Re-Living the Heroic Age: the King’s Threshold, the Green Helmet, and on Baile’s Strand

This chapter analyses Yeats’s plays *The King’s Threshold, the Green Helmet*, and *On Baile’s Strand*. The Plays collectively can be put in the category of Irish mythical cycle. Critics have interpreted the plays in term of their themes and storyline. The Chapter however analyzes the celebration of native heroism, power, possession, conflict and also death and destruction as the issues of cultural nationalism. Yeats attempted to recover, through folklore, myth, and literature, aspects of Irish national identity that were being subjugated, and inaugurated in Ireland a period of fervent cultural nationalism. “Cultural nationalism,” as Terence Brown writes, is the belief that the essential, spiritual life of a people is assumed to subsist in its culture, bequeathed to it from antiquity and prehistory . . . . Indeed, the spirit of a people is vital in their language and in the legends, literature, songs and stories which that language makes available. (516) Brown continues, stating that “Yeats, AE and Lady Gregory wrote therefore of an ancient Ireland, heroic and self-sacrificially magnificent, in which unity of culture was manifest in a pagan, mythic, rural paradise” (518). The chapter posits the view that Yeats's desire to revive the ritualistic origins of the theatre is intimately connected with his aim to make the audience participate in the re-actualization of exemplary actions so as to encourage them to assume a heroic posture and to shake them out of their inertia in an attempt to restore their sense of national identity. The revival of the pre-colonial legends had a purpose of Yeats for reviving the collective consciousness and identity of the nation. Discontent with the desacralization of the world by modern man, Yeats strongly reacts against the commercial theatre and the abusive materialism of his age. He goes back to Celtic roots and uses folklore and mythology to precede the national rejuvenation. Yeats also borrows elements from the highly symbolic Japanese Noh drama, which provides him with an adequate aesthetics to create his own ritualistic theatre. The
use of the climactic dance marks the interpenetration of the natural and supernatural and intensifies the sacred character of the ritual, since the dance represents the fusion of opposites into momentary synthesis. Throughout the mythic *The King’s Threshold* and *Cuchulain* plays, Yeats points out the need for equilibrium, which is achieved only after a hard struggle between antagonistic forces that are at high power; the ordeal of death implies regeneration; the individual and civilization as a whole undergo symbolical death, which signals the possibility of renewal. Yeats believes that the function of art is to reveal a deeper reality beyond superficial appearances and that the role of the writer is parallel to that of the saviour or the shaman, whose mission is to heal and transform society. By means of the aesthetic experience, he intends to promote an intellectual change in his countrymen so as to encourage them to fight for their ideals. The plays under analysis have different themes and patterns. The chapter analyses the aspect of heroic idealism which common in all these plays. Yeats believed in the power of old recitation and remoteness. When the poem or a dialogue is spoken in the person of a peasant farmer, fisherman, Gaelic bard, or ancient chief, it becomes the voice of the primitive and the folk. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon talks if decolonization as:

… quite simply the replacing of certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ by another species of men. Without any period of transition there is a total, complete and absolute substitution. It is true that we could equally well stress the rise of anew nation, the setting up of a new state…(27)

In the plays of the chapter the transition is shown as to be happening in the cultural sphere. There is rise of the new nation with the cultural revival. In the plays the distance from actuality and nearness to imaginative reality makes possible the narration of a series of extraordinary
events which are given credit, for the audience trusts the wise words of the old reciter, who has seen everything and knows all the secrets of the human heart. His craft is allusion, never illusion; what he tells is always distant, noble, mysterious, admirable; the deeds narrated are authentic, fabulous; the words he uses are kind, precise, evocative, magic, almost incantatory; the allusions lead the hearer to remote lands where the unfamiliar is a part of daily life. And the art of speech is fundamental; the reciter speaks about universal truths of human nature, heightening and even transcending any form of real life, helping with the imaginative re-creation of national history and legend. Yeats, then, influenced by Lady Augusta Gregory and her compilation of the Irish sagas in *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, starts writing plays whose roots are founded in ancient legends and folklore mainly, achieving the intensity he desired by means of the Japanese Noh style. Before he started with the plays of Cuchulian cycle there was a play which Yeats had given importance, *The King’s Threshold* is different from the cuchulian heroic passion the play deals with the heroic ideal of the poet/artist in the society. As readers of Textual Cultures are aware, William Butler Yeats was a notorious reviser of his own work. He took advantage of any occasion, from the rehearsal and performance of one of his plays to a crisis in Irish politics, to tinker–and sometimes to do considerably more than tinker–with the words on the page. Editors of Yeats's work have long confronted the challenge of how to present reading texts of poems like "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner", or "The Scholars", which were revised so heavily over time that we are left not with a single poem with a few variant readings, but with multiple versions of the poem, each with claims to authority.

The plays, perhaps, present even greater editorial difficulties, since on many of them, Yeats worked collaboratively, both at the composition stage, with Lady Gregory and other colleagues at the Abbey Theatre, and at the rehearsal and performance stage, with the actors in the
company. As with almost all works written for performance, Yeats's plays were living documents, changing shape over time, frequently in very significant ways. What is an editor to do, for example, with *The King's Threshold*, an early play first composed in 1903, whose central character heroically triumphs at the end of early published versions, while he dies tragically in later ones?

The best answer, it would seem, is to do what Declan Kiely did in his recent volume of the Cornell Yeats series, which is to provide for readers and scholars a complete view of the play's evolution. From its first existence as a prose scenario dictated to Lady Gregory in 1903, to its last reworking at the proof stage of the unpublished Macmillan Edition de Luxe in 1931, Kiely's edition reveals the changing shape of the play, particularly as Yeats reconceived it in response to traumatic events in Ireland's national life between 1903 and 1921. What emerges from this careful treatment is a new appreciation for the importance of *The King's Threshold* among Yeats's early plays, and for its interest as an example of the textual complexity that typifies so many of Yeats's works.

*The King's Threshold* tells the story of Seanchan, a bardic poet at the court of King Guaire in sixth-century Ireland. In some writings the hero has a remarkable variation: the poet, the artist whom Yeats, on the basis of the romantic tradition, defines similarly to a hero like Cuchulain. Thus, for example, Seanchan in *The King's Threshold* (1904) can be paralleled with Cuchulain or the tragic heroes and heroines like Deirdre.

Other tragic heroes and heroines like Deirdre. In the play, Seanchan has been expelled from the king's table of advisers; in response, he begins a hunger strike at the palace gates to insist on the centrality of the poet in the hierarchy of political power. As Kiely notes in his excellent
introduction to the volume, Yeats's use of this material allows him to bridge his early interest in the Irish bardic tradition with his later conception of the artist as a crucial voice of wisdom amidst the clamorings of society.

