Cultural Nationalism
in the Life and Work of W. B. Yeats:
The Man Behind the Myth

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Introduction

I

My interest in the Celtic culture has been there for as long as I can remember. Ever since I was little, its worlds filled with magical and mythical creatures have appealed to me and incited my imagination. It could take me hours to reach a concealed and secret place that was as old as the Earth itself, and I enjoyed every second of the journey. As I got older and started to read these stories myself, I became more and more interested in their origins. During my studies, I frequently came upon the name of W. B. Yeats, whose name soon began to take on mythical proportions of its own. Apparently he was interested in these stories too and had used them as a background for his own literature. When reading further, I found out that he had a vision about Ireland that he called cultural nationalism and that the stories provided this theory with the much-needed legitimacy. Unfortunately, as I wanted to examine his cultural nationalism and its mechanisms more closely, I stumbled upon many studies dealing with Yeats and nationalism, but none of them sufficiently answered my questions. I wonder where Yeats' cultural nationalism originally stems from and how exactly it presents itself in his life and in his works.

II

My dissertation can be subdivided into two main fields of research that are constantly interconnected. My starting point for the first part is Yeats' life. Based on his autobiography, his memoirs, and a collection of letters I have reconstructed most of his life and added certain elements from Irish history where this is relevant for my research. This is either to get a general idea of the time's context or to look at particular events in relation to these historical elements. Either way, it is impossible to look at Yeats' life separately from what is going on in Ireland at the time. After all, Yeats has influenced Irish history just as much as Irish history
has influenced Yeats. I then continue by expanding the visual field to the main figures in Yeats' life in order to trace their influence. This influence can be either direct through the role they play in his life or through collaborations, or indirect through their own involvement in the nationalist movement. This part gives me a chance to elaborate on certain key phases in his life as well as describing the general Zeitgeist.

While the approach for the first research field expands from Yeats' life to his surrounding, the approach for the second works in the opposite direction. I start from a very broad definition of cultural nationalism to explain the basic characteristics and ideologies. I then discuss two theories on nationalism and highlight their similarities and differences. Since it is not my intent to research cultural nationalism or these theories as such, I have only selected the relevant information that can later be applied to Yeats in particular. The originality lies here in the combination of these theories. I use one of the standard works on post-colonial studies to add interesting insights to a relatively recent cultural nationalist theory. After I have clarified these basic insights, I can apply them to Yeats' particular situation. I again follow a similar structure than before here. I begin by applying the theories' main principles to produce the general insights and background to Yeats' cultural nationalism. After I have applied the broad structure I can once again focus on more specific details. I will consecutively discuss the role of the Societies and two key works to see how the theory is put into practice. To conclude, I will briefly examine the periods following on and in proportion to Yeats' cultural nationalism.
1 Biography

1.1 1865 - 1879

On 13 June 1865 William Butler Yeats is born in Sandymount, Ireland as the first child of John Butler Yeats and Susan Mary Pollexfen. His father is a successful barrister at the time while his mother stays at home to look after the newborn baby. Susan Pollexfen came from a wealthy Anglo-Irish family who owned a prosperous milling and shipping business in County Sligo, and soon after William's birth the family relocates there to stay with her extended family. Sligo becomes synonym for Yeats' child- and boyhood and in one of his later letters he even mentions it as his “native place” (Wade 91). During his youth and his many visits there he falls in love with the peacefulness of the countryside and the beauty of its nature. It is there also that he will come in contact with the Irish folklore and faery tales that would become a constant influence in both his life and his work. These stories are told to him by the local population – among them many of his own family – and early accounts of Yeats already betray a certain fascination for the tales, the fantastical worlds they conjure up and for the effect they have on people, including himself.

In the summer of 1866 Susan Mary Yeats – or “Lily”, as she is known to her family and friends – is born. Yeats' eldest sister – and the second child of a family that will count five children in total – will later become an embroiderer associated with both the Celtic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1867 John decides to give up his career in law to pursue his dream of becoming a painter. To support him, the entire family moves to London later that year where he has more chance of finding success. There, three more children are born:

1 Unless mentioned otherwise the name “Yeats” refers to William Butler Yeats and is preferred here for reasons of conciseness and fluency.
Elizabeth Corbett “Lolly”\textsuperscript{2} in 1868, Robert\textsuperscript{3} in 1870, and finally John “Jack” Butler\textsuperscript{4} in 1871. Growing up in London is especially hard for Yeats who now spends time in Sligo only on holidays or when he is sent there to live with his grandmother and aunts for certain periods because of the expanding family. The calm and familiar countryside forms a shrill contrast to the noisy and dirty industrial town of London, which does not feel – and never will – like home to him. This becomes painfully clear when from 1875 to 1880 he attends the Godolphin primary school at Hammersmith, where he feels himself an Irish boy among foreigners and barbarians. The antipathetic feelings Yeats develops in these years towards the British capital will never completely resolve, or as he himself puts it in a letter from 1887 to Katharine Tynan\textsuperscript{5}: “Any breath from Ireland blows pleasurably in this hateful London where you cannot go five paces without seeing some wretched object broken either by wealth or poverty.” (Wade 35)

By 1880 the Land War is stirring great unrest among rural Ireland and the Yeats family is forced to return after difficulties have arisen with the County Kildare property owned by Yeats' father. As a member of the former Protestant Ascendancy John Yeats still owns some land in County Kildare, but when the troubles break out he sees no other solution than to return to Ireland and to take care of things himself. Luckily, John and his tenants are able to resolve the matter without any violence, but he thinks it best to stay in Ireland for the time

\textsuperscript{2} Elizabeth was an art teacher and studied printing with the Women's Printing Society in London. William and she started the Cuala Press in 1908, publishing many of his own works. She was the first commercial printer in Ireland to work exclusively with hand presses.

\textsuperscript{3} Robert will die in 1873 at the age of three.

\textsuperscript{4} Jack became a well-known painter who depicted predominately landscapes and figures from the west of Ireland – including Sligo. In 1916 he was elected a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy.

\textsuperscript{5} Katharine Tynan (1861 - 1931) was an Irish writer and a close friend of Yeats at the beginning of his career. She is the first in a series of women whom Yeats will come to admire and confide in.
being anyway. Even though there is little real harm done, this event shows how unstable the situation in Ireland was at the time of Yeats' youth and how no one could escape from it. Yeats never really spoke that much about this period in his life, but one could ask himself how important this influence has been and what marks it may have left on him. After all, he was only fifteen years old when his family suddenly had to move to Ireland in the midst of the Land War and the Ascendancy of which he was a member was undergoing a crisis of identity. However supportive his family was about the changes that Ireland was going through, there is no denying that these also directly disadvantaged his heritage.

1.2 1880 - 1890

After settling in Dublin in 1880 – first in the city centre and later in the suburb of Howth – Yeats resumes his education later that year at the Erasmus Smith High School, were he graduates in 1883. His father urges him to go to Trinity College and continue the family tradition, but Yeats refuses because he wants to study art instead. From 1884 to 1886 he takes classes at the Metropolitan School of Art where he meets George Russell\(^6\). Russell's interest in mysticism influences Yeats greatly and the two will remain friends until Russell's death in 1935. Yeats also attends the Royal Hibernian Academy School, yet around 1886 he suddenly decides to give up his art studies to become a writer. Coincidence or not, but in the same year his father thinks the time is right to move back to London and the family returns to Bedford Park where they had lived for a while before coming to Ireland.

Yeats finds it difficult to be heard in London and in the first year only one poem gets printed in an English periodical. Subsequently, he still sends out his poems and articles to Ireland. It are two American papers who respond, however, among them the *Boston Pilot* in

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\(^6\) George Russell, also known under his pseudonym Æ, was an Irish writer, poet, critic, painter, and nationalist. He is most famous for his mystic symbolism and is considered one of the main writers of the Irish Literary Revival.
which he can publish with an introduction from John O'Leary⁷. The second half of 1887 is spent in Sligo where Yeats finishes his long narrative poem *The Wanderings of Oisin*⁸, followed by a compilation of *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* the year after that. Despite these publications Yeats is paid very little and all the money he has goes to his family. His father, however, urges him to stay a writer and keep his independence. He still lives in London – which he still hates – but starts to meet some interesting people there as well, like William Morris, W. E. Henley, and Oscar Wilde. Finally, in 1889 his first book of verse, *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* appears, and Maud Gonne⁹ comes to Bedford Park. Yeats instantly falls for her beauty and enthusiasm and begins working on *The Countess Kathleen*, a play he writes with her in mind. By 1891 the play is finished and awaits publication. Yeats is slowly but definitely building up a reputation and things are finally starting to look as if they can only get better.

1.3 1891 - 1903

1891 is very eventful and tumultuous for Yeats. Early in the year Ernest Rhys¹⁰ and he found the Rhymers' Club¹¹ and in the winter a group of kindred spirits meets at Bedford Park

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⁷ For more information on John O'Leary and the particular role he plays in Yeats' life, see 2.1

⁸ During the Gaelic Revival some uncertainty and disagreement arose concerning the spelling of Old Irish names. For instance, Oisin is sometimes spelled as Usheen, Kathleen as Cathleen, and the hero Cú Chulainn is found as Cúchulainn, Cúchulain, Cúchullain, or Cú Chuain. I have always adopted the same spelling for reasons of consistency, unless the name of a work is involved, in which case I have adopted the author's choice.

⁹ For more information on Maud Gonne and the particular role he plays in Yeats' life, see 2.2

¹⁰ Ernest Rhys (1859 - 1946) was an English writer, essayist, poet, and playwright. He is best known for his role as founding editor of the Everyman's Library series of affordable classics.

¹¹ The Rhymers' Club consisted of a group of London-based poets who dined together while mainly discussing poetry. They produced two anthologies of poetry, one in 1892 and one in 1894. Among the members of the notorious club were John Todhunter, Arthur Symons, Francis Thompson, Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson,
to discuss the plans for an Irish Literary Society. In between, Charles Stewart Parnell\textsuperscript{12} dies, leaving Ireland vacant and divided. Yeats attends his funeral in Dublin, but returns to London shortly after. In the early summer of 1892 the Irish Literary Society is founded by T. W. Rolleston\textsuperscript{13} and Yeats with the next scheme already on its way. Yeats wants a National Publishing Company\textsuperscript{14} – a “Library of Ireland” – to bring out cheap series of good books. He informs Sir Charles Gavan Duffy\textsuperscript{15} about his plans and his wish to appoint Duffy as director of the company. When Yeats visits some family in Sligo, however, he is informed that Duffy has stolen his idea and has founded The New Irish Library – as the project is eventually called. Partly because of this setback, Yeats returns to London at the end of the year feeling disillusioned.

