

# The Construction of Irish Cultural Identity in Yeats's Poetry

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W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), Noble Prize winner for literature in 1923, is an influential Irish poet, playwright and critic. This paper will discuss that Yeats is devoted to seek and construct Irish cultural identity in his poetry because of the Irish cultural and identity crisis as well as his own identity anxiety. Yeats endeavours to establish a distinctly Irish cultural identity through reviving Irish traditional folklore, myths and legends, hybridising English language, and absorbing oriental culture in his poetry.

*Keywords:* W. B. Yeats, poetry, construction of cultural identity, Irish cultural identity, Irish Literary Revival

## 1. Yeats and Ireland

### 1.1 Irish National and Cultural Identity Crisis

As the first British colony, Ireland was deeply influenced by British colonial history. In the 12th century, Norman invaders settled in Ireland and turned some parts of the country into Anglo-Norman colonies. Gradually, they integrated into the whole country and eventually became "Old English" or Anglo-Irish of Ireland (Kee, 2003). During the British colonial rule over Ireland for nearly eight centuries, although the colonial and anti-colonial forces were struggling repeatedly, the British colonial power over Ireland was far greater than the anti-colonial power on the whole.

In the colonial period, British government implemented political rules to oppress the Irish nation economically and culturally. Economically, British government levied the majority of Ireland's gross product of grains as high taxes, which posed a heavy burden on Irish peasants. In addition, Irish economic policy was controlled by England, which undermined Ireland's economic development. In 1666, Cattle Acts was passed by Westminster parliament to prohibit Irish cheap herds from entering Britain. Culturally, Irish people were forbidden to use the Gaelic language. After centuries of colonial rule, English became the dominant language in Ireland. In the 1840s, the Great Famine occurred in disastrous Ireland, and as many as one million native speakers starved to death. After the disaster, there were almost no original works in Gaelic. With the loss of Gaelic language, Irish people lost their memories of their glorious history and their understanding of history was basically poured in by Britain. People's concept of country was weak and they lacked the consciousness of resisting colonists, thus being on the edge of national identity crisis and cultural identity crisis. Under the control of British colonial discourse, the Irish nation became the object of colonial discourse, the mute who could not describe its own history, and the other who lost its collective memory and were marginalized.

## 1.2 Yeats's Identity Anxiety

Yeats's identity anxiety in his youth stemmed from Anglo-Irish identity background and his personal life experience. Yeats was born in a middle-class Protestant family in Dublin. His father John Butler Yeats was a lawyer, but later he decided to become a painter. His mother Susan Pollexfen came from a wealthy Sligo merchant family. Later, they moved to London and Yeats began to take classes in London. However, lack of discipline and business awareness, the economic situation of the family declined. The children and their mother spent some time in Sligo. For Yeats, Sligo was a fond memory of his childhood, where he heard many Irish folklore and myths from sailors and peasants. Yeats inherited many Irish cultural traditions due to this special split life experience, such as a mixture of Anglo-Irish, Gaelic and English. However, young Yeats used to miss Sligo because London was a painful place compared with the happy times in Sligo. Yeats recalled in his autobiography, "an obscene, bullying place, where a big boy would hit a small boy in the wind to see him double up, and where certain boys, too young for any emotion of sex, would sing the dirty songs of the street" (Yeats, 1961a, p. 64). In addition, Yeats was ridiculed for being Irish and lost almost all his fistfights (Yeats, 1961a, pp. 59-63). Yeats depicted his complicated feelings of love and hatred for Britain and British culture:

...no people, Lecky said at the opening of his Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, have undergone greater persecution, nor did that persecution altogether cease up to our own day. No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive...I remind myself that, though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate... Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue. (Yeats, 1961b, p. 520)

Identity is complicated, Irish identity perhaps particularly so. In Shakespeare's *Henry V* (Shakespeare, 1965), when challenged by Welsh captain Fluellen, Irish captain MacMorris raised a question about Anglo-Irish identity: "Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal. What is my nation? Who talks of my nation (Shakespeare, 1965, pp. 124-126)?" The typical characteristics of Irish man were described "a villain, a bastard and a knave and a rascal". James Joyce also talked about language issues in his novel *A Portrait of Artist as a Young Man* (2008). In one episode, the young Irish artist Stephen Dedalus speaks of lighting a lamp. The Irish student uses "tundish" while the English Dean uses "funnel". The 19th-century Anglo-Irish people, represented by Yeats, were confused about their identity. Yeats belonged to the intellectual and artistic group of the Anglo-Irish, who were interested in native culture and were nationalist in political views, but still maintained the British way of life. However, for Irish Catholics, they were associated with English colonists; in England, they were ridiculed for being Irish. They belonged to no group. The phrase "Anglo-Irish solitude" is repeatedly employed by Yeats in his later period.