In this respect, The King's Threshold seems to anticipate some of Yeats's later aesthetic and political concerns in a way that other, more widely anthologized early plays, such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) or *On Baile's Strand* (1904), do not. Thus, this edition clarifies in new ways the evolution of Yeats's view of the poet's social and political function. Even more important, the edition provides further evidence that for Yeats "the text" is not the singular fixed object that we find in *The King's Threshold* in *The Collected Plays*, which Yeats himself prepared in 1934 and which has since served as the standard edition. Rather, Kiely's edition suggests that the play is really a process of revision through discrete versions, a history of rewriting that mirrors Yeats's own evolving relationship with Ireland and with his public role as bard. The theme of the play is the role of art in society and the final revision presents us with both the tragedy of the poet’s exclusion from affairs of state and the heroic death which proves him to be a man of action as well as one of ideals. The basic elements of the plot were taken from an obscure Irish legend and the hunger strike from the Celtic tradition (it had not yet become a political protest). The action of the play is conceived as a confrontation between the immortal aspirations of poets and the various forces of temporal degradation. The play celebrates the poet as an important legislator in the human affairs. It is he who names all the things and recognizes their inherent qualities in the physical worlds. Without him societies inevitably descend to the trivial and ignoble. The dramatic action which was conceived to express this simple theme is more particularly oriented towards satirizing the defects and deficiencies of a society which no longer recognizes the artist’s role than in demonstrating that role directly.
Seanchan represents the last poet of the bardic tradition and his heroic death is society’s original sin, the fall from the unity of being. Seanchan is both hero and the poet, active and imaginative man, while only his pupils of all the stereotypes and caricatures who appear in the play, retain any semblance of imagination or intuition. Innocence They act as kind of chorus in the play and while the hero remains constant in his opposition to the king’s wishes, they remove from a stage of innocence to one of the understanding and participation. Their values and judgement inform those of the audience by positive associations, just as those of the other characters repel by negative ones. The king, for example, who is the main antagonist, represents reason, self-interest, and political expediency. He must subordinate the poet’s wild freedom of imagination to his own will. He cannot give-in to Seanchan. For the sake of law and order the poet must be excluded from the king’s council. The king is the voice of corrupting materialism. He wants to subdue and subvert the freedom and expression of Seanchan for which he is given temptation of every kind.

The other characters in the play can be understood as merely extensions of his nature, various manifestations of a demeaning and narrow self interest which characterize society. Seanchan has a strong ethical order and sense. He refrains from eating anything. All the king’s men carel do not persuade him to eat. Instead they speak to him with condescension and disdain, but are properly put in their place by the dying poets searing exposure if their hypocrisy. The values they represent are strongly contrasted and also complemented by the character and actions of the court ladies whose entrance animates the scene. A definite pattern exists in which the poet is placed between opposed sets of forces: king versus pupils; mayor and cripples versus Brian and chamberlain; soldier and monk versus court ladies. The whole action is played out in the threshold of the king, before one of the most powerful images of all, the great door of the king’s palace, while throughout the play, humble bread is visibly offered again and again to the poet.
who rejects life in a society which does not honour art. The young pupils and the princesses can be said to represent an innocence and unity of culture which is about to be lost forever. The threatening halters worn by the pupils and the acquisition of leprosy leveled against the princeses are brought together in the paradoxical image of moon, which normally a symbol of subjective and creative life, but in this case white with leprosy, an evil picture in the sky which is responsible for the contagion that afflicts the mankind. Seanchan triumph over his subjectivity is in embracing his antithetical nature, in experiencing the death of the hero as an objective man of action. The play was an important asset of the Irish literature in the revival of the position of the ancient bardic tradition, whose position in the ancient Irish society was equivalent to the tough and valorous heroes.

In 1904 he writes *On Baile's Strand*, the first play of the Cuchulain cycle; the last one, *The Death of Cuchulain*, is written in 1939. It takes him thirty-five years to recreate the legend of the bravest Irish hero, Cuchulain. He goes back to the remoteness of his country's past in order to find old values and ideals. He rejects modernity and wants to grasp the unspoilt primitive creative power to arouse the patriotic spirit of the Irish people. Following the aesthetic principle of simplicity and naturalness, he abandons everything which is not necessarymand which might deviate the attention of his selective audience. Yeats's use of the Noh techniques perfectly fits this purpose. But since his appropriation of the Japanese ritualistic drama has been widely explored by a great number of critics, the chapter not concentrates on these aspects and will focus on issues that have not been touched upon as yet: Cuchulain process of initiation, his development and the growing of his self assurance as a human being and as a universal hero. A close analysis of the five plays that compose the Cuchulain sequence has revealed that the initiatory quest pattern can be detected in each play as a separate unit as well as in the sequence.
of plays considered as five units of a complete whole that is each play constitutes one step of the initiation process. The standard path of his mythical adventure reveals an archetypal initiation structure; in order to analyze it, one can borrow methods from philosophy, psychology, cultural anthropology or sociology, always having in mind the history of religions in primitive societies all over the world. The Play *Green Helmet* has been from the Cuchulain cycle of legends of Ireland. In *The Green Helmet*, the subject of the play comes from tales which belong to the Ulster Cycle. Lady Gregory compiled these sagas in her already mentioned and fascinating book *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. "Bricriu's Feast, and the War of Words of the Women of Ulster" and "The Championship of Ulster" are the main sources in which Yeats found the basis for *The Green Helmet*. In the first legend, Bricriu of the Bitter Tongue (also called Poison tongue or Bricriu of the Poisonous Tongue because of his great skill at creating discord) holds a banquet for king Conchubar and the most prominent heroes of Ulster. In those days, at great Celtic festivals, it was a custom to award the so-called Champion's Portion to the foremost hero. Bricriu's hidden intention is to disseminate strife; therefore, he separately allures Conall, Laegaire and Cuchulain by saying that each of them deserves the Champion's Portion.1 All the heroes have their own charioteers who, in an attempt to defend their masters' right to the portion, start a big fight in which "the one half of the hall was as if on fire with the clashing of swords and spears, and the other half white as chalk with the whiteness of the shields." (Gregory, 1979, . 56). Conchubar and Fergus manage to stop the dispute but the women start a war of words in which they display the qualities of their husbands. The tale ends without a final conclusion about who would deserve the Champion's Portion. The resolution comes only in the second tale,"The Championship of Ulster," which narrates the trials undergone by the young heroes to conquer the most important award of Ireland. According to the second story, the young warriors are sent to
Curoi (the Druid) for a right judgement. They are put to hard probation and only Cuchulain is able to master the enchanted monsters with the shape of cats and to cut up the terrifying witches of the valley. Besides, he subjugates Ercol (Maeve's foster-father) and wins some other games. Even after such daring deeds, Conall and Laegaire are not convinced of Cuchulain's superiority; they go back to Emain to wait for Curoi's decision. Then Uath, the Stranger, appears to test them once more; he solemnly states, "The thing I want is the thing I cannot find, [...] and that is a man that will keep his word and will hold to his agreement with me." (Gregory, 1979, 74). After that, he proposes to have his head cut off by a hero who, the next day, would allow him to have his own head in return. Laegaire is the first to make the agreement and is followed by Conall. Both strike the giant's head; nevertheless, their courage fails them and they try to escape from being struck; neither is able to keep his promise and they break the word given to the stranger. On the other hand, Cuchulain, without any previous agreement, gives Uath a definite blow with the axe. The stroke is so violent that the churl's head is thrown "to the top half of the hall, so that the whole house shook." (Gregory, 1979, 75).

