WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS
AND THE CELTIC REVIVAL:
OF MYTH AND MAN

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Amanda,

This is another strong essay. It does a good job of explaining the motives and principles behind Yeats’ advocacy of the Celtic Revival. The connections to the poems are apt and interesting, but could in a few cases be developed more fully.
When people first started settling in Ireland they not only brought over their way of life but also their religious beliefs and traditions. Over time, these evolved to become more inclusive of the place that they were now calling home and soon the landscape was filled with places that were imbued with enchantment and spirituality; a very real mystical presence had taken root and began to grow. These beliefs were nurtured and passed on for hundreds of years by the people that called this land home. It wasn’t until the arrival of the British that a spiritual plague began to spread throughout the land, essentially putting an end to the enchantment by cutting off the peoples ties to the nature of the landscape. This event was almost successful in obliterating the old myths and legends completely. In the small out of the way villages that modern industrialization had bypassed, however, the traditional Gaelic Language, religious beliefs, and traditions managed to survive (O’Driscoll, 401). When a yearning for independence and identity eventually sprouted in the Irish people they began to realize that they wanted more for their country than to just be an afterthought that England was using for profit.

The Celtic Revival saw its unofficial beginnings in the 1760’s with the publication of James Macpherson’s no-so-authentic Ossianic translations (O’Driscoll, 401). These writings slowly began to spark an interest amongst some members of the literary community of the time who then began to sift through Ireland’s long forgotten past. It wasn’t until the 19th century, however, that the Celtic Revival really took off when artifacts from the Bronze Age were unearthed and analyzed (O’Driscoll, 402). This discovery helped to strengthen this interest of the past among the Irish scholars and researchers and they immediately began delving into the buried past of Celtic Ireland. For the artistic community, this provided a unique opportunity to break away from the flock and start creating the works that would set Ireland apart from the rest of the world.
During this period, the people of Ireland were struggling to establish an identity as a unified nation. Believing he was in possession of the answers the people were desperately searching for, W.B. Yeats chose this time to establish himself in the literary community as a pioneer of the Celtic Revival. By incorporating the legends and myths of the past into the current literature, Yeats believed that they would not only be preserved, but that they could be used by the Irish people as the center for which they could begin to establish an identity that is true to their nature and unite them as one nation (Yeats, 260).

In his critical writing entitled, “Hopes and Fears for Irish Literature” from 1892, Yeats finds that the literary minds of Ireland are in agreement that literature should be an ‘expression of conviction’. When looking into this subject, he also found that these artists were passionate about producing works which resulted in the creation of characters that displayed great passion, something that readers could draw their own inspiration from (Yeats, 259). Yeats was a firm believer that the characters portrayed in mythological tales were evolved over the years so that they came to represent a combination of the beliefs and passions of the people as a whole (O’Driscoll, 403). Keeping this thought in mind, he delved into his work in hopes of producing poetry that was based on these old Gaelic legends in hopes that his work would bring about this sense of ‘pride of place’ for the Irish. Yeats wanted to bring about a change in Irish literature where, instead of a distinct line being drawn between the poetry and the people, the poetry could be used as a way to unite them by focusing on the working class and the peasants (Cullingford, 9). Although he had nothing but good intentions in mind when he began this journey, the reputation he had acquired regarding the occult, such as his becoming a member of The Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, caused a misunderstanding among readers in regards to the messages of these poems. Realizing what was going on, Yeats became creative and, instead of
addressing his readers in a public forum-type setting, he did what he knew best and inserted his rebuttal, including his reasoning, into his poetry.

