



Yeats, Myth and Mythical Method

a Close Reading of the Representations of Celtic and Catholic Mythology in “The Wanderings of Oisín”

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1. Introduction

A lot has been written about W.B Yeats and the importance of mythology in his body of work. However, it is more difficult to find papers and articles covering the earliest work by Yeats. "The Wanderings of Oisín" was published in 1889 and is one of Yeats' earliest poems and is the main focus for this article. The poem depicts the duality of Irish identity and the transition from one system of belief to another. This essay will demonstrate that W.B Yeats uses Celtic and Catholic mythology in "The Wanderings of Oisín" (hereafter "Wanderings") in order to reflect his contemporary Ireland. The analysis in the essay is divided into two parts. In the first part I will begin with a definition and discussion about the word myth and in connection to this I will discuss the literary term the mythical method. The mythical method is a modernist literary term and was attributed to Yeats by T.S Eliot as the "first contemporary to be conscious" of this method (Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth"). The method consists of a way of using myth and narrative to create order when writing a novel or a poem. Usually this term is applied on Yeats' later work which is why I will compare "Wanderings" to Eliot's definition of the mythical method to see whether the poem is written after this method or not. In order to do this I have used Eliot's review "Ulysses, Order and Myth" and Denis Donoghue's article "Yeats, Eliot, and the Mythical Method".

The second part is more concerned about the depiction of Celtic and Catholic mythology in "Wanderings" and the connections to the late nineteenth century Ireland. The first section presents information on Irish nineteenth-century history and the second section contains the argumentation. The argumentation focuses on five parallels to Yeats' contemporary society: The vitality of Celtic mythological beings, the depiction of Oisín as mediator, the sense of loss regarding Irish culture, the juxtaposition of Celtic and Catholic and the ambivalence that follows in a society where two conflicting mythologies coexist and compete. The main body of arguments discusses these parallels between Yeats' portrayal of Celtic mythology and nineteenth century Ireland and shows that "Wanderings" reflects a contemporary Irish society. Lastly I will discuss the juxtaposition of Catholic and Celtic which mirrors the Irish society of the late nineteenth century where Catholicism was a central religion while pagan beliefs belonged to the periphery.

In order to do this I will do a close reading of the poem, and compare it to other analyses as well as texts about Irish history and folklore. My main secondary source is Hiroko Ikeda's "Churchman and Fenian in 'The Wandering of Oisín'".

1.1 The Poem

“Wanderings” is over 900 lines and divided into three books. It is based on an adventure tale from a collection of stories called the *Fenian Cycle*. The *Fenian Cycle* portrays the adventures of the Fianna, a militia which was led by Fionn Mac Cumhail and who are thought to have lived in the third century A.D (Mahon 17). The frame of “Wanderings” is a conversation between St. Patrick, the man who is thought to have Christianised Ireland and is its national saint (O’Raifeartaigh), and an aged Oisín who recalls his adventures on the islands of the faeries.

Oisín’s story begins with a recollection of the Fianna meeting a woman called Niamh. Oisín travels together with the fairy woman on a horse that runs over the waves to the enchanted islands west of Ireland where no one grows old or dies. During his stay Oisín visits three islands; the island of dance, the island of victory and the island of sleep. Each time he is remembered about his home in the human world he travels on to the next island. When Oisín returns alone to Ireland three hundred years have passed and the Fenians are long since dead. Not only that, but Ireland has been converted to a new religion by a man called St. Patrick. Seeing this Oisín turns his horse to return to the land of the fairies, however the girth of the saddle breaks and Oisín falls down on the path. When he touches the ground the three hundred years fall over him all at once and the horse disappears. The aged Oisín is forced to stay in Catholic Ireland, still longing for the company of the Fenians.

2. Myth and Mythical Method

2.1 Definition

In order to discuss the mythical method and the use of the Celtic and Catholic gods in “Wanderings” the word myth needs to be defined. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines the word myth as “a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief” (Smith). The *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines myth as “a story from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people; this type of story” (“Myth”). The two definitions both specify the myth as a story, or a narrative and emphasise that the myth is old by the words “ancient” and “partly traditional”. A myth is an explanatory narrative with religious and ancient connotations, this is the definition of the word myth that I will use for this essay.

The other term, the mythical method, was coined by T.S Eliot in his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the *Dial* in 1923, where Eliot ascribes the method to Joyce's novel (Donoghue 206). Eliot describes this method as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" and that "[i]n using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him" (Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth"). Furthermore Eliot claims that Joyce uses a mythical method instead of a narrative method in *Ulysses*, and that this way of writing would offer a more structured system (Eliot). Both Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Joyce's *Ulysses* depict the modern society although with constant parallels to ancient texts and characters. This constant parallel between modern and ancient times is both part of Eliot's idea of structure and a key feature of the mythical method.

Eliot's mythical method seems to have made use of the explanatory element from the myth; when using a myth to create intertextuality between a contemporary and an ancient text the myth provides a well-known existing narrative or explanation which could affect the reading of the contemporary text. If a myth is an explanatory, religious narrative then this could be the element of control and order mentioned in Eliot's description of the mythical method.