But the idealist Yeats does not give up just like that and he has more ideas he wants to see accomplished. Together with a close group of friends he starts to work out the idea of an Irish Literary Theatre. These friends are J. M. Synge, George Moore, Edward Martyn\textsuperscript{16}, and even Oscar Wilde. Although the Club had little or no impact at the time, it shows the connectedness of the artists and their wish to be heard.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}Charles Stewart Parnell (1846 - 1891) was a nationalist political leader and founder of the Irish Parliamentary Party. His character and political genius manages to unite the different Irish political factions, but he is forced to resign after a divorce scandal in 1890. He dies a year later from a heart attack.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Thomas William Rolleston (1857 - 1920) was an Irish writer and poet, and founder of the \textit{Dublin University Review} (1885). Among his works are some of the finest representations and descriptions of Celtic culture.
\item \textsuperscript{14}The Irish Literary Society and later the National Literary Society were meant to support the National Publishing Company in a scheme to publish national literature. The Company would publish the books cheaply while the Societies could then distribute them to a large audience. This is an example of how Yeats’ schemes ultimately had the same goal and could support each other.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (1816 - 1903) was an Irish nationalist and Australian colonial politician. He formed the Tenant Right League, co-founded \textit{The Nation} and avidly promoted Irish Home Rule and Irish culture.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Edward Martyn (1859 - 1923) was an Irish nationalist and playwright. Coming from a wealthy family, he
Lady Gregory. Yeats has just met Synge while he was staying in Paris\textsuperscript{17} and the two have become instant friends. George Moore he knew already after helping him with his book \emph{Evelyn Innes} and Moore had reviewed \emph{The Countess Kathleen} as “the finest verse play written since Shakespeare.” (Wade 271) At the time, Yeats was staying with Martyn at Tulira Castle where he also met Lady Gregory. From now on, her house at Coole Park would become Yeats' home for the summer. Still in 1897 and well into the next year Yeats partakes in celebrations and demonstrations commemorating the Rebellion of 1798 and even protests against a visit from Queen Victoria to Ireland.

1899 is a very creative year as it finally starts with rehearsals of the plays for the Irish Literary Theatre performances, which take place in May at the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin. In addition, Moore and Yeats work on a play together telling the ancient story of Diarmuid and Grania. This play is finished and produced in 1901, the same year the three years' experiment of the Irish Literary Theatre is brought to an end. Not long after, however, a little company of amateur players under the organisation and direction of the brothers Willie and Frank Fay adopts the name of the Irish National Theatre Society and continues the work, with Yeats as President and Maud Gonne, Douglas Hyde, and George Russell as Vice-Presidents. In 1902 the Society produces Yeats' \emph{Cathleen ni Houlihan} alongside a play by \AE on the Deirdre legend. After the successful undertaking of \emph{Diarmuid and Grania}, Yeats suggests to continue his collaboration with Moore, but quickly returns to his decision again. Moore takes this action badly and threatens Yeats he is going to write a novel on the same

\footnote{used his fortune to support the Irish culture. He financed the Irish Literary Theatre's first three seasons, ensuring its survival. Politically, he evolved from unionism to nationalism and became the first President of Sinn Féin in 1905.}

\footnote{While Yeats was in Paris, he co-founded the Young Ireland Society of Paris. This Society consisted of half a dozen Parisian Irish and aimed to stir up continental nations against England.}
theme they were going to use. Hastily and with the help of Lady Gregory and Hyde, Yeats writes his play called *Where There is Nothing* in the hope of being quicker than Moore. It works and nothing is heard of Moore's novel. The two are not on speaking terms for some time, however, and the breach in their relationship will never be completely closed.

After Yeats' mother dies in 1900 from a lingering disease, the entire family is left behind struggling. Two years later they decide to move back to Ireland and settle at Churchtown, Dundrum just outside of Dublin. Elizabeth starts a small printing press there – called the Dun Emer Press at this time – with the help from her eldest brother, publishing his work as well as that of a selection of other Irish writers. In 1903 she publishes Yeats' play *On Baile's Strand* which he intends to form part of a cycle of plays surrounding the Irish mythical hero Cú Chulainn. Later that year Yeats crosses the Atlantic Ocean to go on his first lecture tour in the U.S.A. The tour is hugely successful and earns Yeats a steady income.

**1.4 1904 - 1915**

1904 is again a landmark in his life as it marks the opening of the Abbey Theatre – the successor of the Irish Literary Theatre. The Theatre's company still consists of unpaid amateurs and is at first run on a democratic basis where decisions are made by vote. This proves to be an impracticable method, however, and in 1906 Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge are appointed as Directors. Although Yeats loves his work at the Abbey, the responsibilities are a burden and prove to be a hindrance for his own work. He spends so much time doing things at and for the Abbey that little or no time is left to write himself. Not everything runs smoothly for the Abbey and its Directors either, and after internal dissensions the brothers Fay – who still have an active role in the company – resign from their positions.

1909 starts tragically when Synge dies after a long illness. Although Yeats knew he was ill and had visited him shortly before his death, the news still comes as a shock to him.
Yeats not only loses his friend but also a business partner and has to take on Synge's responsibilities at the Abbey now as well. The next year is somewhat ambiguous for Yeats as it holds both prestige and more grief. By now, Yeats is finally recognised as one of the leading men of letters in Ireland and gets invited to become a member of the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature. He is also offered to succeed Edward Dowden as Professor of English Literature at Trinity College, but passes on the occasion due to his bad eyesight and the strenuous work the job would require. Finally, he is awarded a Civil List pension\(^\text{18}\) and accepts it on the terms that he remains free to undertake any political activities in Ireland he might wish.

In September news from his sister in Sligo reaches him with the death of his uncle and old friend George Pollexfen. George had played a large part in Yeats' upbringing in Sligo and had influenced the young mind with his country legends and belief in the supernatural. Yeats is devastated, even more so because he is allowed no time to grieve. The contract between the Abbey Theatre and its financier Miss Horniman is indeed running to an end and in order to gather funds, Yeats has to give lectures. At the outbreak of World War I Yeats is in England – having just returned from his second American lecture tour – but he returns to Coole\(^\text{19}\) for the late summer. Life seems to be going its way pretty much undisturbed, but Yeats is troubled about the future of Ireland – and by extension of that of Europe and the world.

### 1.5 1916 - 1926

On 24 April 1916, Yeats is staying at the country in England when an insurrection known as the Easter Rising takes place in Dublin. More than by the event itself, Yeats is

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\(^{18}\) The “Civil List” is a list of individuals to whom money is paid by the government. According to the Civil List Act of 1837, Yeats will have been granted a pension “by the performance of duties to the public, or by [his] useful . . . attainments in literature and the arts”.

\(^{19}\) For more information on Coole Park, see 2.4
dismayed by its aftermath. After seven days of violent resistance, the leaders of the uprising are captured, trialled, and executed under British law. Among them are many of Yeats' old friends and acquaintances, including Maud Gonne's husband John MacBride. These changes in the political and national landscape make Yeats feel he should live in Ireland again, whereupon he buys a ruined cottage under an old tower at Ballylee which will become his summer residence. At the age of fifty-one, he might have also had the feeling it was time to settle down and get married. He successively proposes to Maud Gonne – for the fifth time already – her daughter Iseult, and finally to George Hyde-Lees. Both Gonne women refuse him, but George accepts his offer and the two get married in the autumn of 1917. In spite of Yeats' initial feelings of remorse about the marriage, their daughter Anne Butler is born in February 1919, followed by a son William Michael two years later.

By the end of 1921 the self-governing Irish Free State is created, replacing the Irish Republic as a part of Britain after two years of guerilla war. Ireland finally seems to have gained the freedom it has been fighting for since the sixteenth century, but a Civil War breaks out after the Irish cannot agree on the extent of their independence. Yeats again feels he should be in Ireland – he was living in Oxford at this time for his work – and the young family moves to Dublin in 1922. This is also the year that his father John dies. John had been living in New York since 1908, despite several pleas of his family to come back to Ireland. But he liked it there and on the few occasions that Yeats could visit him – mostly during his American lecture tours – he too had expressed his fondness after seeing his father so content. The happiness of John's late life and the knowledge he had died without pain or the loss of creativity eased the pain for Yeats, but it was a great loss anyway.

George “Georgie” Hyde-Lees (1892 - 1968) was twenty-seven years younger than Yeats and the two had met some time before through the occult circles they were involved in. Despite the age difference and Yeats' later affairs, George will stand by her husband in sickness and in health until his death in 1939.
Luckily, the rest of the year and the next one bring some exciting news and probably
the greatest honour Yeats could receive. First, he becomes a member of the Irish Senate – a
post he will hold for the next six years – and then he is awarded a D.Litt. degree by Trinity
College. But in November 1923 he is granted the most prestigious acknowledgement of all
when he gets the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly
artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.” He goes to collect the prize
himself and in his lecture to the Royal Academy of Sweden pays tribute to Lady Gregory and
J. M. Synge who have have influenced and supported him throughout his career. A few years
later he expands his political career by becoming Chairman for a committee designed to
advise on the first coinage for the Free State.

1.6 1927 - 1939

1927 marks a first general breakdown in health for Yeats. He is prescribed complete
rest and travels through Spain with his wife in the hope the warm climate will do him good. A
year later his office at the Senate comes to an end, but when he is asked to stand for re-
election, he refuses due to his failing strength. The Spanish temperatures and weather
remarkably improve his condition, so much even that he decides to stay in Rapallo. There he
finds the peace and quiet he needs to recover, and together with Ezra Pound21 he enjoys a life
of idleness.

In 1930 Yeats recovers from a collapse caused by Maltese fever, but later in the year
he feels strong enough to return to Ireland. Although Yeats does not mention it himself, it is
possible that he found out that Lady Gregory's health was failing rapidly and therefore wanted
to speed up his return. At the request of her family he stays at Coole, where she will

21 Ezra Pound (1885 - 1972) was an American poet and a major figure of the early twentieth century Modernist
movement. He and Yeats first met in 1909 and the two regularly saw each other from then on – Pound had
even been Yeats' secretary and was living with him while he was working on BLAST.
eventually die in the spring of 1932 – bringing an end to his personal and creative bond with the place. Since his family has grown up and he has always preferred the countryside to the city, Yeats and his wife move outside of Dublin – first to Rathfarnham and then to Riversdale, the latter being his last home in Ireland.

In the meantime, he receives degrees at Oxford and Cambridge and starts sending out invitations to the proposed members of his latest and last scheme, the Irish Academy of Letters. He also goes on a final American lecture tour, earning a substantial sum which he uses for his new Academy. In June 1935 his seventieth birthday is celebrated with a grand banquet in his honour. Still struggling with his health he goes to Menton and Cap Martin in the South of France to tide over the winters of 1938 and 1939. Although failing in strength, he continues to write on his last play of the Cú Chulainn cycle, *The Death of Cuchulain*.