The next day, the brave warrior offers his neck to the giant's shining blade. When the axe comes down, it strikes the floor instead of his head. Then, Uath reveals his true identity — he is Curoi who, disguised, tried the heroes through his enchantments. He eventually honours Cuchulain with the Championship of the heroes of Ireland and the Champion's Portion, putting an end to the quarrel about the greatest contest of Ulster. Yeats condenses both sagas into one. With great wit and fine humour he compiles the mythemic fragments and overtly stresses the farcical elements, "although otherwise he seemed mostly to prefer tragedy." (Bjersby, 1950, 33). The subtitle of the play, 'An Heroic Farce,' puzzles the reader from the very beginning, throwing
him into a world of antinomies and philosophical questionings. Trying to deal with these questions while analysing *The Green Helmet*, one is easily reminded of the Grail legends as well as of most traditional legends, whose symbolical images express a fantastic world which requires meditation to be interpreted satisfactorily. The images or situations that seem to be incoherent on the surface certainly reveal an unsuspected and latent deeper level that will be apprehended in due time. Therefore, it is the most fantastic, less evident or less coherent aspect, the one which seems not to have historical value, which offers us some help to apprehend the central element that gives the legend (or series of compositions round the same theme) its true or deeper meaning. According to the Emperor Julianus, *Apud Évola* (1988, 11), in the myths, that which bears no apparent verisimilitude is exactly that which opens up the way to truth. In fact, the more paradoxical the enigma is, the more it seems to admonish us not to trust the plain word, but to make an effort round the occult truth. With the purpose of finding out the hidden meanings of the play, there follows a study which is an attempt at revealing its symbolic contents. *The Green Helmet* fuses both legends; therefore, the Red Man embodies the qualities inherent to Bricriu as well as those belonging to Uath, the Stranger. The story opens up with a dialogue between Conall and Laegaire, who are waiting for the Red Man to come out of the sea to ask for their heads. One year before, he had proposed them a deal: he would allow them to whip his head off if they, in return, allowed him to do the same. Both merrily accepted the sport thinking the gigantic figure would die if he were beheaded. Surprisingly, however, after being struck he took his laughing head from the ground and splashed into the sea, promising them to come back in a year's time. While both heroes are waiting for the giant to reappear, Cuchulain arrives and they tell him the strange tale. When the Red Man finally comes up, Cuchulain is prepared to face him. The startling fellow says that, on his part, it has been only a joke, and putting the Green Helmet
on the floor, urges the bravest to pick it up. He leaves the place; nevertheless, the seed of a new altercation is sown; as the result of his plot, each of the three heroes believes he has a right to win the dispute. Cuchulain tries to find a solution and proposes the sharing of the prize by means of symbolically drinking from it; he says, It has been given to none: that our rivalry might cease, We have turned that murderous cat into a cup of peace. I drank the first; and then Conall; give it to Laegaire now (GH, p. 236). He takes the Green Helmet, a receptacle which certainly evokes the abundance vases from different traditions (in the Occident, the most famous exemplar of it is the Grail). They have a central significance. The beverage is equivalent to the drink of immortality; it symbolizes knowledge while the cup is the deposit of traditional knowledge so that it can be transmitted through the ages. The drink is absorbed by the body; knowledge is intellectually assimilated. (GUENON, 1990, p. 149). Cuchulain drinks first and, without meaning it, arouses dispute once more. In his holistic view, Cuchulain realizes his attitudes might affect society as a whole. Similarly to the all traditions as well as shamanism, he is aware of the invisible emanations and the fitting together of every parts, and his effort is directed towards ensuring that every endeavour is brought into alignment with the Cosmos. It is for precisely this reason that he is consulted before all major undertakings. [...] The shaman must, therefore, he the utterer of warnings against the breaking of ritual taboos [...]. Where his warnings against taboo-breaking could not be delivered, were ignored or [...] disbelieved, he must do the next best thing and seek to minimize the damage caused in order to save his fellows from the disasters pursuant on their inadvertent or wanton acts. In any case, even without human assistance, the cosmic equilibrium is always in danger of disturbance. For the shaman, [...] the vital and perhaps most vital task is that of its maintenance. One can see why the sacrifice of a single human life should be regarded as a small price to pay — even by the victim itself.
(Rutherford, 1986, p. 73 - 74). Thinking his sacrifice might rescue the cosmic order he recognizes the guest's right to a head and, showing selfless heroism and great sense of justice, kneels down before him and bows his own neck by saying: Quick to your work, old Radish, you will fade when the cocks have crowed. (GH, p. 243). A fact which confirms that "successfully undergoing the initiatory ordeal in itself After this brief summary of the content of the play, there follows an investigation into the several differences between the legend and play. Among the numberless variations, there is one that at first sight seems to be rather unimportant but it turns out to be very significant — it is the length of time Yeats's characters have to reflect upon the word given. In the original saga, the churl promises to come back the following day; in the play, a whole year has passed by when he splashes out of the sea to ask for his bargain. If the system Yeats develops in A Vision is taken into consideration, one might say the diagram which corresponds to the interregnum both warriors have in the play is a spiral and not a straight line. Straight lines stand for a mere advance in time while the spiral also includes self-growing and real development. Not only the short period of one day but the complete cycle of one year is the interlude for the heroes to mature their choice and strengthen their bravery and courage, achieving a state of firmness that is the ultimate balance men strive for. It is time for them to face this last battle with dignity and responsibility. The moment has come for them to take a decision; on this decision will depend their success or their failure,

There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

Nevertheless, even after this time for preparation, they fail. Afraid of trying, they miss the right tide; for them, the unadventurous domestic situation is preferable to being afloat on an unknown sea of challenges and risks. Restricted to shallows and miseries, both Conall and Laegaire, not able to keep their word, prefer shame and an everlasting moral wound to having their necks cut off. Even though a year has passed by and they have had the opportunity to reactualize the mythical passage in which then Red Man challenges their bravery, they seem not to recognize the importance of the moment. Being at the height, both are ready to decline for they see this probatory step as a burden and not as the tide that would lead them to venture or rather back to a sacred condition and total union with the cosmic order. Frightened, these men of little faith doubt:

But
Our doubts are traitors
And make us lose the good we oft might win,
By fearing to attempt.
(Shakespeare, 1969,1, IV, 1. 77 - 79).

Being aware that their attitude is not something to be proud of, they indulge in cowardice:

LEGAIRE - Cry out that he [Cuchulain] cannot come in.

