

Be a good irishman,
and fight: an analysis
of william butler
yeats's play cathlee...



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Literary composition was a fueling element in the Irish nationalist movement of the early twentieth century. William Butler Yeats undoubtedly placed himself as a leader in the Irish Literary Revival. While Yeats's nationalism was not as drastic as some revolutionaries whom he was, perhaps unenthusiastically, acquainted with, he often incorporates a strong commitment to Ireland and her people. To elucidate the motives for Irish independence, Yeats relates the Irish cause to his innate values of love and sacrifice, which envelop a broader propriety. In his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats contrasts mundane, materialistic life with the beauty, and the glory of martyrdom, specifically martyrdom for the cause of Irish independence. Yeats suggests that to cede one's life to a greater cause requires independence and a firm belief in the "Old High Way of Love (Adam's Curse)." Through his nationalist play, Yeats not only argues for Irish patriotism, but also for the patriotism to be fueled by romantic ideals. Yeats portrays the motives behind Michael and Delia's nuptials as materialistic and impure. In Michael's poor Irish family, Yeats shows a desperation for advancement in society. Since Yeats supports the Irish against the tyrannical British forces, he is clearly not against the concept of human betterment in society. However, it seems that Yeats feels that an individual's progress should not come from sacrifice of pure motives, like love, for the sake of economic advancement. Until Yeats introduces "The Old Woman" into the story, the conversation between Michael and his extended family is focused on their narcissistic fixation on Michael's wealth. Further compromising the sanctity of marriage, they discuss the wealth Delia will bring Michael in their union. The play begins with the gathering of Michael's extended family talking about Michael's aforementioned wedding. However, Michael's

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family's constant association of wealth with marriage leads this jabbering to seem utterly cant-like. Michael's father, Peter, says " Indeed, I wish I had the luck to get a hundred pounds, or twenty pounds itself, with the wife I married (157)". Peter's wife, Bridget, then encourages this materialism by stating how she serves Peter as his wife. She doesn't suggest adulation or devoted love for Peter, but rather, she states her most significant contribution to the marriage is her physical toil. She says, " If I brought no fortune I worked it out in my bones...while I dug the potatoes, and never asking big dresses or anything but to be working." The irony in Bridget's statement is that though she dismisses her immediate materialism by saying that she is " never asking big dresses." Her lack of recognition of love creates a sense of eternal materialism, as she sees her sole purpose as work. Yeats suggests that Bridget's, and possibly Ireland's, forced notion of frugality does not free them from any notions of materialism. Bridget's recognition that she had to sacrifice her materialism for the good of the family demonstrates that materialism is still a value, as relinquishing it seems to be some sort of sacrifice. Peter then enforces further this artificially dual nature of wealth and marriage when he says " It will be Patrick's turn next to be looking for a fortune." Peter's synonymous referral of " wife" and " fortune" suggests that in this age, Irish society has lost the emotional concept of family. Michael's family's inability to state, or even recognize, the righteous qualities of marriage institute an unholy backdrop to Michael and Delia's union. Yeats begins the play with a stark sense of materialism. With the materialism comes a mundane society even though it is poor and oppressed. Yeats places Michael at the heart of this society. Given the opportunity for a greater purpose in life, Michael has to choose whether to conform, and <https://assignbuster.com/be-a-good-irishman-and-fight-an-analysis-of-william-butler-yeatss-play-cathleen-ni-houlihan/>

struggle like all the rest, or separate, and fight for Ireland. This contrast leads the play to argue staunchly for independence. With the introduction of the “ old woman,” the allegorical nature of the play becomes clear. The old woman represents Ireland because she is poor, weakened, and mistreated. However, even in this depleted state, the woman still has an infallible allure which attracts those who are brave and independent. The woman calls upon the Irish to fight for her, for Ireland, and for themselves. The allegorical theme of the story is that if the old, beaten down Ireland is to gain her independence, she will require the unyielding support of her people. Set in 1798, immediately prior to an Irish revolt aided by the French, Cathleen Ni Houlihan takes place at the heart of England’s enclosure movement, where the English nobility seized the land and resources of peasants across Great Britain. Therefore, when the “ Old Woman” says “ My land was taken from me/ My four beautiful green fields (160),” Yeats is not only indicting the English aristocracy in the infliction of misery, but he is also identifying the wandering “ Old Woman” as a symbol for Ireland. Her “ four beautiful green fields” represent the four provinces of Ireland: Leinster, Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. Through the dialogue with the “ Old Woman,” Yeats identifies the Irish cause, while implementing very pro-Irish imagery in order to emphasize the Nationalism of the play. When asked “ what was it put you wandering,” the “ Old Woman” responds, “ Too many strangers in the house (160).” This openly demonstrates Irish nationalism, because Ireland, according to the “ Old Woman,” and Yeats, effectively, have been polluted by the English colonial presence. The “ Old Woman” stresses how long the Irish have struggled for independence: “ I have travelled far, very far; there are few have travelled so far as myself, and there’s many a one that doesn’t make <https://assignbuster.com/be-a-good-irishman-and-fight-an-analysis-of-william-butler-yeatss-play-cathleen-ni-houlihan/>

