

# **Cathleen, Celticism, and Cosmos: The Prototype of Yeats's Vision in *Cathleen ni Houlihan***

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## **Abstract**

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* is one of William Butler Yeats's plays that has been the subject of a considerable number of critics for its evident nationalist theme. To broaden Yeats's envision of Ireland, the research, instead of focusing on nationalism, approaches Yeats's employment of Celtic esoteric elements, as well as his cyclic historicism to explore the prototype of his philosophical system in this early-stage work. To be specific, through textual analysis of three dynamic images that the mythical character Cathleen expresses, as well as the interaction between allegorical meanings of Cathleen and Yeats's cyclic philosophical system, the article will present a microcosmic sight of Yeats's vision of mythological transcendence of Ireland.

**Keywords:** Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Celtic myth, Cyclicity

## 1. Introduction

Some writers are capable of presenting a splendid spectacle of universal history and human civilisation in one vast composition, such as that of James Joyce and his *Finnegan's Wake*. William Butler Yeats, however, hides his universe in small nutshells, in which he delicately delineates every corner of Ireland as a microcosm and through which is a broader world, an imagery nation beyond time and space. Yeats's poetic sensibilities, involving the extensiveness of his esoteric study of Celtic mythology and lifetime pursuit for the identity of "Celticity", inspire him to mythologise self-experience and culture into a new mode of presentation that is historical, political, philosophical and cosmic. During the period of the Celtic Revival, Yeats composed various spiritual plays that mainly dealt with the theme of resurrection. Eagleton Terry fittingly comments that Yeats's myth-creation is related to "dissolved and re-ordered the historical uneasiness by a new system of imagery" (6). Yeats's constriction of his system is throughout his lifetime, which renders a possibility to explore the prototypes of his philosophical system from his early stage works when he had not self-acknowledged and theorised his myth system, instanced best in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.

*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, one of Yeats's early plays, is about a rural family in west Ireland. The setting conveys a political metaphor: the time of this story was set in 1798 when French troops landed at Killala in the west of Ireland in which many Irish peasants joined them to defend the English. It is known that Ireland had a protracted engagement with British colonialism since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the play, an Old Woman with sorrows showed up and claims "four beautiful green fields" of her home was invaded, which implies the four-country lands of Ireland (Yeats, *Collection* 213). Michael, who was going to have a marriage, sacrifices himself and rejuvenates the Old Woman who finally becomes "a young woman with the walk of a queen" (Yeats, *Collection* 229).

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* has been regarded as a pure nationalist manifesto by many critics. The earliest study about this play was by Horatio Sheafe Krans' *Yeats and The Irish Literary Revival*, in which the book claims that Yeats brings back dignity to the image of Ireland with her embodiment of Cathleen (Horatio 2). Then, the main character Cathleen began to receive attention after Diane Stubbings in *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal from Yeats to Joyce* indicated the myth-archetype of Cathleen as a mother figure for national proposes (Stubbings 12). Crain Craig claims in *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry* that Yeats's artistic and cultural recognition is much more obvious than his political orientation in this play (Craig 12). It is undeniable that nationalism is a central concern of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which I will positively demonstrate in this research. However, instead of binding the

theme in the framework of national awareness or cultural identity, the article will approach Yeats late philosophical system to direct the focus back to his journey to draw a dynamic interpretation of this play in a developing view.

The thesis tends to trace the blurry outline of Yeats's post-philosophical system by textual analysis of the three different metamorphoses that Cathleen, this mythical character expresses. Cathleen is first portrayed as a goddess mother, who encourages patriotism. Then, with the development of radical nationalism, Cathleen turns into a devouring mother who asks for a blood sacrifice. Finally, the binary opposition of Cathleen suggests is deconstructed with the third image: a nostalgic supernatural presence of primitivism. Therefore, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a condensation of Irish history, in all its idealism and failure, sacrifice and rebirth, as well as recession and resurrection within a Cycle, which is exactly the structure of Yeats's mythological universe. The following three parts will provide a detailed analysis of Cathleen's three different images from shallow to deep strata, as well as the profound prototypical meanings that Yeats imparts to her.

## 2. Cathleen as a Goddess Mother

In Irish mythology and legend, the female figures are pictured with diverse images such as hag, virgin, warrior or other embodiments. Ireland is the name of a Goddess in a Celtic myth called Ériu. During Celtic Revival, mother figures have been revived in many pieces of literature with profound connotations that represent national ideals or goals by Gaelic revivalists. The mythical mother's role became caught up within nationalist and religious discourses, such as in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *Mother Ireland*, *Dark Rosaleen* and *Shan Van Vocht*. According to Kristeva, Irish mother figures "became a significant element in Irish resistance to British imperialism" (120).