2.2 Mythical Method in "Wanderings"

Historical connections in "Wanderings" indicate a parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity. Myth, as has been stated above, is a narrative and the mythical method a way to employ the knowledge of this narrative to create a parallel between now and then. Such a parallel can be found in Yeats' "Wanderings" between the Celtic era and late nineteenth century Ireland. The Fenians in the poem had their modern counterpart in a revolutionary organisation which took their name from the legendary heroes. Hiroko Ikeda states that "the conflict between Oisín and St. Patrick is analogous to that between the modern Fenians and the Catholic Church" (119) which is probable since the Catholic Church was opposed to the revolutionary organisation's methods (Kinealy). This would imply a direct historical link for Yeats' contemporary audience and an indication that the mythical method can be applied to "Wanderings". The poem portrays events that have historical parallels to nineteenth century Ireland which provide that vertical link between the ancient, classical past and the chaotic now, which is also a feature of the mythical method.

However, the depiction of ancient times in “Wanderings” does not correlate with Eliot’s definition of the mythical method which is a method to portray contemporary times. Unlike James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which is set in early twentieth century, Yeats’ “Wanderings” is set in ancient times. Donoghue claims that the mythical method requires “a movement of the reader’s mind from a mythic relation to an implied modern instance” (Donoghue 221), a movement which is not obvious in “Wanderings”. The connection between antiquity and modernity would perhaps be obvious to the late nineteenth-century reader; however, except from the link to the modern Fenians the text itself does not provide any direct references to Yeats’ contemporary Ireland. The text can simply be read as an interpretation of Celtic mythology.

Even so “Wanderings” is an early example of the mythical method. Even though the mythical method is defined as a way of ordering a portrayal of the contemporary by using the “authority of form and tradition” that the myth provides (Donoghue 208) Eliot also claims that the mythical method is a way to create and manipulate a parallel between modern and ancient narratives (Eliot, “Ulysses, Order and Myth”). As has been stated above “Wanderings” is not a portrayal of contemporary society but of an ancient society. However, the poem carries similarities to Eliot’s definition of the mythical method in its links to Yeats’ contemporary society. Donoghue refers to the mythical method as something which “sends the reader’s mind from one level of allusion to another” (Donoghue 221). This parallel exists in “Wanderings” but the Celtic myth does not provide intertextuality to the contemporary history; the transition is not from modernity to antiquity but from antiquity to modernity and modern history acts as backdrop to the myth. Yeats uses a mythical narrative in “Wanderings” which could be interpreted as a metaphor for nineteenth century Ireland. In the case of “Wanderings” the myth is employed to depict an image of contemporary society, and can thus be said to be an early example of the mythical method.

3. Irish Nationalism in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

During the nineteenth century Ireland was occupied by England and still a part of the United Kingdom (Kinealy). However, there existed revolutionary movements which wanted to see an independent and self ruling Ireland. Two of these were Young Ireland and the Fenian Brotherhood, which provoked uprisings in 1848 and 1867 respectively (Kinealy). At the end of the century the nationalism became “romantic and idealistic ... stimulating intellectual activity and directing attention to the wealth of Irish culture and traditions, which were in

danger of being swamped by the influences of her dominant neighbour. Irish language, literature, history, and sport were revived (or re-invented) with enthusiasm in the quest for an ‘Irish Ireland’” (Hill, “Ireland: culture and religion, 1870-1914”). The nineteenth century saw several nationalistic forces, from the revolutionary organisations, who tried to reach independence by violence (Kinealy), to the cultural organisations who were inspired by the history and traditions of Ireland (Hill, “Ireland: culture and religion, 1870-1914”). All of them strived for Irish independence and preservation. One of the cultural movements was the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival consisting of “a small tightly knit group of Anglo-Irish writers” who “turned to the Gaelic past. Inspired by Irish myths and heroic tales” (Hill). One of these writers was Yeats. As in many other European countries the Irish turned to their ancient stories, their indigenous mythology to “re-invent” their own narrative and history.

4. “Wanderings”; Nationalism, Ancient Heroes and Catholic Clergy

4.1 The Free Folk

The Celtic mythological beings in “Wanderings” are depicted as independent and defiant towards the Christian God in order to represent a time when Ireland was independent. The Celtic mythology tells of several peoples that invaded Ireland, of which the Celts were the last. They defeated the Tuatha de Danaan, the race that according to legend lived on Ireland before the Celts. However, the Danaan, the fairy folk, did not leave Ireland but withdrew underground to fairy forts and mounds (Mahon 27). In Irish folklore there is little difference between the world of the fairies and the world of the dead (41) and the dead are believed to go to the island Tir na nÓg, the island of eternal youth, where no one dies or grows old (50). The first island in “Wanderings”, the island of dance, does resemble the description of Tir na nÓg since no one dies or grows old there either (Yeats, “Wanderings” 1.284). The ruler of the island of dance is Aengus, the king of the fairies, who describes the island like this:

But here there is nor law nor rule,
Nor have hands held a weary tool;
And here there is nor Change nor Death,
But only kind and merry breath,
For joy is God and God is joy. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 1.282-286)

In the lines above Aengus is depicted addressing his people, speaking about the island where the Danaan live. The quotation above implies that the island is apart from the rest of creation

since it is not affected by such changes as time and death. The fairy world is not troubled by these matters; the only god they follow is joy as is indicated in the last line.

