personification of Ireland where an old woman becomes young and beautiful when the protagonist, Michael, on the verge of a happy marriage to Delia decides to follow. The play, indeed, calls on total sacrifice of all personal interests and ties to the service of Ireland. The emphasis on blood- sacrifice is very clear and associated by the gloriousness and remembrance of Ireland. Indeed, the gloriousness of the martyrdom in the play makes failure a kind of triumph. Since the first release of the play on stage on April 2, 1902 in St. Teresa’s Hall in Dublin, many critics have expressed their criticism of the play and of the nationalistic perspectives existing in the main theme of the play.

William Butler Yeats is one of the greatest poets and playwrights in Irish history. The aim of his works was to construct and revive the Irish identity and culture in English.

“From the mid 1880’s to 1914, William Butler Yeats was at the hub of the Anglo-Irish literary revival “producing a stream of poems, and manifestos” (Hutchinson qtd. In Galloway 5). Like Lady Gregory, Yeats belonged to upper-class. He was protestant and did not know the Gaelic language. Despite his class, he never felt English. Rather, he felt that his membership of that class cut him off from the majority of Irish ordinary people and of his fellow country men. “Both Yeats and Lady Gregory saw the prime aim of their work at the outset as necessity to bring back dignity to the image of Ireland, both at home and abroad”(G.J Watson qtd. in Harrington 417). Yeats is the author of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, one of the most significant plays which was published in 1903. He wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on the basis of a dream he had. “I had a very vivid dream one night, and I made Cathleen ni Houlihan out of this dream” (Yeats qtd. in Harrington 390). He wrote the play in cooperation with Lady Gregory since she was familiar with peasants’ patterns of thought and their traditions.

Undoubtedly, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is one of the most nationalistic plays in Irish history which encourages audiences to sacrifice their lives for Ireland. I am not suggesting that political problems the play thematizes can be reduced to each individual’s ideological beliefs. Rather, these categories provide ways of showing how the problems in society overshadow ideological beliefs.

The story in general is about the 1798 Rebellion when French troops landed at Killala in the west of Ireland where joined by many unarmed peasants to attack the English. The play’s main theme deals with the tragic bravery of those who fight for Irish independence

even when there is no hope for victory and death is probable. This essay will discuss what ideology drives Michael to embrace death despite his plan for marriage and what ideas keep pressing forward some people to sacrifice their lives for their goals?

Considering Althusser's concept of ideology as being present in and around subjects permanently without their awareness, this essay explains the ideology of blood-sacrifice in the Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. It will also analyze the impacts of general demands of society on people's ideologies. Perhaps the most crucial question in this play from the ideological point of view is how Michael perceives and interprets the situation he is involved in. Therefore, in order to understand Michael's action, it is necessary to examine the situation through his eyes. It should be understood how Michael interprets the injustices of society. Cohen et al state "people interpret events, contexts and situations and act on the bases of those events. If people define their situation as real then they are real in their consequences (22). Michael looks into the events of society with his own interpretations and regards his blood-sacrifice as the only means to get rid of the injustices of society and to perpetuate the idea of independence for Ireland.

Irish Nationalism

The growing of Irish nationalism was the result of British colonization. "Ireland is a country which has been constantly invaded and resettled." (Welch qtd in Galloway 1). Later the cycle of invasion replaced by British colonization this had political, economic, social and especially cultural impacts on Ireland and its people. That is the reason why

the nationalists always struggled for Irish independence. Until its independence, unlike other independent European countries, Ireland never had the opportunity or power to experience free society and individualism. The Irish had to practice English culture and could not experience modernization of the Renaissance through their own culture. Welch points out “as a colony of England, Ireland was always cut off and experienced modern period, from about 1600 through an English transmission; Ireland, unlike most European countries, did not have opportunity of fully experience the experiments of individualism, enterprise, collectivity and modernization that are known as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment” (Welch qtd in Galloway 3). Thus, one can see that every aspect of Irish society was controlled by the English. The cultural effect of British colonization was even more dramatic. Everything, including language, was imposed on the native Irish. According to Galloway “the native Irish did not have a **system of representation** in the larger society that could reflect the way of life and show it to be of value so”. (3)

In the history of Irish nationalism one can see two kinds of nationalistic movements: political and cultural. Political nationalists mainly focused on political aspects of achieving independence, whereas cultural nationalists attempted to “reunite the different aspects of nation-traditional, modern, agriculture and industry, science and religion-by returning to the creative life-principle of the nation” (Hutchinson qtd in Galloway 5). Cultural nationalists tried to revive national identity and solve the problem of **system of representation** in the larger society. Since civilization is a spontaneous social order, cultural nationalists tend to construct decentralized cultural society from the bottom up by educating people to their common heritage. Although after the tragic events that occurred

in Easter 1916 political and cultural nationalistic movements became one and same, they had different objectives. Lady Gregory and W.B Yeats were among main figures of cultural nationalistic movement. They had a crucial task to make contributions both to art and to the nation.

