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Abstract

Examines not just how but why Yeats deviated from the original tales he mined for this material, shifting the focus and using the archetypal characters to demonstrate new themes and reinterpret traditional values.

Additional Keywords

Cuchulainn; Yeats, William Butler—Knowledge of Irish legends; Yeats, William Butler. "Cuchulain's Fight With the Sea"

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HANGING THE STORY: TRANSFORMATIONS OF MYTH IN YEATS'S POEM "CUCHULAIN'S FIGHT WITH THE SEA"

ROXANNE BOOSWORTH

AMONG THE POEMS WRITTEN BY W.B. YEATS which are narrative retellings of Irish myth is "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," first written in 1892 when it was entitled "The Death of Cuchullin." Yeats claimed that this poem was based upon an oral legend recorded by Jeremiah Curtin in *Myths and Folklore of Ireland* (1890) rather than upon the version found in ancient "bardic" literature (Allt 799). Yet there are few similarities between Yeats's poem and Curtin's tale and even fewer similarities with other versions of the myth.

According to Curtin's version, Cuchulain left a son named Connla with a woman known as the "Virago of Alba" ('Alba' was an ancient name for Scotland). When she hears that Cuchulain has another woman, the Virago sends their son to seek his father, making Connla first promise not to yield to any man nor tell his name to any until he has fought them. As strangers, Cuchulain and Connla engage in battle until, at the moment when Connla recognizes his father, Cuchulain delivers a fatal spear-thrust. Connla lives long enough to say he dies of a blow from his father. Cuchulain is druid-bound then to fight the sea rather than kill others in his rage. He fights the waves until he weakens and the waves go over him (Curtin 227-229).

The poem, "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," tells of Cuchulain returning home to his wife, Emer, after a long absence in which time, unknown to Cuchulain, she has borne him a son who has grown to adulthood. Cuchulain's mistress accompanies him and Emer, in her jealousy, sends their son out with the stated purpose that he should fight and kill his father. While the son is fully aware of his father's identity, Cuchulain does not realize it is his son until delivering the fatal blow. The druids bind Cuchulain to turn his rage upon the waves until his grief is expended (Yeats "Cuchulain" 105-111).

To understand the changes that have been rendered in the development of the poem from the myth, it is necessary to further examine the possible sources of Yeats's knowledge of the myth. That the poem's narrative is so markedly different suggests that when Yeats wrote it, before April 1892, his education regarding Irish mythology was still under-developed even while his passion for it was strong. His reference to bardic literature, however, would

indicate that his knowledge did extend further than Curtin's version. The bardic literature referred to by Yeats would possibly have been from Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789), in which the essential difference from Curtin's tales is that Cuchulain rather than the boy's mother lays the *geasa*, or prohibition, that when the lad is sent to Ireland he should not yield to any man nor give his name (Brooke 1-31). In Brooke's translation, Cuchulain leaves a gold chain for his son to use as means of identification, while in a later translation by Kuno Meyer it is a gold ring with the instruction that when the boy fits the ring, he should seek his father (Hull 79).

Aside from Curtin's as a folkloric collection, and Lady Ferguson's version (Ferguson 68-69) which follows a similar syntagmatic arrangement, these versions are diachronic developments that derive from the tale recorded in medieval manuscripts and known as *The Death of Aoife's Only Son* (*Aided Óenfir Aífe*) or *The Tragic Death of Connla*. The prequel to this tale is *The Wooing of Emer* (*Tochmarc Emire*) where, in order to win Emer as his wife, Cuchulain must first train in the warrior arts under a Scottish woman-warrior called Scathach. Aoife is Scathach's enemy whom Cuchulain defeats and then impregnates. The tale is part of the metanarrative known as the Ulster Cycle, a collection centered on Conchobar as king of Ulster, and his band of Red Branch warriors, of whom Cuchulain was the greatest hero (Welch 125).