The freedom of the Tuatha de Danaan in “Wanderings” is further emphasised by the comparison between the fairies and the subjects of God. After hearing Aengus’ speech Oisín and the rest of the Danaan sing:

As thus our song arose: ‘You stars,
 Across your wandering ruby cars
 Shake the loose reins: you slaves of God.
 He rules you with an iron rod,
 He holds you with an iron bond,
 Each one woven to the other,
 Each one woven to his brother
 Like bubbles in a frozen pond;
 But we in a lonely land abide
 Unchainable as the dim tide,
 With hearts that know nor law nor rule,
 And hands that hold no wearisome tool,
 Folded in love that fears no morrow,
 Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.’ (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 1.329-342)

Here the fairy folk openly defy the Christian God by turning to the heavens and calling the stars slaves. The imagery of this slavery is a powerful element of the stanza. With the lines “He rules you with an iron rod, / He holds you with an iron bond,” the de Danaan defines the Christian God depicted in the poem as someone who rules by threatening and enslaving his subjects. The stars are also described to be woven to each other “like bubbles in a frozen pond”. The word frozen indicates something that is cold, static or even dead. The stars who are the subjects of God are chained, cold and unmoving and the opposites of the lively Tuatha de Danaan. The fairy folk are free and are not ruled by the iron rod of God. This is further emphasised in the second part of the stanza where the conditions of the fairy realm is described. The de Danaan are “unchainable as the dim tide” which once again emphasizes that they cannot be enslaved by anyone. Especially the reference to the tide suggests an

Manannan is depicted on the island of victory, crying out to the church but he does not receive an answer. The holy son with his pale face and crown of thorns does not turn up to battle with the sea god. This also augments a difference between the Celtic sea god and Christ; one represents physical strength and the other physical weakness. According to the bible Jesus said that “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.” (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Matt. 5.5). The meekness, or gentleness, stands in contrast to Manannan who values strength in battle. The strength of the Celtic god is depicted in Oisín’s description of the hall of Manannan as Oisín says to St. Patrick:

Not even your God could have thrown down that hall;
 Stabling His unloosed lightnings in their stall,
 He had sat down and sighed with cumbered heart,
 As though His hour were come. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 2.109-112)

Hiroko Ikeda’s interpretation notes that “Oisín slights the power of St. Patrick’s God who is supposed to discharge ‘unloosed lightnings’ for destructive purposes” (123). In the lines above the character Oisín states that the Christian God is unable to demolish the Hall of Manannan, which correlates with Ikeda’s interpretation. Especially lines 111-112 refer to God’s defeat and death with the words “His hour were come”. Even so, the “unloosed lightnings” imply that the Christian God is violent, or destructive as Ikeda puts it, while the Son is milk-pale and thorn-crowned God is depicted as destructive. Even though St. Patrick’s God is able to unloose the lightning Oisín still holds the strength of the Celtic god Manannan higher. This further emphasises the vitality and durability of the Celtic mythological beings in the poem.

Furthermore Ikeda also claims that “Yeats ... could be seen as claiming that Catholicism was a later introduction, while paganism had an essentially Irish origin” (121). This interpretation certainly fits into the explanatory narrative of Yeats mythology in “Wanderings” and further emphasises the connection between the mythological beings and an independent Ireland. Manannan and the Tuatha de Danaan also represent a time, which Oisín seems to be able to remember, when the Celtic people were free, unchained, unfrozen and independent, a time when the Celts were the mightiest race and the rulers of Ireland. This is one of the explanatory narratives that Yeats employs in “Wanderings” to create a metaphor which depicts typical

Irish values and a new story which reflected and explained the revolutionary ideologies of his own time.

4.2 Oisín: Hero and Mediator

In “Wanderings” Yeats uses the character Oisín as a mediator between modern and ancient times. Nineteenth-century writers was not the only group which employed Celtic mythology and symbolism, political movements also got their inspiration from the past. After a failed uprising for Irish independence in 1848 James Stephens, one of its supporters went into exile. Upon his return to Ireland in 1858 he founded “a new revolutionary organisation, known as the Fenian Brotherhood (or IRB)” (Kinealy). This Fenian Brotherhood probably took their name from the Celtic band of heroes known as the Fianna from the *Fenian Cycle* (Mahon 17). The Brotherhood was “opposed to constitutional tactics, believing that British rule could only be ended by armed insurrection. The Catholic Church was an implacable opponent of the movement” (Kinealy). It could be interpreted as typical of the time, of the zeitgeist, that the revolutionary organisation took its name from a mythological militia. In 1867 the organisation “provoked a major rising ... which ended in complete failure” (Ikeda 119). Yeats was two years old during the uprising and “grew up in an anti-Fenian atmosphere. However, as he became sympathetic to revolutionary nationalism he even joined a branch of the organisation” (Ikeda 119). In the case of the Fenian Brotherhood and Fenianism on Ireland the vitality and force of the mythic narrative can be discerned. It can be assumed that the Fenian Brotherhood named themselves after the mythological Fenians. In doing so the organisation became part of a bigger, or perhaps deeper, picture since the name has connotations to specific stories and the nation’s ancient past.

