Consummation: *Dreaming of the Bones, Purgatory, and The Death of Cuchulain*

This chapter analyses the plays of Yeats *Dreaming of the Bones, Purgatory, and the Death of Cuchulain*. These plays have been put together in this chapter as they complete Yeats genre of Irish drama. The plays of the chapter analyze Yeats’s remorse on the subjugation of the Irish revolutionaries after Easter rising of 1916 and death of the Irish legendry hero Cuchulain. The chapter posits the view that violence, terror and remorse are multifaceted constructs of the ruling class itself. The theme of remorse and subjugation in plays has been developed in the critical framework of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon in his work elaborates upon the ideas of violence, terror, subjugation and remorse in terms of the part of the state policy. This idea has been fully developed in the chapter.

The crisis that gave rise to Yeats's next play, *The Dreaming of the Bones* (Spring-Summer 1917) was Yeats's guilt in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. "I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction." Yeats had spent the previous years far from the causes of Irish nationalism, and instead had delved heavily into spiritism and ghost lore, another aspect of the Irish experience to be sure, but one that the sixteen dead men could hardly associate with Ireland's future. The play sets the political and ghostly worlds in conflict, and past critics, depending upon their critical biases, have emphasized either one or the other. But when we put the play in a biographical context and realize that Maud Gonne is both the ghost that Yeats is trying to exorcise, and the political force he hopes to assuage (she had not approved of "Easter 1916"), we no longer have to decide between Yeats as ghost lover or Irish patriot. Although the ghosts have "mummy truths" to tell,
the young rebel has historical facts about the consequences of their legendary betrayal, which led to seven hundred years of English subjugation of Ireland. Yeats does not ask us to accept the truth of the one and deny that of the other. Both ghosts and man leave the lonely scene with the bitter knowledge that the sorrows of ghostly love are eternal and that the tragic past of Ireland can never be undone.

Behind the irreconcilability of the play's protagonists lies Yeats's sense that his own world view, as embodied in a hieratic art like that of the dance plays, was utterly irreconcilable with the revolutionary energies of Ireland in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. The loneliness that pervades The Dreaming of the Bones is Yeats's own loneliness as he contemplates the world of possibilities swept away by the murder of the rebels-become-martyrs. Cuchulain gave himself up to an heroic destiny because for him there was no other choice. But for those shot after the Rising, there might well have been some other political choice. Like the Young Man of this play, they might have left the scene of fighting to go into hiding, contributing to Ireland's future with their lives rather than with their deaths. Though Yeats gave them credit for having been "transformed utterly," he sincerely wished that their form of "terrible beauty" had never been born. Yeats's sympathies are more fully engaged by the pair of ghostly lovers, whose suffering is partly modeled on his own. In the woman's agonized recitation of a burning desire that cannot be consummated throughout eternity, we are at the deepest point of feeling in the play, where Yeats's own painful experience with Maud Gonne in a long, unfulfilled love merges most fully with his subject matter: These have no thought but love; nor any joy But that upon the instant when their penance Draws to its height, and when two hearts are wrung

Nearest to breaking, if hearts of shadows break,

His eyes can mix with hers; nor any pang
That is so bitter as that double glance,
Being accursed.

Though eyes can meet, their lips can never meet. (CP1, 281)

There were many exasperated double glances, no doubt, during the summer of 1917 when Yeats was courting Iseult Gonne and finishing his play at Colleville-sur-Mer, with mother and daughter looking on approvingly. "Here they say it is my best play," wrote Yeats (L, p. 629), probably because the Gonnes applauded the Young Man's strong rejection of the traitorous pair. Still the tireless revolutionary even in middle age, "joyless and self-forgetting" in her political hatred (L, p. 631), Maud Gonne must have approved especially of the Young Man's politicizing rhetoric (II. 56-58, 247-58). Coming straight from the battle lines at the G.P.O., he is so full of ideological hatred that he interprets everything in light of it. Though the Young Man is clearly not Yeats's spokesman in the play, he is far more than just a rhetorical stalking horse to set off the sufferings of the ghosts. Susceptible to the supernatural from the start, he becomes increasingly fascinated as the strangers undertake to educate him about ghosts, and when the woman begins obliquely to describe her own awful sufferings, he sympathetically tries to envision a crime so monstrous that it could demand such enduring penance. Only when he finally realizes that the lovers are Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, and that their guilt is not personal but political, does he pull back. At this point the ghosts, realizing that they have exhausted verbal persuasion, dance the sweet but strange dance of frustrated longing that virtually ensnares their amazed observer: "I had almost yielded and forgiven it all-/ Terrible the temptation and the place!" (CP1, 284).

I think we can see in the ghosts' strategy to lure the Young Man something of the entire history of Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne. Yeats always tried to fascinate Maud with the
supernatural world, while she urged the exigencies of politics upon him, but neither could ever fully accept the role that had been selected by the other. Despite this incompatibility, similar to that of the ghosts and rebel in the play, Yeats continually tried to manipulate Maud Gonne spiritually. In an extremely revealing passage of autobiography, virtually contemporary with the play, Yeats writes: "I, who could not influence her actions, could dominate her inner being. I could therefore use her clairvoyance to produce forms that would arise from both minds, though mainly seen by one .... There would be, as it were, a spiritual birth from the soul of a man and a woman." A shared visionary life, then, could compensate for the poet's immense sexual frustration. We find something akin to this shared visionary life in the sexually sublimated dance of the ghostly lovers, who can neither end their penance nor reconsume their love unless they can attract the potent Young Man as a surrogate partner. He participates in the vision they create up to a point, but withdraws at the crucial moment when he might have assured the lovers a new spiritual birth. Yeats knew the temper of Maud and of Ireland too well in the summer of 1917 to allow his fantasy of forgiveness and union to complete itself. Ireland could not throw off its burden of guilt and hatred, nor Yeats, his lonely remorse:

Dry bones that dream are bitter,

They dream and darken our sun. (CPJ, 284)

Yeats had the remarkable opportunity to cast out remorse and virtually begin life again when he married in October 1917. After so many years of obsessive love for another woman, it was only natural that he wondered whether he could start and maintain a marriage at the age of fifty-four that would not be overwhelmed by the dark shadows of the past.