On 26 January 1939, while staying in Menton, Yeats suddenly becomes gravely ill and dies two days later at the age of seventy-three. It was his wish to be buried at Drumcliffe in Sligo, but on the chance he would die in France, that would do as well. He is buried at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, but Mrs. Yeats feels he should come home. Because of the War, however, it takes nine more years before Yeats is finally laid to rest at his beloved countryside in Sligo. His epitaph is taken from the closing lines of one of his last poems, *Under Ben Bulben*:

“*Cast a cold eye

On life, on death.

Horseman, pass by!*” (“The Poems of W. B. Yeats” 640)

2 Friends and influences

2.1 John O'Leary
John O'Leary (1830 - 1907) is probably the most important person Yeats meets in his life due to the contacts he makes through him and the profound influence O'Leary has on both his personal and his professional life. He introduces Yeats to a number of people that will become his friends – among these are Maud Gonne and Douglas Hyde – and in turn play an important part in his life. They share poetry, views on Ireland – political and other – and its future, and exchange thoughts on how to build a nation where everyone feels at home.

O'Leary supports Yeats' creativity as well, finding a market for his literature and giving him a chance to meet with his public in order to understand it better. But in the end it is his passion and conviction that appeals to Yeats the most and that will continue to inspire him. A large part of this fascination for O'Leary comes from the timing when the two men meet. Yeats has just turned twenty and is only beginning to find his way in life and a voice of his own when he meets the renowned Fenian leader.

O'Leary returns to Ireland in 1885 after five years of imprisonment and fifteen years of exile for his part in the attempted escape of some leaders of the Young Ireland movement. Shortly after his return, Yeats meets his sister and him and is immediately drawn to his tormented, but vibrant personality. He brings Yeats the poetry of Thomas Davis and introduces him to the Young Ireland Society of which he is President. Yeats joins the Society

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22 “Fenian” refers to a member of the Fenian Brotherhood or the Irish Republican Brotherhood, two organisations that had fought for an independent Irish Republic in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Today, its use has expanded to all supporters of Irish nationalism.

23 The Young Ireland movement was involved in the so-called Tipperary Revolt of 1848. Their leaders got arrested and imprisoned, after which O'Leary tried to help them escape. He himself was caught, however, and was later convicted of high treason.

24 Ellen O'Leary also leaves a mark on Yeats. He remembers her as kind, understanding, and speaking with soft words. In this aspect she is entirely the opposite of her brother, who comes across as a swearing, hard-lined nationalist. (“Autobiographies” 94-5)
and indulges in Irish history and literature, topics on which he himself gives a few lectures as well. The importance of O'Leary and the Young Ireland Society at the beginning of his career cannot possibly be underestimated. Yeats is surrounded by nationalists – many of who have already proven their valour in the war over Ireland's independence – who are infused with a conviction and who strongly believe in the necessity of their struggle. They give Yeats a goal, a purpose for his literature, and the voice he was looking for. Yeats rightly acknowledges their influence by writing in 1916 that “[f]rom these debates, from O'Leary's conversation, or from the Irish books he lent or gave me has come all I have set my hand to since.”

(“Autobiographies” 101)

But O'Leary and his associates do more than convincing Yeats of their cause. Even if Yeats was turning nationalist, it was still the question how he saw his role within the movement. Was he going to fight like O'Leary had done, or did he rather see an opportunity in politics? The answer to this comes after a meeting between Protestant and Catholic Nationalists at O'Leary's house. Although there were many differences between both parties, O'Leary has brought them together to discuss the essence of a common nationalist cause. After the gathering Yeats writes:

“I began to plot and scheme how one might seal with the right image the soft wax before it began to harden. I had noticed that Irish Catholics among whom had been born so many political martyrs had not the good taste, the household courtesy and decency of the Protestant Ireland I had known, yet Protestant Ireland seemed to think of nothing but getting on in the world. I thought we might bring the halves together if we had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory, and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European pose.” (“Autobiographies” 101-2)
This entry is the first and at the same time clearest description of how Yeats saw his part in the movement toward a free Ireland. It will become an ideology during his lifetime and even after his death it continues to inspire generations. Yeats sees literature as the key solution to the ongoing conflict of Irish occupation. In his opinion, it is the only hope of bringing the nation together again. Ireland is symbolically represented by Catholics and Protestants here, because both divisions of Christianity had long divided the country in two camps – in reality, Ireland was politically as well as religiously divided. Because of the internal division Ireland was unable to make front against England and their only chance was to close ranks. Yeats believes a literature that has its origins in the time when Ireland was free and prosperous – termed here the “right image” – can show people the way and unite them in their cause. At the same time, he foresees the comments of critics who could claim that by returning to an ancient past Ireland will lose its drive to move forward. By freeing that literature from “provincialism” through the writers' criticism and selection, Yeats argues, Ireland can move forward by looking backward.

In 1913, six years after O'Leary's death, Yeats mentions him in his poem “September 1913.” By then Ireland is more divided than ever and Yeats ponders the fate of his nation. In this poem that questions everything he has fought for since his youth, Yeats wonders what has happened to his dream, the Ireland he had envisioned when he was twenty, and repeats the answer in the closing lines of the poem's four stanzas: “Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave.” (“The Poems of W. B. Yeats” 289) Lamenting the loss of both, he is pessimistic about the future and maybe feels that his dream has died a little with O'Leary.

2.2 Maud Gonne

It is O'Leary that brings Maud Gonne (1866 - 1953) to Bedford Park in January 1889.
When she arrives with an invitation for Yeats' father, Yeats sees her and feels immediately attracted to her. The next day he writes to O'Leary: “it was you, was it not, who converted Miss Gonne to her Irish opinions? She herself will make many converts.” (Wade 108) Apart from O'Leary's influence on Gonne – and thus indirectly on Yeats as well – it is interesting to look at the language Yeats uses here. He speaks of “converted” and “converts” as if nationalism is a form of religion. In fact, this is exactly what it is for Yeats and even more so for Gonne. By then she has already been involved in a number of nationalist schemes, such as the National League and the efforts to release Irish political prisoners from jail. Yeats is also convinced that Gonne has a potentially important role to play in the movement's future. Her beauty, eloquence, and zealous belief can convert many others, and no doubt is he already counting himself as one of her followers.

Yeats' encounter with Gonne is the beginning of a lifelong devotion that leads him to write his most intimate and affectionate poetry. He writes *The Countess Kathleen* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* – in which she plays the leading role herself – for her, paying the greatest respect by identifying her with the legendary Queens and heroins of Celtic Ireland. She is his Diana, Deirdre, and Helen of Troy, but to no avail. Yeats' feelings for her are not mutual and time after time she refuses his proposals until in 1903 she marries the nationalist John MacBride. Yeats is shocked and devastated, but even after this she continues to be his Muse.

One of the reasons why Gonne refuses Yeats is because according to her, his nationalism lacks radicalism. It is true that Gonne is far more outspoken and fundamental than Yeats in her nationalistic tendencies, as the following anecdote shows. At the end of the nineteenth century, Queen Victoria visits Ireland and from all over Dublin and the country 12,000 Unionists show up to show their support. A week later, Maud Gonne marches the
streets with 40,000 supporters in her wake to swear an enmity against England until Ireland is free. These kinds of statements are indeed unknown to Yeats, but although his approach is different than Gonne's, his ultimate goal is the same as hers.

When discussing Gonne's possible influence over Yeats, Leerssen raises an interesting question. He speculates whether Yeats' participation in certain separatist activities – such as the protest against the Irish visit from Queen Victoria, or the centenary commemorations of the 1789 Rebellion – should not be seen as largely motivated by his passionate desire for Gonne (50). He may have a point here, considering the fact that mass protests and stirring commotion are more Gonne's style than they are Yeats'. In fact, she had organised the protest against Queen Victoria's coming. Up until then, Yeats had largely kept away from public manifestations and when he did share his opinions, he did so somewhat concealed or through his writings. Also, since the timing of the activities coincides with Yeats' series of proposals to Gonne, it is quite possible that he wanted to win her favour by showing his support. Despite her refusal to be together, she remains an important source of inspiration and her passion has undoubtedly incited Yeats' own creed.

2.3 Douglas Hyde

Douglas Hyde (1860 - 1949) grows up at Sligo just as Yeats and it is there that he first becomes acquainted with the Irish language. Spending his days between the old townspeople, he is fascinated by this magical and mythical language with its strange sounds. When he later visits Dublin he meets other people who are interested in Irish as well, and he decides to learn the language by himself. Getting more and more familiar with the language in all its facets, he notices the negative connotations attached to it and the subsequent decline of active speakers. His efforts to save the language from extinction will give rise to the foundation of the Gaelic League – or Conradh na Gaeilge – in 1893.
Yeats meets Hyde again through John O'Leary. When Yeats visits O'Leary at his house around 1890, Hyde is temporarily staying there, collecting the stories and songs of the surrounding people. By then he has already gained considerable popularity as a Gaelic poet, writing songs under his pseudonym *An Craoibhín Aoibhinn*, which means as much as “The Pleasant Little Branch”. The two poets get to know each other better and Hyde contributes a tale to Yeats' *Fairy and Folk Tales*. In return, Yeats helps him out with the London publication of *Beside the Fire*, a book written in the “beautiful English of Connacht” (“Autobiographies” 218). Their collaboration culminates in the National Literary Society, of which Hyde becomes President after succeeding John O'Leary. Hyde's famous presidential lecture “The Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland” on 25 November 1892 leads to the formation of a sub-committee and afterwards reforms into the Gaelic League. Here, the association between Yeats and Hyde largely stops, because even though they sporadically keep in touch, they decide to each go their separate ways.

From early on after their first acquaintance, Yeats has predicted a great future for Hyde and has a feeling he is going to be most important for the nation. Apart from setting up the Gaelic League which endeavours the right to an Irish culture in all its aspects, Hyde is also politically active. After the Irish Free State has been established in 1922, he shortly becomes Senator for the upper house of Parliament. But it is in 1938 that he achieves his biggest accomplishment by being elected as the first President of Ireland. Characteristic of his lifelong fervour for the Irish language, Hyde delivers the Presidential Declaration of Office in his native dialect.