This phenomena correlates with Denis Donoghue’s claim about the levels of the mythical method as working in a vertical way. The classical story “has acquired over many centuries the authority of form and tradition, the force of its allusive power, such that it exerts critical pressure upon the modern story” (208). The myth, or classical story, and the contemporary text are not equal and thus have a vertical relationship. Considering this vertical relationship in combination with the definition of a myth as an explanatory story the organisation could be seen to have stated their purpose as well as ideology when they chose their name. In this case the name becomes a story on its own. Whether or not Yeats was affected by the Fenian Brotherhood in his writing of “Wanderings” I am not able to say, however it is clear that Yeats was strongly influenced by the IRB and the nationalistic movement (Ikeda 119). When Yeats wrote “Wanderings” the word Fenians was associated to both a contemporary and an

ancient group which gave the word, when it was used in the poem, parallels to both modern and Celtic times. Oisín, himself a Fenian, thus becomes a character that is at the same time both ancient and contemporary.

Not only does Yeats glorify and romanticise the Celtic age of Oisín which is described in the *Fenian Cycle*, the author also lets the main character of the poem reminisce over kings of old. In this case it is the kings of the *Red Branch Cycle*¹. In a review in the *Scots Observer* Yeats wrote that “When the Fenian militia were established in the second century they were no mere defenders of coast-line ... They wanted to revive the kind of life lived in old days when the Chiefs of the Red Branch gathered around Cuchullin” (“Bardic Ireland” 164). According to this quotation the Fenians were not only a militia to Yeats but a militia with an ideology. The poet expresses an idea that the Fenians were aware of their ancient chiefs and tried to model themselves after these ancestors. It is not too farfetched to assume that this viewpoint affected the writing of “Wanderings”. On a timeline the character Oisín stands between the famous heroes of the *Red Branch Cycle* and the Fenian Brotherhood of Yeats’ contemporary Ireland and acts as a mediator between the two. Here the myth works on several levels. On one hand Oisín belongs to a militia who, according to Yeats, tried to model themselves on the legendary kings. On the other Oisín is part of an ancient band of heroes and acts as a model to a nineteenth-century revolutionary organisation.

One situation where Oisín acts as mediator is given on the third island when the author depicts Oisín dreaming about the kings of the *Red Branch*.

But in dreams, mild man of the croziers, driving the
dust with their throngs,
Moved round me, of seamen or landmen, all who are
winter tales;
Came by me the kings of the Red Branch, with roaring
of laughter and songs,
Or moved as they moved once, love-making or piercing
the tempest with sails. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 3.81-88)

¹ Another collection of tales and legends mentioned in “Wanderings” is the *Red Branch Cycle*. The heroes of the *Red Branch* are thought to have lived about two hundred years before the heroes of the *Fenian Cycle* (Mahon 9).

The stanza above depicts Oisín's idea of the old kings who are described as roaring with laughter, singing, love-making and piercing the tempest, all of these words are aspects of passion. More statements about the passionate Celtic age are found throughout the text. The burial mound of Queen Maeve, one of the characters of the *Red Branch*, is passed in the second stanza of book one: "Came to the cairn-heaped grassy hill, / Where passionate Maeve is stony-still" (Yeats, "Wanderings" 1.17-18). Once again there is a connection between Celtic Ireland and passion. However the kings of the *Red Branch* are also described to be "winter tales". The word indicates stories which are frozen or dead. As with the stars in the section above who are frozen and static in their movement so are the stories of the old kings. Even if their stories live on the kings of the *Red Branch* are still dead, a state which is often referred to as cold or static. Although, in the memory of Oisín the kings are passionate, a treat which the stars in book one, lines 329-336 do not possess. The stars, which are ruled by God with an iron rod, symbolises Oisín's view of the Christianised people of Ireland. At this point in the poem Oisín is aware of both the frozen old kings and the frozen subjects of the Christian God that represents his future when he returns to Ireland. Oisín is therefore portrayed as being able to compare the two different states of being.