CONALL - He must look for his dinner elsewhere for no one alive shall stop where a shame
must alight on us two before the dawn is up.

LEGAIRE - No man on the ridge of the world must ever know that but us two.

(GH, p. 225).

Forbidden by Conall and Legaire to enter into the house, the Young Man shows he is brave and even daring for he unmakes the law made by both heroes and pushing past Conall, he enters into the interdicted place. He wins this first game showing great strength and will. Both men recognize him to be Cuchulain; nevertheless, they bid him to go away from that unlucky country. Their belief in unlucky places positively indicates that the atmosphere they live in is propitious for abstract subjects, things which are not concrete, values which do not concern exclusively the material world. They order Cuchulain to find a luckier house, but finally agree to tell him the tale having confidence that his good fortune will put an end to the troubles they have been cast into. Differently from both of them, however, Cuchulain does not need one year to get ready for the confrontation. He has just arrived from Scotland and even without having made a deal with the Red Man, he feels that his country would have its integrity seriously injured if there were no man alive able to sustain the word given. Conall states that the Red Man called for his debt and his right, And said that the land was disgraced because of us two [he and Laegaire] from that night If we did not pay him his debt.(GH, p. 230). Actually, all of them seem to be aware that "on the goodwill of these non-human beings, depends the prosperity of the community." (BLACKER, 1986, p. 21). Cuchulain tries to fulfill the Red Man's exigencies and does not enter the pattern of initiation to show his pride as a brave warrior but because he is aware that the word given is the last agreement with superior forces that might try men and even beat them with their supreme power. His ordeal recalls the symbolism of the bridge or paradoxical passage; it sometimes proves to be an impossibility or a situation from which there is no escape. In such a desperate
situation he feels the need to transcend opposites, to abolish the polarity typical of the human condition, in order to attain to ultimate reality. Whoever would transfer from this to the Otherworld, or return, must do so through the un dimensioned and timeless 'interval' that divides related but contrary forces, between which, if one is to pass at all, it must be 'instantly.' In the myths the 'paradoxical' passage emphatically testifies that he who succeeds in accomplishing it has transcended the human condition; he [...] proves that he is spirit, is no longer a human being, and at the same time attempts to restore the 'communicability' that existed in illo tempore between this world and heaven. (Eliade, 1989, p. 486). Cuchulain instantly and heroically takes the decision to undergo the hard probation he is faced with. Even without knowing what might happen he does not avoid the challenge and says:

I am losing patience, Conall — I find you stuffed with pride,
The flagon full to the brim, the front door standing wide;
You'd put me off with words, but the whole thing's plain enough,
You are waiting for some message to bring you to war or love
In that old secret country beyond the wool-white waves,
Or it may be down beneath them in foam-bewildered caves
Where nine forsaken sea-queens fling shuttles to and fro;
But beyond them, or beneath them, whether you will or no,
I am going too.

(GH, p. 227 - 228).
When he affirms to be losing patience, one immediately understands he is being possessed by heat and wrath, which are clear signs of initiation. He gets angry at Conall, who is blinded by pride. As a warrior, Cuchulain is also proud of his deeds, but he condemns Conall's lack of
restraint since at that moment there is nothing for him to be proud of. Presumptuousness is a characteristic that does not belong to real initiates; a hero must be courageous and proud of his deeds, but if his pride is excessive (*hubris*), he will certainly be punished. Cuchulain is daring but does not commit the sin of pride; he respects the sacred and the unknown without fearing or mocking at it. His reverence shows he is on the path of initiation. He shows disposition to undertake the journey either to the old secret country beyond the waves, or even down beneath them in secret caves. Actually, "the monsters of the abyss recur in many traditions. Heroes, initiates descend into the depths to confront marine monsters; this is a typical initiatory ordeal." (ELIADE, 1959, p. 135). From this moment on, the sojourn in the underworld (a step within several patterns of initiation rituals) is inevitable. The symbolical stay in the sea may be interpreted as the return to the womb or to Chaos. In such a state, the intend undergoes symbolical death for water "dissolves, abolishes all form. It is just for this reason that it is so rich in germs, so creative." (Eliade, 1959, p. 135). After that, he may acquire wisdom and knowledge, becoming a new human being. Selfless hero *par excellence*, Cuchulain tries to rescue values which seem to be threatened with extinction — bravery, honesty, manhood. He makes the commitment of his countrymen his own, for he sees the Red Man's axe as a weapon over the whole nation. His attitude is perfectly conscious; therefore, it has the power to redeem not only a nation but all humankind. Cuchulain, as an initiand, proves to have a deep understanding of external occurrences; every single gesture has its dimension amplified by the sharp eyes of a brave man who investigates the secret interrelation of all things in the universe. He despises the shallow illusion of isolation and eagerly dives into the analysis of the hidden connection of facts.
Cuchulain is clearly conscious of his role within the society he lives in and recognizes he must make the right choice, assuming the burden which results from his responsibility as well as from his incomparable sense of justice and honour:

CUCHULAIN - He played and paid his head, and it's right that we pay him back,
And give him more than he gave, for he comes in as a guest:
So I will give him my head.

(GH, p. 242).

Eliade (1975, p. 92) asserts that "among the Sudanese of the Nuba Mountains, the first initiatory consecration is called 'head,' because the novice's head is opened so that the spirit can enter." The opening of the head, which according to Ambelain (1991, p. 42) is the symbol of the Order and the Law, points out the dismemberment pattern which makes part of the initiatory process the novice must undergo. Being ready to have his poll whipped off shows that Cuchulain is on the path of initiation. He stoically submits to the ordeal and volunteers for the benefit of mankind; besides, his kneeling down also indicates that he is prepared to face individual initiation. As Joseph Henderson says that the novice for initiation is called upon to give up willful ambition and all desire and to submit to the ordeal. He must be willing to experience his trial without hope of success. In fact, he must be prepared to die.

The Red Man asserts that Cuchulain is:

such a person; he is

the laughing lip

That shall not turn from laughing, whatever rise or fall;

The heart that grows no bitterer although betrayed by all;

The hand that loves to scatter; the life like a gambler's throw;
And these things I make prosper.

(GH, p. 243).

