

The Myth of the Irish Woman: Identity in Traditional and Modern Irish Folklore

Since its insurrection, Ireland has been suffering from an identity crisis. Politically, Ireland is divided into two areas: the Republic of Ireland, housing the Dublin capitol, and Northern Ireland, which falls under the United Kingdom (Holwell). Culturally, because of this disconnect, Ireland struggles for what defines the country and its people, questioning whether to follow Celtic Christianity or Roman Catholicism, to speak Gaelic or English, and most importantly, to stand as an independent nation or submit to the strength of European influence. When King Henry VII colonized Ireland in 1495, superseding the Irish Parliament, Ireland grudgingly accepted its need for support, leaving behind the idea of a hard-working peasantry in favor of European guidance; however, when English law hurt Ireland more than it assisted, such as during the country's potato famine and economic collapse in the 1840s, Ireland became conflicted over how to reach autonomy again and if it should even try, something that continues to be hotly discussed today (Holwell). In literature, the debates over Ireland's desire for nationalism echoes strongly, inspiring readers from the early 1900s to the start of the 21st century. Through Irish folklore, personalized by Irish authors, the battle for identity is all the more emphasized—however, the question of what is sacrificed in order to reach a unified identity is controversial. According to William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, Ireland will return to its full strength as a country once its people give themselves wholly to the land, celebrating the hardships of lower-class life and embracing the rustic authenticity of the Irish peasant; in contrast, James Joyce and Marina Carr show an Ireland clinging to decaying ideals, purporting new freedoms for Irish citizens so long as change is accepted and life is pursued outside of a country that has died in solitude. It is the disparity between traditional and modern

Irish folklore that contributes to the lack of an Irish identity, reflected primarily in the portrayal of the Irish woman and the embodiment of Ireland as a woman.

THE IRISH WOMAN IN *CATHLEEN NI HOULIHAN*

According to Colm Tóibín in "The Collaborations of Yeats and Lady Gregory," in 1901, Yeats approached Gregory about a dream "'almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage . . . and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak' who was 'Ireland herself, that Cathleen Ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung, and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death'" (qtd. in Tóibín 417-8). A year later, in 1902, Yeats and Gregory published the collaborative play inspired by Yeats' dream, titled *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, illustrating the titular "woman [who] would lead the young man of the house away from domestic happiness to . . . fight the British" (418). Historically, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* describes the Irish uprising against British rule in 1798, but even after a hundred years, the play's poignant theme of Irish independence continued to add fuel to the nationalistic fire that simmered throughout Ireland, its citizens still conflicted over what to make of the British colonizers. Tóibín explains that the premise of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* "belonged to Yeats and Yeats wrote the chant of the old woman" while Gregory wrote the "naturalistic peasant dialogue . . . the naturalistic setting, the talk of money and marriage, the sense of ease in family life in a small holding" (418). Combining a mystical representation of the Irish woman with the power of feminine appeal encouraged Irish peasants to courageously fight for her, the gendered term applied to Ireland itself, accentuating the play's patriotic message: "Lady Gregory managed in the play to temper Yeats' tendency 'to symbolize rather than to represent life' and grounded the development of the play within a realistic framework" (qtd. in Tóibín 418).

Undeniably, the mixture of magic and realism is seen in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* when the Gillane family, lower class but comfortably materialistic, first catches sight of her. Although she appears initially as an old lady, she is hinted to be far more when the youngest son Patrick says, "Do you remember what Winny of the Cross-Roads was saying the other night about the strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there's war or trouble coming?" (Gregory and Yeats 4). The younger generation, voiced by Patrick, immediately identifies the old woman as a foreboding symbol as opposed to an ordinary character. Then, when she enters the family's house, she shares her woeful story, seemingly referring to how others have taken her home:

OLD WOMAN. Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me. But when trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends.

BRIDGET. What was it put you wandering?

OLD WOMAN. Too many strangers in the house.

...

OLD WOMAN. My land that was taken from me.

PETER. Was it much land they took from you?

OLD WOMAN. My four beautiful green fields. (6-7)

As the play continues, it becomes evident that the old woman is Cathleen Ni Houlihan, where the "strangers in the house" signifies the invasion of the British and the "land that was taken from [her]," specifically the "four beautiful green fields," speaks of the English seizing the four provinces that make up Ireland (7). Cathleen Ni Houlihan is the female embodiment of Ireland, the loss of land being the whole of Ireland itself, and her presence declares the call to arms in

order to regain Ireland's independence. As Tóibín points out, in the first performance of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, "Its message was clear: that young men would have to give up everything for Ireland. The audience and the ordinary people on the stage were as one, and both were visited by this haunting force, a woman both old and young, Platonic Ireland, who would pull them toward heroism and away from everyday materialism" (Tóibín 419). Although Yeats initially "[denied] that 'it was a political play of a propaganda kind,'" *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* inspired such strong reactions of nationalism that he later contemplated in a poem, "'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot'" (qtd. in Tóibín 419). While *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* illustrated the negative feelings held toward the English from a hundred years prior, it still left a resounding impact, showing Irish audiences that the anger had not left and nothing had changed, leading to a renewed outcry against European influences upon Ireland.