### 2.4 Lady Gregory

Lady Gregory\(^25\) (1852 - 1932) and Yeats meet in 1896 when Yeats is staying with

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\(^25\) Born Isabella Augusta Persse, Lady Gregory acquires her title by marrying Sir William Henry Gregory, member of the Order of St. Michael and St. George.
Edward Martyn at Tulira Castle. Martyn's property is bounded by Lady Gregory's estate, named Coole Park, and she regularly invites Yeats over. At the time of their meeting, Yeats is struggling with his work and with himself. Troubled by what is going on around him and seeing his beloved Ireland fall prey to internal conflicts, he finds himself lacking the creativity he had when writing *The Wanderings of Oisin* and *The Countess Kathleen*. To take his mind of things, Lady Gregory takes him out for long walks through the countryside where he reconnects with his traditional roots. She takes him into the peasants' cottages where he collects a number of faery and folklore stories. Throughout the years, Lady Gregory continues to support Yeats and stimulate his creativity. She helps him to write plays like *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and *Where There is Nothing* – mainly focusing on the peasant dialogues – and reworks the latter into *The Unicorn of the Stars* after Yeats expresses his dissatisfaction with the rash work.

Her input has been most important during the early years of the Abbey Theatre and before. When Edward Martyn, Yeats, and her start the Irish Literary Theatre, she raises most of its funding and makes sure the plays are fit for the stage – she even reworks some of the passages from *The Countess Kathleen*. When the Abbey Theatre is founded in 1904, she stays closely involved as one of its directors and writes a few short plays herself that serve to support the main plays. Besides looking after Yeats' productivity and that of the Theatre, she also writes prose based on Irish mythology, and some pamphlets on political topics. The adaptations of old Irish folklore stories and many Hiberno-English and Irish translations make her an unmistakable member or the Irish Literary Revival.

Yet nationalism is not self-evident to Lady Gregory considering her Anglo-Irish descent. Her parents and family have an affinity for the British rule and in her early years she seems to share their opinion. But a trip to Inisheer in 1893 inspires her to learn the Irish
language (“Lady Gregory”) and discover the native traditions of her residence. Shortly after, she meets Yeats whose schemes help to guide her recently adopted nationalism. His work and ideas for Ireland establish her nationalist belief and in turn she will help him to achieve his goals. When Yeats is awarded the Nobel Prize he acknowledges Lady Gregory's part in “whatever fame in the world [he] might possess.” For her constant help and being there when he needed a friend the most, as well as for her own writings which “delighted in history and tradition,” Yeats wishes they will be remembered together (“Autobiographies” 552-4). He himself commemorates her by one of her favourite phrases that poignantly captures her spirit: “We work to add dignity to Ireland” (“Autobiographies” 456).

2.5 John Millington Synge

J. M. Synge (1871 - 1909) leads a rather tragic life, being misunderstood by almost everybody and suffering from an incurable disease from the age of twenty-seven. But when Yeats meets Synge in Paris in December 1896, he is immediately convinced of his necessity for the Theatre. According to Yeats, Synge was the only man “incapable of a political thought or of a humanitarian purpose.” (“Autobiographies” 567) Yeats frequently describes him as a genius and places him alongside the likes of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats.

It is true that throughout his life Synge never showed any interest in politics, nor in much else but his private thoughts and work. But exactly these qualities make him for Yeats a pure nationalist and the most genuine person he will ever meet. Because Synge is solely devoted to his thoughts about and for Ireland, his work cannot be compromised by politics, religion, or any other exterior influence. He writes frankly about the Ireland as he knows it and never stops to think about how this portrayal will affect his audience.

Much of his inspiration comes from the stories he hears and the every-day scenes he witnesses on the Aran Island of Inishmaan. Yeats had convinced Synge to go and live there for
a while before joining him and the rest of the company – Moore, Martyn, and Lady Gregory – in Dublin for the preparations of the Irish Literary Theatre. There, Synge discovers the purity of Old Ireland and immediately feels at home. His plays depict the peasant and fishing community to the smallest detail, including the language they speak. Linguistically, he was an avid admirer of Irish and Hiberno-English and he makes use of the native language in his works much like Douglas Hyde and Lady Gregory do, for a noble purpose.

But the peaceful life on Inishmaan lies far away from Dublin and in the city, Synge's plays become highly controversial. In 1903, In The Shadow of the Glen – the play that will feature on the Abbey Theatre's opening night – is performed for the first time and attacked for its incorrect and inappropriate display of Irish women. A year later, Riders to the Sea is heavily criticised and regarded heretical. But none of his plays cause so much commotion as The Playboy of the Western World does. On opening night a mass of protesters shows up at the Theatre, denouncing the play as indecent and offensive. They cannot identify with its peasant characters and find it a scandal upon Ireland's womanhood. But Yeats strongly believes in the play and the playwright and comes to the defence of Synge. He addresses the partly violent audience, defending the artist's freedom, and eventually succeeds in calming them down. Synge, on the other hand, seems to be undisturbed by all of this and continues on writing his next play.

When Synge dies in 1909 of Hodgkins disease, Yeats takes the task upon him to manage his unpublished works after he had promised Synge to do so. He soon clashes with Synge's relatives over the legacy of his work, however, as they are only interested in making as much money as they can from it. Yeats again finds himself defending Synge and his work, feeling that both deserve better. It shows the admiration Yeats has for the man of genius, defending him when he himself cannot do so and believing in him when no one else will.
Synge is in many ways the personification of Yeats' ideal nationalist, focused only on his literature and free from any other influence. It is the nationalist Yeats himself always aspired to be, but never really became.

3 Towards a cultural nationalist theory

3.1 Cultural nationalism

3.1.1 Definition

“Nationalism” is a term that springs forward from the Romantic Era. It first comes into use during the late eighteenth century when the American Revolution and the French Revolution bring about a change in the way people feel and think about their country. Before, these people were generally loyal to a city or a sovereign, but with the rise of the modern state they suddenly find themselves collected under the same banner. Thus, in order for these nations to stabilise and stay united, there has to be enough harmony and common ground among the groups of individuals that make up their population. The national pillars had to create an ideological basis by emphasising collective identity and expressing a single national culture (Hutchinson and Smith 4-5). Traditionally, this culture is marked by a common ethnicity – consisting most notably of language and race – and a political system. Its main focus – also more narrowly defined as “political nationalism” – is on the establishment of this political system to consolidate the formation of the new state. And it is exactly in this aspect

26 The term “nationalism” was coined by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744 - 1803) in his historical essay “Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menscheit” (1774): “So jede zwei Nationen, deren Neigungen und Kreise der Glückseligkeit sich stoßen–man nenntsVorurtheil! Pöbele! eingeschränkten Nationalism!” (319)

27 Romanticism originated in the second half of the eighteenth century as a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment. As it turns away from science and rationalisation, it embraces ancient customs like folklore and fairy tales.
that it differs from cultural nationalism\textsuperscript{28}. 

Rather than having the state as its culminuation point, cultural nationalism achieves to perceive the nation as a community with a historical distinctiveness that is defined by a shared (inherited) culture which may or may not be imaginatively constructed. Cultural nationalists – pre-eminently creative minds such as poets, writers, painters, and artists – are engaged in creating or reviving a national identity that can serve as the starting point for or merely support a broader nationalist movement. By constructing this nationalist spirit in literature and arts, and founding its legitimacy upon heritage and ancestry, they hope to initiate a feeling of togetherness among the people that is strong enough to overcome their inherent differences. They often draw on folklore or legends from the ancient past for symbols and characters that emanate strength, courage, and morality, and that can therefore function as eminent models for the population or general moral standards. These artists unite in numerous societies – mainly of linguistic or literary nature – and spread their ideas mainly through debates, literature, and other fields of the arts. Recently, the term “cultural nationalism” is chiefly used in post-colonial studies to research the colonised nations’ struggle for independence through the search of a unique identity and culture.

3.1.2 Two theories

3.1.2.1 John Hutchinson

John Hutchinson\textsuperscript{29} describes a nation as a creative force (Galloway), an organic being

\textsuperscript{28} Although cultural and political nationalism are considered two different things, they can – and often will – occur simultaneously as parts of a larger nationalist movement.

\textsuperscript{29} John Hutchinson (born 1949) is an interdisciplinary scholar whose work has contributed to theories of nationalism, the study of cultural nationalism, notably in Ireland, and more recently, warfare and nationalism. He is currently Reader in Nationalism in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics, Vice-President of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism and Deputy Editor of Nations and Nationalism. His book The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism is widely cited by scholars as a pioneering
(Hutchinson 13) and the movement of cultural nationalism as seeking to “re-unite the different aspects of the nation – traditional and modern, agriculture and industry, science and religion – by returning to the creative life-principle of the nation.” (14) With this definition Hutchinson agrees that the main goal for cultural nationalists is to provide a strong basis for solidarity that can incorporate and consolidate the different aspects of the nation. He also stresses the significance of creativity – and therefore its main actors, the artists – in the originating and developing process of the new state. Galloway completes his reasoning by adding further that “cultural nationalists tend to establish decentralized cultural societies and journals in order to inspire members in a given community by educating them to their common heritage.”

Hutchinson's main contribution, however, is that he does not merely support the aforementioned view on the purpose of cultural nationalism, but that he suggests a methodology to examine its principles and means. Inspiration for the cultural movement had to come from a time when individual aspirations were still subordinate to a greater good and from a time that could be embraced by everyone as their own history. For this, Hutchinson goes as far back as the origin of the nation's existence, a time characterised by a so-called “creative life-principle” (14). The term “life-principle” can have two different meanings here 30. The first explanation refers to the nation's original life, namely its earliest ancestors. This means that everyone shares a common ancestry that is generally regarded – in an allegorical sense parallel to that of the Bible – as pure, unspoilt and incorruptible by earthly

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30 Even though both explanations have different accents, this does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. In fact, the characteristics looked for in the second explanation are often found in the ancient legends and their heroic protagonists mentioned in the first. The double meaning of the term is only used here to introduce two vital elements to the study of cultural nationalist works, such as Yeats'.
powers. This bond through blood provides sufficient legitimacy to answer the nationalist call for unity. The second explanation interprets the term according to the principles of the nation's life. Rather than focusing on characters from the past, uniformity is reached here by selecting those characteristics – such as bravery, strength, and honour – needed to ensure the nation's glorious future. Everyone belonging to the nation should then strive to possess – and ideally share – these same characteristics in an attempt to strengthen homogeneity. Both possibilities support Hutchinson's theory that cultural nationalism aims at a certain connection of the people through a shared culture and heritage.