In every retelling of a mythic narrative, there is likely to be some authorial departure from the source. Writers such as Lady Gregory or Standish J. O'Grady revised Irish myths to make them more readable for a general audience. Others such as Kuno Meyer focused on providing as accurate a translation as possible. Yeats, however, was prepared to change any aspect to strengthen the evocative power of the narrative. By focusing on the poetic function, on the aesthetics of the narrative, Yeats rendered the sequence of events subordinate to the emotive discourse. When Yeats wrote the introduction to Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, he may well have been talking about his own work when he said of her changes that:

The abundance of what may seem at first irrelevant invention [...] is essential if we are to recall a time when people were in love with a story, and gave themselves up to imagination as if to a lover. (Gregory 332)

Roland Barthes says that a narrative has three levels—functions, actions and narration—related in progressive integration (Barthes 88), but sometimes it is the spaces, the holes, within the story that leave room for the imagination. For example, in the medieval text, Emer warns Cuchulain that the stranger he is sent to fight could be his son but Cuchulain does not raise the possibility with his king though it might save his son's life, and is then devastated when he realizes

he has killed his son. The logical relationships are not always present in the sequence of events. Those who transcribed the stories were not trying to create coherent narratives but rather to record myths already existing in oral tradition.

In his poem, Yeats has moved into these spaces and constructed a more integrated narrative composed of a series of logically related sequences where the characters fulfill particular roles. Nevertheless, it is when the poem deviates from the arrangement of the source material that it becomes so interesting from a structural perspective, particularly when considering the disruption of cardinal and catalytic units contained in the myth.

On the functional level, the cardinal units are those points which are of direct consequence to the syntagmatic progression of the story, arranged in consecutive, logical and consequential order (Barthes 93). In this narrative, they are quite straightforward: Aoife conceives a son by Cuchulain; Cuchulain leaves instructions that when the boy has grown enough, he should be sent to Cuchulain; seeking his father, Connla arrives in Ireland, but under a *geas* not to give his name to anyone who does not beat him in a fight and not to refuse a fight of anyone that he meets; Cuchulain is called upon by his king to hold off a stranger who will not give his name; Cuchulain slays the young man; Cuchulain learns he has killed his own son.

Though not as crucial to the story as the cardinal units, the catalysers are still essential in creating a narrative by connecting the cardinal units, enabling the movement of the story from one point to the next in a syntagmatic, chronological fashion (Barthes 93). In this narrative, a young man is sent to seek his father; the king is alerted to the arrival of a stranger at Irish shores; the king sends Cuinaire to ask the young man his name; he is refused an answer; Conall is sent to beat the name out of him; Conall is defeated; a message is sent to Cuchulain. And it goes on from there.

To change one cardinal unit alters the entire narrative, as happens when Yeats assigns the maternity of Cuchulain's son to Emer, his wife, instead of Aoife, a former mistress and the Virago of Alba. Yeats, however, did not regard cardinal units as fixed such that he must keep to the form established in previous versions, but subject to the discourse he wished to create. Birgit Bjersby writes that the important thing for Yeats was "not the scientific investigation of the sagas, but their imaginative force and power of inspiration" (Bjersby 71). When Yeats imagined the narrative of "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea," he altered cardinal units, rearranged the catalysers, changed the context, and transposed the roles of father and son, mistress and wife.

Yeats also changed the nature and the significance of the narrative units which Barthes called the indices, those less essential elements which serve to add psychological and emotional depth to the characters, or to create a mood or atmosphere (Barthes 95). In the source narratives, Cuchulain may have been an

absent father but he had left a gift, whether a gold ring or a chain, for his son to use as a means of identification, indicating that he did have some interest in his son's future. In the poem, Cuchulain leaves no such gift and is so uninterested in his marriage that he does not even know he has a son. Instead, his son is burdened by an attribute of the father, for the young man will only fight with another who shares the geas not to give his name unless it is won from him; Cuchulain is the only other man under such bonds.

The impending tragedy of the poem is foregrounded in the early stanzas when the young man is reluctant to meet his father in this manner. The catalyser, Emer sending for their son and telling him his duty, is laden with psychological indices of fear, hesitation, duty and even fatalism (108, ll. 31-43).

'There is a man to die;
You have the heaviest arm under the sky.'