Both the Fenians and the Red Branch kings are associated with passion in "Wanderings" By emphasising the strength and passion of the mythological heroes Yeats chooses the explanatory elements for his narrative. It is probable that the Fenian Brotherhood had this heroic narrative in mind when they chose the name for their revolutionary organisation. The Fenian Brotherhood took their name from the Fenians in the *Fenian Cycle* who in their turn, according to Yeats, modelled themselves on the kings of the *Red Branch Cycle*. Yeats therefore uses Oisín as a means to connect modern Ireland with Celtic Ireland and to remind his contemporary society of its former strength. Oisín is a mythological character but is also able to look back on even older mythological characters and as such Oisín represents ideas and narratives from both Celtic Ireland and Yeats' contemporary Ireland.

4.3 The Loss of Celtic Ireland

Oisín in Yeats' "Wanderings" is himself exiled from the shores of Celtic Ireland and is throughout the poem portrayed as longing for his companions the Fenians. The names of three dogs, Bran, Sceolan and Lomair, are repeated in the beginning and in the end of the poem (Yeats, "Wanderings" 1.15, 1.125, 3.5, 3.104, and 3.195). With the repetition Yeats lets Oisín express the longing for what he has left behind.

In what far kingdom do you go,
 Ah, Fenians, with the shield and bow?
 Or are you phantoms white as snow,
 Whose lips had life's most prosperous glow?
 O you, with whom in sloping valleys,
 Or down the dewy forest alleys,
 I chased at morn the flying deer,
 With whom I hurled the hurrying spear,
 And heard the foemen's bucklers rattle,
 And broke the heaving ranks of battle!
 And Bran, Sceolan, and Lomair,
 Where are you with your long rough hair?
 You go not where the red deer feeds,
 Nor tear the foemen from their steeds.

S. Patrick. Boast not, nor mourn with drooping head
 Companions long accurst and dead,
 And hounds for centuries dust and air. ("The Wanderings of Oisín" 1.115-131)

The stanza above is one example of when Oisín is reminiscing about the old days when he hunted and fought together with the Fenians. Oisín asks them "[i]n what far kingdom do you go", which could be interpreted in a number of ways. The far off kingdom could be interpreted as Ireland as well as some sort of hereafter. In the first interpretation, that the "far kingdom" is Ireland, the position of Oisín would be as the exile on the islands of the Danaan, remembering his days in the old country. Considering the vast number of migrations from Ireland during the 19th century this was not something alien to the Irish identity at the time (Connolly). The other interpretation that Oisín is referring to a world of the dead would position Oisín as talking to St. Patrick in the present of the poem. With this viewpoint the sense of time, instead of space, is emphasised. In "Wanderings" Oisín could thus be seen as an exile both within time and space.

In the lines 129-131 St. Patrick further strengthens the viewpoint that Oisín is an exile in time by telling Oisín not to mourn for "[c]ompanions long accurst and dead". The era of the Celts is lost at the end of the story that Oisín tells St. Patrick. In the beginning of Oisín's story the

Fenians rule in Ireland but by the time Oisín comes back Ireland is ruled by the Catholic Church. Oisín mourns the loss of Celtic Ireland but he could also be seen to express a sadness over the youth he has lost as well as longing for the time of independence when the Fenians ruled Ireland.

The sense of loss expressed by the mythological character Oisín in the poem reflects a sense of loss in Yeats' contemporary Irish society. The loss of Irish traditions and language accelerated during the late half of the nineteenth century. Ireland and especially the Gaelic speaking population (hereafter called Irish speaking), saw great changes in culture, economy and industry. In 1841 about half of the Irish population spoke Irish but at the end of the century this number was down to 14% (Maguire and O'Riordan). One reason to this was that the Irish speaking lower classes were more affected by the Great Famine of 1845 and the emigrations that followed it (Hill, "Ireland: culture and religion, 1815-1870"). The Irish language "was increasingly seen as 'old-fashioned', signifying poverty and ignorance rather than tradition and culture" by the Catholic middle classes (Hill). Cultural and industrial changes drove the Irish speaking lower classes towards English language and culture and since much of the traditional knowledge was passed on orally there were "obvious losses of songs, stories, folklore, poetry, and prayers" (Maguire and O'Riordan). While the Catholic middleclass wanted to associate themselves with Victorian England many of the lower-class, Irish speaking people of the nineteenth century were forced by a changing society to dissociate themselves from their history, language and culture. On the other end of the social scale movements such as the Anglo-Irish Literary Revival tried to revive Gaelic culture and were common during the end of the nineteenth century. The use of a vanishing Celtic society in "Wanderings" therefore becomes a powerful metaphor. The myth, the explanatory element, of "Wanderings" also includes the loss that Oisín experiences which could be interpreted as a metaphor for the diminishing Irish tradition of Yeats' contemporary society.

