

*The Countess Cathleen:*

Yeats's Struggle of the Self for the Self

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I

When W. B. Yeats started to write plays, the general public was conservative and still regarded theatre as a place of entertainment although Arthur Pinero and Henry A. Jones had written plays of social problems previously. The movement to let theatre work as a social and literary force was a minor one at the time. G. B. Shaw and William Archer influenced by Henrik Ibsen initiated a similar movement and put the social problems in the fore front on the stage in England. Their plays, however, were written in prose.

In the nineteenth century many famous poets of that period like Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson and Swinburne wrote verse plays, although their plays were either staged unsuccessfully or not produced at all. The exploratory attempts of the verse drama opposed the conventional styles of commercial drama. The advantage of using verse form in drama lies in the possibilities of a wider range of expression, in expressing the subtle emotional feelings of the characters, and in creating the lyrical atmosphere. T. S. Eliot stresses the importance and advantage of verse plays :

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse....The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial ; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.<sup>1</sup>

Yeats was called by Eric Bentley "the only considerable verse playwright in English for several hundred years."<sup>2</sup> He was a

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pioneer of using verse form in the late nineteenth century and practiced his theory, trying to create the dream-like atmosphere where it seems easy to handle the evocation of souls. With the help of Lady Gregory, George Moore and Edward Martyn, Yeats founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, a symbol of the Irish dramatic movement. The aim of their movement was "to create an Irish National Theatre, to act and produce plays in Irish or English, written by Irish writers, or on Irish subjects; and such dramatic works by foreign authors as would tend to educate and interest the public of this country in the higher aspects of dramatic art." <sup>3</sup>

We tend to think of Yeats as a poet, but he began to write plays in his teens, imitating Spenser and Shelley, and throughout his career he devoted himself much to writing plays and to the theatre movement. He managed the Abbey Theatre which was established in 1904.

At this time a powerful nationalistic movement known as Celtic Revival influenced the literary field. After the defeat of Parnell's political activities, people sought another channel to express their nationalistic zeal. Yeats emphasizes the close relation between nationalism and literature: "There is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature." <sup>4</sup> Therefore from the beginning the main basis of Yeats's theatre movement was to prove that the Irish have their own cultural and literary tradition. Yeats, however, was not a propagandist like Bernard Shaw. He distinctly shows his stance :

I am a Nationalist....But if some external necessity had forced

me to write nothing but drama with an obviously patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and early thought, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme.<sup>5</sup>

He thought his mission was to serve taste rather than any specific purpose. His emphasis was a literary cause backed up with nationalism. The 1897 manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre reads like this :

We propose to have performed in Dublin, in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature.<sup>6</sup>

The first plays performed were Edward Martyn's *Heather Field* and Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*.<sup>7</sup> In this essay I would like to analyse *The Countess Cathleen* and see how his theory is put into practice.

## II

The setting of *The Countess Cathleen* is Ireland in old times, and it is based on a legend Yeats published in his anthology, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. In the opening scene a poor Irish peasant-woman Mary and her son Teigue talk about the sinister happenings and a lot of ominous hearsay. He says, "The graves are walking,"<sup>8</sup> "A herdsman met a man who had no mouth, / Nor eyes, nor ears ; his face a wall of flesh, " (p. 4) and actually sees "the shape and colour of horned owls. " (p. 4) They terrify Mary and Teigue. A famine is raging through the country, and people have nothing left to eat. Some starving peasants call the name of God and die, and some cry, "God and the Mother of

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God have dropped asleep." (p. 4) The poverty-stricken peasants are desperate and struggling hard just to survive. Then two demons in the guise of merchants offer them money in exchange for their souls.

Here lyricism is clearly shown in the conversation from the beginning:

Mary: What can have made the grey hen flutter so?

Teigue: They say that now the land is famine-struck  
The graves are walking.

Mary: What can the hen have heard?

Teigue: And that is not the worst; at Tubber-vanach

A woman met a man with ears spread out,

And they moved up and down like a bat's wing. (p. 3)

A famine is raging through the land, and the dark sinister atmosphere is overcasting the entire village. Then Countess Cathleen appears with her old nurse Oona and the poet Aleel who is in love with Cathleen. Here the parallel between Cathleen-Aleel and Maud Gonne-Yeats is apparent. Cathleen's sacrifice for the people is much like that of Maud Gonne who gave up the life of ease and comfort in order to join the political activities for the sake of freedom in Ireland. Liam Miller notes:

The choice of subject for his (Yeats's) first truly Irish play may have been prompted by his meeting Maud Gonne... coincident with Dowden's suggestion that he should attempt a stage play. It is evident that he visualized Maud Gonne in the title role of the piece . . . .<sup>9</sup>

Peter Ure specifies her contribution likewise.<sup>10</sup> The play was actually dedicated to Maud Gonne who later wrote about the incident in her autobiography: "I (Yeats) wrote it for you and if

you don't act it we shall have to get an actress from London to take the part."<sup>11</sup> It is also evident that Yeats wanted to achieve culturally what Maude Gonne did in the political field.