In the play, the Old Woman's name, which is indicated by the title *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, has already been employed by Yeats in his poem "Kathleen-Ny-Hoolihan", and then was portrayed in his myth collection *The Secret Rose* as "Cathleen, the Daughter of Houlihan" (Yeats, *Fairy and Folk* 9). Cathleen is an authoritative and innovative Goddess Mother that Yeats refashioned from a mythological figure in Celtic mythology called Caileach ("hag" in Gaelic), a creator deity and an ancestor deity. Additionally, the mother figure is a sympathetic image to appeal to the audience into mythical structures. Elizabeth Cullingford contends the significance of female characters in directing the male into the dimension of nationality: "the love of a woman is a strong enough metaphor for the love of country" (Cullingford 85). In this

play, Cathleen appropriately conveys the mythical metamorphosis of Mother Ireland:

OLD WOMAN: But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends. Too many strangers are in the house. [...] the land that was taken from me, my four beautiful green fields. (Yeats, *Plays* 7)

Although the nationalist implications in Cathleen's words are evident, for Gillanes, her statement about the British invasion functions as dramatic irony, rather than Gillanes, only the audience may potentially read her words with symbolic meaning. What the Old Woman indicates, in her guise of Irish historical events, is the access to myth. Roland Barthes refers to the "form which is empty but present, it's meaning absent but full, and this is precisely what the Old Woman's words entail (10). Furthermore, to manifest the divinity of Cathleen as a Goddess Mother, Yeats delicately sets an inversion of two types of mother figure: the familial mother and the mythical mother. Bridget Gillane is a familial mother who must be obedient and serve her family, while Cathleen ni Houlihan conversely, is a to-be-served mythical mother. In the story, the tension between two mothers is grasped when Michael Gillane chooses between Cathleen, through whom the country will be revitalised, and his biological mother Bridget Gillane, as well as his Intended Delia, who is going to be the new familial mother in the home. There is a line uttered by Delia that "leave me alone now till I ready the house for the woman that is to come into it", which symbolises the household mother image has been replaced by the mythical mother Cathleen to rejuvenate, both the family and nation (Yeats, *Plays* 239).

Furthermore, Diane Stubbings suitably perceives Cathleen, as a typical mythical mother figure here, bearing the impress of "the intense pre-oedipal relationship" she shared with her children (45). Michael is attracted by mythical mother's song and proposes to offer: "I do not know what that song means, but tell me something I can do for you", and his mother Bridget describes: "he has the look of a man that has got the touch" (Yeats, *Plays* 229). This impression is strengthened by the fact that it is the song Cathleen sings, rather than her conversation, which proves decisively compelling for Michael:

OLD WOMAN: They shall be remembered forever, they shall be alive forever, they shall be speaking forever.

BRIDGET: Look here, Michael, at the wedding clothes. Such grand clothes as these are! You have a right to fit them on now; it would be a pity tomorrow if they did not fit. (Yeats, *Plays* 229)

Both the mother's attempt to engage Michael, who struggles with his decision, which, however, is a feeble and temporary resistance because Cathleen calls him with the name of Goddess Mother. Michael pursues the mother in whom his patriotic complex is guaranteed, which is suggested by Stubbings as "a romantic heroism" (7). It is a subjectivity that his biological mother, Bridget Gillane failed to complete. Therefore, Cathleen also represents a "desired mother" who can offer her son a heroic future and an immortal soul.

Michael's choice of following Cathleen and sacrifice for Goddess mother is bravery, as per the nationalist version, is a happy ending. Cathleen is a familiar cultural figure that Yeats drew on both esoteric and popular sources, which combines the tradition of the Celtic culture, the old hag who is rejuvenated when her people fight and sacrifice for her, with a rooted sense of human sacrifice to the goddess. At the end of the play, Patrick returns and reports, "the boys are all hurrying down the hillside to join the French" (Yeats, *Plays* 230). That is the calling from Mother Ireland who derives her dramatic power from a symbolic identification with the land of Ireland current in both nationalist iconography and the Irish mythology that Yeats was engaged in recovering. Therefore, the personification of Cathleen as Goddess mother is the most uncontested mythical image she may carry in the historical context of the Independent Movement. In this stage, Yeats models her as a Fair Ériu whose "femininity" inscribes several virtues of the nation: idealism, self-sacrifice and spiritual victor.