In "A Spindle for the Battle: Feminism, Myth, and the Woman-Nation in Irish Revival Drama," Maria-Elena Doyle argues how, in order to contribute to Ireland's fight to unify against the English, literature "tended to soften representations of these female characters," as seen with the titular woman in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*: "Nationalists preferred to put forward the figure of the woman-nation who could return to Irish men a sense of their own masculinity by standing as a passive ideal in need of their rescue" (Doyle 33-4). The intention to feminize Ireland to interest men is evident in Yeats' personal writings; for example, in "An Irish National Theatre," Yeats explains that "sometimes the patriot will have to falter and the wife to desert her home," speaking of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*'s message of sacrifice for the sake of Ireland, as "a good Nationalist is . . . one who is ready to give up a great deal that he may preserve to his country whatever part of her possessions he is best fitted to guard" (Yeats 414). Meanwhile, Tóibín points out how Gregory exemplifies "the lone male hero" who is "ready to sacrifice himself," seen in the

character Michael that Cathleen Ni Houlihan seduces to serve the greater good of Ireland: "He was an idealistic, inspirational figure, free from the mire of the struggle for land which preoccupied most Irish peasants . . . the family's desire for more land is something the son will have no truck with now that the old woman has come to the house . . . There was no grubby land-hunger in the rhetoric of these heroes" (Tóibín 420). Together, Yeats and Gregory emphasize the importance of preservation through sacrifice, maintaining the traditionalism of Irish folklore and its support of a pastoral Irish identity while favoring rural life over the materialistic urbane represented by the English. Overall, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* demonstrates Ireland's desire for independence, as the young man Michael gives himself up for the noble cause of a woman—not just any woman, but the female epitome of Ireland, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, who changes from an old woman to "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (Gregory and Yeats 11).

However, as Doyle states, "The tension in *Cathleen* between the needs of real women and those of the emblematic national female who arrives at their door . . . meant that . . . these women still enacted traditional roles. For most, such was the price of a public voice" (Doyle 35). The inequality between the Irish woman and the embodiment of Ireland as a woman is further evident in "Cathleen Ni Houlihan Writes Back" by Antoinette Quinn: "Members played both sets of contrasting female roles: the charismatic Cathleen who subverts the values of cradle, hearth, and smallholding, and the realist peasant women who lose out to the symbolic woman-nation. Nationalists, far from being perturbed by this dramatization . . . were elated by the triumph of the woman-nation" (Quinn 430). In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the feminized representation of Ireland supersedes and altogether rejects the existence of earthly women, "[subordinating] the interests of women to a sacrificial paradigm of male patriotism" and "[invoking] a literary tradition of political allegory" (430). For example, as Michael is enchanted into battle by Cathleen Ni

Houlihan's presence, he all but forgets that he is engaged; his mother Bridget and fiancé Delia cry out to him in vain and, when it looks like Michael might relent, Cathleen Ni Houlihan's voice returns and overshadows the lesser women:

DELIA. Michael! [*He takes no notice.*] Michael! [*He turns towards her.*] Why do you look at me like a stranger?

...

DELIA. Michael, Michael! You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married! [*She puts her arms about him, he turns towards her as if about to yield.*]

OLD WOMAN'S *voice outside.* They shall be speaking for ever. The people shall hear them for ever.

[MICHAEL *breaks away from DELIA, stands for a second at the door, then rushes out, following the OLD WOMAN'S voice. BRIDGET takes DELIA, who is crying silently, into her arms.*] (Gregory and Yeats 10-1)

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats and Gregory want men to be sacrificed to strengthen Ireland as a country and, in doing so, use a woman to represent Ireland to better appeal to audiences; however, in abandoning his family to serve his country, to serve Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Michael is also leaving behind his fiancé, wherein Yeats and Gregory's message also shows that real, tangible women must be disregarded for the magical, political embodiment of Ireland as a woman. In the midst of Ireland's struggle against European influences, Ireland still maintained a patriarchal society; as Doyle points out, "Colonial struggles for independence often bring women out of the house and into the streets, both as stand-ins for imprisoned men and as auxiliaries to, and sometimes leaders of, nationalist organizations" (Doyle 36). Thus, "no controversial new

women disturb the pages" of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, instead celebrating the ideal nationalistic Irish identity: a magical but passive woman that inspires men to take action for the betterment of the country (37).