Countess Cathleen has given all the money she had on the way, but she gives her purse with the silver clasp on it when Teigue begs money of her. His father Shemus is insatiable and calls in the devils who might also give him money.

Whatever you are that walk the woods at night,  
 So be it that you have not shouldered up  
 Out of a grave--for I'll have nothing human  
 And have free hands, a friendly trick of speech  
 I welcome you. (p. 41)

At once two demons disguised as Eastern merchants enter his house and begin to unroll their carpet and sit down on it. There they lay out the money, and Shemus and Teigue are tempted by the presented money, and promised to recruit new peasants for a barter of their soul. They themselves are willing to sell what is nothing to them. Teigue says, "I'll barter mine. / Why should we starve for what may be but nothing." (p. 14) Those commission-agents now go out in the street to advertise the trade. Shemus's wife Mary faints for fear of the consequence.

In the second scene Cathleen is in a wood. The atmosphere in the woods is that of fairyland. Aleel cites the legendary love story to allude to his love to Cathleen.

A man, they say,  
 Loved Maeve the Queen of all the invisible host,  
 And died of his love nine centuries ago.  
 And now, when the moon's riding at the full,

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She leaves her dancers lonely and lies there  
Upon that level place, and for three days  
Stretches and sighs and wets her long pale cheeks.

(p. 17)

Then Aleel sings a song while Cathleen rests on his arm. There Shemus and Teigue rushes in to proclaim the trade of souls, "Money for souls, good money for a soul." (p. 22) Hearing this, Cathleen is horrified by the mere notion of it. She feels she must prevent it, and offers whatever property she has got.

Keeping this house alone, sell all I have,  
Go barter where you please, but come again  
With heards of cattle and with ships of meal. (p. 23)

Cathleen is determined to sacrifice herself for the benefit of the people. Her determination is almost a holy resignation.

Come, follow me, for the earth burns my feet  
Till I have changed my house to such a refuge  
That the old and ailing, and all weak of heart,  
May escape from beak and claw; all, all, shall come  
Till the walls burst and the roof fall on us.  
From this day out I have nothing of my own (p. 24)

This speech foreshadows her coming tragic end.

In the third scene Aleel who has seen a supernatural vision begs Cathleen to flee to the hills and to live in comfort.

. . . and live in the hills,  
Among the sounds of music and the light  
Of waters, till the evil days are done.  
For here some terrible death is waiting you . . . . (p. 25)

Cathleen, however, refuses to abandon her moral duty and stands firm. She dismisses Aleel: "I kiss your forehead. / And yet I send you from me. . . . Good-bye; but do not turn your head and look; / Above all else, I would not have you look." (p. 28)

Before long the two demons break into her castle and steal all that Cathleen has. She becomes desperate with this news, and she resolves to offer the supreme sacrifice for the starving peasants. Now she knows her end is coming near.

I have heard

A sound of wailing in unnumbered hovels,  
And I must go down, down--I know not where--  
Pray for all men and women mad from famine;  
Pray, you good neighbours.

Mary, Queen of angles,  
And all you clouds on clouds of saints, farewell! (p. 34)

In the short fourth scene, four peasants walk along the street, talking greedily about gold. Overhearing their conversation, Aleen laments over the situation.

In the fifth scene, there is an alcove at the back of the stage and there Mary, who refused the demons' money and starved, lies dead. The two demons are busy preparing for the soul-mart. The peasants rush in. The Middle-aged Man claims three hundred crowns for his soul, but the demons disclose that he is contemplating robbery and therefore they decide that he deserves only two hundred. Then comes a woman who has meditated adultery. She is also valued low. Next the old woman who has always been ugly fetches a high price of a thousand crown. She accepts this price, and utters, "God bless you, sir." Then she

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screams horribly: "O, sir, a pain went through me!" (p.42)  
At this sight the other peasants are terrified and try to back out.

Then Countess Cathleen enters and she demands no less than half a million crowns for her soul. The demons agree and they ask her to sign with the quill which is the symbol of the denial of God. Then she distributes the gold among the people, and dies.

Aleel sees a vision of angels and devils clashing in the mid-air. A flash of lightning is immediately followed by thunder. The sinister image is heightened, and the noises of the thunder and the flashes of the lightning are effectively described by Aleel. His description is full of mythological allusions. Then everything is lost in darkness. When the darkness is broken by a visionary light, the armed angels appear in front of them. In the end Aleel recounts Countess Cathleen's fate.