In "Wanderings" the character Oisín on the other hand mainly professes his sense of loss over the lost strength of the Celts. On his return to Ireland Oisín sees two men:

And there at the foot of the mountain, two carried a sack full of sand,
They bore it with staggering and sweating, but fell with their burden at
length.
Leaning down from the gem-studded saddle, I flung it five yards with my
hand,

With a sob for men waxing so weakly, a sob for the Fenians' old strength.
 ("The Wanderings of Oisín" 3.185-188)

The two men are described as "waxing" by Oisín, indicating that they are becoming less than they were before, presumably less than in Fenian time. Oisín, himself a Fenian, is able to fling the sack with ease while the two men struggled with its weight. However, upon Oisín's return to Christianised Ireland the "small and feeble populace" ("Wanderings" 3.164) lets Oisín know that the Fenians are dead (3.172) but also that "the gods a long time are dead" (3.180). This last line indicates the victory of Christianity over the Celtic Deities, the only remnant of this era and the only person left to remember it is Oisín. Oisín is therefore able to represent the strength and glory of ancient Ireland as well as the exile and sense of loss of Celtic traditions in Catholic Ireland, a sense of loss reflected in Yeats' contemporary Irish society. The death of the Celtic gods in "Wanderings" becomes a metaphor for a diminishing belief system, over how the prevalent narrative or mythology can be changed and by this change of ideas the people will change as well. Yeats uses mythology to embody the diminishing Irish traditions as well as creating a visual representation of his times.

4.4 Two Conflicting Mythologies; the Juxtaposition of Celtic and Catholic Beliefs

The character St. Patrick is presented by Yeats as the opposite of the Celtic Oisín and represents the conquering of Ireland as well as its Christianisation. Yeats does not only use one mythology in "Wanderings", but two. However, the two narratives are not presented as equals. They are portrayed as dichotomies of weak and strong as well as conqueror and conquered. Oisín represents both the passion and the strength of Celtic Ireland but also its role of conquered and colonised. If Oisín embodies the ideals and the memories of Celtic Ireland, his listener, St. Patrick, embodies Catholic values of meekness but is at the same time portrayed as the coloniser. This could certainly be seen as a paradox. According to John Tangney "[t]he conversation between Oisín and St. Patrick is both a conversation between enemies on a material plane and between a historical form of consciousness and that which dialectically supersedes it." (152). Tangney states that the narrative of "Wanderings" deals with several levels, one material plane and one ideological. The material plane would be the present of the poem and the story, while the conversation between the two mythological figures represents the ideological plane. Tangney uses the word enemy to describe the relationship between Oisín and St. Patrick which further augments the idea of the two characters as opposites.

The dichotomy of conqueror and conquered is portrayed throughout “Wanderings”. In the poem Yeats lets St. Patrick express a disliking of the pagan belief. According to St. Patrick Oisín is “still wrecked among heathen dreams” (Yeats, “Wanderings” 1.31) and the relationship between Oisín and the fairy woman is described by the saint as a “dalliance with a demon thing” (1.4). The word wrecked strongly emphasises the saint’s view that the pagan belief is harmful, it will wreck any person who believes in it. The word dalliance on the other hand implies that the relationship with the fairy woman is a mere trifle and not to be taken seriously.

St. Patrick is depicted as being both condemning and condescending in his role as coloniser and is placed in a position where he is judging the character Oisín. The same action of condemning and condescending can be seen in eighteenth-century Ireland where the clergy fought Irish traditions. One such tradition was the keening, the lamentation of the dead, which is a part of the Irish wake (Ó Cruaíoch 192). The wake marks the time between death and burial and is traditionally a gathering without churchly connotations. The keening is a passionate display of grief and the keening woman is the personification of someone who is mad with grief (Ó Cruaíoch 182). This phenomenon was condemned by the clergy who tried to eliminate it. In the diocese of Leighlin in 1748 the diocesan regulations included the topic of keening which was seen to be against the “commandment of St. Paul ... forbidding such cries and immoderate grief for the dead, as if they were not to rise again”. If the keener persisted the regulations ordained that he or she be “excommunicated and denounced” (Ó Súilleabháin 139). Like St. Patrick in the poem the clergy dictate the lives of the Irish people. Once again the excess, the passion, is seen to be something ungodly and harmful as it is in the lines quoted in the paragraph above (Yeats, “Wanderings” 1.4, 1.31).

John Tangney claims that “the Christian dispensation, as Yeats depicts it ... tends to repress rather than include its earlier self”(152). This earlier self would here be the Celtic beliefs which are superseded by the Catholic religion. This “Christian dispensation” of ignoring or repressing earlier systems of beliefs eliminates any possibilities for conversation, according to Tangney and instead creates a state of opposition. The regulations from the diocese of Leighlin are an example of this opposition where only one belief system is allowed. There is no room for anything but the Christian faith in St. Patrick’s Ireland either:

What place have Caoilte and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan,
Lomair?

Speak, you too are old with your memories, an old man
surrounded with dreams.

S. Patrick. Where the flesh of the footsole clingeth on
the burning stones is their place;
Where the demons whip them with wires on the
burning stones of wide Hell (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 3.195-198)

The lines above show the ruthlessness of the new religion. The Christian religion holds its power not only over the living but also over the dead. Not even the Fenians with all their might are able to wage “war on the masters of Hell, who could break up the world in their rage” (Yeats, “Wanderings” 3.214).