'Whether under its daylight or its stars
My father stands amid his battle-cars.'

'But you have grown to be the taller man.'

'Yet somewhere under starlight or the sun
My father stands.'

'Aged, worn out with wars
On foot, on horseback or in battle-cars.'

Emer maintains that he is younger and stronger, and he cedes to her will (109, ll. 45-46):

'I only ask what way my journey lies,
For He who made you bitter made you wise.'

The short stanzas convey a sense of rapid exchange and urgency, of compulsion. This is the moment the young man has awaited, but he does not want to go to his death, or perhaps does not want to fight his father. The repetition of 'my father stands' seems to imply either fear or simply reluctance. The arrangement of the language emphasizes the bitterness of Emer and the conflicted emotions of their son.

Roman Jakobson maintained that the poetic function placed the emphasis upon the text itself, with the aesthetic arrangement of the language drawing the focus to the language rather than the message (Culler 56). Yet the poetics in this poem serve to expand the narrative by placing the focus on the

emotion that drives the story forward. The psychological indices become more crucial, for it is the emotions that cause the actions to play out. Rather than just connecting the cardinal points, the catalytic units, such as Emer sending their son out, provide the opportunity in the narrative to develop these aspects.

In Yeats's poem, the setting for the narrative is also changed. In *Aided Óenfir Aife*, Cuchulain is called away from his home to defend his king's honor. Yeats, however, shifts the action to Cuchulain's domestic home and situates it in a pastoral context. As Thomas Byrd writes:

The pastoral world and Yeats's poetic dream are very closely allied in that they are both a "place apart," and they combine to form the environment of the poetic quest. [...] Yeats's pastoral world, no matter how artificial it may seem on the surface, is invariably allied with the world of everyday life by such means as the use of ordinary creatures and objects of nature; by reference, allusion, or their physical presence, Yeats makes sure that the small, familiar things of daily life are not forgotten. (Byrd 11)

Cuchulain is returning in grand style, with the Red Branch as his retinue and chariots laden with gold, which provides a marked contrast with the rural lifestyle of Cuchulain's wife and sets the scene for her resentment and their son's role. The swineherd has been watching for Cuchulain's return and alerts Emer, who is dying cloth, an activity more suited to the peasantry than to the wife of Ulster's champion. Emer sends for their son, who has been herding cattle, "And cried with angry voice, 'It is not meet / To idle life away, a common herd'" (107, ll. 20-21).

In understanding these pastoral references, it is necessary to consider the social stratification of the Celtic societies that had emerged from Indo-European migrations. Georges Dumézil claims they were divided into three classes: the kingly, the warrior, and the agricultural (Dumézil 73). Ireland's society was arranged in strict hierarchies in the pagan and early Christian eras, and with English domination it simply changed in aspect while remaining equally hierarchical (Welch 7). As part of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, Yeats would have been very conscious of the class differences. Dorothy Hoare writes that:

In Irish saga, in the tales of Cuchulain in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, for example, the deeds in childhood of the hero are exaggerated so as to loom enormous and gigantic. The effect of this is to give a much larger, more blaring, and yet more stately tone to Irish saga. It represents a different type of society. It is not the life of the people, but of the princely ones, not the general life, which is noted. (Hoare 19)

By juxtaposing the different lifestyles, Yeats generates a powerful contrast and draws attention to the plight of women left behind to keep the home and the farm while their men go off to war and travels. Elizabeth Cullingford calls it "a traditional model of masculinity: the epic hero leaves his women behind" (Cullingford 15). There is a strong association with *Agamemnon* and related stories of men going off to the Trojan War and leaving their wives behind. Like Clytemnestra, Emer has set a watch for her husband's return but, like Agamemnon, he returns with a mistress at his side (Aeschylus 103-104).