Yeats's Dual Commitment

Since the first release of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on stage, many has criticized Yeats severely because of the overt nationalistic theme in the play. Many attempted to categorize Yeats and Lady Gregory into chauvinistic or political nationalists who were the main opponents of the theatre. Yeats in response claims that one can write a book of lyrics and a few friends will care for it but he can not write a good play if there are not audiences. "Literature is always personal; one man's vision of the world and one man's experience, and it can only be popular when men are ready to welcome the vision of others" (qtd. In Harrington 389). He says that for flourishing Irish theatre, it is necessary to reflect Irish life in the play. As a playwright, he wants to enter imagination of the people and to expand people's self understanding and people's consciousness.

Yeats believed that the public place was where his art could flourish. "I desire to show events and not merely tell of them." (Yeats, qtd in Murry 16). He was always the advocate of artistic freedom in theatre and believed that giving voice to national consciousness was through sincere expression of ordinary people's experience. He denied that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was a political play of propagandist kind. He said he took a

piece of human life and thoughts and put this into what he believed to be sincere dramatic form. He never wrote a play to advocate any kind of opinion and believes that such a play would be bad art. In other words, the arts must not be controlled and diminished by the state. But at the same time he rejected excluding any of the passionate material of drama for himself or for others: "It may be our duty, as it has been the duty of many dramatic movements, to bring new kinds of subjects into the theatre, but it can not be our duty to make the bounds of drama narrower. (Yeats qtd. In Harrington 390)

In fact, twentieth century Irish society was less receptive to the native artistic movement because of the restricting conceptions of literature that Irish writers had in minds. One can say that Yeats was a pioneer in liberating Irish writers from the restrictions through direct and indirect means and help to flourish Irish literature. But after *Cathleen ni Houlihan* Yeats began to backtrack from political drama since he did not want extreme nationalists to use the theatre to call the tune for their own purposes. He believed political achievements of Ireland was not worth the loss of its traditions but there is no denying whatsoever that adherence of some figures like Maud Gonne and John O'Leary to republican ideal played a major role in pushing Yeats towards the direction that he created *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. Some critics also say the nationalism in Yeats' works is a romantic nationalism. "An idealism in Yeats met and understood an idealism in the romantic nationalism of the republican school, and that this enabled him to express memorably a major aspect of Irish life in those troubled years (G. J. Watson qtd. In Harrington 419). The romantic nationalists, including Yeats, were always looking for the roots of Irish culture. They tried to construct the new Irish nation that is not necessarily

pure Gaelic. They also included the history of colonization in their works. Romantic nationalists attempted to construct a young Ireland that did not define the nation. Rather, they desired to make Ireland a nation based on non-sectarianism and the secular state that preach self-respect and self-reliance.

Between 1916 and 1922 nationalism was a central fact of Irish life. Many nationalist writers appeared in Irish society but what differs Yeats from the others is his attempts to vanish Anglo-Irish tradition. His lasting effects on Irish literature is not only because of nationalistic theme in his works but also largely because of artistic and cultural aspects of his works. In other words, Yeats was committed to looking into the individuality of the nation in all its daunting complexities. On the other hand, the focus of chauvinistic nationalists like Arthur Griffith was more on the construction of simpler ideal type by which to arouse national feeling. Thus, it is not surprising that playwrights like Yeats and Synge were accused of slandering Ireland by nationalist critics. For instance, Arthur Griffith criticized bitterly Synge and Yeats and the new theatre movement. About Synge's play he wrote the following comment:

“The Irish National Theatre Society was ill-advised when it decided to give its imprimatur to such a play as “In a Wicklow Glen” [In the shadow of the Glen]...Man and women in rural Ireland, according to Mr. Synge marry lacking love, and as a consequence, the women proves unfaithful. Mr. Synge never found that in Irish life (qtd. in Harrington 400). One can realize from the above-mentioned statement that when Yeats

was writing *Cathleen ni Houlihan* the writers were under pressures from the society and chauvinistic nationalists to devote every aspects of art to nationalism.

Yeats was also criticized from other side. Stephen Gwynn argues in his recollection in *Irish Drama*, 1936:

“The effect of *Cathleen ni houlihan* on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot. Yeats was not alone responsible; no doubt that lady Gregory had helped him to get the peasant speech to perfect.”(Qtd. in Harrington 415) But, in fact it must be borne in mind that Yeats’ plays may or may not have political overtones. But they have always cultural implications. In other words, Yeats had a dual commitment to art and to his country. The effect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* cannot be denied, its main theme was political and it was a clarion call to the republican cause. The effect of the play is to turn the love of young Michael Gillane from bride and from family to the cause the old woman talks to him about. Its effect on the audience is the same as the effect of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on Michael. As Rosenthal points out “death’s finality has been denied, and the result must be one of the most effective recruiting play ever performed.”(63).That is the reason why Yeats’s joy was overshadowed by his uneasiness, perhaps over the contribution of the play to the events of Easter 1916. He wrote near the end of his life, in the poem” The Man and the Echo”:

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
(qtd. in Harrington 415)

In fact Yeats wrote this poem in response to Stephen Gwynn's above mentioned criticism.