Cuchulain's disposition to rescue the dignity of his countrymen shows his belief in the "sacrality that unveils the deepest structures of the world. The cosmos appears as a cipher only in the religious perspective." (Eliade, 1959, p. 150). When the Red Man comes back to ask for the head, he reaffirms the possibility of a straight contact with superior forces. For Cuchulain, keeping the word given to the stranger is an act invested with deep significance since it presupposes "the more or less explicit imitation of the cosmogonic act. For traditional man, the imitation of an archetypal model is a reactualization of the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time." (Eliade, 1974, p. 76). This reactualization of the cosmogony coincides with Yeats's views of the poet as saviour. His intention as a writer and as an Irishman was to restore the national identity of his countrymen so as to re-establish the connection between the Irish people and their own native land, driving away the lifelessness. Yeats believed that the release of creative energy during the ritualistic presentation of the plays would invoke a bigger energy awakening his countrymen in which they were entangled and inciting them to fight for their national identity and for an "ideal land where the fury of human passions is united with the spiritual." (Biderman, 1985, p. 85). Within this perspective, Cuchulain accepts the challenge and undertakes the mission of facing the Red Man. His undertaking is that which Campbell (1973, p. 51) designates the call to adventure, which "rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration —- a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand." The physical struggle he is ready to undergo is symbolical of an inner struggle which takes place in his
indomitable heart. Actually, Cuchulain's time to answer for the call has come. He accepts Conall and Laegaire's deal with the Red Man as his personal quest having in mind that, as a human being, he has a commitment with his countrymen and, therefore, with society as a whole. His ritual sacrifice stands for an exemplary behavior which tries "to restore the primordial unity, that which existed before the Creation." (Eliade, 1974, p. 78). This attempt at re-enactment reveals a pattern of initiation in which both the personal quest and the welfare of society are equally relevant. At the crucial moment of choice, Cuchulain is prepared to keep his word even at the price of his own life. He does not see death as a simple-minded warrior for whom death is the definite end of one's life; as a matter of fact, his physical or external death would imply in psychic integrity, spiritual life and freedom. He is set free from the ultimate sacrifice, but the symbolical death takes place when he kneels down before the Red Man, offering his neck for the benefit of humankind. He rises from the experience much stronger (both morally and spiritually) than he was. His mission is well-succeeded and he proves to be ready to face a more difficult challenge within his initiatory ordeal. The Heroic revival of Cuchulain brought into focus the Irish Heroic Void. One man above all others was actively involved in charting the subtle and dramatic shifts in national and world culture that both prescribed and were written by the artistic movements of the time—William Butler Yeats, whose life and artistic productivity seemed to mirror the changing aesthetics of his country. For more than fifty years, Yeats was at the forefront of every major artistic change, constantly trying to complicate his work and tease out the central tensions of his time and national identity.

After *The Green Helmet* came another strong play in the mythical genre of Irish heroism, In the original version of *On Baile’s Stand*, which was first performed in 1903, the characters of the Fool and the Blind Man were much smaller roles, set up primarily as a subplot
to parallel the struggle between Cuchulain and Conchubar for the purpose of connecting the
mythic to the modern audience. Their names, which created them as characters rather than the
ideological sites they now represent, were Barach and Fintain respectively. And, although they
were meant to be socio-economic locations of connection for a modern audience, they lacked the
contemporary peasant dialect that they now possess. Their language in the first draft was stilted
and Elizabethan, showing that Yeats had not yet decided to break with the tradition that informed
the writing of his tragedy.

The play *On Baile's Strand*, "The only son of Aoife," also found in Lady Gregory's
*Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, is the legend which tells us how Cuchulain killed his only son.
According to this tale, when Cuchulain leaves Aoife after having overcome her in battle, he
knows they are going to have a child. Before leaving, he gives her a gold ring for her to offer the
boy as soon as his thumb fills it. He goes to Ireland and then takes Emer as his wife. Extremely
jealous and in great ire, Aoife's love turns to hatred and she seeks revenge. She puts their son
under the teaching of Scathach, who introduces him to the art of war. When Conlaoch is skilfully
prepared to use the arms, his mother sends him to Ireland, but first she puts him under bonds,
"the first never to give way to any living person, but to die sooner than be made turn back; the
second, not to refuse a challenge from the greatest champion alive, but to fight him at all risks,
even if he was sure to lose his life; the third, not to tell his name on any account, though he might
be threatened with death for hiding it." (Gregory, 1979, p. 237). The young man sets out and
lands at Baile's Strand. When asked about his name, he refuses to tell it. Then Conchubar, the
High King, asks a man to "drag the name and the story out of this young man." Conall thinks he
would be able to overcome the lad, but he fails. So Cuchulain is called to the strand; he threatens
the courageous man, who states, "I will never give in to any man to tell the name, or to give an
account of myself. But if I was not held with a command, there is no man in the world I would sooner give it to than to yourself, since I saw your face. But do not think, brave champion of Ireland, that I will let you take away the fame I have won, for nothing." (Gregory, 1979, p. 238-239). They start a big fight in which neither of them wins. Cuchulain feels great anger and calls for the Gae Bulg, his spear. At that moment, "the flames of the hero-light began to shine about his head, and by that sign Conlaoch knew him to be Cuchulain, his father." Then, he avoids to kill Cuchulain and is mortally wounded by the Gae Bulg. When the Irish hero asks his name, he shows the gold ring and reveals his identity. As he was suffering the pains of death, his father takes his sword and puts it through him, to put an end to the young man's sorrow. "Then, to save the Ulster men from Cuchulain's rage, King Conchubar gives his druids an urgent command to draw their magical circles round Cuchulain, to make him believe for the space of three days that he fights the wild waves of an angry sea." (Bjersby, 1978, p. 24). In Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland, Jeremiah Curtin's (1975, p. 228) version is all the more impressive. Cuchulain's spear goes through the boy's head, and he dies of that blow from his father. Then, the parent takes his sword and cuts "the head off him sooner than leave him in the punishment and pain he was in." After the truth has been revealed Cuchulain feels the weight of his deed in his heart. He is Oedipus in reverse: the father who has killed his son. Being aware of his anxiety, Conchubar bids Cathbad, the Druid, to put an enchantment on the desperate father; instead of fighting against all the men of Ulster, Cuchulain fights the sea for three days and nights (which in Curtin's version mounts up to seven days and nights), and all fellowmen believe he dies in such a terrifying battle. In On Baile's Strand, Yeats adapts the saga to fit his purposes as a poet and dramatist, and also enriches it by adding a secondary or parallel plot, which will be described later. In the play, both Cuchulain and the young man are bound to different oaths; the first has given his word to
obey Conchubar, the High King of Ulster, under whatever circumstances; the Young Man, who is not given a name, is under bonds not to tell his name to any person alive. He arrives at the strand with the sole purpose of fighting Cuchulain, without knowing that he is his parent. Conchubar thinks Ulster must be defended against the invader, and summons Cuchulain to do that. But the brave warrior feels great sympathy for the stranger and respects his courage and noble character when he says:

   YOUNG MAN - I will give no other proof than the hawk gives
   That it's no sparrow!

   [He is silent for a moment, then speaks to all].

   Yet look upon me, kings.

   I, too, am of that ancient seed, and carry

   The signs about this body and in these bones.

   CUCHULAIN - To have shown the hawk's grey feather is enough,

   And you speak highly, too.

   (BS, p. 265).