It is a very different representation of Emer to that rendered by the mythic tales, where Emer is not only beautiful but also the most gifted of women. Cuchulain chooses her because she is the only one well-suited to him in all ways (Ferguson 65). As Joanne Findon writes:

The hero clearly states that it is Emer's eloquence and quick wit, and her ability to carry on an extended, arcane conversation with him, which have convinced him that she is the right choice as a mate. She is his equal in verbal skill and mental acuity, and clearly he is seeking such a wife. (Findon 49)

As his wife, Emer has a high social status and a fine life. There are many references to Cuchulain's various lovers, but these liaisons are not presented as immoral or unacceptable to Emer with the exception of one tale called *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. The title itself suggests that Emer was not generally a jealous woman (Gregory 497-507).

Nor has she been kept in the dark about his affairs. In *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, Emer warns Cuchulain not to go to fight the stranger because she worries that this may be his son. While not a cardinal unit in that tale, indeed one that is left out of a number of the translations, it is nevertheless a pivotal psychological indice for what it reveals about the character of Cuchulain, his relationship with his wife, and what he is prepared to sacrifice in order to defend the honor of Ulster. Yet despite what these earlier translations reveal of Emer's character, in Yeats's poem she becomes a woman consumed by jealousy. Of course, that could be considered a natural response when she and her son have been left at home to labor away while Cuchulain has enjoyed a glorious life with another at his side. Norman Jeffares blatantly suggests that Yeats may have confused Emer and Aoife (Jeffares 25). In 1892, Yeats may not have been aware of the detail of these other stories and while he did later revise the poem from the original version, called *The Death of Cuchulain*, to conclude with Cuchulain still alive and fighting ("Cuchulain" 105, 111), he could not have revised it to the extent needed to keep it more accurate to *Aided Óenfir Aífe* without destroying the poem.

Yet whether Yeats's diverged from Curtin's or the "bardic" versions deliberately or unknowingly, the variations still transform the discourse of the

narrative. While the same theme of jealousy plays out in other versions where it is Aoife's motivation in sending Connla to seek his father, it is further emphasized in Yeats's poem when it is Cuchulain's wife that sends him out. The story becomes not only an anti-feminist discourse illustrating how a jealous woman can bring about the absolute destruction of the father-son relationship, but one which also encompasses the perils of marital infidelity.

However, by ascribing jealousy to Emer rather than to Aoife, Yeats has rendered the actants interchangeable as though, as Vladamir Propp maintained, actants are only important within a narrative for the function they fulfill (Propp 25-65). It does not matter whether it is Cuchulain's lover or his wife that is jealous; only that she sends their son into combat in an act of revenge. The mothering of Cuchulain's son then becomes a catalyser for the narrative, moving it forward to the next point, rather than a cardinal unit because the focus of the remainder of the poem is upon the battle between the father and the son and Emer is not mentioned again. The female actant has served her purpose and is relegated to the background of the narrative.

Yet while the syntagmatic arrangement of the cardinal and catalytic units is crucial for the progression of the narrative, the psychological and emotional indices used in the poem build the actants into more complex characters with their own personalities and motivations. The foregrounding of Emer's jealousy at the beginning of Yeats's poem compels the rest of the narrative and, despite her absence from the latter part, he has still built her into a complex character whose emotive intensity launches the story.

Yeats also alters the catalytic unit of who commands the encounter between father and son. In the source narratives, it is Conchubar, fulfilling his kingly role, who sends Cuchulain into battle with Connla, the young man that has arrived as a stranger to Irish shores. In the poem, the Red Branch warriors are resting in their camp and Conchubar is relaxed, plucking at the harp. It is Cuchulain who notices that someone else is camped nearby and sends one of the warriors to inquire as to who it is. When the warrior comes back and says that the stranger would not give his name unless at sword-point, and that he sought another who shared the same geas, Cuchulain rises to go to him. The king plays no part (ll. 61-62).