In The play *Purgatory* Yeats employed his own creation of myth to illustrate the theory of the soul in judgment, as he explained in his book The Vision. For him, the soul expiated and
re-lived the sins it had committed while it was still living its life on earth. The play also incorporated the Greek Orestes and the Oedipal myths to give it more significant meanings. The elements of the myth of Orestes were employed to illustrate the notion that the transgressions committed by the parents were capable of being passed on to the offspring while the Oedipal myth was used to show the son’s hatred and envy of his father for the love given by his mother. In using the myth about the soul in expiation, Yeats wanted it to be a parable about the decline of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy because the aristocrats lowered themselves to mix with the rising middle class who were overly concerned with money. This was exemplified in the misalliance of marriage between the Old Man’s mother and his father, a groom in a training stable. Like the mother of the Old Man marrying a man of lower station, the Irish aristocrats lowered themselves to mix and marry the middle class and gave birth to degenerate generations. For Yeats, this was a social crime and caused the downfall of the aristocracy. The play tells a family saga of decline and fall of an Irish family through its two remaining members: an Old Man (the father) and a Boy (his sixteen year old son). It is set outside the former family home, which the Old Man's father had drunkenly burned down, leading him to kill his father as the building perished. The Boy is skeptical about tales of his family's former grandeur, and is repelled by the Old Man's story of losing his own mother as she gave birth to him, and the decline subsequent events wrought on the family. Tonight, the Old Man tells the Boy, is the anniversary of his mother's wedding night. This was the night on which he was conceived after a bout of drunken carousing by his father, and thus when his mother's fate was sealed. At this point a ghostly figure appears illuminated in a window of the wrecked house. In an attempt to wrest his mother's soul from purgatory, he suddenly stabs and kills the Boy. However it appears to be in vain: approaching hoof beats of his ghostly father returning to the bridal bed signal that no spirits have left the
place, and the grim cycle begins again. There is a repeated reference to the trees in the play. Knowing Yeats’s use of this archetypal duality between the two trees provides an immediate understanding of the psychological and spiritual condition depicted in *Purgatory*. The scene is described simply as “A ruined house and a bare tree in the background.” While the Old Man points to the ruined house as frequently as to the bare tree, they are dual facets of the same situation. In his book *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality*, David Clark argues that Yeats’s use of these two symbols in the play is as an expression of “an actual human soul in its essential activity of vision, reducing itself to thought” (92). Clark sets the tree and house up as direct representations of the mother’s tragedy and the suffering that has become an inevitable result. He goes on to argue that the house and the tree parallel the play itself, for, like them, the play is stripped of all its “foliage,” until nothing is left but the “desolate reality” of Yeats’s vision. While the tree and house are both destroyed, the Old Man remembers a time when they were alive. The house was at one time a place where “great people lived and died” (35), but his father burned it down. Likewise, the tree was not always barren; lightening blasted it. The Old Man says, “I saw it fifty years ago, before the thunderbolt had riven it, green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter” (33-34). The bolt of lightning, like the burning of the house, can therefore be seen as the traumatic moment when the characters were torn from the sight of God and placed in the purgatorial nightmare they are forced to relive. The Old Man repeatedly invokes the tree by way of explanation, although his words are lost on his son. He says, “study that tree,” as if it holds the answer to everything that is wrong with their world. The Old Man sees the ghosts of his parents re-enact the night of his conception, which he understands as the moment that ultimately led to the blasting of the tree. He tries to explain to his son why the ghosts reappear:

The souls in Purgatory that come back
To habitations and familiar spots …
Re-live their transgressions, and that not once,
But many times; they know at last
The consequence of those transgressions ….
There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God. (34)

Like the ravens in “The Two Trees,” his parents’ ghosts are never at peace and are forced to repeat their actions on earth until they are granted forgiveness by God or by the living. Similarly, the Old Man is also in a kind of living purgatory, as he not only witnesses his parents’ unrest, but also repeats his own sins. He murdered his father in revenge for his burning down the house, and as he watches his parents relive their transgressions he relives his own by killing his son. Mistakenly choosing a blood price for atonement, he believes that by killing his son he will set his mother’s spirit free. Immediately after he kills the boy, the tree is bathed in white light. He says, “Study that tree. It stands there like a purified soul, all cold, sweet, glistening light” (39). Yet as soon as he thinks he is ready to move on and start a new life, he hears hoof-beats, the sign of his father’s ghost approaching his mother’s door. At that moment he knows that he has not only failed to save his mother’s soul, but that he also has damned his own. He laments his fate, crying “Twice a murderer and all for nothing” (39). The play ends with his appeal to God to release her spirit, but not his own, as if he doesn’t understand that he too is trapped in a living hell. The illumination of the tree does not represent a release from purgatory, but rather draws the audience’s attention to the tree itself as evidence of its continued influence on the characters, both alive and dead.
From the story, we know that the play deals basically with the soul in expiation, but at the same time it also comments on the social and political situations in Yeats’s contemporary Ireland. In order for his play to have a bearing on the immediate sociopolitical history of Ireland, Yeats incorporated the myths and symbols from both his own creation and from Greek mythology to help clarify his main points. From his own myths, he presented the concept of the soul in remorse which he had adapted and modified from the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and then combined it with the Oriental concept of reincarnation, as he explicated in Book II of *A Vision*. From Greek mythology, he drew on the patterns of the Oedipal and the Orestes myths to complement his own myths. Apart from these, he also used the archetypal pattern of a journeyman on a quest to portray his characters; thus, the play contains the elements of more than one myth. However, in using these myths in the play, Yeats did not strictly follow the original patterns; he modified them where necessary so that they best suited his own purpose. These myths are so well-articulated and adeptly combined that they give the play a more meaningful significance. On the surface, Yeats’s *Purgatory* deals essentially with the soul in expiation during its second stage of development toward its incarnation which requires six stages. During this second stage, the soul or the spirit is under its meditative period where it goes over the experiences of life in order to prepare itself for the understanding of the good and evil of its past life when it moves onto the third stage. Within this second stage, there are three sub-stages which the soul has to undergo: the Dreaming Back, the Return, and the Phantasmogoria. In the Dreaming Back, the spirit is: ...