Bird imagery will be recurrent in the play. Both men refer to the hawk as a metaphor for their distinction and honour. According to T. H. White, (1969, p. 138), "the Hawk is a bird which is even better equipped in its spirit than in its talons, for it shows very great courage in a small body." But when the heroes use such a poetical language and invoke the hawk as a sign of nobility, tradition and aristocracy — which conforms to Yeats's ideals of rescuing the heroic and noble past of Ireland —, they are also making a reference to the strength of their spiritual life. After all, "bird feathers, whose ascensional symbolism requires no stressing," (Eliade, 1989, p. 177) also stand for the swift journey of the mind as well as the enjoyment of a 'spirit' condition.
Cuchulain also mentions his god-like lineage making clear that he belongs to a special cast of people who possess both human and superhuman qualities:

I have that clean hawk out of the air

That, as men say, begot this body of mine

Upon a mortal woman.

Actually, his preeminent bloodline makes him fitted for the great tasks a hero or future initiand must undergo. Besides that, the identification with the spirits of animals is characteristic of shamanic power. The connection between human beings and animal world is essential to shamanism, and the shaman uses his knowledge and methods to participate in the power of that world. Michael Harner (1989, p. 98-99) points out that, for a long time, the shamans believed that their power was the same as that of the animals, plants, the sun and the basic energies of the Universe. Thousands of years before Charles Darwin, peoples of shamanic culture were certain that man and animal are akin. Even though the mythical paradise of the unity between man and animal is lost for the common sense, for the shaman and those who look for spiritual vision the uncommon reality is still accessible. Anne Bancroft (1987, p. 27-28) asserts that "in shamanic societies of recent date, it has been the custom to take one animal as the embodiment of the ancestral spirit. [...] It embodied the soul of each individual in the group; at initiation times he or she would know the experience of unity with all the group through the living force of the totemic animal." Therefore, when Cuchulain shows to have great intimacy with forces which are beyond common human knowledge, it is not difficult to conclude that he is on the right path to initiation.

At another moment, still talking to the Young Man, he says,

I am their [the god's] plough, their harrow, their very strength:
For he that is in the sun begot this body
Upon a mortal woman, and I have heard tell
It seems as if he had outrun the moon
That he must follow always through waste heaven,
He loved so happily. He'll be but slow
To break a tree that was so sweetly planted.
Let's see that arm. I'll see it if I choose.
That arm had a good father and a good mother,
But it is not like this.

(BS, p. 266).

While addressing his son, Cuchulain once more emphasizes his superhuman origin and ironically comments on the weakness of the younger generations, which are not so strong as their ancestors. He praises the old times for their strength and their sound offsprings. He faces the Young Man by saying that, being a descendant of the gods, they would not fail him; nevertheless, his words bring a strong dramatic irony for, without being aware of it, he is the one who will 'break the tree that was so sweetly planted.' He talks about having been tried by his father, who challenged him to battle but who, before the decisive fight, revealed his identity and gave him a cloak woven by women of the Country-under-Wave. It is this precious token Cuchulain intends to give the Young Man as a sign of friendship. According to the shamanic view, nothing is more insulting or profaning than refusing a gift offered unconditionally by the spiritual world or by any creature of the ordinary reality. The refusal produces a state of severe unbalance that leads to suffering and pain. When someone receives a present, he/she is in fact
honouring the person who gave it and reinforcing the harmony between the spiritual and the ordinary worlds. (Stevens; Stevens, 1992, p. 129-130).

Even in the exchange of gifts both heroes prove not to be second-rate people: the Irish warrior intends to give the lad a magic cloak, which represents nobility and protection, and he wants to receive the boy's arm-ring, which is also a sign of protection, alliance and a kind of talisman for, in conformity with the Oriental philosophy, the arm-ring is worn by fighters to protect a vital centre of energy. Therefore, it is not only the material value which is being taken into consideration; both seem to be aware of the existence of a parallel reality and the importance of keeping the balance between the spiritual and ordinary worlds. Cuchulain refuses to fight the Young Man and defends him with protective words and gestures:

Whatever man
Would fight with you shall fight it out with me.

Boy, I would meet them all in arms
If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me

(BS, p. 269).

The brave hero shows tenderness and affection when he calls the stranger 'boy.' Once more, he says:

— Boy,

If I had fought my father, he'd have killed me,

As certainly as if I had a son
And fought with him, I should be deadly to him;

For the old fiery fountains are far off
And every day there is less heat o' the blood.
These words allude to Yeats's proposal for Irish nationalism; his purpose was to incite the younger generations to fight for a better and independent nation by bringing forth the theme of the strength of the old days. Modern man has degenerated and, being far from the 'fiery fountains,' has less vigour and fire; consequently, he is getting distant from the path of initiation and from the ultimate truth that existed in the mythical time. Cuchulain's disobedience of Conchubar's commands makes the latter say that he himself will fight the Young Man; when the hero seizes the sovereign before the other kings, he feels threatened, but eventually convinces Cuchulain that he is under the influence of witchcraft. Then the father bids the son to go to the strand to fight. As in the Attic theatre, the duel takes place offstage. When Cuchulain comes back, he has already killed the lad. He takes a handful of feathers and begins to clean the blood from his sword. Then the Fool, a character that does not exist in the original saga, starts provoking Cuchulain with bits of the story the Blind Man has told him about the identity of the Young Man who is, in fact, Aoife's only son. The great hero wants to believe the boy was someone else's son, but the Fool declares that the Blind Man said he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had overcome her in battle. (BS, p. 276).

A pause follows this speech; then Cuchulain realizes he has slain his own son. His words are bitter; he blames Conchubar and leaves the house. The Fool follows him with his eyes and tells the Blind Man what he sees. Instead of fighting the High King and all the men of Ulster, Cuchulain fights the waves and is apparently mastered by them. Both the Fool and his companion leave the house to steal and go on with their ordinary lives. Since the very beginning of the play, one can feel the atmosphere has overtones of a non-natural world. A big door (threshold to the underworld) is at the back and there is misty light as of sea-mist. The ambience
suggests mystery; there is economy of props, but the drinking-horns (reminders of the close contact between warrior/hunter and animal life) certainly hint to the reader/audience that there exists the possibility of a shamanic experience. Actually, one of the most relevant characteristics of a shaman is his close contact with the spirits of animals; the animal spirit is believed to give the initiand a great power and vision, and he assimilates the qualities of the creature whose presence accompanies him. Through this signifying prop, one is led to a mythical age in which bravery and pagan celebration were side by side. But even this era is far from the cosmogonic act of creation, and the horn "shows the need people continued to have for contact with the supernatural animal world." (Bancroft, 1987, p. 175).

