



National Identity in Yeats' Poetry

Khalil Hasan Nofal^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Philadelphia University, Jordan.
 *Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper is intended to investigate and scrutinize how national identity is questioned and portrayed in William Butler Yeats' poetry taking into consideration the eco-postcolonial perspective. Some poems have been chosen to fulfill this purpose such as *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*, *September 1913*, *Easter 1916*, *The Fisherman*, *The Second Coming*, *The Stolen Child*, and *The Rose Tree*. Yeats, through these poems, portrays the Irish identity in terms of language, homeland, nature, culture, belonging, and roots and ancestors.

Key words: Identity; Homeland; Language; Culture; Nature; Roots; Ancestors

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INTRODUCTION

Identity can be generally defined as a set of distinct personal and behavioral characteristics, attributes, beliefs, values, and desires that define an individual as a member of a certain group. That is, your identity can be closely related to your beliefs and values and how you may see and respond to the world, i.e. your ideology. Moreover, identity can be glossed as the aspects or attributes of a person that form the basis of his / her dignity, honor, and pride. To put it differently, identity is one's feeling about one's self, character, goals and origins.

National identity is a concept that refers to a national group. It depends on different factors: country, origin, residence, ethnic or religious affiliation, and notions of affinity with one's nationality. Nationality, of course, can be different from the identity the person chooses for him / herself in regard to a given nation or country. Lichtenstein introduced the principle of identity preservation which "stipulates that human beings are motivated by the need to preserve their identity at all costs". (Agnes Oppenheimer, Online article)

Identity is constructed through language. Marked identities are ideologically associated with marked language; linguistic structures or practices that differ / deviate from the norm. Identity is rooted not only in genetics but also in heritable cultural forms, particularly language which symbolizes and iconically embodies the distinctive cultural identity of an ethnic group. Language is a vital tool of communicating thoughts, ideas, feelings, relationships, friendships, cultural ties, and through which emotions are shaped and perceptions of reality are determined. Language, as a fundamental resource for cultural production, is also a fundamental resource for identity production. This assertion challenges the common understanding of language as a mirror reflecting one's culture and identity.

1. NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POETRY

The quest for identity is an important aspect of poetry. Identity is "people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p.2). Deng (1995, p.1) maintains that national identity "is used to describe the way people define themselves and how they are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language and cultural". An answer to the question "What is identity?" may be how one answers the question "Who are you?" or my identity is how I define who I am (see Hopf, 1998, p.175).

~ I'm Nobody! Who Are You? ~
Emily Dickinson

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!
How dreary—to be—**Somebody!**
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

Identity is portrayed in poetry through a variety of symbolic resources, particularly language, land, origin, goals, beliefs, desires, attitudes, values, culture, nature, and heritage among others. National identity “describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols—have internalized the symbols of the nation...” (Bloom, 1990, p.52).

2. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Generally speaking, people search for power, fame or for identity and belonging. For William Butler Yeats, his quest for identity is not for himself, but for the people of Ireland. Yeats sees the people of Ireland without identity get lost as it is a means of unity and connectedness between the Irish people and land. Yeats used poetry to embody a specific sense of identity within people. This may be observed in *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*, *The Fisherman*, *September 1913*, *Easter 1916*, *The Second Coming*, *The Stolen Child*, and *The Rose Tree*.

2.1 An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is **Kiltartan Cross**,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

William Butler Yeats was born in Ireland in 1865 on the verge of the Irish national movement. He was involved in this movement which sought the Irish independence

from England. Young Irish soldiers and airmen went to die for Britain during the war with Germany. For such soldiers the questions like “Where do I come from? Where is my country?” were really the questions of life and death. Yeats gives us the chance to delve into the thought of one of such airmen in the dramatic monologue “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”. Over the clouds an airman thinks about his home, an Irish village “Kiltartan” and about the death that is waiting for him.

The airman conveys his apathy in determined negatives in the very beginning of the poem (line 3&4). For him, as an Irish airman, this war for Britain against Germany means nothing.

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;

The airman belongs to one place, not to Ireland but to Kiltartan Cross, his home village. This makes Moniza Alvi (an English poet of Pakistani origin who was asked to comment on this poem on national identity) think of many instances when people who find themselves between the poles of their national identity do get a feeling of the place they belong to. She says: “This poem makes us think how people shape their identity. The Irish airman certainly doesn't belong to Britain. It is hard to believe that he belongs to Ireland. He belongs to Kiltartan Cross”. See Moniza (1998), (the transcript of the BBC world service's radio program series on poetry *The Lyrics*, October 11th 1998).