The light beats down; the gates of pearl are wide;  
And she is passing to the floor of peace,  
And Mary of the seven times wounded heart  
Has kissed her lips, and the long blessed hair  
Has fallen on her face; The Light of Lights  
Looks always on the motive, not the deed,  
The Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone. (p. 50)

### III

Now let's look at the public reaction to the performance of *The Countess Cathleen*.

There was a rumour that a severe criticism and attack would be seen at the theatre. Yeats wrote to Dr. William Barny on March 24th, 1899:

It has been suggested that there are some passages in the latter

play *The Countess Cathleen* which might be objected to by a Catholic audience as not being in harmony with Catholic theology. I do not myself see anything in the play that could give offence. ... The presentation of the play has been fixed for the 8th May and as it would be too late for us to find another to put in its place I have offered to alter or omit any passage that a theologian of so much literary culture as yourself may object.<sup>12</sup>

The cause of the accusation were the points where Shemus tramples on the holy shrine that fell from its niche, where the Irish peasants sell their souls, and most of all, where Countess Cathleen sells her soul to the demons in exchange for money to save the starving people. Her pardon incurred moral and religious criticism on the ground that Christian doctrine teaches that no one should sell their soul. Some people did not seem to understand the theme of this play. For them the play was unpatriotic and irreligious in showing that an Irish woman who sold her soul would eventually go to heaven.

The press and clergymen joined the critics and the masses protested against the moral standard of the play. Even the Cardinal condemned the play in a pamphlet entitled "Souls for God" and dissuade people from going to see it.<sup>13</sup> He thought it was slanderous as Yeats treated souls as merchandise and made two peasants thieves and a woman an adulteress. Yeats seems to have had the problem of realising on stage the spiritual and religious aspect of the themes, and his ideas were a little ahead of time. Glenda Leeming says, "Yeats' own lack of religious commitment had made him underestimate the effect on the Irish audience."<sup>14</sup>

Yeats admitted: "In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities."<sup>15</sup> Therefore on the night of the performance Yeats had to ask for the police protection to give a performance.

Sign with this quill  
It was a feather growing on the cock  
That crowed when Peter dared deny his Master,  
And all who use it have great honour in Hell (p. 44)

These four lines spoken by the demons were regarded as an attack on the Pope and caused the disturbance. In the theatre, however, angry voices were shouted down by cheers. Arthur Griffith, founder of the Sinn Fein Movement, brought a lot of men and applauded everything the Church would not like. Yeats was abhorred to know that this play turned into an anti-clerical demonstration.<sup>16</sup>

Yeats himself confesses that *The Countess Cathleen* is a piece of "tapestry," and "if I were to think out that scene today, she would, the moment her hand has signed, burst into loud laughter, mock at all she has held holy, horrify the peasants in the midst of their temptations."<sup>17</sup> Yeats also defends his play:

The play is symbolic. . . . The Countess herself is a soul which is always, in all laborious and self-denying persons, selling itself into captivity and unrest that it may redeem "God's children," and finding the peace it has not sought because all high motives are of the substance of peace. The symbols have other meanings, but they have this principal meaning.<sup>18</sup>

The theme of *The Countess Cathleen* is one of saintly

sacrifices, which is rewarded with supreme happiness. But this easy happy ending and the lack of serious insight into character and into reality, either natural or supernatural, were also the targets of the criticism. Yeats himself felt later that the play was mere tapestry.<sup>19</sup> Besides, there is no apparent dramatic presentation of Cathleen's inner struggle of opposing motives.

#### IV

Yeats describes the gap between his intention and his performance in writing the play. In 1904 he writes:

When I wrote my *Countess Cathleen*, I thought, of course, chiefly of the actual picture that was forming before me, but there was a secondary meaning that came into my mind continuously. "It is the soul of one that loves Ireland," I thought, "plunging into unrest, seeming to lose itself, to bargain itself away to the very wickedness of the world, and to surrender what is eternal for what is temporary."<sup>20</sup>

and another problem which was in question is: "... may a soul sacrifice itself for a good end?"<sup>21</sup> It is not clear whether Yeats thought "high motives" must always bring peace, but it was certain that Yeats was inclined to assume that a beautiful idea, or beautiful sentence justified the end product. Yeats learned aesthetic theory from Pater and Wilde, and put an emphasis on style. The theme of Yeats's plays is the struggle of the self for the self.<sup>22</sup> Yeats maintained, "Drama is a picture of the soul of man, and not of his exterior life.... Drama describes the adventures of men's souls among the thoughts that are most interesting to the dramatist, and therefore, probably most interesting to his time."<sup>23</sup>

It is doubtful whether the dramatist's interest is that of the general public but the motive of his writing plays was to arouse the national spirit and refine the sensibility of the people.