In an attempt to set the record straight about himself and his poetry, Yeats published “To Ireland in the Coming Times” in 1892. In this poem, Yeats is defending not only his poetry, but his personal beliefs as well and is giving the reasons as to why he chooses the topics he writes about. In the early years of his writing career, Yeats developed an obsession with spirituality, most notably the supernatural and occult, which is then developed in his writings. Through this poem, he is letting people know that this is not just some random belief that he is preoccupied with, but that it is actually a part of Irish history. Beliefs in the enchantment of the land, of all things mystical and the power of spirituality as a wild and untamed force is not something that is new, it is a part of Ireland’s history because that is where it began. In his writings, Yeats is constantly making reference to ‘her’ and ‘roses’ and these terms are a personification of the country of Ireland as a whole and not just a reference to some obscure woman. These ideals were a part of Celtic beliefs since they first stepped foot on Irish shores. This use of the personification of a feminized and beautiful Ireland is one of the main ways in which he is working to bring the Celtic past to the forefront of people’s minds by re-introducing them to a long forgotten past. For the first Celts, females were not something to be relegated to domestic positions; they were a source of mystical and spiritual power because they alone possessed the ability to create new life. These qualities were then manifested into the myths and legends, Goddess’ and Gods that would be talked about for generations to come. The best example of this can be seen in the form of the Earth Goddess Danu who later began to be referred to as Mother Ireland; this was the beginning of the link that connected the feminized belief of spiritual beauty and the spiritual ideal of Ireland. Now that his intentions have been established, Yeats finishes...
the poem by asking the readers to remember, no matter what the future may bring, that his heart will continue to beat for nothing but the country and people of Ireland.

One of Yeats' most well-known poems, “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, is one that really begins to set the tone for his later works regarding Ireland as a place that is set apart from the rest of the world due, in part, to a deep sense of enchantment and mysticism that will forever blanket the land. While residing in London, Yeats decided to go for a stroll one afternoon and was stopped dead in his tracks when a sound captured his attention. Looking around for the source of this faint twinkling noise, he spotted a small fountain in a shop window and drew in closer to have a look. This seemingly innocent garden ornament became a source of wonder for it held the power to transport Yeats from the dark and dreary streets of London to the lake shores of the small Irish town of Sligo (Yeats, 15). While growing up he heard the tales about a mischievous race of supernatural beings that once roamed the countryside and the mystical spirituality that has saturated the landscape around his tiny country home. For his role in the Celtic Literary Revival, Yeats places special emphasis on these stories because they come from a place that holds special meaning for him and it is this connection between a person and the power and spirituality hidden within the land that he is trying to bring to the Irish people. Through his choice of words and the way he has structured them into the stanzas, Yeats has weaved a shroud of enchantment around this little isle of Innisfree. This ordinary little island in Lough Gill has now become a mystical and peaceful place where anything is possible, even the reversal of time so that the sky begins to glimmer with the light of dawn at midnight while noon-time brings with it the fading purple hues of the heather fields that mirror the color of dusk. Here, a man can free himself from the negativity that surrounds him in the modern world and begin a new life where his days are filled with tending the garden and relaxing.
By describing the isle this way, Yeats has effectively established it as a place like no other, a place of peaceful simplicity and enchanted wonderment. Mystery and intrigue are central to the way of life here and there is a sense of spirituality being evoked, not in terms of a religious presence of God, but spiritual in the sense of the natural world having a magical quality about it. In a very personalized way, Yeats has opened the door to a realm that is filled with all the things from a long-ago past because he believes this heritage is what is needed to unite the people and set Ireland apart from the rest of the world.

Now that he has introduced the people to this ideal of the enchantment that flows through the landscape, Yeats takes the next step and begins to slowly utilize the stories of The Good People. There are many myths and legends in the Irish culture but some of the most well-known revolve around a race of supernatural beings known as the Sidhe; the Gaelic word for wind, they are also known as the Tribes of Danu or the Tuatha de Danaan. Utilizing the place that he is the most familiar with, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” starts off on Knocknarea, a mountain overlooking Sligo Bay and made famous in Celtic lore because of a pile of stones that was placed atop it in the form of a traditional burial mound and is said to be the final resting place of Queen Maeve of the Sidhe. The mention of the mythical tale of Clooth-na-bare takes the readers to Lough Ia, a body of water that sits atop Bird Mountain in Sligo, rumored to be her final resting place (Yeats, 23). Continuing on with this casual introduction of the Celtic lore, Yeats brings in two more characters, Caolte and Niamh, who both play roles in the legendary heroics of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, or Finn MacCool (Yeats, 23). A stronger connection is now being made between Ireland and this mystical sense of enchantment and spirituality through the incorporation of the more specific mythical characters. This mysterious race is being placed in a position of power, a position that can be considered almost holy. For the traditional Celt, the Sidhe were considered...
wild and untamed, some were considered to be Gods and as such they were given a revered and holy status. Modern religions have transformed this sense of something being considered ‘Holy’ into a more peaceful and calm state of mind. So to show the people that they possess this more wild sense of spirituality, Yeats is giving them something that sets them apart from the rest of the world, he is giving them the pieces of the cultural heritage that can be used to as the foundation of a unique national identity. By bringing all of these characters back into the intuitive minds of the people, Yeats is initiating a sense of curious wonderment and thirst for the recovery of the past.