THE IRISH WOMAN IN "EVELINE"

In "Family Bonds and Bondage Within the Family: A Study of Family Ties in Clarice Lispector and James Joyce," Magda Velloso Fernandes de Tolentino writes about reading James Joyce's *Dubliners* and, in comparison to another work, "I found that family bonds, which are supposed to represent ties of closeness and tenderness, turn out to be nothing but chains of bondage" (Fernandes de Tolentino 73). In *Dubliners*, published in 1914 and named for the Republic of Ireland's capitol—distinctly separate from Northern Ireland's connection with the United Kingdom—Joyce "[shows] how frustrating these [family] bonds can be and how they preclude people from trying out new experiences which might lead them to live a richer life" (73). Specifically, in Joyce's short story "Eveline," Fernandes de Tolentino summarizes how the titular Eveline "faces the possibility of an escape from her family ties. She has a lover and is planning to follow him to a faraway place, where they will start a new life," one that is separated entirely from her origins in Ireland (74). For example, as she thinks about how "she was going to go away like the others, to leave home," Eveline glimpses away from her window to look back at where she has grown up, her ruminations on how "everything changes" disagreeing with her surroundings' familiarity:

Home! She looked round the room reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. . . . She had consented to go away, to

leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom she had known all her life about. Of course she had to work hard both in the house and at business. What would they say of her in the stores when they found out that she had run away with a fellow? Say she was a fool, perhaps. (Joyce 27-8)

In *Dubliners*, Joyce focuses on illustrating different stages of life with Ireland as the backdrop; in "Eveline," Eveline is torn between adolescence and maturity as she debates whether to remain home, indebted to her family, or leave for "a distant unknown country," where "she would be married—she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then" (28). It is evident that, by comparing her current life to the life she could live, "scenes of her family life [parading] before her eyes," Eveline has stagnated in Irish society, "[feeling] her ties to the house and family to be unbearable" (Fernandes de Tolentino 74).

In contrast to Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, "Eveline" is in the perspective of a hard-working Irish woman—the same model of a woman that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* disregards to better highlight the ethereal depiction of Ireland as a woman and who men must fight for. By forgoing the mysticism included in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Joyce provides a realistic image of the women forgotten in favor of purporting a nationalistic message; as a Modernist writer, Joyce does not shy away from the disillusionment felt by Irish citizens, dragged along the ongoing and exhausting fight against the English, both men and women caught in a cycle of corruption. For example, Eveline works hard to earn a steady income, having little opportunity as a woman to begin with, but she must also contend her abusive father, who uses the money to purchase alcohol: "She sometimes felt herself in danger of her father's violence. . . . the invariable squabble for money on Saturday nights had begun to weary her unspeakably. She

always gave her entire wages . . . but the trouble was to get any money from her father. . . . for he was usually [belligerently drunken] of a Saturday night" (Joyce 28-9). Yet, the threats Eveline receives from her father and the hardships of tending to her family are seen simply as part of her duty as an Irish woman, making her lover Frank and his desire to take her away from Ireland, to the exotic and colorful "Buenos Ayres," all the more appealing (29). Although "running away with her boyfriend represents freedom, the promise of a new life, love, salvation," Eveline ultimately remains torn, caught between her life in Ireland and the prospects of a life elsewhere, which leads to Eveline not boarding the boat with Frank, as "something holds her back"—that something being the same stagnation that Joyce depicts throughout *Dubliners*, celebrating Irish society in unison to revealing the deterioration upon its people (Fernandes de Tolentino 74). According to "Pattern of Paralysis in Joyce's *Dubliners*: A Study of the Original Framework" by Florence L. Walzl, "The characters are already so injured by their experience with society that voluntary choice is almost impossible for them. Past traditions or present conventionalities immobilize them. The paralytic sub-image of their group is the trap. All the characters either by weak or wrong choices get caught" (Walzl 224).

