

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais  
Faculdade de Letras

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Penance for Passionate Sin and the  
Memory of a Crime:  
Yeats and the Metaphors of Evil

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Maria Rita Drumond Viana

# Penance for Passionate Sin and the Memory of a Crime: Yeats and the Metaphors of Evil

Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras.

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Orientador: Prof. Julio Jeha

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Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

Faculdade de Letras

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários

*Passionate Sin and the Memory of a Crime:*

*Yeats and the Metaphors of Evil*, de autoria da mestranda

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# Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of evil in two plays by W. B. Yeats: *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), first published in the poet's second volume of poetry and the earliest play to be included in his canon, and *Purgatory*, first performed in 1938 and published in the posthumous volume *Last Poems and Two Plays* in 1939. These plays mark the beginning and the end of Yeats's career in the theater, and despite revealing radically different styles, display the author's concern with the nature of evil, salvation and damnation of the soul, and the individual's power against the forces of history and fate.

My analysis of evil in the plays is grounded in two metaphors, as proposed by Julio Jeha: sin and crime. *The Countess Cathleen* is set in famine-ridden Ireland of "old times," and features an aristocratic heroine who is led to selling her soul to the devil in order to save the peasants on her land. The play generated great controversy when it was performed in 1899 Dublin, and the theology behind the countess's salvation disputed.

*Purgatory*, a condensed one-act play, describes the Old Man's attempt to find appeasement for what he considers a great crime in his past: the destruction of a Big House. He describes his mother's soul tormented by her sinful union with an unfit man to the Boy, his own son, whom he later kills onstage. The Old Man justifies his past crime of patricide and his present crime of filicide as an attempt to stop evil, and "end all consequence."

Whereas in *The Countess Cathleen* sin is seen mainly from a religious standpoint, the more encompassing portrayal of evil in its moral and social, as well as religious implications, in *Purgatory* reflects Yeats's development towards greater unity and is in accordance with this general trend in his work.

**Keywords:** W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), *Purgatory* (1939), Irish drama, evil.

# Resumo

Este estudo analisa a representação do mal em duas peças de W. B. Yeats: *The Countess Cathleen* (A Condessa Cathleen), de 1892, publicada pela primeira vez no segundo volume de poesia produzido pelo autor e a primeira peça que compõe o seu cânone, e *Purgatory* (Purgatório), cuja primeira performance aconteceu em 1938 e cuja publicação se deu no volume póstumo intitulado *Last Poems and Two Plays* (Últimos Poemas e Duas Peças), de 1939. Essas peças marcam o início e o fim da carreira teatral de Yeats, e a despeito de terem estilos radicalmente diferentes, demonstram a preocupação do autor com a natureza do mal, da salvação ou danação da alma, e o poder do indivíduo contra as forças da história e do destino.

Minha análise do mal nestas peças se baseia em duas metáforas, conforme proposto por Julio Jeha: o pecado e o crime. *The Countess Cathleen* se passa durante um período de grande fome na Irlanda “de antigamente”, e descreve a história de uma heroína aristocrata que é levada a vender a própria alma para o demônio de modo a salvar os camponeses de sua terra. À encenação da peça em Dublin em 1899 seguiu-se uma longa controvérsia em que se criticava, entre outras, a teologia da peça, que garantia a salvação da alma da condessa.

*Purgatory*, uma condensada peça em um ato, descreve a tentativa do Velho em alcançar perdão pelo que ele considera um grande crime em seu passado: a destruição de uma Grande Casa irlandesa. Ele descreve o tormento da alma de sua mãe, causado pela pecaminosa união com o homem errado, para o seu filho, o Garoto, a quem mata a seguir. O Velho justifica seu crime anterior de parricídio e o recém-cometido filicídio como uma tentativa de estancar o mal, e “findar toda consequência”.

Enquanto em *The Countess Cathleen* o pecado é visto principalmente do ponto de vista religioso, a representação mais abarcante do mal em suas implicações moral e social, além de religiosa, como visto em *Purgatory* reflete o desenvolvimento de Yeats em direção a uma maior união, o que confirma uma tendência geral em sua obra.

**Palavras-chave:** W. B Yeats (1865-1939), *The Countess Cathleen* [A Condessa Cathleen] (1892), *Purgatory* [Purgatório] (1939), Teatro irlandês, o Mal.



# Abbreviations

- Au*     *Autobiographies* ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 3. New York: Scribner, 1999.
- AVA*   *A Vision* (1925) ed. Catherine E. Paulo and Margaret Mills Harper. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 13. New York: Scribner, 2008.
- AVB*   *A Vision*. London: Macmillan, 1937.
- CL2*   *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 2, 1896-1900. Ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997
- Ex*     *Explorations*. London: Macmillan, 1962.
- IDM*   *The Irish Dramatic Movement*. Ed. Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 8. New York and London: Scribner, 2003.
- L*       *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.
- LE*     *Later Essays* ed. William H. O'Donnell. New York: Scribner, 1994.
- Pl*      *The Plays*. Ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind Clark. *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 2. New York and London: Scribner, 2001.
- VP*     *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1957; corrected 3<sup>rd</sup> printing 1966.

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## Introduction

Despite the controversy over William Butler Yeats's "religion" and the importance of mystic pursuit in the understanding of his oeuvre (Hough 5), the poet and dramatist himself never had any doubts as to the centrality of a mystic vision in his life. In the first part of his *Autobiographies, Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, originally published in 1914, Yeats ponders over his religiousness:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters, with some help from philosophers and theologians. (*Au* 113)

From the start of his efforts as an artist, he had religion and art very closely linked, as were the figures of the priest and the poet – with a slightly greater praise for the latter's accomplishments. Grandson to a rector of Drumcliffe, where he would later find his final resting place "Under bare Ben Bulbin's head," the "simple minded religion" of his childhood was Protestantism, under whose teachings he was raised, as befitted a member of the so-called Irish Protestant Ascendancy – even if his family was somewhat "fringe Ascendancy," and even "déclassé" (Foster, "Yeats and Irish Politics") as his father, John Butler Yeats, relinquished a career as a barrister in order to pursue an artistic life.