### 3. Cathleen as a Keen Woman and Devouring Mother

In a certain historical context, Cathleen is portrayed as a heroic mother figure who motivates her people to fight for Ireland. However, with the development of radical movement, Yeats implicatively expresses his anxiety about sacrificial nationalism through Michael's rejection of marriage and turning to brutal warfare and grave. In this case, Cathleen is ulteriorly pictured as a Devouring Mother who derives from a figure in a Celtic myth called Morrighu, an old sow who eats her young. Apart from the heroism, Cathleen implies the dangers of Irish mass nationalism by emphasising that "answering the siren call of the country is invariably fatal" (Stubbings 23).

In the text, the evil image of Cathleen as a Devouring Mother starts from her keening song. She is a keening woman who is commonly known as "the bean chaointe" in a Celtic culture that inhabited a liminal state between the living and the death. Keening women's sound of weep is similar to a grave song, which is the same with Cathleen's crying:

OLD WOMAN:

Do not make a great keening,  
When the graves have been dug tomorrow.

For the dead that shall die tomorrow,  
They will have no need of prayers,  
They will have no need of prayers. (Yeats, *Plays* 225)

The keening women's song repeats in a certain pattern that gives the status of a ritual incantation. She does not convince Michael by rationality, but it works on Michael by putting him into a trance, instead of appealing to an identifiable personal or national emotion. Michael does renounce his fiancée Delia Chael so much as to forget her by asking "What wedding are you talking about?" and recalling her only partially (Yeats, *Plays* 223). More obviously, at the end of the story, when Michael hesitates to leave his crying bride, the witchery song rises again, and unsurprisingly, Michael "breaks away from Delia, then rushes out following the Old Woman's song" (Yeats, *Plays* 229). Therefore, Michael's decision is not the expression of his conscious accord but a consequence of its suppression. Michael's transformation into a follower of Cathleen erases his aspirations, subjectivity and previous life altogether. As Cathleen says, "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (Yeats, *Plays* 226). These incantatory lines gain an ominous fatalism. While assuming the appearance of a goddess, the Old Woman Cathleen ironically does not sacrifice herself for her people but requires them to sacrifice for her and "red" her cheek with their blood (Yeats, *Plays* 226). More obviously, when she refuses the offer of milk, the Old Woman is allusively characterised as a vampire who only drinks blood to maintain her life. There is no better evidence of this than the transformation of the Old Woman into a young girl: Michael's death brings this vampire's resurgence after sucking blood.

Furthermore, the vampire-like Devouring mother Cathleen even has a powerful accomplice who causes Yeats anxiety: the invisible, but indeed existing "cheering crowd" of the mob (Yeats, *Plays* 218). In the opening line of the play, Michael's mother Bridget asks her husband Peter: "what is that sound I heard", which implicatively introduces the mob who blindly call for a sacrifice (218). Then, the sound of the crowd "reappears" and repeats more and more frequently: "They are cheering again down in the town"; "They're not done cheering yet" (221-2). The instigated cheering is throughout the whole story as a backdrop that shouts approval for Michael's sacrifice. When Peter asks the Old Woman if she has heard it, she replies, "I thought I heard the noise I used to hear when my friends came to visit me", and the friend is regarded by her "They are gathering to help me now" (227). Perceptibly, the crowd is



the mob, the sons of Devouring Mother who assist her in sending the young man to the sacrificial altar. The sound of the cheering crowd works the same way with Cathleen's keening that hypnotises Michael into death.

The evil image of the crowds, Yeats in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* connotes the fact as per his political awareness: the crowd is like the mob, the irrational political actors who instigate the tragedy. Maud Gonne, the Irish revolutionary who plays the role of Cathleen, comments that during their political work: "he (Yeats) hated crowds; I loved them", as a thorough nationalist, Gonne separates herself from Yeats, "he has a higher work to do, with me it is different. I was born to be in the midst of a crowd"(Hassett 8). For Yeats, Gonne's connection with crowds is similar to Cathleen and the cheering crowds in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. He portrays Cathleen as a Goddess embodiment of mother Ireland, the "higher work" he intends to achieve, however, renders him an ambivalent mentality to see Cathleen as a Devouring Mother: mass politics and blind sacrifice cannot bring a bright future to Ireland.