My country is **Kiltartan Cross**,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.

All these determined negatives bring us to one impulse, quite unexpectedly, that is of delight. For Moniza Alvi this “lonely impulse of delight” is the essence of the poem.

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A **lonely** impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

The word “lonely” is the only adjective that has its significance in this poem. The war is a lonely situation. You face your death when you are alone in your flight. This is exactly of delight because the airman gets something delightful from his situation of ultimate despair. The airman has neglected all he rejects – cheering crowds, public men and all people on the ground below him. And above in the clouds there is a sweet roar of the battle

egged on by his lonely impulse. Moreover, the airman is going to get part of the pleasure out of his action before he dies. He feels he is going to die. And now there would be something ecstatic in his action because he is going to take pleasure in what he enjoys the most—his flight—which is beyond belonging to some country or taking part in a certain war.

2.2 *The Fisherman*

His *Fisherman* deals with the inability of the Irish people to establish a unified national identity. Within this poem, Yeats has an emotional feeling of sorrowful remorse for hope. He struggles to bring awareness to the Irish people for establishing a true national identity. He seeks the identity that encompasses everyone and embraces the old Irish /Celtic idea of identity. The poem indicates that Irish people are not only separating themselves from each other, but they are separating themselves from their ancestors and Celtic roots. Yeats feels that hope for a unified Irish national identity is dead and he expresses his pity and regrets for this ideal. The first section illustrates a last thread of faint and fleeting hope.

Although I can see him still—
The freckled man who goes
To a gray place on a hill
In gray Connemara clothes
At dawn to cast his flies—
It's long since I began
To call up to the eyes
This wise and simple man.

The first line gives us a sense of hope that is still able to be seen. The imagery of “gray” and “hill” illustrate Ireland in a very natural sense. Ireland is a place of mist, rain and bogs that create greyness that encompasses the land. Yeats is depicting the nature of Ireland and how the nation of Ireland is fading. The image of “gray Connemara clothes” is very Irish Celtic image, but again it is fading.

Yeats is a staunch Irish. He is involved in the Irish cause. He is addressing his people you are not successful to have your own country or your independence. You are not doing what you should do. You forgot your luster. Therefore

All day I'd looked in the face
What I had hoped it would be
To write for my own race
And the reality:
The living men that I hate,
The dead man that I loved.

The last section of this poem is a direct response to the Irish people for their inability to establish their national identity. It is response that is supposed to shock them to

their very core with his anger and sorrowful remorse. The “dream” is Yeats' vision of liberating Ireland from oppression. For Yeats this dream is unattainable. The last lines of the poem illustrate Yeats' anger and frustration. “He is a vehement person full of contempt for the vulgar crowd that surrounds him” (Bugchee, 1978, p.53). The “man who does not exist” is the core of this poem. The “man” refers to the Ireland that no longer exists. The old sense of romanticism and the relationship with nature is no longer part of the Irish people identity.

A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream;
And cried, “Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.

2.3 *September 1913*

In this poem, Yeats writes with frustration and repeatedly brings us, as readers, back to the prospect of the death of Irish ideals, and hope for independence. This poem represents the death of romantic Ireland at the hands of religion and the rebirth of the Irish national identity. When reading this poem, you can easily note a tone of frustration because of the decline of romantic Ireland and the death of Irish ideals. The poem also shows the selfishness of Irish people who care only for their own fate, but not for the fate of their country.

In the First stanza, Yeats explores the function of religion by drawing attention to love of money, and a tendency to pray. Lines like “Fumble in a greasy till”, “add the halfpence to the pence”, and the metaphor “dried the marrow from the bone” demonstrate a refined preoccupation with a material wealth which is killing the fiber of Ireland's cultural tapestry which was formed by the bravery of men with very different attitudes to those which Yeats witnessed at the time he wrote this poem. Yeats is addressing his people that nothing comes to your sense, but money and prayer. You have forgotten home. You only remember your own affairs. You are not born to pray and save money only. You are born to save your country. Ireland is dead and gone when **O'Leary** (an Irish nationalist) died.

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

In the second stanza, Yeats describes those men as heroes whose names (mentioned in the third stanza)

“stilled your children play “and whose reputation spread the world “like wind”. Yeats mocks those merchants who rely on religion while the heroes of the past relied on actions rather than prayer. Yeats rhetorically asks “And what, God help us, could they save?” This is a very sad song. It is a complaint. It really a reprimand.

Yet they were of a different kind,
**The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,**
But little time had they to pray
For whom the hangman’s rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
It’s with **O’Leary** in the grave.