Notably, Eveline is paralyzed due to a vow she made to her now-deceased mother: "She could hear a street organ playing. . . . Strange that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could" (Joyce 30). Because of the promise to remain in Ireland to take care of her family, Eveline is immobilized in her decision of whether or not to leave with Frank; yet, again, "as she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life laid its spell on the very quick of her being—that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness," Eveline shows that a life of mere survival is not enough to sate her: "Escape! She must escape! . . . But she wanted to live. Why should she be

unhappy? She had a right to happiness" (Joyce 31). The memory of Eveline's mother directly forms the "paralysis connected with family ties," regardless of the fact that the vow Eveline made—just like her mother—has died with the corrosion of Eveline's family and country (Fernandes de Tolentino 77). Thus, figuratively, Eveline's mother personifies Ireland itself, a symbol of decay that Joyce explores throughout *Dubliners*: "Joyce gives the case history of a nation, tracing a paralyzing disorder . . . through increasing degrees of prostration to a final immobilizing stroke. . . . he shows the Irish people as successively paralyzed in emotion, will, action and social values. The 'moral history' *Dubliners* presents is a long decline, and the prognosis for the patient is death" (Walzl 228). Again, Ireland retains its feminized presence, but without the magic that Yeats and Gregory incorporated in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Joyce reveals Ireland, and the womanhood that draws its citizens to arms, to be failing, leaving real Irish women like Eveline "torn between two forces: the wish to escape and be happy, and the need to conform and accept her predicament" (Fernandes de Tolentino 75). Joyce displays the transition from the support of a nationalistic identity to questioning if such an identity can exist without hurting its people. Each short story in *Dubliners*, like "Eveline," shows Irish citizens caught between disintegrating patriotism and the freedom to live elsewhere; however, by choosing to leave, the identity Ireland has been struggling for is abandoned altogether, making Eveline's paralysis, "her white face . . . passive, like a helpless animal" and how "her eyes gave . . . no sign of love or farewell or recognition," all the more a testament to the perpetuating conflict of whether the country or individual should survive (Joyce 32).

THE IRISH WOMAN IN *BY THE BOG OF CATS*

In "'That a Black Twisty Divil Could Be Hiding under Such Comeliness': Woman versus Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Irish Theatre," Paul Murphy points out the challenges

women in Ireland endured in the 1900s, as seen in Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and Joyce's *Dubliners*: "The 'ideal Irish woman' [was] inherent in this ideology as 'the self-sacrificing mother whose world was bound by the confines of her home' . . . who 'inculcated these virtues in her daughters and nationalist ideology in her sons' . . . who 'knew and accepted her place in society' and who 'served the purposes of the ruling Irish male elite'" (qtd. in Murphy 202). Yet, as studied in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and openly questioned in *Dubliners*, the "ideal Irish woman did not exist in the material sense" and instead "was constructed by . . . Irish nationalist intellectuals . . . as part of the . . . nationalist counter-hegemony to British colonial rule" (Murphy 202). Thus, released in 1998, *By the Bog of Cats* by Marina Carr brings the disconnect between the Irish woman and the embodiment of Ireland as a woman to a full circle; a hundred years after *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*'s performance and eighty years since the publication of *Dubliners*, *By the Bog of Cats* stands as a postmodernist piece that blatantly exposes the mysticism of the woman-nation to be corruptive, illustrating its hostile effects upon the real and often neglected women of Ireland. From "Eveline" in *Dubliners*, literary analyses have shown "the profound disjunction between the physical, social *woman* and the ideal, symbolic *Woman*" (202); in *By the Bog of Cats*, it is revealed how "'there's no such thing as Woman, Woman with a capital *W* indicating the universal. . . . the ideal Irish Woman is the fantasy object of patriarchal nationalist desire, which is necessarily at one remove from the physical Irish woman who was faced with the impossible task of fulfilling the variously idealized roles of Woman, Wife, and Mother" (qtd. in Murphy 202). Arguably, *By the Bog of Cats* retells *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* through a warped interpretation, taking the similar story of a woman devoted to her land and emphasizing the result of sacrificing oneself for a lifeless country, all the more repulsive as Ireland enters the 21st century.