To his materialist father's discontentment, Yeats's idea of art necessarily included a religious basis. In a letter to the Fenian John O'Leary, Yeats defended himself against his father's charges of irrationalism:

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "weak" or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life. [. . .] If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen* ever come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. (*L* 210-11)

What Yeats chooses to call Magic with a capital M was the practical side to his mystical pursuits into many religions and philosophies. Virginia Moore in her study of Yeats's religion proposes that his beliefs ranged from Paganism or Druidism to Hermeticism, with an intense Christian coloring not only in the Rosicrucian and Gnostic variations, but also with an understanding of Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy. Patrick J. Keane parallels her list and adds:

Yeats ranged speculatively through Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity; Arabic and Indian philosophy; Buddhism and the spiritual implications of Japanese Noh drama; Irish mythology and folklore; Hermeticism, the Kabbala, Swedenborgian angelology, Theosophy, psychical experiment, astrology, automatic writing, and the Lord knows what. (110)

To this list I would add that he was heavily influenced by mystics such as Boehme and by fellow poet and mystic William Blake, whose works he edited and annotated into the three-volume edition mentioned in the letter.

From this amalgam, Yeats derived many aspects of his own system of belief, which was later expounded in the two versions of *A Vision* (1925, 1937) and related prose. In the essay "If I Were Four-and-Twenty," Yeats describes his life-long search for overreaching explanations, for totalizing solutions, and for the need to unify his interests: "Hammer your thoughts into unity" was the sentence he tested all he did by (*Ex* 163). The same impulse propelled him in the writing of *A Vision*, described by Margaret Mills Harper as "part cosmology, part apocalypse, part psychoanalysis, part poetry, and part confusion" (160). Of this volume, Yeats has commented:

I write [*A Vision*] very much for the young men between twenty and thirty, as at that age, and younger, I wanted to feel that any poet I cared for – Shelley let us say – saw more than he told of, had in some sense seen into the mystery. I read more into certain poems than they contained, to satisfy my interest. The young men I write for may not read my *Vision* – they may care too much for poetry – but they will be pleased that it exists. [. . .] I have constructed a myth, but then one can believe in a myth – one only assents to philosophy. (*Ex* 781)

Yeats draws here a traditional distinction between myth and philosophy, one that has great resonance in his work. In his study of Blake, he had come across the idea of the conflict between the individual and the universal, a conflict brought about from the

breaking down of an original unity with included man and God. Even if the joining of the fragmented individual with the universal could only be possible with the restoration of the Golden Age, man still possessed an element of the universal that was “mood” or emotion. Thus, passions and emotions became holy, deriving from the universal. According to Leonard E. Nathan, in his reading of Blake Yeats found that “emotion, then, is associated with the good and the supernatural, while reason is associated with the evil and the natural” (3). In Yeats’s own words:

The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before mechanized nature. That lasted to our own day with the exception of a brief period between Smart’s *Song of David* and the death of Byron, wherein imprisoned men beat upon the door. [...] Soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the mirror turn lamp. (“Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, LE 194)

Reason was the realm of philosophy, whereas emotion was the realm of the mythical, of the religious, and of the arts.

The conflation of religion and art was even more patent in his drama than in his poetry or even in his more overtly mystical prose. The ritualistic aspect of drama was central to him, as he believed that the theater was “essentially defined by a ceremoniousness profoundly akin to religious ritual; the identification of theater with religious verse is one of those deeply held ideas that links Yeats’s work from first to last” (Nathan 12). Drama was for Yeats an extension of Magic, leading George Mills Harper and John S. Kelly to conclude that the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre “was, in part, an attempt to widen the scope of the Celtic Mysteries” (131), Yeats’s plan for a mystical society, an Irish-mythology based Order of the Golden Dawn.

In working on *The Countess Cathleen* (1892), his first play<sup>1</sup> performed by the Society and the first he included in his canon, and with *Purgatory*, a play included in his last, posthumously published, *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939), I intend to assess the development of his theory of evil in two main metaphors, as proposed by Julio Jeha (19): sin and crime. Whereas in *The Countess Cathleen* sin is seen mainly from a religious standpoint, the more encompassing portrayal of evil in its moral and social,

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<sup>1</sup> The text used throughout this thesis is the one in *PI*, ed. David R. Clark.

as well as religious implications, in *Purgatory* reflects Yeats's development toward greater unity and is in accordance with this general trend in his work.

The two plays reveal radically different styles and are grounded on separate periods of Yeats's career. Nevertheless, a concern with the nature of evil, salvation and damnation of the soul, and the individual's power against the forces of history and fate create a thematic link between them that has not yet been explored.

By working with evil, I intend to evade the many divisions that Yeats scholars have traditionally employed in an attempt to deal with the multitude of identities he adopts throughout the long span of his artistic and public life. Richard Ellmann, in his very influential biography *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, divides the figure of the poet into two opposing characters, who are taken from Yeats's prose and seen as his multiple alter egos: Owen Aherne, with whom Ellmann aligns his nationalist persona, and Michael Robartes, his mystical side. In the introduction to the first volume of the new biography, now seen as the standard work on Yeats, Roy Foster acknowledges some of the reasons that led to this division in different personalities:

Faced with the multifarious activities, the feints and turns, the wildly differing worlds which WBY [William Butler Yeats] embraced, Ellmann followed his subject's example in dealing with his life thematically. WBY's own *Autobiographies* dictate this arrangement for his life, and it is a thematic one. [. . .] The natural reaction is [. . .] to deal with the periods of frantic and diverse involvements, as in the early 1900s, by separating out the strands of occultism, drama and love, and addressing them individually. (1: xxvi-vii)

This division is then understood in the context of the biography, the object of both Ellmann's and Foster's studies. Nevertheless, as the text points out, it was soon followed by several other studies. Although this division is justifiable by Yeats's own practices, I agree with Foster on the impossibility of separating these strands as they worked in shaping the composite identity of Yeats as an artist. Thus, even though my choice of methodology is in itself thematic, and therefore necessarily a selection, it does not seek to separate Yeats into two schizophrenic personalities.

Another traditional division I intend to disregard is the delimitation of Yeats's work into early, middle, and late periods. This chronological division has an important pedagogic and even pragmatic justification: Yeats wrote prolifically and for many years, choosing to start his canon with the volume *The Wanderings of Oisín*,

published in 1889, and ending it with *Last Poems and Two Plays* in the year of his death, 1939. Unlike poets such as Wordsworth, whose “withering” he discusses in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Yeats is said to have maintained the brilliance of his early work, and constantly developed his technique, producing some of his best poems quite literally on his deathbed. Moreover, certain features in technique, language, and theme can be distinguished in each of the phases and thus seen as characteristic of this or that period. These and other reasons more than clearly justify this division into three phases. Nevertheless, my study will profit from a diachronic perspective, from which the development and progress toward a more unified experience can be gathered. Works from the early and late periods are included in my corpus to allow for this developmental and processual understanding of Yeats’s treatment of evil.