compelled to live over and over again the

events that had most moved it;

there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light which
is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them. They occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity, the more intense first, and the painful are commonly the more intense, and repeat themselves again and again. (Yeats 266)

In the Return, the spirit must live through the past events in their chronological order because “it is compelled by the Celestial Body to trace every passionate event to its cause until all are related and understood, turned into knowledge, made a part of itself” (Yeats 266). If the intensity of its life’s experience is great and the action affects a great many people, the soul may have to be confined in the Dreaming Back and in the Return for centuries before it is able to move on to the Phantasmogoria, which “exists to exhaust not nature, not pain and pleasure, but emotion” (Yeats 230). In this sub-stage, the physical and moral life is completed and its implications are fulfilled. However, the soul in stage two is still confined to the emotions of bodily life and still does not understand good and evil. While the soul is in the Dreaming Back and in the Return sub-stages, it usually re-lives its past life, particularly crucial moments of passion, weakness, or sin normally in the locale where the event occurred in life (Brogunier, 1966. 24). In the play, Yeats conveyed this idea through the Old Man when he has the Old Man explain to the Boy that:

But there are some

That do not care what’s gone, what’s left.

The souls in Purgatory that come back

To habitations and familiar spots.2. (p. 203)

The Old Man goes on to explain further that these souls return to the old places in order to:

Re-live
Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times; they know at last
Whether upon others or upon themselves;
Upon others, others may bring help
For when the consequence is at an end
The dream must end; if upon themselves,
There is no help but in themselves
And in mercy of God. (203)

The soul has to go through this expiatory process repeatedly until it becomes conscious of the passion which causes itself to sin and of the remorse which results from it. In this process, the soul is agonized since it is forced to re-live its sins, but the suffering is necessary for the soul before it can proceed toward the next stage of its incarnation. To illustrate the concept of purgatory as a re-living by the soul of the sins of its life on earth, Yeats enacted a scene in which the Old Man sees the ghost of his mother, who was a member of a rich family, appear in the ruined family house on the night in which she and the Old Man’s father surreptitiously slept together and the Old Man was conceived. In doing this, the woman committed a sin because she formed a misalliance (or married below her social class) with a family groom or horse keeper. In lowering herself to marry a family servant, she betrayed her own social class and showed her disregard for the customs and tradition appropriate to her social position. As the Old Man mentioned above, his mother’s transgressions were committed both upon others and upon herself. Her crime upon others was that she was the means through which a degenerate offspring was produced. This crime is represented in the play especially by the character of the boy who is “ignorant, amoral, thieving, and a potential patricide, and---it is hinted—lecher,” and the sin that
the woman committed upon herself is the “fouling of her own nature by lust,” (Ure, 1963. p. 247), as the Old Man explains when he re-enacts in his mind the bridal night:

She has gone down to open the door.

This night she is no better than her man
And does not mind that he is half drunk,
She is mad about him. They mount the stairs,
She brings him into her own chamber. (p. 206)

Since the sin was committed on her bridal night, the purgation takes place on every anniversary of that night. In the process of expiation, the soul has to re-live every detail of the event that causes the transgression so that, in agony, it will learn both the causes and the consequences of its action. But there’s a problem:

she must live
Through everything in exact detail,
Driven to it by remorse, and yet
Can she renew the sexual act
And find no pleasure in it, and if not,
If pleasure and remorse must both be there,
Which is the greater? (206–207)

As the Old Man suggests above, the re-living of the soul’s past life brings with it both pleasure and remorse. In order to be free of it, the remorseful spirit must “repeat, explore, or dream through the crime which it committed during life,” but in this case the renewal of the sexual act renews the “self-degrading pleasure that accompanied it. Thus, the very consequence from which release is sought—self-degradation—is entailed upon the mother’s spirit each time she lives
through her transgression” (Ure, 1963. 248 -49). In addition to the myth of the soul in remorse, Yeats also used some elements of the Orestes myth, especially the idea of sins being able to be passed from parents to offspring and that of breaking the cycle of the sin. As a result of the transgressions committed by the parents, the Old Man’s house was under a curse in the same way as the House of Atreus in the Greek myth was, and the descendants of the house inherited the ancestral sins. In the play, Yeats portrayed the idea of sin being inherited by the offspring in the scene where the Old Man told the Boy that he was “twice a murderer.” First, his mother died while she was giving birth to him; thus, by extension, it was he who had murdered her. Then on his own sixteenth birthday, he killed his drunken father who had set the house on fire. However, the Old Man said that his sins went back beyond himself to his mother. He would not have sinned if his mother had not thrown herself to the man of the barn and the stables. Because of his mother’s lust, she had begotten the son whose birth would kill her and the son who would later kill not only his own father but also his own son. The Old Man realized that it was not only he himself who had inherited his mother’s sin but his son had also inherited it since the son possessed many traces of degeneration. He was a son who had no respect for his father, who was willing to steal, and even entertained the idea of killing his own father. Seeing that the sin could be inherited and perpetuated, the Old Man took upon himself the task of severing the cycle of the family sin. In order to wipe out the degenerate stock, the Old Man felt it necessary for the son to be killed and exorcised like the grandfather; otherwise, the Boy would repeat the same polluted pattern the Old Man had gone through, which began at sixteen with the murder of his own father and went on to the begetting of a bastard:

I killed that lad because had he grown up

He would have struck a woman’s fancy,
Begot, and passed pollution on.

I am a wretched foul old man

And therefore harmless. (209)

After the boy was killed, the mother’s spirit was momentarily assuaged, as signified by
the tree becoming “like a purified soul,” and:
All cold, sweet, glistening light.

Dear mother, the window is dark again
But you are in the light because
I finished all that consequence. (208-209)

However, the Old Man’s god-like attempt had failed because soon after the murder the Old Man
heard the hoof-beats again which signified that the spirit was being agonized in its purgatory
again. Thus, the cycle of the sin had not been severed. Realizing that human beings could not
break the cycle of sin and that the task required divine power, the Old Man finally prayed to God
to appease the misery of the living as well as the remorse of the dead.

O God

Release my mother’s soul from its dream!