## 2. Distinctively Irish Cultural Identity

Yeats believed that literature should shape the cultural identity of a country. He once said, "I understand my own race and in all my work, lyric or dramatic, I have thought of it ... I shall write for my own people, whether in love or hate of them matters little, probably I shall not know which it is" (Howarth, 1959, p. 111). This creed is evident in most of Yeats's literary works. His main goal of literary creation was to construct a distinctively Irish cultural identity away from the influence of English dominance. Yeats was inspired by John

O'Leary to launch Irish Literary Revival Movement and advocated the creation of a distinctively Irish literature to awake the Irish people's sense of national independence. This movement was to replace Englishness with Irishness (Deane, 1985). Yeats endeavoured to elevate Irish national culture and to resist British colonial culture.

A lasting Irish literature in English could not develop unless writers were willing to commit themselves to Irish nationalism. No great literature could exist without nationality; no nationality could define itself without great literature. If Ireland were ever to gain her political and cultural freedom, the Irish writers would have to provide the climate for it by helping create a national imagination which was distinctively Irish. Irish writers should write about Ireland and they should write in a recognizably Irish style. Because the Irish language was virtually dead, Irish writers would have to use English, but by studying the mythology and legend of ancient Ireland as well as the folklore and history of modern Ireland and by listening to the English actually spoken in Ireland, the writers could find a subject and a style which were distinctively their own (Fallis, 1977, pp. 5-6).

### 3. The Construction of Irish Cultural Identity in Yeats's Poetry

#### 3.1 Reviving Irish Traditional Folklore, Myths and Legends

Under the background of colonisation, folklore became a powerful tool for integrating history and culture, past and present, determining the survival of Irish culture and subverting the status of colonised people. Therefore, folklore is placed in an essential position in the construction of Irish cultural identity. The "national literature" he calls for in the 1890s would not search for its identity in European tradition, but in Ireland's own folk tradition; and the fundamental difference between Ireland and other European countries lies in that Ireland remained in an epic era, in which folk culture constituted the foundation of national literature (Zhou, 2019). In addition, Yeats believed myths played an important role in the construction of Irish cultural identity. Yeats cherishes the past and looks forward to the Celtic myth as a possible site on which to build an edifice of Irish identity (Harrison, 2019). Based on Irish folklore, legends and myths with unique Celtic colour, he composed *The Madness of King Goll* (2008), *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea* (2008), and *The Wanderings of Oisín* (2008) and other poems. By reinterpreting them, Yeats devotes to revive legendary Celtic heroes like King Goll, Cuchulain and Oisín in his poetry. He re-creates the heroes with his imagination, combining their environment with the plight of modern Ireland. Yeats believed that his subject matter became Irish from writing *The Wanderings of Oisín* (Jeffares, 1984).

*The Wanderings of Oisín* is based on the Irish myths. Oisín, the son of Fianna, was lured away from fairy princess Niamh and lived carefree life on three islands of Dancing, Victories and Forgetfulness for 300 years. However, after hearing the call of Fianna heroes, he decided to return to Ireland, guarding the country together with Fianna warriors (Jeffares, 1996). Oisín was an ideal hero image in Yeats's mind. He was both a Fianna warrior and a talented poet who guarded Ireland dutifully together with other Fianna heroes. Oisín is a Celtic hero worthy of praise as he was willing to sacrifice his personal happiness for the benefit of the country, even if this sacrifice was at the expense of aging and death. Various worldly temptations became insignificant compared with patriotism. Oisín was not only a hero from Irish myths, but also a representative of Irish people who should be patriotic, brave and persistent in Yeats's view. The poet's praise of Oisín reflects his deep call for heroes like Oisín, because Ireland under British colonial rule needs heroes like him to boost morale and to

rebuild their homeland. Similarly, Ireland's call to Oisín is also the call of Ireland in plight to its people. Colonial Ireland needs heroes like Oisín to sacrifice everything for national independence.

Through Irish folklore, myths and legends, Yeats not only depicted Ireland's past, but also restored Irish people's confidence. This awakened Irish people's heroic spirits and memories, and revealed the importance of the unity of Celtic Irish and Anglo-Irish in the construction of Irish national and cultural identity.

### 3.2 Hybridising English Language

Language is the embodiment of culture and collective memory, and it is necessary to involve language issues to construct Irish cultural identity. Ireland traditionally used Gaelic or Celtic, and their works had a history of over a thousand years. Under the rule of England, Gaelic was on the verge of extinction. It is essential to save the Gaelic language, to preserve and use it more frequently and universally to ensure the independence of Irish culture. Yeats prefers to create poetry in English, because he does not understand Celtic and he believes that English is more conducive to the revival and spread of traditional Irish literature. His use of the language seems to be a recognition of English colonisation as writing poetry in English requires the author to follow its rules and habits, which makes it difficult to construct a unique cultural identity and objectively helps prolong the British cultural colonisation from the point of language.