The Fool's mentioning of the witches also reinforces the idea of a superhuman existence — and the belief in their power opens the channel for a deeper and initiatory contact with this supernatural reality. Conchubar, on his turn, also believes in witchcraft — but he has come to the strand only to become Cuchulain's master. He knows Cuchulain has run too wild, and the king's children, heirs to the throne, feel threatened by the hero's deeds. Once more it is the Fool who narrates some of the feats which, in reality, demonstrate Cuchulain has superior power and strength and, like Hercules of the Greek mythology, undergoes several trials which are a means to achieve his own initiation. The jester sings, pointing out the Irish hero's superhuman deeds:

Cuchulain has killed kings,
Kings and sons of kings,
Dragons out of the water,
And witches out of the air,
Banachas and Bonachas and people of the woods.
Witches that steal the milk,
Fomor that steal the children,
Hags that have heads like hares,
Hares that have claws like witches,
All riding a-cock-horse

[Spoken]
Out of the very bottom of the bitter black North.

(BS, p. 251).

Killing kings is, in fact, characteristic of several initiatory patterns; it is a proof that the man who performs such a brave act is as strong, powerful and royal as a sovereign. In the old sagas, from his early boyhood Cuchulain possesses an unquenchable divine inner heat which makes him, in his ire, slaughter lots of enemies—among them several kings—at once. Even though it is not a requisite for shamanism, Ward Rutherford (1986, p. 116) states that, despite a historical eclipse and supression of old religious practices, in some places the shamans managed to survive "becoming not only king-makers, but also king-slayers." This idea is complemented by Anne Bancroft (1987, p. 105), who affirms that, in druidic times, the shamans "were in charge of the appointing of kings (the old king was often ritually killed before the new one was chosen)."

Therefore, little by little, Cuchulain seems to assume all traits which may lead him to the accomplishment of an initiatory ordeal. The passage cited also refers to dragons, legendary beings which make part of the old mythology and that, as animals, dwell in the rich shamanic imagination as well as witches and people with animal features or vice-versa.5 The Blind Man says that Cuchulain doesn't care for common fighting, but if it were a white fawn that might turn into a queen before morning, he would fight passionately. Through his words, one can deduce that the duel with the Young Man is no common fighting at all; it is a higher strife which will
lead Cuchulain to the pattern of initiation. In fact, the Blind Man touches upon the possibility of an animal changing into a human being; that recalls the shamanic metamorphosis into different animal forms. Eliade (1989, p. 467) asserts that certain societies "involve the member's magical transformation into a dog or a wolf. Shamans, too, can turn themselves into wolves, but [...] they can assume a number of other animal forms," thus corroborating the idea of transfiguration within shamanism. When Cuchulain first appears, his voice is heard in anger. Conchubar refers to the wildness of the hero's blood as something powerful but at the same time extremely dangerous; therefore, he wants the warrior to take an oath, what makes him answer:

And I must be obedient in all things;
Must I, that held you on the throne when all
Had pulled you from it, swear obedience
As if I were some cattle-raising king?
Are my shins speckled with the heat of the fire,
Or have my hands no skill but to make figures
Upon the ashes with a stick? Am I
So slack an idle that I need a whip
Before I serve you?

(BS, p. 255).

Cuchulain feels revolted against the king's wish for subservience and domesticity. He considers himself able to serve the sovereign without a whip or without taking the oath. He is conscious of the responsibility towards his countrymen for his deeds might change the reality around him; he does not belong to the tame corner of civilization and wants to grab reality so as to make it part of himself. Conchubar then talks about Aoife, whose hatred threatens the whole kingdom
of Ulster. Cuchulain praises her qualities and gets to the conclusion that he has
never known love but as a kiss In the mid-battle, and a difficult truce
Of oil and water, candles and dark night,
Hillside and hollow, the hot-footed sun
And the cold, sliding, slippery-footed moon —
A brief forgiveness between opposites
That have been hatreds for three times the age
Of this long-established ground.

(BS, p. 259).

The antithetical pairs reveal the tension of opposites which forms the basis of Yeats's thought. In
On Baile's Strand, Cuchulain experiences deep inner struggle; in fact, he does not want to be
bound by an oath for he praises free will; however, his role within the society he lives in requires
a well-defined position; it requires the affirmation of his total obeisance to the king. But the great
warrior has different plans. When Cochubar says he needs “Cuchulain's might of hand and
burning heart”(BS, p. 260).

— which once more refers to his heroic features showing that he is a gifted man, with enough
qualities to undertake an initiatory ordeal — the hero's answer is plain,

[going near the door]

Nestlings of a high nest,
Hawks that have followed me into the air:
And looked upon the sun, we'll out of this
And sail upon the wind once more.
Run to the stable
And set the horses to the chariot-pole,
And send a messenger to the harp-players.
We'll find a level place among the woods,
And dance awhile.
(BS, p. 260).

Undoubtedly his words reveal a pattern of shamanic rituals. Close to the door—a traditional symbol for communication with the Other World,—he summons the 'nestlings' to follow him into the air once more. Bird imagery referring to the voyages clearly hint at the shamanic trance-like state. And the flight symbolism, (Eliade, 1989, p. 478) suggested in the ability he has to sail upon the wind, stands for the capacity the shamans have to experience a magical flight, a moment in which their souls wander out of their physical body. He also refers to the woods (the sacred place of the Druids, who are considered the shaman-priests of the Celts) as a spot for pleasure, poetry and dance rituals, skills which a real shaman should master. Besides that, he intends to go to the forest being conducted by horses, which are an incontestable shamanic device: they are the animals that mediate between the material and the spiritual worlds; they produce "the 'break-through in plane,' the passage from this world to other worlds." (ELIADE, 1989, p. 467). While he talks to the king, three women prepare the ritual for the oath. Two of them carry a bowl of fire and the third one puts fragrant herbs into it. Both the flames and the scent are elements strictly necessary for an initiation rite. Fire is used to purify the ambience as well as to enlighten the initiand's mind and the path he is supposed to follow; it stands for transmutation and the beginning of a new life. (Eliade, 1979, p. 83). Herbs are devices which keep evil spirits off; their pleasing odour also clears the way for the good helpers that live in other spheres. The smoke which ascends to heaven is a symbol of spirituality and
communication with a supernatural dimension. When Cuchulain is finally led to take the oath, Conchubar states:

On this fire
That has been lighted from your hearth and mine;
The older men shall be my witnesses,
The younger, yours. The holders of the fire
Shall purify the thresholds of the house
With waving fire, and shut the outer door,
According to the custom; and sing rhyme
That has come down from the old law-makers
To blow the witches out.

(BS, p. 261).

The rhyme the holders of the fire sing in a low voice is an incantatory song. They exorcize the Shape-Changers, feminine creatures whose powerful witchcraft deceives man. Through the use of fire, which represents the universal theme of the restoration of balance and purity (Kalweit, 1992, p. 125), they intend to extinguish all the evil. The Shape-Changers can even change into hounds — a shamanic device, as already seen — and completely master the man who faces them. The song admonishes for the risks the initiand takes while in a trance-like state, for the women are a product of their fancy or altered state of consciousness; they are but whirling wind, Out of memory and mind. They would make a prince decay With light images of clay

Planted in running wave;
Or, for many shapes they have,
They would change them into hounds
Until he had died of his wounds,
Though the change were but a whim

(BS, p. 262).