me welcome (159)." The last portion of that sentence demonstrates that Ireland has been abused by " many a one," from the Normans to the Vikings to the the English, but also that many of Ireland's own have rejected this " Old Woman." Therefore, they have rejected their own duty to stand up for Ireland. Yet the " Old Woman" believes that the fight for Ireland's independence is still very much alive. She says, " Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me (160)." She does not think that Ireland has not grown limp with age. However, the " Old Woman" then points out that when Ireland faces times of difficulty and misfortune, she needs support from her patrons, as well as those abroad, such as the French. " But when trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends (160)." The " Old Woman" then states that a love for Ireland is often debilitating to the lover, claiming that " many a man has died for love of me." This once again underlines the ardent pride which many have for their Ireland, as well as the repeated persecution of the Irish. The " Old Woman" then expresses what she needs, and therefore, what Ireland needs, saying, " It is not food or drink that I want...I it is not silver I want...If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all (162)." Here, Yeats brings the thematic lesson back to materialism, when the " Old Woman" states that meager economic sacrifices won't affect the Irish cause, rather, all she needs is the Irishman " himself." The " Old Woman" is ever mindful of the risks involved in joining the fight for independence, especially the inherent risk of death, proclaiming, " Many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name (164)." The " Old Woman" then calls upon the family to join the French

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in fighting for themselves. Michael, entranced by a mystical allure, agrees doubtlessly, “ I will go with you (163).” The simple manner in which Michael agrees with the Old Woman affirms the simple nature of what she is asking. No long soliloquies are needed for Michael to ponder this decision; he is simply entranced, without realizing the possible drawbacks to such a monumental decision. The ease with which Michael rejects his materialism for a greater truth demonstrates Yeats’ convictions regarding love and martyrdom. Yeats suggests that to fully love is to be utterly absent of hesitation, and that martyrdom, ironically, leads to eternal life. Michael’s fallacious relationship with Delia is the antithesis of what Yeats would call “ The Old High Way of Love (Adam’s Curse.)” Yet in the story, Yeats contrasts Michael’s marriage with his seemingly uncontrollable pursuit for the “ Old Woman.” And while Michael’s quest to find the “ Old Woman” is not of a romantic journey, the intensity of his emotion mirrors how Yeats feels romantic love should be. In the same quote which the “ Old Woman” lets known that death is a symptom of martyrdom, she argues that martyrdom enables, or even ensures eternal life: They shall be remembered for ever, They shall be alive for ever, They shall be speaking for ever, The people shall hear them for ever (164). By placing these claims directly after successive negative aspects of sacrificing oneself for Ireland, Yeats can effectively dismiss the economic or personal drawbacks to the attainment of eternal presence. Yeats also stresses the independence that martyrdom requires. He believes that a man must be able to reject his mundane social norms and habits, the quality of life which he possesses, and his assured stability. A Man must be willing to throw everything away, if he wants to carry out his unshakable convictions of love and pride, which are more universal qualities

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which contribute to a valid but relatively local Irish nationalism. The final allegorical image of the play reaffirms that martyrdom for Ireland can make Ireland young again, and therefore, can make Ireland belong to the Irish again. “ Did you see an old woman going down the path? / I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen (165).” Yeats suggests firmly that before any action has taken place, Ireland will become strong again. This requires the Irish to be ready to give themselves to Ireland, and once they abandon their materialistic convictions, Ireland will be saved, at least internally. In William Butler Yeats’s allegorical play Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Yeats argues for marriage be based in the unceasing love of two people above all. He argues that instead of working to improve themselves economically in an oppressed society, the Irish should sacrifice themselves to change their society and return Ireland to her former prowess. He suggests that only through sacrificing oneself for a magnanimous and great cause, can man “ be alive for ever.” However, after living through years of violent struggle with the British, Yeats grew weary of his youthful idealism. Later in his career, as the death of young Irishman began to take its toll on Yeats’ naïve outlook towards martyrdom, he responded with a poem, “ Man and the Echo” which portrayed his newly cynical commentary on his previous work in “ Cathleen Ni Houlihan”: “ Did that play of mine send out Certain men the English shot.”