Mankind can do no more. Appeases
the misery of the living and the remorse of the dead. (209)

Turning to God, the Old Man acted like Orestes when he turned to the goddess Athena to help
him from being pursued by the Furies. Another aspect of the Greek myth that is employed in the
play is the Oedipal myth—the pattern of a son having sexual impulses toward the mother and his
hostility, hatred, and violence toward his father. In Purgatory, this element is first shown in the
Old Man’s recount of his crime of patricide. He revealed that he hated his father many years after
killing him for his vulgarity, selfishness, and opportunism. However, the Old Man hated his father mainly for his virility and for the desire he excited in his wife or the Old Man’s mother. He considered his father unfit to marry his mother because of his lower social status. He did not like the idea of his mother having sexual intercourse with his father. On his mother’s bridal night, the Old Man cried out painfully:

    Do not let him touch you! It is not true
    That drunken man cannot beget
    And if he touch he must beget
    And you must bear his murderer. (206)

His cry, though in vain, shows that the Old Man was jealous of his father’s relationship with his mother. He saw the father as a rival in the struggle to gain love from his mother. The Old Man was very strongly attached to the mother because even in his prayer to God he asked God to release only his mother’s soul from agony. He made no mention about his father’s soul, but he told us that he hated his father because his father had committed a “capital offense” in squandering the mother’s money and property and destroying the house where his ancestors who were “magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament, captains and governor, and other great people” (p.204) lived and died there. The bare tree, standing in the background of the scene, was used to signify the barrenness and desolate reality. When his father set fire to the house, the Old Man:

    Struck him [the father] with a knife
    That knife that cuts my dinner now.
    And after that I left him in the fire. (205)

Later his Oedipal pattern was mentioned again when the Old Man was asked by his own son:
What if I killed you: You killed my grand-dad,
Because you were young and he was old.
Now I am young and you are old. (. 207)

The Boy here certainly entertained the wish to kill his father which is an aspect of the Oedipal myth.

In addition to the myth that Yeats employed in connection with the other myths in this play, he also incorporated into the play the archetypal pattern of a character on a quest. The basic action of this pattern involves the need for the character to “break away, to find a new home, identity, or commitment, or to return to a remembered place after years of absence” (Elsbree, 1982. P. 36). The Old Man returned to his ruined house, which he had left many years before, in order to release his mother’s soul from remorse. The Old Man returned home because home is the place where a person could find his own identity, affirm his perception of his own self, and find enlightenment at the end of his quest (Elsbree, 1982. 39). At his home, the Old Man did learn the truth about himself that as the product of the union between his sinful parents, he and his son also inherited that ancestral sin. Furthermore, he learned that the task of severing the cycle of sin or of redeeming the soul in remorse was not the job of the mortal. The task required divine power. As mentioned earlier, Yeats did not write this play merely to present the idea of the soul in expiation, but he also wanted it to be a parable about the decline of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Yeats regretted seeing the aristocracy in decay due to the fact that it allowed itself to be in contact with the rising middle class, especially the merchants.

To him, the aristocrats were “the most cultivated, the most polished, most powerful (in an ideal society), most urbane, the product of the oldest and best families in the land” (Zwerdling, 1975. 64). Yeats’s dislike of the rising middle class stems from his belief that these people were
the antithesis of the aristocracy. To him, these people were un-heroic, uncreative, materialistic, too concerned with money, and envious and hateful toward the grandeur of the aristocracy. Worst of all, Yeats felt that they never derived their ideas independently; they simply adopted the ideas of others without careful examination (Zwerdling, 74-77). After the first performance, Yeats made clear his intention to make Purgatory a parable for this decline in an interview, published in the Irish Independent on August, 13, 1938. He said:

> In my play, a spirit suffers for its shares when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house. The destruction is taking place all over Ireland today. Sometimes it is the result of poverty, but more often because a new individualistic generation has lost interest in the ancient sanctities. I know of old houses, old furniture that have been sold without apparent regret. In some few cases a house has been destroyed by a misalliance. I have founded my play on this exceptional case, partly because of my interest in certain problems of eugenics, partly because it enables me to depict more vividly than would otherwise be possible the tragedy of the house. (Cited in Jeffares and Knowland, 275)

Viewed within the context of the political and social history of Ireland, the Old Man’s house represents the aristocracy since this house, like any other great houses in Ireland, had had its past and heroes—the people who used to hold high office and serve the country.

> Great people lived and died in this house.
> Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,
> Captains and Governors, and long ago
> Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne. (204)

Unfortunately, this House was cursed like the House of Atreus in the Orestes myth because its members had no respect for the “ancient sanctities” and had committed the sin of social
misalliance, which, by extension, refers to the intermingling of the aristocracy with the rising middle class. By allowing itself to become polluted by the rising bourgeoisie, the aristocracy was corrupted and headed towards its downfall. As the ruined house is the symbol of ruined Ireland, the Old Man and the Boy are also allegorical figures. The Old Man symbolizes the revolutionary generation to whom Yeats belonged. It is the generation which was the product of the union between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Though he was robbed of his inheritance, the Old Man was still able to make contact with the classical culture. He was taught how to read Latin and books “modern and ancient” (205). Some scholars also claim that the Old Man was well-read both in philosophy and in the arts because he knew the Platonic theory of the aerial and celestial vehicles, the mixed nature of the soul, and the works of modern poets (Wilson, 152).

The Boy typifies the younger generation of the new Ireland. He inherited his father’s violence, but was ignorant of the traditions of the past for which Yeats himself cared so much. He was not well-educated. In fact, he received the kind of education that “befits/ a bastard that a peddler got/ Upon a tinker’s daughter in a ditch” (205). Therefore, he was obtuse and blind to the question of morality. He did not see the crime his grandparents had committed. When told of the ancestral sin, he just said:

What’s right and wrong?