Yeats is concerned with evil on many levels. In his system, evil is an important force of change, and knowledge of evil is necessary for the achievement of Unity of Being, the final state of ecstasy and of achievement. Helen Vendler explains the difference between two types, personified by Shelley and Dante: “According to the first edition of *A Vision* those idealists who hope for a ‘final conquest’ see only the Vision of Good; those who are content to struggle with no final conquest, who can truly love tragedy, have not only the Vision of Good but also that of Evil” (264).<sup>2</sup> The idea of the eternal struggle is exemplified in the figure of the Irish mythological hero Cuchulain, who, in *On Baile’s Strand* (1904), finds tragic joy as he fights the invincible waves until he can do no more and falls, exhausted. Not having a Vision of Evil, for Yeats, makes a man unaware of an important part of his experience. In this sense, Yeats is close to Lucius Annaeus Seneca and other philosophers who contended a very similar point: “To be always happy and to pass life without a mental pang is to be ignorant of one half of nature” (Seneca 20). Considering Yeats’s emphasis on unity and on self-knowledge, knowing one half and not its contrary impeded the “beatific vision” of Phase 15, where Unity of Being is possible. Vendler thus defines this state:

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<sup>2</sup> In *A Vision*, Yeats draws examples for the types representing the 28 phases of the moon from both historical figures and arts, with great prominence of poets and writers. Thus, *A Vision* can be seen also as a history of art.

The beatific vision of Phase 15 is, like its religious counterpart, at once simultaneous and whole: that is, in it all experience is integrated, everything finds its place. But it has one startling difference from the perfect joy of traditional ecstasy. It involves somehow a process of purgation, a time of pain, a passage through vision, where evil reveals itself in its final meaning. (25)

In this phase, those who had not known evil come to see it, and those who had not known good experience it in a similar manner. As a self-declared disciple of Blake, Yeats agreed with the idea that “Without Contraries there is no progression” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* plate 3), but not without qualification of the idea of progression; for him progress was a vulgar innovation of the Enlightenment. For the straight and forward-pointing line Yeats substituted the figure of the gyre and of the interconnecting cones.<sup>3</sup> But for Yeats, only when the soul manages to regard both good and evil impassively can it ascend to a higher state. As long as it is bound to the distinction, it will be “caught in the treadmill of repetition” (Vendler 80). This repetition is enacted in *Purgatory*.

This idea of evil is closer to Blake’s, and is in some ways an extension of the idea of the contraries:

It is hard to see how this odd type of evil [cruelty and ignorance] could be the conditions for the entrance of a species of Paradise: Yeats’s metaphysics seems to have gone too far. But when we recall that for him, the cruelty of the beloved and the ignorance of the lover (themes which recur so often in the plays) were the two essential ingredients for a tenacious passion, the passage becomes less obscure. (Vendler 90)

The evil here alluded is then seen as both the genesis of passion, an important characteristic of the hero, and as a source of adversities to be (at least in an attempt) overcome.

For Yeats, this is the other facet to evil. In *A Vision*, he states that “evil is that which opposes Unity of Being” (*AVA* 190). This depiction is closer to St. Augustine’s,

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<sup>3</sup> For a 3D rendition of Yeats geometry, see Neil Mann’s website *The System of W. B. Yeats’s A Vision*.



who defines evil as “merely the privation of good” (*City of God* 56). It seems contradictory that evil is necessary for achieving Unity of Being while also impeding it. Nevertheless, Yeats’s focus on struggle, on the process rather than on the result, dissolves this contradiction as it makes evil an obstacle to conquer. It is a doctrine of perfectibility: in *The Countess Cathleen*, the evil that decimates the land leads the heroine to her final sacrifice, which in turn saves and immortalizes her.

The fighting of evil or even smaller adversities is, for Yeats, a heroic struggle, and thus leads to a greater good. In his essay “Monstroscomometáforas do mal,” Julio Jeha distinguishes several approaches to evil, one of which he ascribes to Leibniz, who argues that the existence of evil makes courage, compassion, and self-sacrifice possible (17). Jeha objects that these virtues would not be necessary had evil been excluded from creation, but the pragmatist in Yeats would retort it simply has not. Keane explores this pragmatism: “There were few qualities Yeats admired more than ‘unwilling belief,’ that is, capacity to acknowledge the limitations of rationalistic optimism and to accept the tragic facts of ‘evil’ and suffering” (96). Evil is intrinsically part of his system.

Because Yeats’s system is without God, the existence of evil is never a problem for him, it is merely a given. Yet, despite its undeniable existence, agency is never ascribed to anyone in particular. As Vendler notes, Yeats’s definition of evil as conflict means that evil is understood in no ordinary sense: “Of human bonds to earth as well as to heavens Yeats was well aware, but the Infernos of both Dante and Blake formed no part of his cosmology” (41). His cosmology included purgatory and a promise of ascension to heaven or at least a higher state of existence, but hell only features in St. Patrick’s imprecations against Oisín in “The Wanderings of Oisín.” Evil is again seen as something that holds the soul back.

Since there is no God, and no devil, in *The Countess Cathleen* except in the allegorical form of the merchants, all agency is attributed to a disembodied history or even fate. Determinism and free will are crucial in Yeats’s understanding of history, and the description of the historical cycles, past and future, occupies an extensive part of *A Vision*. Patrick J. Keane elaborates on how Yeats’s cycles and their determinism depart from the “grey truth” Yeats rejected:

How does the self, having rejected one machine (the Newtonian clockwork universe of dead matter in motion), find freedom and even exultation in a universe roughly calculable by wheels and interlocking

gyres? Yeats's paradoxical solution – defining freedom as the recognition of necessity, asserting that creative man is at one “predestinate and free” – goes beyond stoic and Spinozistic fatalism to the astringent tragic joy of Nietzsche's similar recognition, culminating in *Amor Fati* and the embrace, whether fierce or serene, of Eternal Recurrence. (18-19)

The idea of Eternal Recurrence in its Yeatsian fashioning is of course paramount to the discussion of *Purgatory*, but it is also relevant for the analysis of Yeats's understanding of evil, and how it figures in a world marked by such recurrence. In these cycles, evil is a necessity, even in its more metaphysical side:

The original Deluge, we recall, did not drown “the ceremony of innocence,” but rather came to cleanse corruption, and this is the characteristic function of mythical cataclysms. Yeats's world, however, is not being destroyed out of wrath but of necessity. There is no agency at work, no God repaying with vengeance. The ceremony of innocence is drowned by a tide of anarchy which, though evil and murderous in itself, is nevertheless historically innocent, acting as an agent of inevitable historical necessity. (Vendler 100)

Yeats's system included, simply put, a series of 2000-year historical cycles that would follow one another and be the previous one's antithesis, following the structure of two intersecting gyres. The cycles can be subdivided into shorter ones, and the important aspect is the simultaneity of both cycles; the apex of the one coincides with the base of the other. The end of one historical cycle and the beginning of another is followed by a period of intense violence, as Charlemagne's conquests marked the year 1000 A.D. and as the fall of Rome marked the end of the classical sub-era.