If the neophyte allows his imagination to take him too far away from his body, his soul can get lost and it will not be able to come back, what might even provoke the death of the individual who has ventured into such a dangerous soujourn. The indomitable shapes can also make strong use of magic words and cast a spell on the man who, completely seduced, will follow them with ungovernable desire,

But the man is thrice forlorn,
Emptied, ruined, wracked and lost,
That they follow, for at most
They will give him kiss for kiss
While they murmur, 'After this
Hatred may be sweet to the taste.'
Those wild hands that have embraced
All his body can but shove
At the burning wheel of love
Till the side of hate comes up.

(BS, p. 262-263).

The chant recalls the Greek theatre in the sense that the curseis on the verge of taking place. It also refers to the tension of opposites and hard struggle which makes the wheel of life go round and round until, at a later stage, it reaches the balance searched for. The antinomies love and hate
are always present in Yeats's work. When the Women refer to the wheel of love which turns around 'till the side of hate comes up,' they are hinting at the end of an era and the beginning of another, which corresponds to Yeats's actual belief, as expressed in *A Vision*. Besides that, in *On Baile's Strand*, one whole cycle is completed, for Cuchulain is finally induced to slay his offspring —a son he had conceived during his adventures at the Hawk's Well — and meet the boundless sea. Cuchulain's great admiration for Aoife, the Young Man's mother, is no secret at all. But one can see his love turning into hatred mainly in the legend in which, after having slain the brave young warrior, he goes to the strand where there is a great white stone and, taking his sword in his right hand, he says, "if I had the head of the woman that sent her son to his death, I would split it as I split this stone." (Gregory, 1979, p. 241). And he makes four quarters of the stone; then he fights with the waves. Cuchulain speaks while the Women are singing; without knowing that his words are dramatically ironic, he says he has never given a gift and taken it again. All irony lies in the fact that he gave life to a son and is going to take it. When he is finally ready to swear obedience, two of the Women bend down before him, and he stretches out his hands over the flame. Most probably, the light over their heads symbolizes the light which "searches out truth or reveals the unseen future." (Rutherford, 1986, p. 95). Actually, through their chant, the holders of the fire reveal to be aware of the hero's future. But he will have to undergo a much harder trial than just being bound to strict domesticity having to serve the threshold and the hearthstone. While taking the oath, he thrusts his sword into the flame and the kings kneel down in a semicircle. The stage directions reinforce the idea of a magic ritual since the shape of the semicircle suggests a mystic mandala. Besides that, kneeling reveals humility, respect and subservience, ingredients necessary for a ritual of initiation and introduction of the neophyte to his new spiritual leader. In order to become an initiate, the novice endures hard trial
and is guided by a master. Conchubar comes to the strand to be “Cuchulain's master in earnest from this day out.” (BS, p. 249).

He imposes the oath, and it is his commandment which will throw Cuchulain onto a challenging initiatory path. When the Young Man arrives saying he is from Aoife's country, the King rush towards him; Cuchulain throws himself between and tries to be ethical, since the foreigner is but one against several people. Even though the young warrior does not reveal his identity, he shows great nobility of character. Several incidents follow this scene; Cuchulain even tries to make an alliance with the lad, refusing to accept the King's instruction to kill him. Then, master Conchubar eventually convinces the Irish champion that he is under a spell. Astonished, Cuchulain cannot believe he has laid hands on the High King himself. At this moment, he attempts to rationalize and gets to the conclusion that his offence to the sovereign is a product of witchcraft. Completely blinded and acting against all his natural intuition, he summons the Young Man to the strand, where he finally kills him. The three Women — whose dramatic function is similar to that of the Chorus in the Greek tragedies — comment on the events. The First one says she has been shown that which is to come in the ashes of the bowl. The First Woman declares to have seen Cuchulain's roof-tree Leap into fire, and the walls split and blaken. (BS, p. 271). In her vision, she sees complete devastation in his dwelling place. The striking image of the fire, which suggests transmutation of energy, is highlighted by the contrast of the walls that split and blacken. Besides evoking disjunction, scission, dissolution, fragmentation, the breach also indicates an access door to a different dimension, to the underworld. The colour black which comes up, tinging the walls and the interspace as well, hints at the entrance of a cave, which is a spot propitious for an initiatory descent. Therefore, she anticipates the hero's supreme ordeal. When Cuchulain comes back after having slain the lad
offstage, he accidentally discovers he is the boy's father. Possessed by great heat, he defies the King, who has fled away. His pain is so extreme that he seeks for oblivion on the strand; he rushes into the sea and fights the merciless waves which are going to wash up his memory. Once more it can be said that his actions disclose a shamanic ordeal. Among the Eskimos, when on the verge of going into trance, the shaman makes movements as if he were diving. Even when he is supposed to be entering the subterranean regions, he gives the impression that he is diving and returning to the surface of the ocean. Thalbitzer was told that a shaman 'comes up a third time, before he goes down for good.' The term most commonly used in referring to a shaman is 'one who drops down to the bottom of the sea.' (Eliade, 1989, p. 293).

These words can throw some light at the Fool's remarks when he narrates:

Cuchulain's performance in the waters,

There, he is down! He is up again. He is going out in deep water.

There is a big wave. It has
gone over him. I cannot see him now. He has killed kings and giants, but the waves have
mastered him, the waves have mastered him!

(BS, p. 278).

In fact, Cuchulain's immersion is highly symbolic; it is "equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the waters implies both death and rebirth. Contact with water always brings a regeneration — on the one hand because dissolution is followed by a new birth, on the other because immersion fertilizes and multiplies the potential of life." (ELIADE, 1959, p. 130). Hence, Cuchulain's fighting with the waves, which is also a metaphor for his personal
immersion and struggle with his own divided self, has a positive connotation. His apparent
madness corresponds to the crisis the novice has to undergo in order to become an initiate; after
all; "only a shock resulting from the greatest possible conflict can make the greatest possible
change." (Yeats, 1977, p. 119). The next step within Cuchulain's initiatory ordeal is the sojourn
to the underworld, which is beautifully narrated in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*.

Many critics believe Yeats had a biographical relationship with the character of
Cuchulain, and in the first draft of *On Baile’s Strand*, that seems reasonable. Cuchulain is the
warrior poet, capable of being the most powerful man in Ireland, but also of spouting blank verse
and extended metaphors. He is a character bound to tragedy4, much as Yeats is a writer bound to
tragedy by his manifesto. Everything about Cuchulain suggests the retrospectively imposed
mannerisms of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, setting up Yeats’s ideal social class (the
Ascendancy) as the real Ireland, the mythic Irish kings. In the first production, it was clear that
all of the power in the play belonged to the kings, while the two peasant characters were little
more than narration and emblems of an Irishness that did not really exist. Yeats apparently did
not approve of them because they could not appreciate Art, and, so left them thin and
underdeveloped as serious characters in the play.