3.1.2.2 Frantz Fanon

The second theory is based on Frantz Fanon’s most famous work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Although the book itself tells the story of the Algerian struggle against its coloniser France, there are some interesting points we can remark about decolonisation in general – notions we can then later adapt to Ireland and Yeats in particular. Fanon describes very clearly how difficult it is for a colonised nation to impose its own culture and language against the oppressing political, military, and cultural force. Important here is that he considers language to be an inherent part of culture, a thesis that had already been postulated by philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767 - 1835) in the 19th century. In his major work on human language von Humboldt concludes that language is the “outer appearance of the spirit of a people” (46), and thus already connects language to culture. This

31 Frantz Omar Fanon (1925 - 1961) was a psychiatrist, philosopher, revolutionary, and author from Martinique. He is perhaps the pre-eminent thinker of the 20th century on the issue of decolonisation and his work remains up to this day influential in the fields of post-colonial studies and critical theory. (“Frantz Fanon”)

32 The book tells the story of decolonisation from an Algerian point of view, but the mechanisms and structures mentioned do not limit themselves to the Algerian case. For clarity's sake, I will therefore treat these processes as generally occurring and make no explicit further mention of Algeria.
is of particular importance because it can lead to the suggestion that this symbiotic
relationship of language and culture eventually leads to a double loss when the native culture
merges into the coloniser's.

In this assimilation process Fanon recognises the exceptionally delicate situation of the
rural population, as they usually hold on to their native language or dialect more firmly than
the urban community does. Since there is less social mobility and requirement of formal
register in the country, linguistic changes tend to develop slower here than in the cities, where
those changes usually originate. Because of this, a brutal and forceful disruption of the
cultural or linguistic situation is felt as more threatening and profound in rural than in urban
areas. However, while recognising the peasants' precarious situation, Fanon also sees the
solution for decolonisation lying in this corner and imputes great importance to the rural
population. Whereas large cities are the first to be brought under foreign restraint and swiftly
become the centres of the new ideology, the countryside is not put under such strict control
and maintains a greater distance to the colonising powers. Because of this, Fanon argues,
these peasants have enough independence from the coloniser to revolt.

He then goes on by diagnosing the necessity of the use of violence as a means of
liberation. Since the oppressor will not just accept any revolution and his dominion has spread
throughout society, it will take all means, including that of violence, to overthrow the
established regime and triumph. Apart from these additional insights – language is a part of
culture, there is a liberating role for the rural population, and the use of violence as a means of
detachment – this work gives us, its main principle is the same as we saw in Hutchinson's
theory, namely that a past culture can be used as the basis for a future one. This past culture
should then be above all a pre-colonial culture.

3.1.2.3 Fact or fiction?
However clear both Hutchinson's and Fanon's theories may be when it comes to the characteristics and peculiarities of cultural nationalism, neither of them mentions whether the historical claims made by cultural nationalists should be factual or not. The truth is that for writers this probably does not matter so much as it does for historians – who can also be part of the cultural nationalist movement – and that for the former the validity of their writings will lie somewhere in between truth and fiction.

The basic principle for a cultural nationalist is to create a history the entire nation can believe, embrace as its own and be proud of. These artists tend to use folk tales and historical characters from the oral or written tradition for inspiration, simply because they have been passed on from generation to generation and from family to family and are therefore rooted in a common memorandum. These myths and legends may have a source of truth, but when they do not it does not make them any less inspirational or appealing. People need to believe in something, even when they know it is not true, if it is only to aspire the qualities that promise a brighter future. In this light, Hutchinson's “creative life-principle” (14) can mean that at the beginning of the new nation everything is still possible and needs to be written down, and this is exactly the time when cultural nationalists are needed and come forward.

3.2 The cultural nationalist period

3.2.1 From a vision to a theory

At the beginning of his literary career, Yeats is full of enthusiasm and hopes about the future – both his own and that of Ireland. Centuries of occupation might have damaged the country, but the Irish spirit is as strong as ever. Under the influence of his environment, Yeats creates a vision that needs to help Ireland attain the independence it has been fighting for. Through his literature, he undertakes to construct a national identity that has its roots in ancient Ireland, a time when the Irish people were still free and a place where legendary

33 Since the sixteenth century there had been a constant presence of English authority in Ireland.
heroes fought for the nation's honour and glory. Yeats hopes these tales will inspire the nation and address the crisis of representation in which the Irish found themselves (Lloyd 6). By striving for the nation's unity through literature based on a shared culture, Yeats' intention thus effectively meets the requirements of Hutchinson's and Fanon's notion on the purpose of cultural nationalism.

When Hutchinson talks about the nation as an organic being (13), he means it is a structure that forms and supports itself without any exterior influence to mould it into something that would be by definition unnatural. The nation is an organism that needs to develop freely under its own mechanisms if it wants to achieve its natural state. Considering the importance Hutchinson attaches to creativity, the impetus for these mechanisms should preferably come from the artists and their work. Yeats has a similar view, but he uses different terminology to explain it. They key factor in Yeats' theory is the role played by the writer to (re)construct a national culture. After all, this is the effort that leads to a connection of the people and ultimately forms the basis of the nation. Because of the importance of the writer's role in convincing the people that they essentially share the same culture, he need to have a certain credibility and authority. According to Yeats, a nationalist writer should therefore belong to the culture and feel its drive, as it were. Such a person is termed by Yeats the Unity of Being. This is the ideal of the artist who is built into his background, and sustaining it while at the same time being sustained by it. Only a person belonging to that culture and being completely encapsulated by it, can convincingly express its values to the masses. This is the starting point of Yeats' theory that eventually leads to with the Culture of Being. Yeats sees the route between the two Beings as a slow process of conversion. First, the country people will be addressed by the stories because by nature they stand closest to the folklorist sources and traditions – this order of rank corresponds with Fanon's claim that rural communities hold
on to their indigenous culture and are therefore more sensitive to it. Next, the message will slowly spread outside the rural area and into the cities. Here the hearts of the people will be warmed by the solidarity and sentimentality of the ancient world – especially in contrast with the often lonely and hard life of modern society as Yeats experiences it. The final stage is reached in the Culture of Being, when the men of power have been swayed by nationalist feelings and prince and peasant share the same culture. Since this process is carried out within the nation and without external interests, it answers Hutchinson's statement that the nation is an organic being that grows into a natural state by itself and from the inside out.

Of course, Yeats does not think he can complete this mission all by himself. There is a group of artists needed who each add their own views and opinions to the cultural nationalist movement. Yeats is confident that there is enough support for such a movement when in 1887 he writes to Katharine Tynan: “I feel more and more that we shall have a school of Irish poetry – founded on Irish myth and history – a neo-romantic movement.” (Wade 33) To guarantee that this school is in line with the nationalist movement's initial concept, to establish a stream of creativity and an active exchange of ideas, and to regulate all the produced literature, there is need of a solid structure or even a combination of structures. Yeats sees the realisation of this structure in the foundation of a number of supporting societies that each have their own field of activity, but that nevertheless strive after the same goal. When Parnell dies in 1891, Yeats finds that the time is right for these societies to emerge. He was convinced that after Parnell's death “the moment had come for work in Ireland, for I knew that for a time the imagination of young men would turn from politics.” (Wade 193) With the loss of their leader, Yeats thinks these young men will look for an alternative to express and share their nationalist feelings. This alternative should then ideally

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34 I will discuss two of these societies – the Literary Societies and the Abbey Theatre – separately under 3.2.2 to examine their particular role and effect in Yeats' scheme.
be found in the literature of the new cultural movement. We can demonstrate the operation and the importance of the societies within Yeats' master plan again by a combination of Hutchinson's and Yeats' theories. Hutchinson's premise of cultural nationalism is that it should seek to “re-unite the different aspects of the nation” (14). To this, Galloway adds that the “cultural nationalists tend to establish decentralized cultural societies”. In the Ireland of Yeats' time there were a number of disputes between opposing factions. There was division between Unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants, English and Irish, and the rich and the poor. Deeply-rooted conflicts that Yeats has to overcome both in and through his societies. The only way he can manage to do this is by staying as neutral as possible – apart from the English vs. Irish conflict, of course, which is the drive of his national feelings. It will become one of the most ambitious principles – and there is a certain doubt as to what extent it is actually achieved – but Yeats is determined, for instance, to keep politics out of the societies35. Because the movement must accommodate everyone, the societies have to “decentralize” to consolidate all the different aspects of the nation. Only in so doing can Yeats optimally guarantee the fulfilment of his ideals.

The choice for Celtic folk tales as a background of the national literature might seem evident, but there are actually three main reasons why Yeats opts for these stories. The first one is rather pragmatic. Yeats believes the stories have to be kept simple in order for the lower classes to understand them. They are not educated enough to comprehend too profound images, so these have to be recognisable and fairly straightforward. This is exactly what the folk tales are. They have a moralistic nature, contain universal values, and since they have

35 Although Yeats wants to keep politics out of the societies, he is well aware that politics and art are intrinsically linked. He merely opts, however, to comment on these issues through his work rather than via the institutions. Especially in the middle part of his career, he uses his poetry to comment on Irish politics as well as educate the people about Irish history and culture.
been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries, they belong to the common heritage and are known by everyone. This brings us to the second reason why the choice has been made for these legends. Because the nationalist movement is striving for Ireland's independence, it opposes by definition to the English presence and oppression. Consequently, Yeats needs to construct a typically Irish culture without English or other influences. Looking at Ireland's turbulent history, this only leaves the Prehistoric (8,000BC - 400AD) and Early Christian (400 - 800) eras to return to. This choice for a pre-English source of inspiration is a good example of Fanon's post-colonial theory. In order to escape the British culture and form its own identity, Ireland has to go back to pre-colonial times. Not to do so would mean being exposed to an established English cultural model and would compromise the national character from taking its own natural form. The third and last reason to adopt these folklore stories is because of their content. They contain everything Yeats' Ireland needs in times of uncertainty – a moralistic message, courageous and persistent heroes, and epic battles between good and evil in which the good always prevails – and he hopes that they can inspire the people to fight for their beliefs and for their country. This also matches Hutchinson's contribution that the ideas of cultural nationalist literature should come straight from the nation's origin, which he calls the “life-principle”. Here both meanings of the term are being referred to, namely the ancestors who are being used as characters and their objective characteristics for everyone to aspire. The Irish founders – such as Cú Chulainn, Deirdre, Fionn mac Cumhaill, and Oisin – are usually the tales' main characters and because they stand by Ireland's cradle, everyone can lay claim to their descent. This gives them – and Yeats – the necessary authority to appeal to everybody.