My grand-dad got the girl and the money. (204)

His chief concern and value, like those of the rising middle class, were materialistic, such as “grand clothes, / and maybe a grand horse to ride” (204). As these two characters are symbolic figures representing both the old and the new Ireland, the Old Man’s murder of his son is also symbolic of the older generation’s attempt to wipe out the degenerate younger generation. By getting rid of the new Ireland, the old Ireland hoped to completely sever the tie between them.
However, that task was too formidable and too far beyond the ability of the old Ireland to accomplish since the tide had changed and the wheel of history had to turn to a new era. As the soul of the mother had to continue suffering, the ghosts of the old generation of Ireland had to be in remorse until the power overturned the wheel back again to the era in which the aristocracy was at its glory. From the discussion above, it can be seen that Yeats used the myths not only to help explain his theory of the soul in judgment but also to make a comment on the political and social situations in the Ireland of his time. He equated the Old Man’s house—a symbol of the Irish aristocracy with the house of Atreus so that he could show that the important social class in Ireland was cursed and was disintegrating because it had abandoned its own ideals and allowed itself to mix with the materialistic middle class. This mixing was tantamount to, as Yeats called it, a crime of social misalliance. The Oedipal myth was used to convey the antagonism between the rising middle class and the waning aristocracy. The aristocrats represented in the play were those who were the product of the mixing of the two social classes, but they favored and yearned for the past glory and greatness of the ancestors more than they did for those of the bourgeoisie. The aristocrats wanted to get rid of the degraded elements in their blood lines.

In this play, Yeats illustrated that ancient myths could be employed, with new social and political implications, in modern literary work. Therefore, with appropriate selection and an understanding of their implications, myths can be applied in other modern literary works as well.

The Last play, Written in 1939 and not revised before Yeats's passing, *The Death of Cuchulain* is the last of the sequence of five plays which portray the life and accomplishments of the legendary hero. The absence of the *Unity of Culture* is the basis of *The Death of Cuchulain*. The motionless, dying Cuchulain tightened to a pillar is utterly lonely, alienated from his reality. Yeats achieves this in the following way: the hero, who was defined in the *Helmet*, and whom
Cuchulain now really embodies, is taken out of the legend and placed into a milieu which is mythic only on the surface, however, in fact, reminds us rather of Yeats’s own present. In the play, Yeats introduces a device which he has not used previously in his works: he starts it with a long prologue. The speaker, the Old Man (more or less Yeats himself) utters the same feelings reflected also by the fate of Cuchulain: the feeling of being obsolete, the feeling that the world has changed and he is alien in it.

The plot incidents are extracted mainly from "The Great Gathering of Muirthemne" and "Death of Cuchulain," both found in Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*. There follows a brief summary of the legend, which gives an account of the main details of the hero's death. In Muirthemne, Cuchulain does not wait for his fellows and fights alone against his enemies after having fallen victim of a shape-changing spell. One of the three daughters of Calatin (a king he had killed in battle) changes her own shape and takes the appearance of a crow to deceive him. His friends and Cathbad, the Druid, discover the enchantment and succeed in keeping him safe. Yet, Badb (Calatin's daughter) puts on herself the semblance of Niamh (Cuchulain's lover) and sets him free from the promise he had previously made of not facing his enemies while Conall did not come to his help. Free from the oath, he goes to the field to meet the opposing army. He refuses to wait for support and says,

"I would not give up my great name and my courage for all the riches of the world [...] for a great name outlasts life.[...] And if you are sorry and loth to let me go into the fight, I am glad and ready enough to go into it, though I know as well as you yourself I must fall in it. Do not be hindering me any more, then, for if I stay or if I go, death will meet me all the same." (Gregory, 1979, p. 252-253).
His statement seems to be heavily based on the druidical doctrine pointed out by the Roman Emperor Julius CAESAR (1943, p. 146), according to which the soul does not come to an end, but passes from one body to another. The druids think that this is the best stimulus to bravery, because it teaches men to ignore the terrors of death. Cuchulain faces his coming death as a natural process which would only take him to a different mode of being, while his deeds and his name would outlive him and defy time.

The Little Hound faces his destiny and is deadly wounded; he goes down to the lake, drinks from it and washes himself; then, he sees a pillar-stone, "His eyes lit on it, and he went to the pillar-stone, and "he would not meet his death lying down, but would meet it standing up." (Gregory, 1979, p. 256).

At the time of his death while tied to the pillar-stone, a bird comes and settles on his shoulder. One of his enemies comments, 'It is not on that pillar birds were used to settle'. (Gregory, 1979, p. 256). This statement might stand for Cuchulain's final shape-changing and consummate transformation. According to the shamanic mythology, the birds perched on the branches of the World Tree represent men's souls. Because shamans can change themselves into 'birds,' that is, because they enjoy the 'spirit' condition, they are able to fly to the World Tree to bring back 'soul-birds.' The bird perched on a stick is a frequent symbol in shamanic circles. (Eliade, 1989, p. 480-481). After the foe's remark, Cuchulain is beheaded and has his hand cut off, a ritual which retraces the initiation ceremony of dismemberment. The Hound's death is avenged by Conall, who lays the head together with the body. Emer takes the head in her hands, washes it and puts a silk cloth round it. She laments his slaughter and asks to be buried by his side. Then, her life goes out of her and the whole Ulster starts to lament over the death of the heroic couple. "But the three times fifty queens that loved Cuchulain saw him appear in his Druid chariot."

going through Emain Macha; and they could hear him singing the music of the Sidhe." (Gregory, 1979, p. 263). One cannot help noticing the beauty and poetry of this passage. Undoubtedly, Lady Gregory has captured the feeling and emotion of the Celtic soul. The fact that Cuchulain's lovers see him after his death emphasizes the druidical belief in the existence of different spheres or realms which, in reality, are one. Besides, it also recalls the ancient belief in the power and sacredness of music. Ancient peoples believed in the healing properties of music, and the shamans were also healing specialists who possessed their own magical song. Cuchulain sings the music of the Sidhe; therefore, one realizes he has acquired his song of power and already participates in the sacred. Even briefly retold, it is possible to observe in the legend details that hint at an initiatory atmosphere. The saga serves as a basis for *The Death of Cuchulain*; nevertheless, as in the other plays, Yeats made some alterations to suit his own ends.