The Christian era, whose end Yeats felt drew near, was not agreeable to the poet. It was a primary, objective era, when the individual counted as part of a whole rather than as self-sufficient entity. The previous era, whose apex was the opulence of Byzantium, valued the antithetical, the subjective, and the individual. It is thus understandable that Yeats should exult at the end of the Christian era even in the face of the coming violence, as he witnessed the Great War and the escalating tension of World War II. As Vendler noted, whereas this violence was evil in itself, it was also the portent of a newly arriving, and possibly more congenial era.

Several studies have focused on *A Vision* and related prose, explicating these cycles and Yeats's understanding of history in view of his system. *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History*, by Thomas R. Whitaker, was one of the first, and is possibly still the best, study of this relation. This study's motto is the idea of dialogue, the interplay between self and subject. Yeats saw personal history and world history as reflecting one another, the history of the mind closely linked to the history of its surroundings. Whitaker focuses on the balance between freedom and fate and on the possibility of change in the cycles.

In her *Yeats's Vision and Later Plays*, Helen Vendler examines *A Vision* as an account of aesthetic experience. Although reading it as an important volume of Yeats's oeuvre, and asking for the gravity it deserves (thus opposing the then common dismissal of the book as mystic mumbo-jumbo), she misses some of the important moral and philosophical issues *A Vision* presents. The book, however, is invaluable in its clear exposition of obscure passages, using both 1925 and 1937 versions as bases.

This thesis, however, will not focus on *A Vision*. Considering that "[a] standard rule Yeats's critics come to abide by, sooner or later, is that nothing he did or wrote was random; [that] everything has its role in that seems to have been a lifelong program to make everything in and around him significant or Yeatsian" (Nathan 12), *A Vision* and related prose and poetry will play an important role in my study, as will letters, pamphlets, and manifestos Yeats and collaborators wrote. Yet, this is a case study of Yeats's portrayal of evil in two plays from very early and very late in his career: *The Countess Cathleen* and *Purgatory*.

*The Countess Cathleen* was first printed in *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, published in 1892. It was Yeats's second volume, following *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), which contained a long dramatic poem and some lyrics, but no plays. The play was only to be performed in 1899, seven years after the first publication. This delay can partly be explained by *The Countess Cathleen*'s long story of revisions, which, according to Peter Ure, extended "over nearly thirty years, is lengthier than that of *The Shadowy Waters* or any other play by Yeats" (13). This long process of revision is both linked to Yeats's development as a playwright, as he included many changes after assessing what worked and not, and his biography, especially in the figure of the poet Aleel's rejection. Despite having access to the almost 800-page long *The Countess Cathleen* manuscript materials, published

in the Cornell Yeats series, and the plays variorum, I will focus on the “final” version Yeats published and included in *Poems* (1919) and *Plays and Controversies* (1923).

The play is based on the story of a saintly Irish countess who, in a time of famine and despair, sells her soul to the devil in order to save the peasants around her by using the money she gets to buy food and stop them from selling their souls out of hunger. To this moral tale,

Yeats had begun by introducing an emphasis alien to his source and by refusing suggestions that might have appealed to a dramatist less concerned with the personal and the subtle. It was this re-making of the “conflict between the forces of good and evil” into a hinted choice between dreams and responsibility that was to grow progressively into a much more elaborate structure. (Ure 20-21)

Yet, the choice between dreams and responsibility that is increasingly prominent in the play is yet another “conflict between the forces of good and evil,” since doing her duty, abiding to what she sees is her responsibility, is what leads the countess to salvation in the end of the play, regardless of the great sin of selling her own soul. Rather than placing the conflict in metaphysical and overreaching terms, as it is found in the folklore source, with the devil conspiring against a whole nation, Yeats relocates the source and locus of conflict inside the countess’s own consciousness. Her failure to abide to the imperative of her responsibility toward her people would probably mean her damnation, even if she had never sold her soul.

In my discussion of *The Countess Cathleen* in a later chapter, I will analyze how Yeats’s take on salvation and damnation conflicts with that of most of his audience and the Catholic majority in Ireland. Yeats always meant his plays to be performed and the performance made very public what might otherwise have been a somewhat private affair. Given the aspirations of the Irish Literary Theatre to be national and representative of the Irish, the audience had a very particular set of expectations widely differing from the subscribers and even casual buyers of his books. From the clash between this audience and Yeats’s defense of the theology in the play has sprung much of the material I will discuss in that chapter.

Yeats’s “mystery religion” (to borrow the title of Graham Hough’s seminal book) not only included unorthodox views on damnation but also a belief in the conflation of Christianity and paganism in Irish folklore. The poet Aleel, whose prominence grew in the consecutive revisions, is the memory and heart of paganism

in the play, but it is in the other peasants, less archetypical and more supposedly “truly Irish,” that this syncretism most offended readers and theatergoers.

In his search for condensation and suggestion rather than exposition (made clear in the comparison between the early five-act long *The Countess Cathleen* and the late one-act *Purgatory*), Yeats frequently resorted to characters who were types rather than fully developed figures. We thus have the Rua men, who follow a *carpe diem* philosophy and hope for the best (reassuring themselves that there is no proof of the existence of the soul), being blasphemous, base, and corrupt; Mary Rua, the pious poor, who dies with her lips tinged with green from eating dandelions rather than selling her soul; Oona, whose Christianity conforms to the practical side of life; the Countess Cathleen, whose personality is quickly established in a parallel with the Virgin Mary; and aforementioned Aleel, the romantically lost pagan poet.

Aleel is lost in many ways: his soul cannot be bought because it is lost to another, namely his love, the Countess Cathleen. For the devil merchants who buy souls in the play have a very clear set of rules in their valuing system: souls are valuable relative to their purity. Being comparable to the Virgin Mary, the countess has the most valuable soul in the play: it is a gemstone, for she is pure, innocent, and good.

From the countess’s innocence also springs what is revealed as her salvation: acting from instinct, she is able to come to solutions a more learned Christian might be caught on. Giving away her best, she is able to save others, and sacrificing herself for those who may even be undeserving (most of the peasants are shown to be lecherous, murderous, and thieving), she is also comparable to Jesus Christ.