Nationalism and Blood-Sacrifice

At first the old woman arouses pity by her loneliness and by her lack of shelter when she is engaged in conversation with Peter and Bridget:

“PETER”: It's a pity indeed for any person to have no place of their own.

“OLD WOMAN”: That's true indeed, and it's long I'm on the roads since I first went wandering.

“BRIDGET”: It is a wonder you are not worn out with so much wandering.

“OLDWOMAN”: Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that the stir has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends. (6, 7)

But soon she speaks in political riddles while the dialogue goes on.

“BRIDGET”: What was it put you wandering?

“OLDWOMAN”: Too many strangers in the house.

“BRIDGET”: Indeed you look as if you’d have your share of trouble.

“OLDWOMAN”: I have had trouble indeed.

“BRIDGET”: What was it put the trouble on you?

“OLDWOMAN”: My land that was taken from me.

“PETER”: Was it much land they took from you?

“OLDWOMAN”: My four beautiful green field. (7)

Regarding the old woman as a beggar, Peter and Bridget offer her an oat cake, some milk and money, but she contemptuously rejects their offers. She wants something more. She needs help to take back her “four beautiful green fields” from the “strangers in her house”. But this help is the people’s total sacrifices to her.

“BRIDGET [to the OLDWOMAN]: Will you have a drink of milk ma’ am?

“OLD WOMAN”: It is not food or drink that I want.

“PETER [offering the shilling]: Here is something for you.

“OLD WOMAN”: This is not what I want. It is not silver I want.

“PETER”: What is it you would be asking for?

“OLD WOMAN”: If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all. (8)

A close reading of the play quickly unveils the old woman’s references to the oppression inherent in society that must necessarily lead to revolt. Her “*Four beautiful green field*” and the house confiscated by “*strangers*” leave everyone in Ireland no option but to serve as fast as they can. The old woman is waiting for that service and is very hopeful to get her property back.

“MICHAEL”: What hopes have you to hold to?

“OLD WOMAN”: The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting strangers out of my house. (9)

Michael says no to his fiancée’s love, money and his parent’s advice in order to devote himself to the old woman who personifies Ireland. Bridget advises Michael to think of his marriage rather than going with the old woman.

“MICHAEL”: I will go with you

“BRIDGET”: It is not her friends you have to go and welcome, Michael; it is the girl coming into the house you have to welcome. You have plenty to do; it is food and drink you have to bring to the house. (9)

He decides to devote himself to the ideological beliefs he has. When Michael leaves the house he knows that there is no return, but he believes he will achieve what he deserves as the old woman states:

“It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

[She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing]

They shall be remember forever,

They shall be alive forever,

They shall be speaking forever,

The people shall hear them forever,”

(10)

With this statement Michael is called from his marriage and wedding preparation to higher nationalistic duty. Calling on Michael to revolt, the old woman states overtly that

blood-sacrifice is the only means to get rid of “strangers”. She says that she can never rest until she has taken her land back. In return, she promises that those who have sacrificed their lives for Ireland have not done so in vain because “they shall be remembered forever”. This is their reward. Therefore, Michael decides to participate in the war despite his plan to marry Delia and despite his family’s disagreement. One can say this is the most patriotic part in the play. Death’s finality has been denied and has replaced by the remembrance and the glorification of Ireland. At the end of the play when old woman leaves the cottage with Michael, she is transformed into a young beautiful girl with a walk of a queen.

PETER [to PATRICK, laying a hand on his arm]. Did you see an old woman going down the path?

PATRICK: I did not, but I saw an young girl, and she had a walk of queen. (11)

One can see that the poor old woman at the moment of commitment to her becomes a young and beautiful girl with the walk of a queen.

Michael’s Ideology Rooted in the Society

According to Althusser, ideology is the practicality of the reality in which society functions and into which subjects are hailed or interpellated. All consciousness is constituted and inscribed within ideology. He states furthermore that “ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence but a material existence. An ideology always exists in an apparatus, or practice. This existence is material.”(qtd. in Literary Theory; an Introduction 296) Therefore, ideology is an inescapable fact of life. Everyone is trapped within an ideology that controls his thoughts and his actions without his awareness.