In the play, there is a prologue introduced by a very old man, who seems to have come out of mythology. After his fierce introductory words, Eithne Inguba enters, acting as a substitute for Niamh, who is Cuchulain's lover in the legend. She bids the hero ride out and fight, even though his death might come out of it. Then, he reads a letter she holds in her hand, in which Emer advises him to stay and wait for Conall's help. Eithne thinks Maeve has put the words in her mouth to deceive Cuchulain and send him to his death. But she also accuses him of not having anymore the passion necessary to reach fullness of being in life. Their conversation is interrupted by a servant, who announces the horse is bitted. The stage darkens. After that, Cuchulain enters wounded and makes an effort to fasten himself to a pillar-stone with his own belt. Aoife, who has come to avenge the death of their son on Baile's Strand, attaches him to the menhir. Cuchulain tells her how he was fated to kill the young man. Next, someone approaches and Aoife hides not to be seen. The stranger is the Blind Man, who was present at Baile's Strand.
when the hero went mad. He tells Cuchulain that Queen Maeve has offered him twelve pennies to strike his head off. At this point, Cuchulain sees the feathered shape his soul will take after death. The stage darkens once more and he is beheaded by the sightless man. The curtain rises again to show the Morrigu holding a black parallelogram, which represents the hero's head. Stylization marks the influence of the Noh theatre in Yeats's plays. Instead of "the realistic props found in some Western theatres (fountains with real water, doors that slam with a convincing bang), the props for Noh are seldom more than outlines of the objects suggested." (Keene, 1975, p. 23). Yeats employs stylization not to deviate the audience's attention from the action itself. The stage props are not supposed to convince the spectators, but to help create the illusion of a particular place or atmosphere. The Morrigu leaves and Emer starts a dance; then, she stops and some bird notes are heard. The play ends with the song of a Street-Singer, who sings the music of some Irish Fair of the present day. After the abbreviated summary of the legend and plot of the play, there follows an analysis of The Death of Cuchulain, which will confirm the completion of his initiation and unity of being. The stage-directions indicate a bare stage and a very old man introduces the prologue. Following the Noh aesthetics, "the stage offers nothing to distract the audience, certainly nothing in the nature of the facile realism of representational theatres." (Keene, 1975, p. 87). Yeats's use of the Noh conveys the timelessness in art as well as in life or in the history of mankind. The bare stage of any period opens up a great possibility of interpretations. Not defining the age and at the same time employing a character who looks like someone out of mythology, the author does not limit or circumscribe the sphere of the play. Its content may refer to all ages, all societies, all religious sects, all folklore, all traditions. From the very beginning, the play discloses an initiatory ordeal. The symbolic stage and the lack of props recall an initiatory scenario in which the search for a spiritual path is the most relevant.
The first character to appear is the old man, who seems to belong to a mythic era; he is visibly disquieted and completely abominates the vile age he lives in. He justifies the series of plays which have for theme Cuchulain's life and death and, in the same way as in the Noh plays and the Greek theatre, he presupposes the audience's previous knowledge of the saga, clearly assuming the role of Yeats's spokesman.

His historical consciousness is founded upon an intense concern for the age in which he himself was living and a desire to understand its problems. Yeats's desire to arouse a nationalistic feeling in people so as to make them cherish the idea of their country as a nation which should firmly establish its own identity makes him look back into the heroic past of this country to search for the sources of this work. In this sense, when he chooses Cuchulain as the central character of his plays, he not only respects the present but also tries to rescue the cultural inheritance where the roots of the nation can be located. The scene is thus set in Ireland. The odds the hero faces are exemplary actions supposed to encourage his countrymen to fight for their ideals and try to restore the order and a spiritual discipline that seems to be lost. Eithne urges her lover to combat; her instructions are plain,

You must not linger here in sloth,
No matter what's the odds, no matter though
Your death may come of it, ride out and fight
The scene is set and you must out and fight.

(DC, p. 695).

Emer, on the other hand, advises Cuchulain to postpone the battle saying that she has sent Eithne to be his bedfellow in order to be sure he would not take up arms without the support of his companions. She has not realized Cuchulain's inward growth; his "personal desires, sexual
societies and worldly values have not been rejected (as [he has] experienced the cycles of such activities) but have been outgrown." (Stewart, 1987, p. 188).

Cuchulain says he prefers Eithne's unwritten words; yet, he does not believe her when she affirms Maeve has put her in a trance state. Eithne insists she feels the presence of the Morrigu, whose black wing touches her shoulder. Cuchulain argues the woman headed like a crow was not monstrous when he met her as a boy and accuses Eithne of trying to get rid of him:

you thought that if you changed I'd kill you for it,

When everything sublunary must change,

And if I have not changed that goes to prove

That I am monstrous.

EITHNE - You're not the man I loved,

That violent man forgave no treachery.

If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,

It is because you are about to die.

(DC, p. 697).

Actually, a time for regeneration has come. When he clearly admits that everything which is terrestrial or worldly must change, she recognizes — or rather doesn't recognize — the old Cuchulain; she is suddenly aware that the moment is crucial and if he can forgive, it is because he is close to death. She accuses him of having lost the ability to live passionately; she fails to perceive that he is crossing a border line, leaving the "sea of passions" behind him and getting closer to an authentic balance. He starts accepting life in all its painful possibilities. He feels to be integrated to the turning wheel of life, and to belong to a powerful reality that is the Cosmos itself.
Cuchulain loses his aggressiveness and, little by little, surrenders to the flowing movement of life. He is getting closer to his Tao. Even though not reluctant to face his destiny, he answers Eithne's remarks with these words:

Spoken too loud and too near the door;
Speak low if you would speak about my death,
Or not in that strange voice exulting in it.
Who knows what ears listen behind the door?

(DC, p. 697).

He seems to be aware of the actuality of a different reality, of a dimension pulsating 'behind the door,' of a plane of existence not commonly felt by those who are far from achieving supreme oneness. He realizes the door might be the passage between two states, two worlds, between the known and the unknown, light and darkness. The opening also has a dynamic, psychological value: it not only indicates a passage, but invites to cross it. And most of the times, in the symbolic sense, this is the transition from the profane to the domain of the sacred. The door opens up to revelation and is the symbol of the possibility of access to a superior reality.