In the third stanza, Yeats describes the sacrifices of those who lived before them; heroes who were exiled and killed trying to establish the Irish ideals. This stanza includes the names of those heroes who sacrificed themselves for the beauty of Ireland. For the beauty of Ireland the blood of those great people was shed.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
**For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wilfe Tone,**
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
It’s with **O’Leary** in the grave.

The last stanza includes the idea of recalling those heroes who fought for the romantic Ireland. Yeats is addressing his people: Could you go back to the past and “call all those exiles in their loneliness and pain?” But let them be quiet in their graves.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You’d cry,” Some woman’s yellow hair
Has maddened every mother’s son”
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
**But let them be, they’re dead and gone,
They’re with O’Leary in the grave.**

Most importantly, O’Leary’s name is mentioned at the end of each stanza, his death is completely connected to romantic Ireland. All Irish heroes fought to pursue the Irish ideals, and they were all buried with O’Leary.

2.4 The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

**Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again ; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?**

Yeats’ idea of this poem is forming new independent Ireland which is full of “anarchy” and needs a new beginning and a well-formed national identity. The title of this poem suggests a new manifestation of the Christ. It represents the possibility for rebirth, and Yeats’ desire for Ireland to get its national identity. In the first stanza, Yeats believes that history works in “gyres”. This can be exemplified through the movement of the falcon which flies in “widening gyre” or spiral motion and it gets further away from the falconer until it becomes detached. This detachment or separation causes anarchy. The “tide” is being loosed and the “ceremony of innocence” is being drowned. This may be interpreted that no balance between religion and politics. Yeats divides the population, describing the best as “lack all conviction” and the worst as “full of passionate intensity”. Yeats describes the state of the world, its political upheavals, the chaos and cynicism of modern civilization, and the haphazard brutality of contemporary culture. The first image of the falcon separated from the falconer as it flies far away portrays all this. The most important central idea around which our civilization, like a falcon, had revolved is that Christianity has lost its power, i.e. it can no longer hold the society in an orderly structure. That is, things are flying away and falling apart.

In the second stanza, Yeats declares that all this chaos, confusion and disintegration must be the sign of revelation, a second coming of the Christ is at hand. The poet sees a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*, a sphinx - like creature, “a shape with lion-body” (as a symbol of pride and integrity) and “the head of a man,” moving across the desert (as a symbol of conviction and passion) . Having such a vision, Yeats has a revelation “That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a

rocking cradle". That is the coming of the Christ. This moves the poet to wonder, as he waits for the second coming. "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/ Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

2.5 Easter 1916

Easter 1916 is written after the act of **Bloody Sunday** that occurred in April, 1916, a rebellion of fifteen hundred people which took over the streets of Dublin for three days in an attempt to get independence from Britain. Sixteen Irishmen were executed. However, this poem represents the other side of Yeats, the side that has hope and is able to finally celebrate their national identity.

In the first section Yeats is connecting himself with the men responsible for the 1916 Dublin rebellion. In the first line "**them**" refers to leaders of the rebellion whom Yeats later names them. The "**I**" the first line begins with refers to Yeats. By inserting himself within the poem, he is interesting his notion of what the Irish identity should be. He is also setting up the notion he deems, the terrible beauty. It is beautiful to die for the sake of your country. It is a terrible beauty.

I have met **them** at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
 From counter or desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
 I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words,
 And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The lines: "Being certain that they and I/But lived where motley is worn", emphasize the fact that all Irish people are well-aware that they all share a common traditional and cultural identity. The final line of the stanza "A terrible beauty is born" describes the Irish people as they come together and work towards the goal of Irish independence from England. The birth of these united people is terrible because the fight for independence will inevitably cause bloodshed and death. It is also beautiful because the Irish people are finally united for their beloved country. This line is repeated throughout the poem (at the end of stanza (1, 2, and 4) and creates the main theme of the poem.

In the third stanza, Yeats says that hearts have been changed, "hearts with one purpose alone". They became

very strong like stones. It is the illustration of Ireland being unified. Yeats, "through summer and winter", is connecting nature to the Irish national identity. The entire stanza has the theme of nature. Nature to Yeats, metaphorically illustrates the imagery of the old Celtic idea of identity. The word "through" illustrates the connection of the past and present, and the Irish people to the past, the past Yeats has long tried to recapture within the Irish people. The line "enchanted to a stone" connects the present of Irish people back to the identity of nature and romanticism.

Hearts with one purpose alone Through summer and winter seem Enchanted to a stone

To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road,
 The rider, the birds that range
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse splashes within it;
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 The hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all.