In *By the Bog of Cats*, Hester Swane struggles to survive against her banishment from traditional society, seen as an outcast by her former lover Carthage Kilbride, Carthage's mother Mrs. Kilbride, Carthage's new bride Caroline Cassidy, and Caroline's father Xavier Cassidy. Defined by her otherness, Hester is left living in the bog, with the wellbeing of her and Carthage's daughter, seven-year-old Josie, a primary conflict that drives the play. However, a majority of Hester's living situation is enabled by her own actions; although Hester states that it "wasn't me as pulled [my life] asunder," blaming the treatment by the Kilbride and Cassidy families for her misfortune, it is Hester who is determined to remain in the bog, where "everythin' I'm connected to is here" as she desperately awaits for the return of her mother, Big Josie, who abandoned Hester when she was a child (Carr 354, 357). In comparison to *Dubliners'* "Eveline," which explored the conflict of leaving Ireland, *By the Bog of Cats* exemplifies the commitment of remaining, with Hester addicted to the wish that Big Josie will return for her, far more mired in the memory of her mother than Eveline. However, as studied in "A Cautionary Tale: Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*" by Melissa Sihra, Big Josie is not the Cathleen Ni Houlihan-esque maternal figure who Hester is hoping for: "The mother-figure in Irish theatre has traditionally been viewed as a personification of the nation. Carr presents the myth of Big Josie Swane as an alternative to the romanticised [*sic*] literary Mother Ireland figure" (Sihra 582). As Sihra explains, "Big Josie is described . . . as being ' . . . a harsh auld yoke, [who] came and went like the moon'" (qtd. in Sihra 582), and Hester is warned several times to avoid "[longing] for Josie Swane," that Hester "[was] lucky [Big Josie] left ya," and to "just forget about her and lave [the bog] now or ya never will" (Carr 358-9). Through the descriptions of Big Josie, it is clear that she serves as a reimagined Cathleen Ni Houlihan from Yeats and Gregory's play, where "Yeats' 'Mother Ireland' now metamorphoses into a 'rancorous hulk' with a 'brazen walk . . . and

her reekin' of drink' as opposed to the comely young girl who previously had the 'walk of a queen'" (qtd. in Sihra 582). Yet, because Big Josie is a contrast of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, rather than anticipating her appearance, as shown in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Hester is cautioned away from Big Josie, her devotion to her mother and the land—who has abandoned her and which has been reduced to a bog, respectively—foretold to be the end of her.

Ultimately, by staying in the bog, Hester sentences herself to death. Driven insane by "the unattainability of the past" (Sihra 583), Hester burns down the house belonging to Carthage, taking revenge for her abandonment in her heartbroken state: "Ya think I can be flung in a bog hole like a bag of newborn pups? . . . I'd burn down the world if I'd enough diesel—Will somewan not come and save me from meself before I go and do worse" (Carr 382). However, when Hester realizes she is doomed to die, she makes the decision to also kill her daughter Josie, refusing to leave her behind like Big Josie did to Hester: "It's alright, I'll take ya with me. I won't have ya as I was, waitin' a lifetime for somewan to return, because they don't, Josie, they don't" (395). Again, as a foil to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, where sacrifice for the woman who represents Ireland was lauded, the death of Hester and especially the innocent Josie is a tragic response to the lack of a mother-nation; as Sihra points out, "Both Cathleen and Big Josie have the power to compel and to seduce those around them," but where "Cathleen states that: 'many a man has died for love of me,'" Hester is left emptily questioning, "'Who'd believe a look [from Big Josie] could destroy ya?' (qtd. in Sihra 583). From *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in 1902, celebrating a nationalist identity with the symbol of Ireland as a woman, to the uncertainty in *Dubliners*' "Eveline" in 1914, debating where a woman falls within Ireland's stagnating society, *By the Bog of Cats* climaxes the transition from blind loyalty to Ireland to realizing that the country does not provide to its people as much as it expects to be provided to.

In conclusion, mired in the conflict against European influences, Ireland has grown from the cry for independence to floundering for an identity, questioning whether the establishment of an identity requires Ireland to be isolated from the world or if the country should simply submit to its English colonizers in order to flourish; thus, as Murphy states, "At a time when political life in Ireland 'was concerned with one issue only: Ireland's domination by Britain and whether or not to fight for independence,' it is perhaps unsurprising that feminism was subsumed and at times positively disavowed by nationalism" (qtd. in Murphy 204). Similarly, the external and internal battles Ireland has endured and continues to face is reflected in its literature, beginning with William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, progressing with James Joyce's *Dubliners*, and closing resoundingly with Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, all exemplary testaments to the power of Irish folklore. By "[replacing] familiarity and comfort with estrangement and unease," providing finality to Ireland's long battle for a patriotic identity, *By the Bog of Cats* takes the uncertainty seen in *Dubliners* and retells *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* by deciding once and for all to forgo magical traditionalism for realistic modernity (Sihra 586). The drama of each piece "articulates the dynamics of ownership in relation to personal and political identity," being "recognisably [*sic*] Irish" while also open to interpretation to how readers, especially Irish readers, can identify with it: "The play possesses the mythic dimension of timelessness" (Sihra 585-6). Ultimately, each piece "[offers] the necessary objectivity of self-scrutiny," overall demanding for an opportunity to exist outside of the embodiment of Ireland as a woman, as something ethereal and therefore unattainable, and to live finally as an authentic Irish woman in order to discover a unified identity (Sihra 586).

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