The Servant interrupts Cuchulain's conversation with Eithne to announce the great horse is bitted. The hero asks him how he should act in relation to Eithne and the suggestion the subordinate gives is to make her swallow poppy-juice. As it is known, poppy is a flower from which opium can be extracted. The drinking of the beverage would lead her to a semitrance, a fact that might be a subtle suggestion about the use of narcotics so widely spread in late shamanism. Once more she professes that the great hero is about to die. Suddenly, there is the sound of pipe and drum; the stage grows dark and when it lights up again, it is empty. Wounded,
Cuchulain tries to fasten himself to a pillar stone with his belt. In Japan, "the mast and the tree are still believed today to be the 'road to the gods.'" (Eliade, 1989, p. 285). Besides that, the stone is considered "the symbol of the immortal self." (Jung, 1975, p. 140). Adding to the symbolism of immortality, the pillar-stone also corresponds to the World Tree, whose sacred place constitutes the center of the earth or *omphalos*, the earth's umbilicus. Like the human navel, these stones represent the sustentation point, but in a metaphysical sense. They are related to the maintenance of the earth's health and of the spiritual life of the people. Typically, they used to mark places where there was communication with the spirit of the world and they are a version of the Cosmic Axis, which is an essential element in the shamanic traditions. (Devereux, 1993, p. 112, 184).

The use of the belt and the veil to fasten Cuchulain's body to the pillar-stone is also relevant. Ascensional symbols, they are mere variants of the rope and the ladder which necessarily imply "communication between sky and earth. It is by means of a rope or a ladder [...] that the gods descend to earth and men go up to the sky." (Eliade, 1989, p. 430).12 I

Cuchulain's physical sufferings recall an initiatory death. As stated by Kalweit, if we were able to understand illnesses and sufferings as processes of physical and psychic transformation, we would have a deeper and less partial view of the psychosomatic and psycho spiritual processes and we could learn from the numerous opportunities which the suffering and death of the ego present.

On the verge of losing consciousness, Cuchulain asks Aoife where he is and what he is doing there; he seems to realize the time has come for him to meet the divinity and participate in a different reality. He desires to die upon his feet. The vertical position he wants his body to assume is the reflection of the internal disposition of all his psychic life and soul. The external appearance corresponds to the spiritual rectitude he is determined to achieve. Cuchulain's heart
is bound to be linked with the cosmos. Spiritually alert, he intends to be attached to the pillar-stone to lay hold of and control the experiences and inner phenomena which will take place during his psychic transformation and ultimate connection with the Cosmos. Aoife tells Cuchulain it was not Maeve who let her get close to him. She says,

Her army did not part to let me through.
The grey of Macha, that great horse of yours
Killed in the battle, came out of the pool
As though it were alive, and went three times
In a great circle round you and that stone,
Then leaped into the pool; and not a man
Of all that terrified army dare approach,
But I approach.

(DC, p. 699-700).

Her speech is rich in symbols. She alludes to the grey of Macha revealing the Celtic worship for horses. In addition, the close relation between Cuchulain and his horse can also hint at the magico-religious rapport which involve the shaman and this powerful animal. For three times, the horse makes a circle round Cuchulain.15 Drury (1987, p. 38) affirms that The Circle incorporates many symbolic meanings but most importantly it represents the Infinite Godhead, the Alpha and Omega, the Divine Self-Knowledge which the magician aspires to. As a symbol of what he may become the Circle symbolises the process of invocation, a reaching towards a higher spiritual reality. By standing in the centre of the Circle, the magician [in this case, Cuchulain] is able to identify with the source of Creation, and consequently his Will ensures that the 'ego-devils' or his lesser self remain outside the 'sphere' of higher consciousness.
In the centre of this mandala, Cuchulain is magically protected. In the centre of the circle and fastened to the pillar-stone, Cuchulain's body is motionless. Yet, he emanates such a life-force that none of his enemies dare approach. He does not show any outward action; however, beneath his seeming stillness there is a contemplative state in which internal action surpasses all external movement.

The Blind Man arrives and makes clear he had been offered some money to behead Cuchulain. "He is, in fact, the arch-materialist, having agreed to kill Cuchulain for twelve pennies. His murder of the hero [epitomizes] the demise of the heroic ideal itself at the hands of pragmatic sanction." (Friedman, 1971, p. 317). Cuchulain ironically says that twelve pennies are a good reason for killing a man. His bitter remark alludes to Yeats's revolt and irony against the materialistic society he lives in; however, if everybody is not satisfied with the exclusively material development of modern civilization, it might be a sign that there is still some hope for salvation. This scene recalls the passage in which Judas betrays Christ for thirty coins. Therefore, a parallel can be traced between Cuchulain, the hero, and Jesus, the saviour. Both try to save people and recover a state of integrity which is lost. Their intention is to restore the conditions that existed ab origine and give men the opportunity to share a sacralized world once more.

Cuchulain feels a certain religious nostalgia that expresses "the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands" (Eliade, 1959, p. 65). His role is that of a saviour who intends to give dignity back to his people. His heroic deeds and suffering are an attempt to establish a pattern of exemplary behaviour to be followed by his countrymen.

Even before his death, Cuchulain's psychic dismemberment brings him an enlightened mind, intensified perception, greater capacity to feel compassion and true kindness towards all fellow-
creatures. It seems that only suffering stimulates the true tolerance and the genuine compassion. He seems to be willing to be dismembered and, consequently, to abandon his previous human nature. On the process of transformation, Cuchulain has a mystical vision in which he transcends the human condition. While describing it he says,

There floats out there
The shape that I shall take when I am dead,
My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape,
And is not that a strange shape for the soul
Of a great fighting man?

(DD, p. 702).