Therefore, the conflict Yeats deliberately identified between the future of Ireland and the private dreams of its citizens, represented by Bridget and Delia, is embodied in the uncertain images of Cathleen ni Houlihan between Goddess Mother and Devouring Mother, which on another level, mirrors Yeats' ideology transfers from advocating self-sacrifice for Ireland to a position that questions the significance of patriotism, or more pessimistic, questions whether an individual can confront the historical progress. In Yeats's 1910 essay, "J.M. Synge and Ireland of his Time" attacks the petrified nationalism that carries its adherents to the scaffold, which has lost the ability to adapt to new challenges and precludes any innovative approach to the problem of Ireland's political or cultural liberation (Yeats, *Collection* 564). *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, indicated by the co-author Lady Gregory, mirrors Yeats's departure from the "school of patriotism that held sway over his youth" and his searches for a new dramatic idiom that will be more congenial to "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland" (Cusack 89). According to Yeats, the ideals of nationhood cannot be achieved by violent political action, but should be constructed from within, from the inner power of culture, which endows Cathleen a more profound significance: the recuperation of pre-scientific custom.

#### 4. Cathleen as Primitivism supernatural Presence

Beyond the opposition of Goddess and Devouring mother, Cathleen on a broader scale has a more subtle but profound meaning: a supernatural presence comes from a pre-modern world, which coincidentally, could be traced back to the initial idea of Yeats's playwriting during the

Irish Theatre Movement: with the forms of spiritual drama, deliberately set against the commercialist and realist trends within British theatre of the time. Being disappointed in political movements, Yeats's vision turns from modernisation to a nostalgic and primitive Celticism. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats creates a pre-modern world in rural Ireland where all religious beliefs and mythical manifestations are interconnected. From this aspect, the responsibility that supernatural character Cathleen carries is not the positive or negative heroism, but the idea of Primitivism, which sets against the utilitarian, material and commercial ideology. Yeats's proposal is predominately on recalling a prior mythological union that had since undergone deviation during the period of modernisation.

In the text, the subject of poverty to historical and political resonance the trauma of the Great Famine was in the memories of Irish people. In Yeats' other play, *Countess Cathleen*, he symbolically represents the Famine and critics commodity and structure of value through the plot that God-like, supernatural Countess Cathleen sells her soul to exchange gold and silver to succour her people in famine. As a spiritual dramatist, Yeats seeks adequate representations of Irish national identity by drawing on images from Irish history, folklore and mythology, which be put in a theatrical framework of the belief of supernatural existence in reality. Through the employments of supernatural elements in plays, Yeats draws traditional Irish discourses into the process of modernisation, which he believes can distinguish his culture from British realism and pure materialism. In *Yeats and European Drama*, Michael McAteer points out that Yeats's early play offers an "articulating sense of alienation bearing a significant relation on Marx's critique of value to politically loaded and historically recognisable" (78). In this sense, the peasantry class and rural setting, as well as the supernatural presence of deity Cathleen, he intentionally introduces in this play, characterises a growing sense of dislocation in the society of modern industrial Europe.

In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, it is exposed at the beginning of the story that the scarcity induced families to accommodate religious belief to economic needs:

PETER: Those are grand clothes, indeed

BRIDGET: You hadn't clothed like that when you married me, and no coat to put on of a Sunday more than any other day. (Yeats, *Plays* 222)

Michael's parents Peter and Bridget, whose names originally convey an obvious Catholic significance: in the marriage of them is an implication of the Irish Catholic alliance with Rome, on the name of St. Peter (the Bishop of Rome), and the Christianisation of pagan Ireland: "Brigid" was originally a pagan goddess who came to be adopted into Christianity as an Irish



saint (Yeats, *Twilling* 23). Ironically, the “grand clothes”, which signifies that fetishism replaces Christianity and believers’ “pilgrim souls” (Yeats, *Twilling* 90). It is a foreshowing of the appearance of Cathleen as an anti-commerce supernatural presence.

The bag of money brought by Michael’s bride Delia as dowry is implicatively presented as a character, who is given up by Michael for his decision of following Cathleen ni Houlihan. In the story, Delia, as a less significant role, only has a commercial value with the bag of money and appears at the end to appeal to Michael to stay. However, Cathleen, the poor old woman, keeps herself away from commerce throughout the whole story. When Michael’s father, Peter Gillane offers her a shilling, she refuses:

BRIDGET: Will you have a drink of milk, ma’am?