It is the identity of the old leaders executed by shooting. It is the identity Yeats always wanted Ireland to regain and embrace once more. The tragic event of *Easter 1916* seemed to have brought back the heroism of the past, romanticizing Ireland anew and turning the earlier poetic statement, "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, into old fashioned cliché" (Khan, 1998, p.43). The last few lines illustrate this:

Bewildered them till they died?
 I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Wherever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly;
A terrible beauty is born.

In these few lines, Yeats ends with "**terrible beauty is born**" because he wants his people to understand and feel the trouble of how Ireland suffered to achieve a unified national identity. Happiness and joy can come from terrible actions. Said (1994, p.220) praised Yeats as an "indisputably great national poet" because he "during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experience, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of people suffering under the domination of an offshore

power". This shows Yeats' role of the process of Irish de-colonization.

2.6 *The Rose Tree*

"O WORDS are lightly spoken",
Said Pearse to Connolly,
'Maybe a breath of politic words
Has withered our Rose Tree;
Or maybe but a wind that blows
Across the bitter sea.'

"It needs to be but watered",
James Connolly replied,
"To make the green come out again
And spread on every side,
And shake the blossom from the bud
To be the garden's pride".

"But where can we draw water",
Said Pearse to Connolly,
"When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree".

In his poem *The Rose Tree* Yeats imagined a conversation between Pearse and Connolly, two leaders of the Irish independence movement. *The Rose Tree* represents Ireland that has withered due to "a breath of politic words" or by a "wind that blows across the bitter sea". Yeats believes that independence cannot come from passive politics, but it requires actions. The "wind" represents England as it occurs across the sea, and it has blown over the rose tree, Ireland. In the second and third stanza Yeats reveals his notion of Irish identity. In order to bloom the rose tree, it must be watered. Yeats imagined the rose tree is watered by "our own blood". Pearse and Connolly state that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the restoration of Ireland.

2.7 *The Stolen Child*

The Irish revival is "a movement towards the colony and away from the mother country, a replacement of Englishness by Irishness" (Deane, 1985, p.48). With this ideology in mind, Yeats attempted to elevate colonial Irish national culture and resist British colonialist culture through restoring to his idealized Irish landscape. That landscape of nature refers to the Irish western countryside represented by Yeats' hometown Sligo. By landscape, as Ellmann indicates (1954, p.14), Yeats "meant more than a collection of inanimate nature objects" belonging to nature landscape, but more close to cultural landscape exemplified by "local customs, local characters, local songs and stories and local expressions". Yeats once said that "from the moment I began *The Wandering of Oisín* I believe, my subject matter became Irish" (Jeffares, 1984, p.3).

Yeats portrayed a beautiful, harmonious Ireland characterized by its nature and its fairyland from the folk literature. This portrayal showed a peculiar native culture different from that of Britain, and he excavated and enhanced the Irish national culture. This poem *The Stolen Child* is an early poem with Sligo countryside as its background, which describes vividly the pictorial scenes of the native countryside and the happy life of the fairies as well. Yeats reveals the life of the worldly people which is "full of troubles/ And is anxious in its sleep", and thus he satirizes colonialism that brings misery to Irish people. Through the refrain,

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand.
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Yeats shows his identity as a national poet, calling upon Irish people to be away from the big cities assimilated by colonialist culture and come to the countryside in the west to access the authentic native culture and to strengthen their ties with their own nature.

CONCLUSION

Yeats uses his poetry to explore and express his sense of Irish national identity. In his *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* he depicts his sense of identity as belonging to homeland. In *The Fisherman* he portrays his sense as ancestors, roots, culture, and the relationship between Irish people and nature. That is, *The Fisherman* is a piece of poetry that clearly depicts his sense of identity as one that embraces the old Celtic sense of romanticism and heroism that deal with nature and its relation to man. In his *September 1913* he expresses his idea of identity as homeland, ancestors, and resistance. *Easter 1916* depicts the other side of Yeats that has hope that Ireland is able to finally celebrate the Irish identity. It is the illustration of Ireland being unified because all Irish people share the same common traditional and cultural identity. Both poems *September 1913* and *The Second Coming* explore the impact of religion on Irish national identity, and they both indicate requirement for change. *September 1913* represents the death of romantic Ireland at the hand of religion while *The Second Coming* represents the rebirth of Ireland, and the dawn of a new national identity. In his *The Rose Tree* Yeats believes that Ireland has withered and in order to bloom, it must be watered by the Irish blood. *The Stolen Child* depicts the native countryside and the happy life. It is a call for Irish people to come to the countryside to be very near their native nature and culture.

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