In *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea*, it is not duty, not his king, that instructs Cuchulain; he makes an autonomous decision. He becomes not a man subject to authority but an independent man whose personality determines his own destiny. And Yeats achieves all this simply by altering the catalyser of who sends Cuchulain into action. The traditional discourse of the glorification of heroic qualities is subverted and the poem can instead be read as a warning against over-riding aggression and pride. Findon summarizes it well when she says that:

The conflict between reason and action is reinforced by the structure of the tale [...] and the trajectory of male violence resumes its course, proceeding to its inevitable conclusion. The implication here is that heroic deeds, performed without the guidance of reason [...] are destructive and dangerous. (Findon 105)

Yet rather than using the structure of the tale to reinforce an ideology, Yeats uses it raise questions and create uncertainty, to defamiliarize the narrative. Those readers familiar with the myth would barely recognize it in the poem and could well be disturbed by its range of unfamiliar associations. It is not just the syntagmatic arrangement of the narrative elements which conveys a story, but the associational relationship of those elements with other paradigms. That associational value, however, is largely determined by the reception of the reader, especially in regard to the meaning of the metaphors and symbols that enrich the poem as a revision of the myth.

For example, Emer has her arms immersed in the red dye, and draws them up dripping red. An immediate association is that of blood dripping, with echoes of Lady Macbeth trying to remove the stain of murder from her hands (Mac. 5.1) Yet for a readership familiar with the Irish peasantry, this may have emphasized the pastoralism because, in parts of Ireland, the women were renowned for their red petticoats and would dye the cloth in the manner described in this poem (Synge 14). Yet even this tradition could be seen as containing ominous overtones if associated with the mythical Washer at the Ford, an old woman who might be seen washing blood from clothes in a waterway as a portent of the viewer's death (Hull 247).

It is a swineherd who carries the news of Cuchulain's return to Emer. For a contemporary audience, swine would be associated with filth and degradation, but Yeats was writing at a time when pigs were commonly kept as productive and free-ranging animals (Carleton 414). As for the swineherd, Yeats's reading of Sir Walter Scott and William Carleton meant he was more likely to connect such an occupation with cleverness (Kline 52). Yet in his macabre play, *A Full Moon in March*, (1935) the swineherd does seem to represent the lowest level of humanity. However, Eric Bentley reads it in a more positive fashion when he writes that "the Swineherd is not interested in winning a kingdom for himself but in introducing the Queen to love, the forest, and the dung of the swine" (246-7). Illustrating the wide spectrum of associational relations, Seamus Deane draws a parallel between this play and the fraught relationship between Ireland and Europe (Deane 47).

The symbolism of the Cuchulain saga can also be ascribed to theories of solar mythology. Daniel Hoffman writes that Cuchulain was "often described as the son of Lugh, the sun god, and Rhys in his *Celtic Heathendom* [1898] interprets

Cuchulain [...] as a solar myth" (Hoffman 97). In Yeats's poem, Cuchulain's return home with chariots laden with gold could well be interpreted as a metaphor for the return of the sun, who must then battle with the chthonic forces of darkness.

That the battle, in the source narratives as well as the poem, takes place on the border between sea and land gives added significance to this seasonal attribution. It is a place of change, a place between worlds, even a place between life and death. In the source narratives, this is the place where the young man arrives in a new land and is held back, but in Yeats's poem they first meet in the forest. Yeats associated forests with the discovery of hidden meanings and of life itself:

The lover in the Irish folk song bids his beloved come with him into the woods, and see the salmon leap in the rivers, and hear the cuckoo sing, because death will never find them in the heart of the woods. [...] Surely if one goes far enough into the woods, there one will find all that one is seeking? Who knows how many centuries the birds of the woods have been singing? (Yeats *Writings* 194)

But when Cuchulain is grieving, the scene in Yeats's poem shifts to the sea, as though that geographical context were essential to the story. Yeats stated that:

Cuchulain in the Irish folk tale had the passion of victory, and he overcame all men, and died warring upon the waves, because they alone had the strength to overcome him. (Storey 111)

It is the nature of water that it cannot be injured by blows but can wear out the attacker. It is symbolic of the futility of striving against nature, and that includes the nature within self. Cuchulain could not be other than he was, and Bjersby explains this in connection with Yeats's personal experience:

Man may struggle against his fate, but struggle as he may, he cannot escape it. [...] The despair Yeats himself experiences over his own frustrated love is like that of Cuchulain, when he finds out that he has killed the son he had by the only woman he had loved passionately. It is a despair comparable only to man's fight against the elements. (Bjersby 78)