Even so, physical weakness is still a feature connected to the Christian faith in the poem. When Yeats depicts the reaction of Oisín when he recalls the conditions of the Christianised Irish the weakness is emphasised:

But now the lying clerics murder song
With barren words and flatteries of the weak.
In what land do the powerless turn the beak
Of ravening Sorrow, or the hand of Wrath?
For all your croziers, they have left the path
And wander in the storms and clinging snows,
Hopeless for ever: ancient Oisín knows,
For he is weak and poor and blind, and lies
On the anvil of the world. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 2.196-204)

With the words “flatteries of the weak” Yeats portrays the character Oisín’s feelings towards Christianity. As has been stated above, the depiction of Christian meekness stands in great contrast to the Celtic admiration of strength portrayed in the poem. In this stanza Yeats indicates that akin to the stars in lines 332-333 in book 1 the people of Ireland are now also ruled by someone carrying a rod but this rod is called a crozier and the man of the croziers is St. Patrick. The stanza continues with Oisín’s statement that even though the Irish are led by this crozier they are still lost and that he, Oisín, knows this because he is “weak and poor and blind”. Ikeda writes about this stanza that “[t]hroughout WO ‘crozier’ is repeatedly used as an

emblem of Christian rule. Thus, the newly-introduced lines emphasize a resentment at Church authority, which does not seem to be much help to the suffering people or may in fact be making them suffer” (120-121). Ikeda points out the antagonism that exists between Oisín and the Church, however, if this resentment is a direct link to the suffering of the people is unclear in the stanza. Oisín’s resentment towards the Church is what placed him on “the anvil of the world” and acts as a warning to, or a metaphor for, others who resent the Church.

The relationship between the two mythologies in the poem is not equal; the Christian faith is dominant and judging towards its predecessor while the pagan beliefs are depicted as waning and defeated. The use of two contradictory mythologies, with their different explanations of the world is a powerful tool to expose the ideological differences between forms of consciousness as well as a way to symbolise their relationship. Once again the symbolic and metaphoric value of the Celtic myth is used to convey a message.

4.5 Two Conflicting Mythologies; the Coexistence of Celtic and Catholic Traditions

Symbols of Christianity exist side by side with the Celtic symbols in order to portray the ambiguous Irish identity. Even though the Celtic and Catholic mythologies compete with each other in “Wanderings” they still coexist. The poem “not only shows us various antithetical relations which appear totally uncompromising on the surface, but also suggests a point of breakthrough in these relations” (Ikeda 119). It is however hard to see this breakthrough in the conversation between the characters St. Patrick and Oisín:

S. Patrick. Be still: the skies
Are choked with thunder, lightning, and fierce wind,
For God has heard, and speaks His angry mind;
Go cast your body on the stones and pray,
For He has wrought midnight and dawn and day.

Oisín. Saint, do you weep? I hear amid the thunder
The Fenian horses; armour torn asunder;
Laughter and cries. The armies clash and shock,
And now the daylight-darkening ravens flock.
Cease, cease, O mournful, laughing Fenian horn!
(“The Wanderings of Oisín” 2.204-213)

Even though the Celtic and the Catholic are presented as opposites in “Wanderings” it can be seen in the lines above that the two representations exist side by side. Both characters react to the thunder but interpret it in their own way. According to St. Patrick the thunder is God speaking “His angry mind” and to Oisín it reminds him of the sound of battle. This reflects the ambiguity within a society where both Catholic and Celtic traditions exist next to each other.

Even though the Celtic deities, as well as the main character, in “Wanderings” express their defiance towards the Christian God and the Catholic Church, the Christian mythology is part of their world. Aengus, the fairy king, is talking about “Earth and Heaven and Hell” (Yeats, “Wanderings” 1.271), adding the Christian afterlife instead of the Celtic and by defying the Christian God the Tuatha de Danaan recognise him as well (1.329-342). Even the sea god Manannan (2.128-135) recognises Christ by challenging him. The Celtic deities in the text are definitely aware of the existence of God, a situation which Ikeda describes as “something more than a clear choice between Christianity and paganism in WO” (Ikeda 123). This ambivalence is prevalent in the character Oisín more than in the authoritative St. Patrick.

But now two things devour my life;
The things that most of all I hate:
Fasting and prayers.

S. Patrick. Tell On.

Oisín. Yes, yes,
For these were ancient Oisín’s fate
Loosed long ago from Heaven’s gate,
For his last days to lie in wait. (“The Wanderings of Oisín” 2.358-363)

In this stanza Yeats shows that the old Oisín performs the actions of the Christian faith, fasting and praying, which are devouring Oisín’s life and seemingly forcing themselves upon him. The word “devour” indicates that Oisín is unable to avoid these two chores and thus Yeats lets Oisín express a sense of inevitability when facing Christianity. Another example of

this sense of inevitability is that the fate of Oisín has been released from heaven, indicating that the life of Oisín has been predestined by the Christian God and that he rules over Oisín.