Yeats justifies her martyrdom in the face of what can be seen as the rod of Irish history: the Famine. In the second chapter, I will discuss many notions and ideations related to the word “famine,” but suffice to say that a widespread famine is an evil situation to find a whole country in, regardless of time and causes. Cataclysms have a very important characteristic for Yeats: they represent a “moment of truth,” when the conflicts and distinctions between the different persons in that era are heightened. In the context of the Famine in *The Countess Cathleen*, this “moment of truth” makes a lesser side to Irish society bloom: that of materialism. Yeats was a great critic of materialism, and it is no surprise that the most unqualifiedly evil peasants in the play (the Rua men) suffer from greed.

Avarice is also one of the sins that the Boy in *Purgatory* exhibits and can be said to have triggered his murder at the hands of the Old Man, his father. When the Boy tries to reach for the Old Man's bag of money, the Old Man awakens from his reverie and attacks the boy. Even if the murder was planned, as to relieve the soul of his mother, the Old Man is brought to action in response to the Boy's attempt at his purse.

In the absence of God, it is up to the Old Man, he thinks, to attempt at judgment and take over matters of salvation and damnation in *Purgatory*. The Old Man is the mouthpiece of the play, as well as a sort of anti-hero. After many of the mythological plays, and early ones such as *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats would turn away from his idea of the hero and focus on the type of anti-hero the Old Man represents. The Old Man is confused, deranged even, and the tension between his intentions for committing both parricide and filicide are justified within his twisted logic; the audience can never see him as an unqualified hero. As Yeats's last comment on the state of affairs in the Ireland of his time, *Purgatory* is much more direct, stripped of allegories, and bleak than any other play he ever did. The Old Man is closer to the audience in this play, which is one of Yeats's most naturalist pieces, but at the same time, it is clear that the Old Man's experience is to be taken very symbolically.

In the third chapter, I will analyze how evil is portrayed in *Purgatory*, with a focus on this change in style and theme that Yeats achieves with this play. Even if in a context of purgatory that is, in the end and if stripped of some of the heterodoxies, close to Catholic ideas, Yeats criticizes the moral and social evils in his society. In this chapter, I will distinguish between three possible views of evil in the play. The first would be a decontextualized view, which focuses on the crimes of homicide against a descendant and an ascendant. The second is the Old Man's view of evil and what he seeks to fight against. His is a clearly misguided but nonetheless heroic attempt to eradicate or appease the sins he is able to detect in the world around him. This view is different from Yeats's own, and should, Peter Ure has counseled, be distinguished from that. Closer to Yeats's would be the third view, that of the initiate, for whom knowledge of a greater truth (such as exposed in *A Vision*) would help make sense of the real conflicts and the options available.

In *Purgatory*, tradition, violence, eugenics, agency, and the interplay of the living and the world of the dead are central topics. Knowledge of *A Vision*, however

welcome, is nevertheless dispensable since the world of the play is slightly different from that exposed in Yeats's philosophy, which never accounts for the possibility of interference of human agencies. The play is successful in setting up its own scenario and the assumptions in the Old Man's worlds, and my analysis, despite recourse to *A Vision* for further clarification, will focus on the play as source of its own meanings.

In the final chapter, I will examine how the portrayal of evil has evolved from *The Countess Cathleen* to *Purgatory*, in a parallel with the evolution of Yeats's techniques as a playwright, from his early period to his mature period. Relevant to this discussion is Yeats's trend toward unity, condensed forms of expression, and a vision of evil that pervades and extends the religious vision to moral and societal evils.

## “Evil Wonders Live in This Old Wood”: *The Countess Cathleen* and Sin

*The Countess Cathleen* (1892) divides Yeats's artistic career in two ways: it was the earliest play he chose to include in his canon, thus marking the end of what could be seen as juvenilia; it was the first play performed on a professional stage in Ireland (*The Land of the Heart's Desire* had been staged in London only), being included on the bill for the very first presentation of the newly founded Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) on 8 May 1899. For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to distinguish these two events, as the play passed from the more private medium of a book to the largely public event of the theater. Even if Yeats always meant his plays to be performed, and frequently based his subsequent revisions on the performative experience, in the case of *The Countess Cathleen*, the performance has acquired a history of its own, and its reception and discussion is very much grounded on circumstances outside the text of the play, which will be discussed in time.

This distinction of the play in written medium, as an expression of the author's system of beliefs and practice, and the play as public event, confronted by an audience, is relevant to the analysis of Yeats's unique understanding of evil. In studying first what the imaginative context of the play portrays as good and evil and then confronting that with the later reception of the play, and the audience's (or at least its more vocal participants') own perception of good and evil, I intend to verify how Yeats's by then still forming system differs from a purely Christian view and even more so from Catholicism as practiced by the majority in his contemporary Ireland – even in a play that has a clear Catholic setting.

*The Countess Cathleen* recasts in drama form a legend that Yeats had already published in *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) as “The Countess Cathleen O'Shea.” David R. Clark makes this relation explicit:

*The Countess Cathleen* uses as its material the convergence of pagan and Christian Irish tradition. The original fable was included among traditional Irish stories about the devil in Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*. Demons bring plague and famine to Ireland then offer the oppressed peasants gold for their souls. The Countess



Cathleen O'Shea, who is so good she would be nobility in Heaven as in earth, in desperate pity redeems the other souls with the sale of her own. She dies broken-hearted, but Heaven cancels the bargain; her soul is saved and the demons disappear. (127)

Clark overlooks an important change that occurred as the story was made into a play: included among stories about the devil, the agents of evil in the story are much more active than in the play, where they are never said to have brought plague or famine. The focus of the play is much more on the figure of the countess, and the merchants/demons only serve as catalysts to an already pervasively evil situation – the scene is already set when they arrive.

Agency is much less clear in *The Countess Cathleen*; evil preexists the merchants in the play. First, there is the already mentioned natural evil in the event of the Famine, which is brought about before the arrival of the merchants. Shemus and TeigueRua see the Famine as rather a lapse of God's power than the action of the devil or some more palpable source of evil: "God and the mother of God" have forgotten them. In ascribing the source of evil to God, the Rua men are not exactly blasphemous, for this is a proposition from St. Paul that St. Augustine justifies: "God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to suffer no evil to exist" (*Enchiridion*, par. 27).<sup>4</sup> The Rua men's imprecations turn blasphemous as they condemn God for the evil that befalls them not in recognition of divine omnipotence but in a belief of its failure: God cannot see evil as it is committed against the Irish land, and is ignorant of its fate. The implication is that God is not omniscient (for He does not see) or that he is not all good (for he allows evil) These are the terms of what Leibniz called the "theodicy," which, as a query, much predated that philosopher and can be dated back to Epicurus. It is hinged on the main beliefs about the nature of God: that He is omniscient, that He is omnipotent, and that he is omnibenevolent (Larrimore xvii). The trilemma of evil, which opposes God's goodness and His omnipotence to the existence of evil, is evoked in *The Countess Cathleen* in Teigue's speech. Mark Larrimore explores the need to distinguish evils:

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<sup>4</sup> For Augustine, evil enhanced one's perception of good by comparison, and could bring further good from the acknowledgment of that difference by the shunning of evil in favor of good. Yeats shares this antinomial view.