More surprisingly than the choice for Celtic folk tales is Yeats' preference for English

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36 From 800 onwards there are successive waves of invasion from the Vikings (800 - 1166), the Normans (1168 - 1536), and the English (1536 - present).
over Irish as the language of his stories. This is an important theme and for many nationalists even a breaking point in their stand on nationalism. Yet Yeats' choice fits in his approach and can be justified even from a nationalist point of view. Since Fanon sees language as an inherent part of culture, it is tempting to suspect Yeats of a certain ambiguity over his thoughts on the Irish culture. Especially because at the time there is a lot of support – not in the least from Yeats' own friends like Lady Gregory and Douglas Hyde – to revive the Irish language and restore its dialects. Books are translated from and into Irish, linguistic studies are undertaken to demonstrate the value and richness of the language, and grammars are being written to provide its structure. Yeats does not partake in any of these schemes, which sometimes earns him the suspicion of other nationalists or parts of the population. However, while not actively using the language himself, Yeats never denies that the Irish language belongs to the culture just as much as Cú Chulainn and Oisin do. On the contrary, he lets Lady Gregory rework many of the peasant dialogues in his plays precisely because of her knowledge of rural dialects, and supports Hyde in the foundation of the Gaelic League. So he does not disagree with Fanon's assumption nor with that of nationalists who work on a Gaelic revival, he merely handles a different strategy. That strategy is based on the future he sees for Ireland. The new Ireland has to move forward and Yeats considers English as the language of that future. The active use of Irish Gaelic and its dialects had been in decline for several decades already and there were no signs of any quick recovery. Rather than investing in a dying language, Yeats therefore chooses to use English instead. An added motif for his decision comes from the fact that he wants to reach everybody with his work and especially the cities, because they are still the centres of innovation and that is where his influence can make the biggest difference. Since everyone in Ireland speaks English, but only a minority understands Irish Gaelic, his choice is soon made. At the most we can accuse Yeats of being
realistic rather than idealistic when it comes to choosing English over the Irish language. In support of his decision and to underline his importance, it is sufficient to note that the Gaelic tradition in English survives up to this day whereas the knowledge and use of Gaelic Irish has since Yeats' time declined even more. The last and most vital part of Yeats' theory thus deals with the future of Ireland. Instead of using the tradition to return to the past, he uses it as a means to move forward. In this aspect it almost paraphrases Fanon's thesis that “the claims to a national culture in the past . . . rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification of a future national culture.” (Fanon 169)

3.2.2 Societies

3.2.2.1 Literary Societies

In 1891 a group of Irish writers, poets, and nationalists meet at Yeats' house in London to discuss his plans about a new society. In 1892 the Irish Literary Society is founded as a direct consequence of this meeting, followed some time after by a similar National Literary Society in Dublin. They soon attract the attention of many prominent nationalists – such as John O'Leary, John F. Taylor, Douglas Hyde, and Standish O'Grady – and are therefore looked upon with hostility by the Members of Parliament. The latter's suspicion grows even bigger when the Societies make it clear that there will be no political influence or any political purpose connected to their mission. That mission is to give a new generation of writers and critics a chance to be heard, as well as to restore some old forgotten values. Apparently Yeats is discontent with what is being written at the time and if not with what is written, then certainly with that which is read or told to be read. He calls it “the propagandist verse and prose that had gone by the name of Irish literature” (“Autobiographies” 396). At the time of the first meeting, Parnell has already fallen into disgrace and the Irish national landscape has shifted, making its future unclear. Yeats wants to support the nation – now in these difficult
times more than ever – by providing it with solid, authentic materials; something the people could fall back on and draw strength from. As mentioned earlier, after Parnell's death Yeats' intentions become even stronger as he wants to offer an alternative with his literature to the void Parnell leaves behind.

Some of the writers the Societies want to see revalued include Sir Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady, and Clarence Mangan. Ferguson was a nineteenth century author famous for his interest in Irish history and mythology. He also studied archaeology and wrote a number of antiquarian works on Celtic topics. Mangan was praised for his intensity in poems like *Dark Rosaleen*, which have a strong nationalist bent. And Standish O'Grady – the only one of the three still alive at the time – was admired by Yeats for his descriptions of Ireland's legendary past in *History of Ireland: Heroic Period*. He had still to write his popular romances on Irish legends. Dead or alive, the three are well-known Irish figures and can provide the new Societies with the authority they need. Their work and beliefs fit Yeats' intentions perfectly: to provide support – that has its origins in a shared and glorious past – for the people to help them get through these uncertain times.

### 3.2.2.2 Abbey Theatre

While the Literary Societies aimed at winning the hearts of the people through reading were moderately successful, Yeats' biggest achievement has undoubtedly been the Abbey Theatre. Its intention is similar to that of the Societies, and for that reason it should be regarded as a supplement rather than two separate institutions. As Yeats is evaluating the Literary Societies, he notices that they do not reach their full potential – or in any case the potential Yeats had in mind. When looking for an explanation, he comes to the conclusion that

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37 Part of Yeats' anger against Unionist Ireland and the reason why he wants to keep politics out of the Literary Societies, comes from the fact that they find the literature that Yeats wants to restore provincial and barbarous.
the great mass of people just does not read enough. Since the Societies publish a lot of plays and he himself is a playwright, the idea of an Irish Theatre is soon born. Because theatre is a pre-eminently social event, it is the perfect medium to bring the plays and their message to large groups of people.

Dublin had theatres at the time, but they were empty buildings mainly hired by English travelling companies. The Theatre Yeats has in mind is all-Irish with Irish plays and Irish actors, romantic and poetical to match his nationalism. He wants to bring the imagination and speech of the country to the town, or as he himself puts it, “bring the old folk-life to Dublin, patriotic feeling to aid us, and with the folk-life, all the life of the heart.” (Leerssen 55) In this description we can clearly see Yeats' romantic view of the countryside with its deeply rooted traditions and nationalism showing through, as opposed to the cold, rational and self-centred city that needs its help.

A first attempt to the realisation of his plans comes in 1899 with the Irish Literary Theatre. Helped – financially and creatively – by Lady Gregory and other close friends the Theatre survives for three years but then comes to an end. Its place is soon taken by an amateur company lead by the brothers Fay who continue under the name of the Irish National Theatre Society. They attract Yeats, Maud Gonne, Douglas Hyde, and George Russell as members of their organisation. The Society produces a large number of plays, but needs to find support to guarantee its continuation. After several speeches and pleas from Yeats, this support is eventually found in the person of Miss Horniman38. She functions as theatre administrator, buys a property and on 27 December 1904 the Abbey Theatre opens its doors. Lady Gregory, Synge, and Yeats are democratically chosen to lead the Theatre.

38 Annie Horniman (1860 - 1937) uses the legacy of her family – the tea business of Horniman and Company – to support the theatre. She encourages playwrights like Yeats and George Bernard Shaw, and is besides the Abbey responsible for the foundation of the Manchester Gaiety Theatre.
Right from the start, the Theatre is regarded a public danger by politicians, the Church, and even certain nationalists – not surprisingly the same nationalists who already opposed Yeats' strategies. Its plays and employees are attacked fiercely and Yeats' plan to conquer the heart of the city with romantic sentiments seems harder to realise than he had anticipated. The city-life is completely different from that in the country and has been for quite some time. Because of industrialism, politics, and the general pace of life, urban societies are less subjected to traditions and folklore. Merely presenting them with these traditions is therefore not enough to change their lifestyle or habit of thought. Moreover, because they often cannot understand the symbolic meaning of many of the plays' concepts, they can interpret them incorrectly. This happens to Yeats' *The Countess Kathleen* when after its publication and performance it is slandered by Cardinal Michael Logue and called heretical. Logue bases his attack on a pamphlet by Frank Hugh O'Donnell and has not even seen the play for himself. He assumes that Yeats' pagan play – the story is based on an old folk tale – is a threat to the Catholic Church and acts in its defence, when in fact Yeats himself is a devout and religious man.

Apart from this dispute, three important confrontations have taken place in the Abbey's history. They all show Yeats' remarkable obstinateness and are perfect examples of his nationalist spirit. The first conflict dates from 1907 with the commotion around Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. The second confrontation follows only two years later and involves George Bernard Shaw's *The Shewing-Up of Blanco Posnet*. Shaw had written the play for Her Majesty's Theatre, but was refused a license from the Lord Chamberlain on the grounds of blasphemy. Thereupon Shaw offers the play to the Abbey, which is located in an other jurisdiction and can therefore not be convicted. In August of that year the play is performed and becomes a huge success. Yeats has made a stand that artistic integrity should
come before political influence, and his persistence restores much of the popularity the Abbey had lost in 1907. The third and final upheaval takes place in 1926. After several years of struggling – mainly financially – the Abbey greets a new playwright, Séan O'Casey. His first two plays are welcomed with great enthusiasm, but his third play, *The Plough and the Stars*, causes a storm of protest reminiscent of the riots that had accompanied Synge's play. Even some of the actors object to the sexual and religious content of particular scenes. The Directors hold firm, however, and partly due to the commotion the play is performed to full houses. Up to this day O'Casey's controversial piece is a very well-known and well-liked play.

The Abbey Theatre is symptomatic for Yeats' passion and conviction in accomplishing his scheme to educate the people. His choice of plays that tell a genuine Irish story has at times been controversial, but his perseverance eventually earns him the respect of friends and foes. In 1925 he is responsible for making the Abbey the first state-supported theatre in the British Isles, and even after his withdrawal it remains primarily a theatre of the writers and the people.

3.2.3 Literature

3.2.3.1 The Wanderings of Oisin

*The Wanderings of Oisin* is an epic poem in the style of Homer's *Odyssey* that tells the story of Oisin, a great Irish hero. After he falls in love with the faery princess Niamh, she and Oisin exchange the mortal realm for three immortal faery isles where they live and feast for three hundred years. After this time, Oisin regrets leaving his friends behind and he wishes to return to his old world to visit them. He lends Niamh's faery horse but is told he cannot touch the ground or he will instantly become mortal again. Upon his return Oisin notices that the world he left behind has changed dramatically. His fellow warriors are dead and Christianity has replaced the religion and traditions of pagan Ireland. When he tries to help two men lift a
sack full of sand from the ground, his saddle girth breaks and he falls onto the ground where
the three hundred years he spent in faery land catch up with him in a single moment. The
entire poem consists of three parts and is constructed as a dialogue between Oisin and St.
Patrick after Oisin's return to the mortal world.

Yeats writes the main part of his great epic poem in Sligo during the summer and
autumn of 1889. It is the first in what has to become a Légende des Siècles, narrating and
glorifying the Irish history. The story of this poem is largely taken from legends in the Fenian
or Ossianic Cycle. The Fenian Cycle or Fiannaídheacht centres around the mythical hero
Fionn mac Cumhaill. He is the leader of a band of warriors called the Fianna Éireann, who
roam the country looking for adventure and warfare. He is also Oisin's father and that is the
reason why the Fenian Cycle is known as the Ossianic Cycle too. Yeats puts a number of the
original stories together to create his own adaptation of the legend. Apart from the Fenian
Cycle, Yeats mentions two other sources for this poem. The first is “a most beautiful old poem
by one of the numerous half-forgotten Gaelic poets who lived in Ireland in the last century.”
(Wade 132) This poem, left unnamed by Yeats, has been identified by Alspach as Michael
Comyn's “The Lay of Oisin on the Land of Youth” (850). This poem deals with the same topic
as Yeats' and especially in the opening lines Yeats stays very close to the original (851). The
second source Yeats mentions is rooted in his own tradition and concerns the islands Oisin
visits. According to Yeats these stem from the “three phantom islands” (Wade 132) of Tír na
nÓg, also known as the Land of the Young or the Land of Promise. As the most popular of the

La Légende des Siècles (1859, 1877, 1883) is a collection of poems by Victor Hugo (1802 – 1885), depicting
the history and evolution of humanity by a series of epic poems. Yeats plans a similar attempt for Irish history
and this is his first contribution. Although he writes several more stories on the same topic – including his Cú
Chulainn series – he will later admit that he had not been able to fully realise his ambitions.