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

OLD WOMAN: This is not what I want, it is not silver I want. (Yeats, *Plays* 225)

According to folk tradition, an offer of money was an insult to the fairy world. In this sense, it is obvious that the appealing and governing force of commerce do not work on the Old Woman, this supernatural presence from the primitivist world, as it does on the Gillanes. The motif of “milk drinking” has a very special esoteric meaning as a pretext for calling supernatural strangers in ancient writings. The Old Woman starts showing her supernatural attribution after she rejects the offer of milk. Their sinister undercurrents and uncanny effects provide a discreet signal of the dehumanising nature of material production, as Foster Hirsch describes as “unhuman”, which derived from Marx’s theory of alienation that the tendency to see other people as less than human arose from a historical situation of scarcity (Hirsch 154). According to the Old Woman’s curse: “They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid” (Yeats, *Plays* 229). The word “paid” negligibly connects with connotations of materialism. Cathleen is a supernatural presence to take Michael away from his faithless and materialistic parents, Peter and Bridget, who bond their son’s marriage and happiness with the dowry. To seek an “unhuman” power from primitive past and recalls the appearance of the supernatural belief of people, metaphorically, Yeats promotes a primitivist view of rural Ireland consistent with the ideology of Empire. Cathleen as a supernatural manifestation signifies Yeats’s move beyond the revolution of nationalism and recuperation of pre-scientific custom.

## 5. Yeats's Cosmos: Predestined Cycles of Reincarnation

As I endeavour to demonstrate, the three images of Cathleen develop through a cyclical path from twilight pre-modern to modern, and then goes back to Irish primitive past, with the same trace that the Old Women rejuvenates and looks “like a young girl” (Yeats, *Plays* 229).

For Yeats, the time does not go unilinear, which allows people to return to the ancient year after the failure of nationalist pursuit during modernisation. Correspondingly, there is no set beginning or defined end. At the end of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Michael's younger brother Patrick who was absent for most of the time, returns after Michael's sacrifice, symbolising a spiritual transformation. Through Patrick's eyes, Cathleen appears as “a young girl” who “walks like a queen” (Yeats, *Plays* 229). Cathleen's rejuvenation outlines a multifaceted, esoteric system of thought, centred on cycles of change, which Yeats demonstrates systematically into a philosophical exposition: *A Vision*.

The cyclical ideal then is theorised as a Cycle of Gyration in *A Vision*, which is a way to interpret historical changes: each cycle of history runs for 2000 years and then turns back. The historic cycles emerge as an explicitly national phenomenon that Yeats frequently refers to Plato's *Timaeus*, which describes a concept of cyclical time. Yeats mentions in *A Vision* that only the ancient Greeks have the system of thought that can “leave imagination free” and “create part of the history” (Yeats, *Vision* 2). Perceiving from Yeats's circular historicism, the spiritual transformation in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* can be detected through the reincarnation of people. In the family, Peter and Bridget, as mentioned, can be traced back to Saint Peter's era around 30AC. Furthermore, their son Patrick has the same name as St. Patrick, the first apostle and patron saint of Ireland; whose return brings a brand-new start. That is why he appears with Cathleen's transfiguration into a young girl. Through the allegories of their names, Yeats allusively implies a much longer history. From St Peter's era to 1798, it is around a 2000-year historical cycle he suggests, also a new start for Ireland.

## 6. Conclusion

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* published in 1901, at the turning point of the century, serves as a prototype for politics, or cultural responsibilities, it also renders us a glimpse of Yeats' cosmic vision of history and civilization. With an understanding of the cyclic system, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is a micro-universe, which Yeats creates with mythical allegory and attempts to discover the different possibilities of Irish cultural connotation through the recovery of the

Celtic mythical system as an imaginary universe. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, Yeats remoulds the mythical figuration of Cathleen in a certain historical context, while skillfully bonding her with Irish nationality and his future vision. Therefore, the historical reality and Yeats's self-myth are intertextual in this play. With the conventions of nationalist drama, self-created mythology and the occult, Cathleen becomes a trope, through which it can blend Irish history and the mythical world as both political unit and mystical force. Furthermore, the multifaceted images of Cathleen allusively reflect Yeats' understanding of the world. The macro universe he erects is processing in Cathleen's micro-universe following a cyclic track. The immortality Yeats pursues is through "being chronicled into an eternal world", whereas "gaining an embodiment from the physical world" (Wellek and Austin 319).

W. H. Auden, in his poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", profoundly epitomises Yeats's lifetime with his much-loved homeland: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry" (Auden 42). In the most troubled times of Ireland, Yeats realises the periodical decline of history is inescapable. It is a tragedy that individuals try to project their life and soul into the infinite pursuit of the outside world. Therefore, Yeats poetically creates an "eternal world" — a spatiotemporal and cyclic structure that coexists with reality and myth, history and future, in which Cathleen, his beloved Ireland will be revitalised as a young girl.

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