[M]erited and unmerited suffering, between those which are sent by good or by bad agencies, between those which must be borne and those which must be struggled against. The basic distinction between real and merely apparent, and between remediable and irremediable evils are for all practical purposes more important to responding to evil than theoretic categories like “moral” and “natural” evil. (xvii)

Whereas Mary Rua remains pious in her acceptance of evil as part of God’s unknowable plan (for good may come out of it), the Rua men reject this view and are more questioning in the terms proposed by Larrimore.

The Rua men are agents not only of their damnation (through blasphemy among others) but also of that of others. The merchants use them as intermediaries to make bargains with the peasants. This device introduces a further distance between the demons and the sinners: they are not out buying souls, but rather sit tight and expect people to come to them. This distancing raises another question of the demons as agents of evil: just how necessary is their presence and actions for the committing of sin? In the bargains, we realize that the peasants had previous sins that would already condemn them to hell. The merchants say, “Come, deal, deal, deal. It is but for charity / We buy such souls at all; a thousand sins / Made them our Master’s long before we came” (743-45). The implication is that humans will sin regardless of the presence of agents of the devil such as the merchants. As John Rees Moore writes, “[T]hose who profit [in the play] by the misfortunes of others are evil, in fact they are devils, but they only act according to their natures (they have no temptation to be good)” (62). Seeking out damnation at the hands of the merchants is just a more flagrant way the peasants have for finding damnation.

The canonical version of the play introduces new characters in the figures of the peasant family, Shemus, Teigue and Mary Rua, the foster-mother Oona, the bard Aleel, and some other peasants whose souls the merchants seek to buy. This set up was only achieved more than 25 years after the play was first published; *The Countess Cathleen* went through four major revisions in 1895, 1901, 1912, and 1919. These revisions were substantial, and were motivated by a desire both to perfect the play as it was to be performed and to match Yeats’s intellectual and philosophical development. The successive revisions brought the play closer to Yeats’s idea of a theater: less populated, with recourse to types as condensed characterization that dispenses with longer show-and-tell, the presence of the figure of the artist/visionary,

who can see beyond what other more pedestrian characters can, or whose interpretation is closer to the mystical vision of the plays; the use of opposing forces, in this case the two lovers, whose different opinions are acted out in dialogue form and whose superiority is never really established; a spotlight on the feelings of the characters and the effects the external actions have on them rather than the actions themselves; a mystical vision dissociate from reality (Clark 131).

The use of types in *The Countess Cathleen* makes it possible to embody competing theologies in each of the characters, all of which were concerned with the problem of evil. ShemusRua's is one of *carpe diem*, even when he marginally considers the existence of an afterworld: "Not we! Not we! For souls – if there are souls – / But keep the flesh out of its merriment" (414-15) and

And if there is [a world to come],  
I'd rather trust myself into the hands  
That can pay money down than to the hands  
That have but shaken famine from the bag. (417-20).

Shemus's argument takes into account what he can perceive of good and evil: in his immediate situation, he can see evil (the Famine) issuing from God, and good (money and sustenance) issuing from the merchants as agents of the devil. For him, then, good comes from the devil and evil from God. Evil issuing from God is in fact supported by St. Paul, since "everything comes from God" (Corinthians 11:1). Shemus uses pure rationality to understand the problem at hand. Coming from Yeats, who distrusted reason<sup>5</sup> and even more so the power of oratory, Shemus's reasoning can be seen as faulty, just as the merchants' is. Yeats denounces abstract rationalization in Shemus's speech, which although logical is nonetheless shown as wrong, and can be compared to that of the serpent as a rhetorician in Eve's temptation in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*:

Queen of this Universe, do not believe  
Those rigid threats of Death; ye shall not Die:  
How should ye? By the Fruit? it give you Life  
To Knowledge: By the Threat'ner? [...]

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<sup>5</sup> Yeats's distrust of reason can be paralleled to St. Thomas Aquinas's, who in "Summa contra Gentiles" (I, c. xii) dismisses the entire enterprise of theodacists who tried to prove or disprove the existence of God by reason and understanding alone.

[...] or will God incense his ire  
 For such a petty Trespass, and not praise  
 Rather your dauntless virtue, whom the pain  
 Of Death denounc't, whatever Death may be,  
 Deterr'd not from achieving what might lead  
 To happier life, knowledge of Good and Evil;  
 Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil  
 Be real, why not known, since easier shunn'd?  
 God therefore cannot hurt ye, and be just;  
 Not just, not God; (684-87, 692-701)

Satan's rhetoric is perfect in that Eve does not know what death is, and not knowing it has no reason to fear it, just as the Rua men do not know of the afterlife or of the existence of the soul, and therefore do not fear losing it. Satan also questions the possibility of an all-good God issuing evil and hurt, something the Rua men also find fault with.

This parallel with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is not a stretch in terms of Yeats's thought: first, because despite Yeats's return to the original Celtic mythology imagery of the final battle scene, in the intermediate versions of *The Countess Cathleen* he had Miltonic horde of demons fight for the Countess's soul (Clark 142). For Yeats, Milton was part of the Christian tradition he was trying to evoke in the play, and according to *Autobiographies*, in an attempt to pray in fear at a séance, and failing to remember any decent prayer, Yeats recited the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*.

Mary Rua, conversely, typifies the pious poor. For her, death is a protection, and her premature death in the play is possibly, the source of her salvation: "Maybe He'd have us die because He knows, / When the ear is stopped and when the eye is stopped, / That every wicked sight is hid from the eye, / And all fool talk from the ear!" (53-56). It is as if corruption is inevitable once temptation presents itself, and protection comes from non-exposure to evil. Living humbly and shielding herself from the evil around her (and even inside her home), Mary Rua follows the precept that the meek will inherit the earth in her pity for the rich, in an aside that some critics have found out of tune with her overall behavior (Rosenthal 53), but which I think befits her in this sense:

God's pity on the rich!