Michael has grown up in a society that has been colonized for years. He has seen and experienced poverty in his family and also in the larger society in which he lives. He believes all the miseries that people have suffered are rooted in British colonization. Furthermore, he observes the injustice carried out by the English. They have occupied the old woman’s fields and confiscated her house. He sees the English as cause of all the cruelties against the Irish and this gives him deep feelings of humiliation. He is ready to do everything possible in his power to get rid of the poverty and injustice. To some degree we can say that the value system through which Michael has been taught to interpret the world, or the ideology into which he has effectively been interpellated make him act as he does.

Michael sacrifices his life for Ireland. What he does in this context is completely normal as far as the demands of the society are concerned. In other words, his blood-sacrifice is a duty for Ireland. To give up his marriage and become a martyr for his country is conditioned by the dominant ideology that perpetuates the idea of Independence for

Ireland. Michael's response to Cathleen ni Houlihan is immediate and is made out of his natural choice. His ideology which is rooted in the society dictates to him what to do. We see that Michael's action is best perceived from a collective and systemic point of view rather than on individual and idiosyncratic one. That is the reason why nationalism can never be categorized into individualism.

One can see Michael's feelings of humiliation, frustration and helplessness, which are demonstrated in violence towards the English and also toward himself (the less powerful) as he knows he will be killed. Michael is blind to see the real reality behind in his action. In presenting the issue of blood-sacrifice as mainly a question of survival of Ireland and considering blood-sacrifice itself unquestioned and thus an inescapable fact of life, Michael fails to understand the cause of his sacrifice and forces that create or perpetuate it.

If one subscribes to Althusser's theory as being present in and around subjects permanently, monitoring all their thoughts and actions without their awareness, one can see how the idea of blood-sacrifice or martyrdom becomes dominant or natural, and protest against such an action becomes unnatural because this type of consciousness has been spread out in every aspect of society. It is the dominant ideology in that culture which dictates what "morals" to teach, what "conventions" or norms it must follow and

help to perpetuates. So it is not surprising to see someone like Michael sacrifice his life in that context¹.

One can say that Michael is absorbed in and preoccupied with the consciousness prevalent in the society and thus become limited or confined in his perceptions by that consciousness. When he leaves he is in trance and he does not even hear a word other characters are saying. He entirely forgets his forthcoming marriage and all the pleasures accompanying on it. The other characters are not as convinced as Michael. For instance, Bridget and Delia are two characters who react very strongly to Michael's decision. They do their best to prevent him from joining the French army. At the end of the play Bridget even asks Peter to help her in this matter.

“DELIA”: Michael won't be going to join the French.

“BRIDGET”: [to Peter]: Tell him not to go, Peter

“PETER”: It's no use. He does not hear a word we are saying.

“BRIDGET”: Try and coax him over to the fire.

¹ The same thing can be seen in Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. The phenomenon of suicide-bombing in Palestine can be compared with what Michael did in the play which is martyrdom for a national cause. There is the humiliation the Palestinians experience in every day life; this humiliation resulting from a direct and daily experience of pain and suffering in the region where they live. People are being treated inhumanly and been made to feel socially inferior. Like Britain in relation to Ireland, the state of Israel dominates Palestine in economic, political and military terms. This is one of the main causes of repeated uprisings and radical attitude of Palestinian society against Israel.

“DELIA”: Michael, Michael! You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married!(11)

Thus, not only does self-sacrifice require one's own death but it also requires rejection of familial ties. Bridget and Delia become a hindrance in Michael's self-immolation and ultimately must take a back seat to Cathleen ni Houlihan.

Conclusion

Cathleen ni Houlihan is a nationalistic play that encourages people to sacrifice their lives for Ireland. Blood-sacrifice in the play is associated with gloriousness and remembrance of Ireland. Thus, the play denies the death's finality and makes failure a kind of triumph. Applying Althusser's concepts of Ideology one can see Michael is trapped in his own ideology and interprets the events with his own value system. The injustices of society reflecting the injustices of colonization and humiliation have impacts on Michael's decision to welcome death. His blood-sacrifice is a duty to Ireland and everything else is conditioned by the dominant ideology of blood-sacrifice that perpetuates the idea of independence for Ireland.

Yeats always tried to construct and revive Irish identity based on Irish ordinary people's experience. There is no denying whatsoever that nationalistic theme exists in the play, but as Yeats claims himself *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is not a political play of propagandist kind

that was written only for advocating nationalism. At the same time it has artistic value that portrays Irish peasants' life styles and traditions.

In a long run, though, one can see Yeats has made a remarkable contribution to Irish culture and literature. Since the Gaelic revival failed to produce a vital national culture, Yeats' works to construct Irish identity in English has appeared increasingly viable and successful. He was from minority protestant community but his works deny any single sectarian definition of the nation and have particular value in an island in need of unifying ideology. Yeats was true both to his art and to his self-constructed national role.

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