The Fenian Cycle is one of four major cycles of Irish mythology. The others are the Mythological Cycle, the
Ulster Cycle – featuring Cú Chulainn – and the Historical Cycle.
mythological Otherworlds, Tír na nÓg is a place of eternal life and therefore resembles the Valhalla of Scandinavian mythology or the Christian representation of Heaven. Since all these sources are well-known among the people as a popular part of their heritage, Yeats successfully constructs the basis for a revival of ancient Ireland.

There are a few parallels that can be drawn between the story and real-life in Yeats' time that allow us to understand the intended effect of the poem better. First of all, there is the main character Oisin. Being a legendary hero, he possesses fearsome strength and relentless courage. With Hutchinson's theory in mind, he is clearly used as a role model for the Irish people here, and his admirable characteristics should be pursued by everyone. Furthermore, he belongs to a notorious group of warriors who are renowned all over the world and into the next. When Oisin finds out his comrades have died during his absence, he praises their bravery that transcends even the Realm of Death:

> “Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians, O cleric, to chant
> The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise, making clouds with their breath,
> Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath them shall pant,
> And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled beneath them in death.
> And demons afraid in their darkness; deep horror of eyes and of wings,
> Afraid, their ears on the earth laid, shall listen and rise up and weep;
> Hearing the shaking of shields and the quiver of stretched bowstrings,
> Hearing Hell loud with a murmur, as shouting and mocking we sweep.”

(“The Poems of W. B. Yeats” 61-2)

What makes these lines and this poem so effective, is the cadence of the rhythm and the repetition of sounds that make these images palpable. Through these lines the Fenians are
resurrected and once again ready to fight. Considering the centuries of domination Ireland has undergone by the time Yeats writes this poem, this is intended as a reminder to the Irish people that their situation has not always been like this and that it can be changed again if they can find the courage and strength to stand up to their oppressor.

The second parallel supports the notion that Ireland's situation has deteriorated under English rule. When Oisin returns to the old world he has left behind, he finds it has completely changed. He mourns the loss of his companions in arms and sees how St. Patrick's Christianity has replaced the old pagan beliefs. This blaming of Christianity for the disappearance of paganism is in Yeats' time not without danger. Religion is a key aspect of the nationalist struggle and the tension between Catholics and Protestants is tangible. However, it is very unlikely that Yeats meant to directly target any of the two Christian divisions. Although he is a Protestant himself, he never meddles in religious quarrels nor does he take a clear stand in the discussion. It is more likely that Yeats stages St. Patrick merely to stay true to the original material. Rather than wanting to invoke a religious debate, he contrasts both worlds in the story to emphasise their differences. In the same way that Oisin compares his original life to the new one, Yeats compares modern to ancient Ireland. He thus effectively links the deplorable state of the story's world to contemporary Ireland, turning Oisin's lament for the loss of his homeland into a nineteenth century elegy.

3.2.3.2 Cathleen ni Houlihan

*Cathleen ni Houlihan* tells the story of an Irish peasant family on the eve of their oldest son Michael's marriage. The family is in good spirits, showing the wedding clothes and discussing how to spend the dowry. When they hear a commotion coming from the town, Patrick, the youngest son, is sent out to find out what is going on. During his absence an old woman approaches the house and is warmly welcomed by the family. She later announces that
she goes by the names of Poor Old Woman, or Cathleen, daughter of Houlihan. She begins to
tell a sad story about how her land has been taken away from her and how many men have
died for her. Occasionally, she interrupts the story with a song dedicated to one of her fallen
heroes. All the family except for Michael do not attach much importance to her story, but
when she is ready to leave, Michael surprisingly announces he will accompany her. As his
parents and soon-to-be wife try to convince him to stay, Patrick returns with the news that
French troops are landing to fight the English. Michael goes off to join the French in their
battle, lead on by the enchanted singing of Cathleen, who has apparently turned into a young
girl.

Yeats writes this one-act drama in 1902 with the help of Lady Gregory. She co-authors
the play and reworks the peasant dialogues to make them more authentic. Unlike The
Wanderings of Oisin and the Cú Chulainn poems, this work is not entirely based on an
existing story. Yeats borrows the mythical character of Cathleen, but this time places her in his
own setting. Cathleen ni Houlihan is an Irish character, a mythical symbol of Irish
nationalism. Her general portrait is that of an old woman who has lost her home and is now
looking for young men to help her reclaim it. This home consists of “four green fields”
(“Cathleen ni Houlihan”) which traditionally stand for the four Irish provinces – Leinster,
Munster, Connacht, and Ulster. As such, this makes her the female personification of Ireland
that is under British control.

The play opens with a description of the scene: “Interior of a cottage close to Killala,
in 1798.” The setting for the time and the place of the story is not chosen randomly and every
Irishman would have immediately recognised the play’s true background. 1798 marks the
great Rebellion of the United Irishmen against the British rule in the Kingdom of Ireland.
Inspired by the French Revolution and supported by the French government, this
revolutionary group plans to start a war against the coloniser. Their plan to take Dublin by storm fails, however, and when in late May the surrounding counties start to revolt there is not enough support to counter the British attacks. Killala is one of the places that gets hit worst and captured or wounded rebels are massacred on a large scale. Over the course of three months, around 10,000 soldiers are killed and countless more wounded. The Rebellion of 1798 is one of the bloodiest pages in Irish history and its setting is therefore never chosen randomly.

It is exactly this choice of background that makes the story so important and significant. By selecting a historical event, Yeats gives his play an authenticity and a sense of realism that is both shocking and overwhelming to the audience. At the same time, he consciously keeps the setting of the cottage small and simple so the focus of the play is on the message's content. By contrasting the two, Yeats emphasises the large- and small-scaled impact of this drama. The family is honest, hard-working, and they are trying to live their lives in a land under the continuous threat of war. At the beginning of the play, everyone is happy and expecting great things of this marriage. Yet all their hopes and dreams turn into despair when the French troops land and the oldest son goes off to fight for Ireland – and due to the historical background we know that he will be surely killed. The play shows how great historical tales are made possible by the smallest individuals and how eventually everyone is affected by them.

One of the play's main themes is self-sacrifice for a greater good, in this case the independence of Ireland. Michael answers the call of Cathleen who needs help to recover her home and he goes off fighting and dying for her. In return, he is given immortality through martyrdom. When Cathleen wanders off, she is singing:

“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.”

The resolving to violence as the only answer to the coloniser's dominion is a good illustration of Fanon's post-colonial theory. Michael is never given an other option than self-sacrifice because Cathleen had already determined it so. The play's message for young men to go off to war and die for Ireland has raised questions from its first performance. Yeats always denies that he advocates this message or that he supports it, but the criticism will follow him for the rest of his life. To indicate that he remains conscious of the issue, he comments on it in his notes of 1904, stating that

“[i]t may be said that it is a political play of a propagandist kind. This I deny. I took a piece of human life, thoughts that men had felt, hopes that they had died for, and I put this into what I believe to be a sincere dramatic form. I have never written a play to advocate any kind of opinion and I think that such a play would be necessarily bad art, or at any rate a very humble kind of art. At the same time I fell that I have no right to exclude for myself or for others, any of the passionate material of drama.” (Jeffares and Knowland 36)

This statement complies with earlier declarations that his work is predominately cultural nationalist and therefore by definition free from political influence. In fact, it is an example that cultural nationalists use both imaginative tales and actual history to construct a shared heritage that needs to appeal to the nation. The discussion regarding Yeats' intentions proves that he has succeeded in doing just that.

Towards the end of his life and looking back on the events leading to the foundation of the Irish Free State, Yeats does question the role of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in the often violent
struggle for independence. He knew many of the participants in the Easter Rising of 1916 and they had all read his work, but it is uncertain whether the play really had an effect on them. After all, they had since long been political activists and there were numerous other incidents that preceded the insurrection. Still, in one of his latest poems, “The Man and the Echo”, Yeats considers his responsibility and asks himself:

“Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked?” (“The Poems of W. B. Yeats” 632)

While this play is more realistic than earlier works such as The Wanderings of Oisin and already carries some unmistakable elements of Yeats' next period, it is still predominately cultural nationalist. The use of Cathleen as the embodiment of Ireland and the historical context need to remind the audience that they ultimately all share the same culture and past. The realism adds the notion to this that nobody can escape the course of history and that eventually everyone is affected by its outcome. Nevertheless, the play ends hopefully when Cathleen is rejuvenated by her hero's sacrifice – which has therefore not been in vain – and her rebirth heralds the dawn of a new age free of British domination.

4 From cultural nationalism to physical force nationalism and back again

4.1 A tendency to politics and violence

4.1.1 Motives

Yeats does not reconsider his own intentions with the play as discussed before. He merely ponders its reception and his responsibility in the actions that followed.
There is no clear breaking point that marks Yeats' shift away from his original cultural nationalist theory, just as there is no noticeable finishing point where he has completely abandoned these notions. We can rather see the execution of a slow process in which Yeats becomes more realistic and ultimately even pessimistic under the strain of what goes on in and around his life. There are a number of events that cause Yeats to question his mission and eventually turn him away from cultural nationalism, looking for alternatives to accomplish his dream of Irish independence. The first of these events is the death of Parnell. Whereas Yeats originally sees this as a chance for the cultural movement to emerge, in hindsight it marks the beginning of his troubles. With the disappearance of their great leader, the different factions are unsure about how to stay together as one unit. They soon start to quarrel and fight over political power, causing a crack in the Irish national landscape that will never completely restore. Over the following years the national party splits in two – Parnellites and anti-Parnellites – and the newly formed factions slowly drift away from each other. This is all clear in hindsight, of course, and at the time Yeats was still very actively trying to construct his societies. He does write a few poems about Parnell, but these are always more personal than they are a political statement. Yeats admired Parnell and laments the loss of a great leader without taking political sides. In the closing decade of the nineteenth century, he is still very much focused on his literature and on the foundation of the cultural movement, but the death of Parnell is the catalyst for the events that will later make Yeats reconsider his choices.