Had we been through as many doors, and see  
 The dishes standing on polished wood  
 In the wax candlelight, we'd be as hard  
 And there's the needle's eye at the end of all (61-65)

Mary Rua refers to Matthew 19.23-24: "[. . .] I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," which makes the same point. According to her theology, she is privileged for being dispossessed, and her salvation even more guaranteed.

Aleel, in the figure of the imaginative poor, the dispossessed artist, is a pagan character, who believes in the old gods in Celtic mythology. His characterization, however, is complicated by what seems a late conversion, at the end of the play, and by the coincidence of some of his beliefs with Christian tenets. Reprimanded by the older woman for distracting the countess and offering her an "unchristened arm" to lean on, he retorts:

Old woman, old woman,  
 You robbed her of three minutes' peace of mind,  
 And though you live unto a hundred years,  
 And wash the feet of beggars and give alms,  
 And climb Cro-Patrick, you shall not be pardoned. (355-60)

Aleel sees Oona's interruption as a sin that cannot be atoned. The list of repentances is very Christian, but insufficient to cover the sin he thinks she has committed, even if it is a slight one.

It would seem that Mary Rua's criticism of the rich is directed not so much at the Countess Cathleen, to whom Mary Rua feels rather indebted ("For my old fathers served your fathers, Lady"), but rather to figures such as Oona, who, despite being portrayed as a caring nurse, is rather hard on the poor. Interrupted by Aleel, she scorns him for never having been baptized: "I care no more than if a pig had grunted" (363). The rudeness of her answer and his merit create a situation of sympathy for Aleel, who treats the countess much more humanely. Oona's Christianity is cold, and begs for reconciliation, expressing some resentment for the countess's liking of Aleel. Nor does she forgive the starving men who steal the green cabbages.

The superiority of the Countess Cathleen's theology is expressed in her reaction to the same incident. She acknowledges, showing both her scholarship and her intuitive sense of good:

A learned theologian has laid down  
That starving men may take what's necessary,  
And yet be sinless. (381-83)

And if it be a sin, while faith's unbroken  
God cannot help but pardon. There is no soul  
But it's unlike all others in the world,  
Nor one but lifts a strangeness to God's love  
Till that's grown infinite, and therefore none  
Whose loss were less than irremediable  
Although it were the wickedest in the world.  
[. . . . .]  
But there is a world to come. (385-91, 418)

This seems to refer to Thomas Aquinas, which the critics of the play may have missed. Aquinas concedes in Question 66 of the Second Part of the Second Part of his *Summa Theologica*, Article 7, that: "It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another's property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need." The famine situation described in *The Countess Cathleen*, wherein Mary Rua starves to death, certainly characterizes such extreme need. In forgiving the peasants in the canonical version, the countess acts as a Christian that recognizes that she has excess whereas there is a lack that compels these peasants to steal from her. A. S. Knowland sees in the countess's "passionate assertion of God's infinite capacity to pardon any act" if committed in unbroken faith a prefiguration of her own salvation despite the sin of selling her soul (13). Oona, Countess Cathleen's foster mother, is much sterner, and less of a Catholic, for condemning these men.

I will not go into detail on the different versions except in relation to the reception of the play, and whenever particular excised scenes are alluded to. The existence of many versions, be it in plays, poems, or prose, has led to the necessity, in Yeats studies, of the recourse not only to variorum editions of the published material but also to the use of manuscripts such as in the Cornell Yeats editions.

As it stands in the last revised edition, *The Countess Cathleen*, despite Yeats's disavowal, still centers on a moral question:

[M]y *Countess Cathleen* [. . .] was once a moral question, may a soul sacrifice itself for a good end? – but gradually philosophy is eliminated more and more until at last the only philosophy audible, if there is even that, is the mere expression of one character or another. (*Mem* 150)

Yeats's denial can be understood in the context of his effort to make his controversial philosophy "pass" and not call attention to itself. Yet, the genesis of the play was this interest in the sacrifice, and its implications are everywhere in the play.

The sacrifice the countess submits herself to makes her a heroine in Yeats's terms. As the protagonist, she is the center of a metaphysical struggle, which, regardless of its outcome, is to be considered good, since it implies transcendence and a will to defy and to change. In his comprehensive study of Yeats's drama, Leonard E. Nathan interprets the role of the hero for Yeats as that of a man who is "the center of cosmic tension" because in him a war between the spiritual and the natural orders is enacted. This war takes form in the hero's allegiance to the natural, in the form of his temporal and local reality, and his desire to transcend that reality in the form of access to the supernatural. For Nathan "the hero is, therefore, one of those who bear 'immortal passions in mortal hearts'" (13-14). An excess of passion (which can be understood in *The Countess Cathleen* as much more akin to the passion of Christ rather than the passion of lovers, as in the Cuchulain cycle) in a mortal heart ultimately leads to that heart's extinction as such, and Cathleen dies of a broken heart only to be reborn in the company of "Mary of the seven times wounded heart" (939).

Even if this description best fits heroes such as Cuchulain, patent in his use of masculine forms, the countess's dilemma is a truly heroic one. It is unrelated to Aleel's offer of love in a pagan world, for she never really considers that option, which, after all, would not represent the naturalistic alternative. Her dilemma is between her natural allegiance to her "temporal and local reality," that is, the starving peasants on her lands, and the supernatural reality of a God and a church that forbids her to use whatever means she can to save her people. Understanding the nature of her sacrifice, she stops being concerned with her salvation, for she recognizes her bonds with the people. She is thus similar to another figure dear to Yeats: the great adept. In a pamphlet written to the members of the Golden Dawn, he explains what he meant by it:

I have preferred to talk of greater things than freedom. In our day every idler, every trifler, every bungler, cries out for his freedom; but the busy, and weighty minded, and skilful handed, meditate more upon the bonds that they gladly accept, than upon the freedom that has never meant more in their eyes than right to choose the bonds that have made them faithful servants of the law. ("Is the R. R. and A. C. to remain a Magical Order?" qtd. in Harper, *Yeats's Golden Dawn* 267-68)

In this sense, choosing Aleel's path would imply a freedom that she never had and could never have. Her bonds were already set out for her, and her individuality obliterated. In the same pamphlet, Yeats says of the kind of suffering that the countess goes through before her decision to sell her soul: "The great adept may indeed have to hide much of his deepest life, lest he tell it to the careless and the indifferent, but he will sorrow and not rejoice over this silence, for he will always be seeking ways of giving the purest substance of his soul to fill the emptiness of other souls" (267). Both the countess and the great adept represent ideals for Yeats. In the giving away of the souls (and the countess gives her whole soul away), Yeats distinguishes between the soul of the adept (filled with purest substance, which can be used to fill up emptiness of others) and those other souls. This difference is clearer in *The Countess Cathleen* since the purity or the value of the soul is given in a quantitative way, corresponding to certain amounts of money. The value seems to increase inversely to the sinful nature of the owner: the more sinful, the less valuable.