This God could however be interpreted as Oisín's own God, who exists "outside the sphere of Catholicism" (Ikeda 123). Ikeda continues her discussion by saying that Oisín in "Wanderings" believes in his own personal God as well as the pagan gods, which would contradict the image of Oisín as unbelieving (123). With this interpretation the definition between Oisín's God and St. Patrick's God is unclear in the poem. This further emphasises the coexistence of pagan and Catholic beliefs in "Wanderings" and the duality with which Yeats have portrayed Irish mythologies. This duality is stressed in the last stanza of the poem where the old Oisín has returned to Ireland and converted to the Christian faith. However, Yeats lets the character express a last act of defiance against this new religion:

I throw down the chain of small stones! when life in
my body has ceased,
I will go to Caoilte, and Conan, and Bran, Sceolan,
Lomair,
And dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in
flames or at feast. ("The Wanderings of Oisín" 3.222-224)

By repeating the names of Oisín's kin and the hounds for one last time Yeats once again reminds the reader of what has been lost. The chain of small stones could very well be a rosary, and the fact that Oisín talks about throwing it away when his life has ceased shows that he will renounce his new faith. He will remain a Christian until he dies but in death he will throw down the rosary and reunite with the Fenians. This correlates well with Ikeda's claim that in "Wanderings" there is no clear choice between Christianity and paganism. Even though Oisín outwardly professes that he is a Christian in life his afterlife is ambivalently pagan and Christian. The last phrase expresses an uncertainty as to which afterlife the Fenians belong to, whether they are feasting or burning in Hell. It could be interpreted that Oisín simply does not know which one it is.

The ambivalence about the afterlife in "Wanderings" has its reflection in the Irish society. Folklorists who studied Irish funerary traditions noted that the wake and funeral had both Christian and Celtic connotations (Ó Cruaíoch 176). The wake and its traditions could have two explanatory narratives at the same time. The same occurrence could simultaneously have

Christian and pagan symbols and stories connected to it (Ó Cruaíoch 176). So when Yeats decided to use the two mythologies in “Wanderings” it was probably no coincidence. The two narratives existed side by side in Yeats’ Ireland, although one of them was dominant while the other existed in the periphery. In “Wanderings” Yeats uses these two prevalent explanatory narratives of his contemporary society in order to give the poem the depth and gravitas of classical myth and ancient tradition.

5. Conclusion

The occupation of Ireland is one of the factors that influenced Yeats in the beginning of his career as a poet. The nationalistic movement consisted of revolutionary organisations which strived for independence as well as cultural institutions which strived for a revival of Gaelic culture. In this atmosphere Yeats wrote “Wanderings”, which in its turn is based on an ancient story from the *Fenian Cycle*, a Celtic mythological text. In this essay I have discussed the parallels between the mythology in “Wanderings” and Yeats’ contemporary society. Since Yeats was said to be the first contemporary writer to be aware of the mythical method I have compared “Wanderings” to Eliot’s and Donoghue’s definitions of the same method and showed that the poem correlates to some aspects of this definition. The poem contains historical connections between Celtic and modern Ireland which is a feature of the mythical method. It is not a depiction of contemporary society, which is part of the definition of the mythical method. However, “Wanderings” is still a metaphor for Yeats contemporary Ireland which makes the poem a way of portraying the present with the aid of mythical narrative which is the major defining feature of the mythical method. In the second part of the essay I discuss the parallels between “Wanderings” and nineteenth century Ireland. This essay has focused on five of these parallels. Firstly I have argued that the vitality of Celtic mythological beings in “Wanderings” reflected and provided an explanation to the Irish nationalistic movements of the late nineteenth century. Secondly I have discussed the character Oisín’s role as mediator between Celtic and modern times. Oisín is portrayed as being able to remember both a time of self-rule for the Fenians and the glorious kings of old as well as being able to see the static state of Catholicism that meets him on his return to Ireland. Thirdly I have claimed that the main character of “Wanderings” expresses a sense of loss regarding Celtic Ireland which reflects the diminishing Irish traditions of nineteenth century Ireland. Fourthly I have discussed the juxtaposition of Celtic and Catholic characters Oisín and St. Patrick and how this opposition creates a situation where the two belief systems compete with each other. I continue by providing an example of how Catholicism was the dominant religion and how the pagan belief was judged by the Catholic clergy both in nineteenth century Ireland and Oisín in the poem. Lastly I argue that although these two mythologies competed against each other they still coexist in “Wanderings” as well as in Yeats’ contemporary society. I also point out the ambivalence regarding belief system which is present in the poem and in Irish funerary traditions where the same tradition is simultaneously described from a Christian and a Celtic viewpoint. It is probable that Yeats

used the characters of the two prevalent Irish mythologies, Oisín and St. Patrick, in “Wanderings” in order to reflect contemporary events and ideas. The mythological characters also add a level of history and tradition to Yeats’ poem as well as being the embodiments of different historical forms of consciousness.

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