In the medieval text, Cuchulain is fated to a short-life span, as foretold early in his career, and he is encouraged to find a wife partly to ensure his line is continued, but the progression of the tales indicates that Emer remains barren. In Yeats's poem, in Curtin's folklore, and in Lady Gregory's version, the story

focuses on the grief of Cuchulain, but in the medieval *Aided Óenfir Aífe*, the demise of Connla is the dominant factor. Findon says that:

Cú Chulainn's invincibility both protects Ulster and ultimately deprives it of the survival of his martial brilliance into the next generation. In killing his only son, Cú Chulainn cuts himself off from the continuation of his own bloodline. (Findon 84)

The tragedy goes beyond Cuchulain's grief to the loss of the heir of their hero for all of Ulster. In *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea*, Yeats has reduced the narrative from the experience of the community to that of the individual. In the original poem, Yeats had given Cuchulain's son the name of Finmole but in a later revision, perhaps after becoming more familiar with the myth, Yeats removed that name. He could then have corrected it to Connla, but instead Yeats leaves the character nameless. Cuchulain is the dominant personality and all else fades to the background.

Hoffman claims that the three most important themes in Yeats's writings about Cuchulain were transfiguration, heroism, and love, and that Yeats took these from Irish folklore and balladry and "fused them together in ways unmistakably his own" (Hoffman 27). But Yeats's presentation of the hero Cuchulain in this poem can as well be read as illustrating the foolishness of heroic behavior, the untrustworthiness of love, and how it can turn bitter and fickle.

Yeats gives a very human portrayal of Cuchulain as someone accustomed to adulation (108-109, ll. 39-44):

Among those feasting men Cuchulain dwelt,
And his young sweetheart close beside him knelt,
Stared on the mournful wonder of his eyes,
Even as Spring upon the ancient skies,
And pondered on the glory of his days;
And all around the harp-string told his praise [...]

Then Yeats demonstrates how all this glory counts for nothing when Cuchulain must face the deep grief of having slain his own son. It is not a theme of transfiguration, but of losing the glamour; not of heroic action but pointless combat; not of love but of betrayal. This assessment fits more closely with the way that Alex Zwerdling describes Yeats's ideal hero:

There are at least three heroic attributes which can be taken as constants: intensity, solitude, defeat. The hero's intensity is a product both of his absolute conviction and of the need to defend it against a hostile

environment. In the ideal world of art [...] passion and intensity are the attributes of the best and never of the worst human beings. [...] [T]he hero, says Yeats, 'makes his mask . . . in defeat.' (Zwerdling 9)

As a heroic archetype, the poem reduces Cuchulain to a pitiful man manipulated by the petty jealousies of a woman. His penchant for the aggressive response turns out not to be a heroic quality but self-destructive. Yeats wrote that:

Cuchulainn should (and could) earn deliverance from the wheel of becoming by participation in the higher self, after which he should offer his spiritual history to the world; instead he condemns himself to a career of violent and meaningless action, and this is responsible for the developing tragedy of his life. (qtd. in Deane 157)

Yeats describes Cuchulain in this way as something more than simply an actant serving a functional purpose. Even before the poem, the characters in the Ulster Cycle were not just fulfilling folktale roles in a standard narrative progression. Rather than being subsidiary to the action, they drive the development of the story, and the stories. The narrative follows the characters on their adventures, rather than it being the purpose of the characters to develop the narrative. So despite what Yeats does in replacing Aoife with Emer, such familiar characters are not interchangeable without some level of destruction of the myth. Yet in destroying the myth, Yeats made room for new possibilities. As Lévi-Strauss explained:

[A] myth which is transformed in passing [...] finally exhausts itself—without disappearing [...]. Two paths still remain open: that of fictional elaboration, and that of reactivation with a view to legitimizing history. This history, in its turn, may be of two types: retrospective, to found a traditional order on a distant past; or prospective, to make this past the beginning of a future which is starting to take shape. (Lévi-Strauss 268)



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