The great warrior is bound to achieve the spirit condition and get in contact with the ancient people who lived in the present (no) time, rescuing the traditional Irish values that seem to be lost. Before dying, Cuchulain seems to be certain about his mystical rebirth; he embodies "an outstanding instance of that Celtic paradox, the physical defeat from whose ashes spiritual victory rises like a phoenix." (Armstrong, 1970, p. 12). Once more, there is music of pipe and drum. The Morrigu holds Cuchulain's head, actually a black parallelogram, and there are six other parallelograms, the heads of those who gave the hero six mortal wounds. She says the dead can hear her and to the dead she speaks. It shows the sacred aspect of "the Morrigan, or Great Queen, who fought against the hero Cu Chulainn by means of constant shape-shifting. The Morrigan was maiden, bride and crone as occasion demanded, and presided over birth and death." (Bancroft, 1987, p. 96). In The Death of Cuchulain, she presides over the hero's death and arranges the dance.
Emer appears for the first time and starts the dance of the severed heads, revolving three times round the circle of the skulls. Then, she moves towards the head of Cuchulain and is about to prostrate herself as if in adoration or triumph when she hears some bird notes. At the moment the bird sings, Cuchulain has already suffered the ultimate "transformation common to all things." (Rawson; Legeza, 1984, p. 32). After Emer's dance, the stage darkens slowly. Then comes the loud music of some Irish Fair of our day. When the lights come up again, the three musicians, in ragged street-singers' clothes, start to pipe and drum. One of them sings a song in which a prostitute praises the mythical time and the ancient race it produced. She recollects what centuries have passed since they were living men, and shows the impoverishment of the present age in terms of spiritual values. Then, referring to the heroes of the present time she asks,

```plaintext
What stood in the Post Office
With Pearse and Connolly?
What comes out of the mountain
Where men first shed their blood?
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
He stood where they had stood?
A statue's there to mark the place,
By Oliver Sheppard done.
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(DC, p. 704-705).

At first, her tone seems to be pessimistic when she describes the Irish heroes as the exemplary paradigm for the unheroic age she lives in. However, her speech assumes a positive connotation when she states Cuchulain was the one who stood in the Post Office with Pearse and Connolly and incentivated them — as well as the whole nation — to fight for their ideals. This recalls the
fact that Yeats was "especially delighted by the story that some of the men who fought at the Post Office in 1916 'had the Irish legendary hero Cuchulain so much in their minds.' Here was a modern heroic event which accepted as its model the Irish heroic past that Yeats had been trying so steadily to recreate for his own generation." (Zwerdling, 1965, p. 107).

Yeats's last dramatic production is very complex because of the special characteristics of its introduction and of the difficult allusions of the song ending it. It begins with a realistic 'prologue', moves into a mythical universe, in which the inner play takes place, and ends in a world of reality. The inmost core, where the supreme Irish hero's death is presented, is, therefore, affected by the two realistic fragments framing it, a fact that must be taken into account in any reading of the text. Irony characterizes the prologue. The three musicians, who disappeared from the stage in Yeats's last years, have been replaced with an acrimonious old man who harasses the audience. His references to his origin and aesthetic inclinations, and his claim to have had a predominant role in the production of the play, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the gestation of the text, suggest his identification with the author. This, as well as the overt allusions to Yeats and his theatre, turns the playwright into an explicit element of the drama as it develops before the spectator. Through the inclusion of the external character, described as "a very old man looking like something out of mythology," Yeats expresses manifestly not only his rejection of modern art, but also his irony about his own person, his concerns and the decay of old age. However, despite the prologue's attempt at humour, the sour tone betrays an underlying bitterness. At the same time, the Old Man's words, which provide essential clues for the comprehension of the whole work, anticipate a summary of what will happen in the inner play, thus contributing to the predetermination presiding the mythical world. In the central portion of the text, the hero is presented as a part of a cosmos on whose evolution he depends and to whose
laws he is subject. In the instant of his death he experiences the full force of its indifference, 'personified' in the coldness and detachment with which the Blind Man of *On Baile's Strand* kills him. As happens with Hector, Achilles and many others, Cuchulain's victories prove to be incomplete when he is faced with the final defeat of his own annihilation, inherent in his nature. Yet the most outstanding feature of Yeats's treatment of the theme is his emphasis on indifference.

The predetermination ruling the inner play can be understood as a reflection of Yeats's pessimistic nihilism. In the hero's fate, which he cannot escape, it is possible to perceive the playwright's awareness of his own death, which also seems to underlie the last section of the text. When we leave the timeless mythological world, we are brought back again to reality, as if we had awoken from the dream of Cuchulain's death. After the stage darkens slowly and brightens again, "loudmusic .. of some irishFairofourday" introduces the words of one of the three Yeatsian musicians, who have significantly turned into the three ragged street-singers to whom the Old Man in the prologue had said he was going to teach Homer's music. Those words oppose "the harlot" to "the beggar-man," who is an allusion to the blind Greek poet. As the first line seems to indicate and the last two confirm, the song retells what the harlot sang to the beggar-man. Meanwhile the latter's silence is eloquent.

The song is composed of three stanzas which are based on the temporal juxtaposition of three different periods by means of a complex network of references: the remote, mythological past, the recent, historical past, and the personal present, which are related by the narrator's voice. The first stanza acts as a link with the inner play, since it introduces the mythical past into the quasi-reality of the last portion by referring to relevant figures of the legendary Irish world. The song, however, emphasizes the contrast between their attractiveness and their immateriality,
suggesting that they are beyond the harlot's reach. In this way, since the prevailing point of view is hers, the first sign of the predominance of the material, modern world is given, and a bridge to the prologue's bitterness is established. The second stanza, through allusions to Pearse and Connolly, focuses on the immediate past and questions the mutual influence of tradition on the present and of the heroic actions of the present on the permanence and the paradigmatic qualities of myth. The third stanza relates both periods with a still more personal present time, which is evidence of Yeats's more direct involvement.

Far from being optimistic, the song is at least ambiguous. Positive feelings seem to derive from the second stanza, which suggests a solid bond with the heroic past revived by the patriots' sacrifice. Nevertheless, the final references to Cuchulain and Sheppard's statue can be considered a negative element. The implicit contrast of the hero with the present stresses the feeling of frustration which inevitably emanates from the cold objectivity of the harlot's tale, in contrast to the intensity generated by the heroic images.

The song ending *The Death of Cuchulain* may be regarded as another contrast between physical, objective, material, perishable reality and spiritual, subjective, everlasting art.

The great hero was the one who first shed his blood on the mountain (a symbol for the *axis mundi*) in an attempt to induce his fellowmen to struggle and try to find the unity that they had lost. Cuchulain's sacrifice in a way recalls the theme of the wounded king who, in an inaccessible and mysterious place, waits to be restored to health so that he can "return." (Évola, 1988, p. 36). His boon to society is finally delivered in the form of tenacity and stimulus to bravery.

The statue is the homage paid to Cuchulain for his valour as a redeemer; he is the one who faced destiny and underwent all the possible changes to get to a real unity of being. Through hard
struggle he abolished all the limits of his personality, achieving a state of oneness with the universe.