A second important event that makes Yeats question the realisation of his intentions, starts with the opening of the Abbey Theatre. He wanted to bring the culture and warm sentimentality of the country to the city in order to win the hearts and minds of the people there. But as the Abbey struggles to remain viable and Yeats repeatedly comes in conflict with his audience, he discovers that the town is only capable of thinking town-thoughts
(“Autobiographies” 562). As some of his most valued plays and playwrights are attacked, he becomes more and more embittered and disillusioned, slowly realising that his dream will not be fulfilled. By 1909 - 1910 he has more or less given up on his old ideals and openly speaks about his disappointment. *The Wanderings of Oisin* was supposed to be the start for a *Légende des Siècles*, but Yeats stops trying to create a profound and enduring set of symbols that would spark nationalism (Donoghue 184). And while *Cathleen ni Houlihan* still contained a complex mass of images and provided a model to spark national feelings, he is convinced that “[n]ational spirit is, for the present, dying” (“Autobiographies” 491). He comes to the conclusion that modern society and its people cannot unify anymore, or simply don't (Donoghue 251), and blames this lack of union for his unaccomplished ambitions. This discordance can then in turn be ultimately traced back to Parnell's disappearance from the political stage. Yeats explains in his later life that “[t]he modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics” (“Autobiographies” 559).

A third and final reason why Yeats will choose to change his strategy is consistent with the dominating European climate at the time. When World War I breaks out, he is shocked about the damage and the scale of it. He cannot comprehend how things could have come so far and starts to question the use of democracy. This is further instigated by the developments in Ireland. It was bad enough that there was no unity anymore between the people, but now politicians and nationalists start to attack each other and Yeats sees Ireland being destroyed from the inside out. When the Easter Rebellion takes place in 1916 he is at first dismayed by the use of violence, but turns around when the leaders – among them many old friends and acquaintances – are executed by the British government. All these circumstances make him
doubt the meaning and purpose of his original theory and will lead to a new nationalism after 1916. The message of this new movement can be best put into Yeats’ own words when he indicates in 1922 that “[d]emocracy is dead and force claims its ancient right” (Wade 695).

4.1.2 Reaction

There are two notable aspects to this newly adopted nationalism. The first one is that Yeats openly turns to politics. When he accepts the Civil List pension in 1910, he does so “on the understanding that he [is] to remain perfectly free to undertake any political activities in Ireland he might wish.” (Wade 518) This already betrays any future ambitions he might have towards a political career, even more so when in 1922 he becomes a Senator for the newly founded Irish Free State. Yeats will hold this office until 1928. With the new developments and the independent Free State, Yeats feels he has to participate in history and do all he can for modern Ireland. He believes that the young nation needs a centre of policy to guarantee its stability and agrees to take part in it. Consequently, the topics of his poetry become more contemporary and even political in these years. The best example of this is his poem *Easter 1916* in which he commemorates the republican leaders of the uprising. Yeats had known many of them personally and through his verse he immortalises them by writing their names, turning them into the martyrs of the Free State.

The second aspect that deviates from earlier convictions is his view on violence as a means of liberation and this is where Fanon's theory again comes into use. While Yeats remains somewhat conflicted about this, he nevertheless agrees with Fanon's premise that violence is necessary in order for the colonised to break free from its coloniser. Although the

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42 Although Yeats turns from cultural nationalism to political nationalism and his work in this period features more contemporary and political subjects, he still writes poetry based on ancient mythology since he remains a nationalist. However, the main tendency during this period is that his work is deeply influenced by this new take on nationalism.
toll of the Civil War and the centuries of violent resistance is high, the result is there with the Free State. This causes Yeats to say that “[a]ll creation is from conflict . . . and the historian who dreams of bloodless victory wrongs the wounded veterans.” (“Autobiographies” 576) He is of course influenced by the Irish case and the inevitability of violence in World War I, but even in questioning his own responsibility with *Cathleen ni Houlihan* does Yeats acknowledge the purpose of violence. However, while accepting physical force nationalism on the one hand, on the other he still regrets the many lives that are taken by it. Apart from politics, many of his poems also deal with violence and warfare. In “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death”, for example, a pilot describes the circumstances of his own death. The poem is based on Major Robert Gregory, the only child of Lady Gregory, who died as an aviator during World War I.

### 4.2 The final act

The final period in Yeats' ever-developing nationalism encompasses more or less the last decade of his life. In 1928 Yeats refuses to stand for re-election as a Senator due to health problems. Hereupon he travels to Italy and France to benefit from the mild climate and finds the peace and quiet there truly liberating. This gives him a chance to look at his life from a distance and reflect on the choices he has made. While he stands by his decisions and is proud of the role he has played before and after the Free State, he does feel that a new time has come and partly returns to the old mystic imagery and symbolism of his earlier days. The difference now is, however, that Yeats has literally distanced himself from Ireland and looks at his subject matter from the outside. He still feels connected to it and will remain a nationalist until his death, but he no longer feels that his fate depends on Ireland's. As a result, his later poetry such as “Leda and the Swan” is impregnated with metaphysical elements and even erotic connotations. But significant for Yeats' return to the inspiration of his early years is the
last play that he ever writes. With *The Death of Cuchulainn* Yeats closes the mythological cycle that had started in 1892 with the poem of the same name.

5 Conclusion

When we look at Yeats' life, we see the story of a man who grows up in and out of a country that does not even feel like his own. Centuries of foreign domination have brought Ireland to its breaking point, but in its darkest hour the visionary poet W. B. Yeats steps into the light. He has an image of Ireland as a glorious and prosperous nation, attaining once more its ancient illustrious status. Yeats gets the idea to found a literature based on mythology and legends from John O'Leary. O'Leary will remain a large influence in Yeats' life, shaping his nationalist impulse and supporting his work. An other notable influence is Maud Gonne who incites Yeats' nationalist feelings through her beauty and enthusiasm, turning her into his Muse. Then there is Douglas Hyde who, after working with Yeats and then going his own way founds the Gaelic League and becomes the first President of Ireland. One of Yeats' closest friends, Lady Gregory, reworks a number of his plays by paying specific attention to the peasants' speech, co-founds the Abbey Theatre, and is always there when Yeats needs advice. Finally, J. M. Synge is described by Yeats as a genius and the prototype of a cultural nationalist. He also writes a great deal of the Abbey's plays. All these people have each in their own individual way influenced Yeats and are largely responsible for his vision.

This vision becomes a theory when we look at the basic principles of cultural nationalism. Cultural nationalism aims at uniting a nation by offering it a literature that is based on common heritage and culture. The post-colonial addition to this highlights the discrepancy between the indigenous culture and that of the coloniser. We find an elaboration of both these concepts in the theories of John Hutchinson and Frantz Fanon. Hutchinson's cultural nationalist theory contains three main arguments: the nation is an organic being that
has to grow unrestrictedly from within, cultural nationalism seeks to re-unite different aspects of the nation, and creativity is imperative in the development of a new state. Yeats meets all these three demands as they form the cornerstones of his own theory. Firstly, he calls the nationalist writer a Unity of Being who will, when free from exterior pressure, lead the nation into a Culture of Being where every person shares the same culture. This Culture of Being is the last stage in a process of conversion and therefore corresponds to Hutchinson's natural state. Secondly, in order to re-unite all the different aspects of the nation, Yeats remains as neutral as possible and keeps all politics out of his Societies. Thirdly, through his work Yeats constructs or reconstructs the nation's heritage. In *The Wanderings of Oisin* he bases his text on an existing legend – using the main character and his qualities to inspire the people – while in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* he combines the mythical character of Cathleen with an actual historic event. As a result of complying to all Hutchinson's demands as well as the aforementioned general, Yeats' vision can be truly called a cultural nationalist theory.

Fanon's post-colonial theory is partly situated in the second period, but has resemblances with the first one as well. Although Yeats chooses a different strategy, he initially agrees with Fanon's statement that a language is an inherent part of the culture. While Yeats' acknowledges the originality of Irish Gaelic, he opts to write in English anyway. This is done to ensure Ireland's future and in this aspect both theories do completely come together since they both found the legitimation of the future state on the ancient one. The use of violence as a necessary part of the nation's struggle away from the coloniser is already mentioned in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* with the theme of self-sacrifice. But it is not until the second period that Yeats really starts to believe in this premise. Confronted with the atrocities of both World War I and the final battles over Irish independence he has no choice than to admit their necessity. Another striking difference of this period with the previous one is Yeats'
involvement in politics. Whereas in the first period the absence of politics had to guarantee union across divisions, in the second period Yeats sees it as an alternative to his failed mission. From 1922 to 1928 he is Senator for the Irish Free State.

The latest years of his life, finally, mark a third period, although this one is short and more a balance of the two previous ones. Distanced from Ireland, Yeats looks back on his life and on the choices he has made. He is happy with the life he has lived and the roles he has played in Ireland's history. In these later years, he returns to the mysticism and mythology of his earlier works, thus closing the cycle of his life.
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Yeats, W. B. *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. 20 Mar. 2010


WB Yeats: the poet (in front of the door, third row) outside the Royal Irish Academy with a group that includes Kevin O'Higgins and William T Cosgrave. Photograph: National Library of Ireland. Dark star: Charles Stewart Parnell, a politician who preoccupied WB Yeats. This was his interest in the fascistic Blueshirt movement and his misbegotten attempt (pressurised by Ernest Blythe) to write “marching songs” for it. Although the poem Church and State suggests that he was declaring a plague on politics in general he could never quite divorce himself from the subject, especially as it concerned Ireland. Yeats’s close connection to politics comes into sharp focus as we celebrate both the 150th anniversary of his birth and the approaching centenary of the Easter Rising. Yeats’s work shifts from the heavily ornamental, fantasy-driven early poems to the fascination with Irish myth and legend, which matured into the concerns of the Celtic Revival and the embrace of distinctly Irish culture. As an older but still unmarried man, he became more interested in contemporary social issues, though he never lost sight of the history which informed them. The simple imagery of the quiet life the speaker longs to lead, as he enumerates each of its qualities, lulls the reader into his idyllic fantasy, until the penultimate line jolts the speaker—and the reader—back into the reality of his drab urban existence: “While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey.” Many of the early works of Yeats share this common theme of Celtic folklore and myth. As the poet continued in this manner, it becomes clear to the reader that the thematic elements of the work become more focused. How the pre-industrial rhythm of life had been interrupted by the hourly wage in the cities, as opposed to the pastoral life of the country that was governed by the changing of the seasons, rather than the movement of the hands of a clock. Yeats authored plays that relied heavily upon the myths and legends of ancient Ireland, among them; “On Baile’s Strand”, “Deidre”, and “The Death of Cuchulain”. Though the author deviates from the source material throughout, the core of the plays remain true to their origins.