In order to make this connection between Ireland and the spiritual presence that was evoked by the Sidhe even more tangible, Yeats begins revealing the beliefs of the peasants from the past. “Stolen Child” brings together the wild and untamed nature of the Sidhe and their mischievous adventures in the human realm. In a time before the advances in science began to dissolve the ideals of the enchantment and mystical presence in the world, the people found other ways to give meaning to unknown, often tragic events of life. One such tragedy, a sudden illness or death of a seemingly healthy child, was said to be the work of the Sidhe and is the source of the legend of ‘Changlings’. In Irish lore it was said that the faeries coveted the youth and ability to feel joy over the little things often possessed by children. In order to bring these feelings back into their dreary lives, it was said that they would sneak into the homes of peasants and steal the children, whisking them away to their magical realm and leaving a sickly replica from their own race as a replacement. Science has now rationalized such sudden illnesses which has effectively erased the mystery that fueled such legends. For Yeats, this poem was a way in which he could show the Irish people that, in a time before science and technology, their ancestors embraced the spiritual enchantment of the landscape and the mysteries that came with life. This is the heritage...
they needed to embrace if they wish to create a unique identity for themselves. Yeats also believed that these myths and legends were the beginning of a new era in Irish literature because the public would prefer to read these over the dry, science-based literature that was being produced in England at the time (O’Driscoll, 406).

Now that Yeats has furthered the establishment of Ireland as being a place filled with enchantment and a natural spirituality, he begins to fashion these ideals into a more overtly political form of National Identity for the Irish people to utilize. In “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, the central figure, Aengus, was the God of youth, beauty, and poetry. This knowledge brings an entirely new dimension to the message Yeats is trying to convey to the people of Ireland. There are many examples of magical and enchanting qualities that are being mixed together with the historical beliefs of the people in this poem. Immediately in the first three lines, Aengus is found crafting a fishing pole out of Hazel Wood which was believed to have mystical properties by the Celtic Peoples (Yeats, 24). The trout was another being that was commonly referenced in Celtic tales and was often said to be the form that some of the Fae took when roaming the countryside. After returning to his cottage, Aengus plans on cooking the trout but once his back is turned his slimy catch is transformed into a beautiful young woman who then ghosts through the door and out of his life as quickly as she came into it. This has a definite mystical feel which drives Aengus to spend the rest of his days wandering the countryside in search of this divine creature that appears to have enchanted his soul.

One of the things Yeats was defending in “To Ireland in the Coming Times” was the way in which he utilized this feminized personification of Ireland. Making the connection back to “The Song of Wandering Aengus”, this God is seen giving up everything in order to pursue the strange woman. The underlying message that is being conveyed is that the people of Ireland must not
give up their search for a unique national identity that will unite them. So long as they are persistent and don’t lose hope, they too will one day find their identity as a nation and begin the long process of restoring beauty to a country and culture that has suffered for far too long.

During a time of national turmoil among the Irish people, the literary community in Ireland came together to try and bring about a unified sense of national identity. The belief for many, Yeats included, was that in order for this to happen in such a way so as to set Ireland apart from the rest of the world they need to embrace the cultural heritage that the country was founded on. The Celtic Revival was a time in which the artists took it upon themselves to research Ireland’s history and try and bring back all the things that once made the country unique. The way in which W.B. Yeats decided to go about this was to focus on the people that make up the foundation of the country. By focusing on the beliefs and traditions of the peasants of the past, Yeats was able to generate a very real connection between his readers and the spirituality of nature and enchantment of the land. Reinforcing this feminized personification of Ireland was a way in which he could help bring about the unity of a nation by creating a tangible connection between their country and the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the men who would die to protect the women in their lives. Basing his works off of the mythological beliefs of the peasant class, he was able to reach a greater number of people. The beliefs were simple and the tales contained morals and lessons that were simple to spot and still held meaning to the people of this time.
Works Cited