However, Yeats rebuilt, transformed and converted English in Irish way, and created a new form of English that mixed Gaelic words grammar and pronunciation. Therefore, His poetry is Irish in content while it is British in form. Yeats's efforts to search for a hybrid poetry form help to establish Irish cultural identity through English. He consciously promoted Irish traditions, rhythms and forms, appropriating and changing the English literary traditions and English language. The poet seeks to highlight Irish characteristics through the adoption of Celtic subject matter and images, the lively and subtle form of Celtic ballad, and ancient Irish style. Yeats's creative method is symbolic, because the form, metrics and diction are Irish, general and historical. He wrote in *Under Ben Bulbin*: "Irish poets, learn your trade,/ Sing whatever is well made,/... Cast your mind on other days/ That we in coming days may be /Still the indomitable Irishry (2008, pp. 303-304).

### 3.3 Absorbing Oriental Culture

Fanon (2007) believes that native people of culture involve both the responsibility of national culture and the global responsibility, and the establishment of a country is bound to be accompanied by the encouragement and discovery of universal values. According to Said (1994), Ireland and other countries including China and Japan, are in one group, although they are usually treated separately. Irish culture, like that of many other colonial countries, is subordinate, as all of them belong to the category of "Other", even though these countries are farther apart. Yeats turned to the oriental cultural which he found were interesting, profound and powerful to enrich Irish culture and to construct Irish cultural identity.

Yeats composed poetry based on the elements of oriental culture. Japanese culture is presented in some of Yeats's poems. "All-destroying sword-blade" in *Symbols which* symbolises the destructive power of violence and ignorance is based on the gift from Japanese diplomat Sato in 1920. It was also mentioned in *My Table* and *A dialogue of Self and Soul*, respectively symbolising immortal art, and love and war. Moreover, Yeats's mask theory is greatly influenced by Japanese Noh which employs various masks to enhance dramatic effect. The Crazy Jane series of his poems prominently demonstrate the mask theory. Therefore, Yeats's thoughts and

poetry are deeply affected by Japanese culture, and this contributes to the construction of a new Irish cultural identity.

In addition to Japanese culture, Yeats employed Chinese elements which are presented in *Lapis Lazuli*.

Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
 Are carved in lapis lazuli,  
 Over them flies a long-legged bird,  
 ...  
 One asks for mournful melodies;  
 Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
 Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay. (Yeats, 2008, p. 251)

The “two Chinamen” are typical Chinese ancient sages, and the “long-legged bird” is a kind of crane. Yeats believes that the fate of dramatic figures is paid little attention to and the old people with wrinkled eyes have the unique wisdom of the oriental. They profoundly know that life and death are just like day and night, thus being calm, detached and cold, and enjoying “mournful melodies”.

Yeats absorbed the poetic craft and thought of Chinese ancient poetry. *Maid Quiet*: “Where has Maid Quiet gone to,/ Nodding her russet hood?/ The winds that awakened the stars/ Are blowing through my blood./ O how could I be so calm/ When she rose up to depart?/ Now words that called up the lightning/ Are hurtling through my heart (Yeats, 2008, p. 57).” *Memory*: “One had a lovely face,/ And two or three had charm,/ But charm and face were in vain/ Because the mountain grass/ Cannot but keep the form/ Where the mountain hare has lain (Yeats, 2008, p. 125).” The poems are short and concise, with Chinese characteristic images and artistic conceptions, resembling Chinese ancient metrical poetry.

John Rickard (1997) believes that Indian literature and philosophy offered Yeats viable options that he liked to replace his disliked materialism empiricism, rationalism, and modern urban culture. He describes that India was Yeats's “utopian, blank space” that “remained fundamentally connected with pre-Christian, pre-rational, pre-modern culture that had originally animated the now-degenerate Celts and, indeed, all of Indo-European culture” (1997, p. 101). Some of Yeats's poems involve in Indian culture, such as *Anashuya and Vijaya* (2008), *The Indian upon God* (1889) and *The Indian to His Love* (1889). In addition, Yeats's *Leda and the Swan* (2008) adopted the Indian concepts of Godhead, re-incarnation and Samadhi in Hindu myths.

Through mixing Irish culture with oriental culture and hybridising English Language, Yeats endeavours to establish distinctly Irish literature. His efforts have evoked Irish people's national national consciousness, elevated the status of Irish culture and made Irish culture more profound, inclusive, and open. This has promoted the construction of a new Irish cultural identity free from the influence of British dominance.

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