Yeats suggested many times that art must use the external world as a symbol to express subjective moods. Criticising the realistic drama, Yeats stressed the description of the inner self rather than the exposition of characters and situation in the external world with copying the actual life. When we read or see Yeats's plays, we have to be ready to accept that the action of his play is not to demonstrate certain purpose or to express passion but to reveal perception. Mr Kenneth Burke, in an essay entitled "Psychology and Form," distinguishes two kinds of literary composition, "syllogistic progression," in which the reader is led from one part of the composition to another by means of logical relationships, and "qualitative progression," . . . in which the reader is led, according to a "logic of feeling," by means of association and contrast.'<sup>24</sup>

Apparently Yeats's drama belongs to the latter category, and his verse plays were significant as a nucleus of the renaissance of modern verse play, especially that of T. S. Eliot's. Eliot paid tribute to Yeats's experimental verse plays: "Yeats had nothing, and we have had Yeats."<sup>25</sup> Even from this comment we know how significant Yeats's verse drama was. Sean O'Casey also praises the greatness of Yeats as a dramatist and the theatre manager: ". . . he made the Abbey a great theatre . . . . After he died it went downhill. There was no one left to fight for it and protect it from the political and clerical yahoos."<sup>26</sup>

Thus Yeats's entire life was devoted to theatre activities as

well as poetry-writing. There is an unmistakable trace of nationalistic motive in his play, but his stance is seen in the idea that drama is a picture of the immortal passion in mortal human beings. Countess Cathleen's self-sacrifice is not only from the nationalistic cause but a transcendental way of accepting one's fortune. Yeats was successful in embodying supreme goodness and virtue in her. Yeats worked whole-heartedly for verse drama from this *The Countess Cathleen to Purgatory* (1939) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939) to lay the firm foundation of Irish theatre in Ireland. His contribution to modern drama should be highly estimated.

### Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), p. 46.
2. Eric Bentley, "Yeats as a Playwright," *Kenyon Review*, X (Spring, 1948), p. 197, quoted in David R. Clark, *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1965), p. 14.
3. Peter Thomson & Gamini Salgado, *The Everyman Companion to the Theatre* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1985), p. 77.
4. James Hogg (ed.), *Poetic Drama & Poetic Theory* (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1981), p. 39.
5. "An Irish National Theatre," *Collected Works*, 1908, IV, pp. 121-22, quoted in Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer, *The World of W. B. Yeats* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7. In several letters in the year 1889, Yeats indicated his desire to write a poetic drama based upon the tale of Countess Kathleen O'Shea. In April he informed Katherine Tynan that the "new poem" would be "in all ways quite dramatic," and that it "five scenes" and be "full of action." Cf. Leonard E. Nathan, *The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 20.
8. W. B. Yeats, *Collected Plays* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 3.

All the following quotations from *The Countess Cathleen* are from this edition, and page references are cited in the text.

9. Liam Miller, *The Noble Drama of W. B. Yeats* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1977), p. 10.
10. "It is true that Maud Gonne, whom Yeats met for the first time on January 30, 1889, shortly after the publication of *The Wandering of Oisín*, was very much present in his mind when the play was begun in March." Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963), p. 17.
11. Maud Gonne Macbride, *A Servant of the Queen* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938), p. 136.
12. Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 317.
13. E. F. Lucas, *The Drama of Chekhov, Synge, Yeats and Pirandello* (London: Cassel & Co. Ltd., 1963), p. 289.
14. Glenda Leeming, *Poetic Drama* (London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1989), p. 30.

15. W. B. Yeats, *Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 416.
16. W. B. Yeats, *Dramatis Personae* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1935), p. 39.
17. Cf. Leonard E. Nathan, *The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 29.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
21. Ashley E. Myles, *Theatre of Aristocracy* (Salzburg: Institut fur Alglistik und Amerikanistik Universitat Salzburg, 1981 ), p. 39.
22. Robin Skelton & Ann Saddlemyer (eds.), *The World of W. B. Yeats* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), p. 60.
23. "The Freedom of the Theatre," *United Irishman*, November 1, 1902, p. 5., quoted in Robin Skelton & Ann Saddlemyer (eds.), *The World of W. B. Yeats*, p. 59.
24. Cf. David R. Clark, *W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1965), p. 26.
25. T. S. Eliot, "The Poetry of W. B. Yeats" in J. Hull and M. Steinmann (eds. ), *The Permanence of Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), p. 342.
26. E. H. Mikhail & John O'Riordan (eds. ), *The String and Twinkle* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1974), p. 162.