We thus have two different levels of sin: one's sins throughout life being weighed up before this one sin of finally confiding one's soul to the devil. The sinful nature of the peasants' souls is assessed by means of an all-knowing book from which the demons read. It makes the account of one's life rather deterministic: all is inscribed there, the past, the most intimate thoughts, and possibly the future, in the sense that the judgment it passes is unlikely to change. The virtues all seem rather dull, in comparison with the sins: John Maher is thought safe by the angels because he is "a man of substance, will dull mind, and quiet senses and unventurous heart" (712-14). It can be argued that this is the devil's book and therefore the virtues are less interesting to them than the vices are. There is no indication, however, that this is not a universal book, and ought to be considered impartial.

In analyzing the young Woman's case, the merchants conclude that her soul will not be worth much just by reading that she is "[s]oft, handsome, and still young"



(730-31). Assuming that beauty alone is enough to lead to temptation and thus to sin, the merchants go against Augustine of Hippo in their understanding of evil, thus having a good thing (beauty) as cause of a bad one (sin). For Augustine,

Greed, for example, is not something wrong with gold; the fault is in a man who perversely loves gold and for its sake abandons justice, which ought to be put beyond comparison above gold. Lust is not something wrong with a beautiful and attractive body; the fault is a soul which perversely delights in sensual pleasures, to the neglect of that self-control by which we are made fit for spiritual realities far more beautiful, with a loveliness which cannot fade. (61)

For the merchants, one thing leads almost necessarily to the other, expressing their rather cynical take on the effects of temptation on man. In effect, the beautiful woman is indeed adulterous and commits the sin of lechery. The sins committed by the peasants include avarice (especially by the Rua men) and lechery (the Woman and her lover). The Middle-aged man is also sinful because he displays evil will in his plan to rob his neighbors.

Other aspects, however, seem to be taken into account in the valuing of the souls. Even if the play has it as a given that the countess is good and pure, possibly the purest (though it is more tell than show), her soul is disparately more valuable than all others; this distance seems to stem quite simply from her status as aristocracy (deterministically related to birth) rather than any more material proof of her good nature. Criticism of the play has noted this effect, as exposed by Moore:

The starving peasants should undoubtedly die of hunger rather than sell their souls, but their death would serve no purpose. In actuality, the famine is good for just one thing: it allows Cathleen to immortalize her soul. The souls of other people count as nothing beside hers. [. . .] They [common people] have no real idea of their souls because their souls do not really have much value. Cathleen knows the supreme value of hers, and were it not for the drama's sake, would never believe any amount of money could buy it.(62-63)

When Moore writes that the deaths of the peasants would serve no purpose, he is focusing on the dynamics of the play, rather than on the idea of individual salvation. Even so, Mary Rua's death has the purpose of showing there is an option available for

these starving peasants, and makes the contrast between her good choice and her husband's and son's much poorer one.

Nevertheless, even if Mary's decision may lead to her salvation, it is a whimper compared to the countess's bang of an end. Richard Taylor compares the two characters:

Cathleen and Mary have the quality of disinterested goodness in common and the parallelism is made abundantly clear in the final scene of act one which is played out in the theatrical presence of Mary's corpse. The actual buying of souls takes place before the bier of the one who preferred to starve rather than submit to that ultimate debasement. Cathleen's triumph over evil through conscious self-sacrifice is the active counterpart to Mary's passivity. In each instance the women elect their fate. With full knowledge of the implications they proceed to act against immediate self-interest and in pursuance of an ideal. (25)

For a similar outcome, the countess has fashioned herself into a heroine. This is a deliberate attempt at creating a myth of oneself, present in many of Yeats's works: "Cathleen, the first of Yeats's superwomen, is also the most Christian. But it is pretty clear that Yeats is much less interested in her Christianity than in her determination to be every inch a heroine" (Moore 63). What Moore calls the Countess Cathleen's "sublime self-confidence" can conversely be seen as an instance of Yeats's belief in the inevitability of certain outcomes, or his antinomies between fate and free will.

In *The Countess Cathleen*, as opposed to his Cuchulain plays, for instance, there is very little room for the countess to maneuver, and her destiny presents itself to her without her being able to ponder it. Moore has commented on a sort of Eastern fatalism in the play, which, as noted, is much consistent with Yeats's religious interests. Moore thus analyzes this inevitability of outcomes: "The action moves towards its preordained end, and the agents of that action, though faced with decisions that mean life or death to them (or perhaps for that very reason), act almost as involuntarily as animals exercising their conditioned reflexes" (62). The analogy with animals here is rather infelicitous because, differently from what can be affirmed of animals, the countess's impulses are moral ones and in no way related to survival – quite the opposite. Given what the play portrays as one of her supreme qualities, her selfless love, sacrificing herself for her people is the only possible outcome.

In the context of the play, her sacrifice is justified by her good motives, as “The Light of Lights / Looks always on the motive, not the deed” (941-42). Being saved by means of a *deus ex machina* angelic intervention, her intuitive choice of personal damnation reveals itself as her only salvation. Clark analyzes this double solution:

Cathleen is caught in an apparent quandary, forced to choose love and beauty, or patriotism, or God. But since her lover Aleel is also a poet of Irish legend, her renouncing him for her country is really a gesture of love and a defense of aesthetic values. Again, she is forced to choose between serving her particular people and serving her universal God. She chooses to serve her people. We learn, however, that to serve her people is to serve God. What would puzzle abstract thought and conventional morality, she knows through sympathetic intuition. (129)

The choice of love and beauty, as represented by Aleel, I have already discarded as an impossible option. The crux here is the same one presented to the hero, as discussed by Nathan: her particular people versus her universal God. The solution Yeats presents is a heterodox one, placing the salvation of others in the hands of this one woman.

This parallel with hagiography is one of the explanations for why Yeats, with his occult beliefs and Protestant background, would devote himself to writing a Catholic miracle play (as he himself subtitled it). Nathan notes that Yeats’s interest in the lives of saints, figures of orthodox faith, arise from the fact that “the lives of saints were seldom, except in pious legends for the instruction of the young, orthodox”(21). The play’s greatest heterodoxy was certainly Cathleen’s salvation despite her decision to sell her soul. This can be justified in light of Nathan’s remark on the unorthodox nature of hagiography, but it does not account for the heightened sense of heterodoxy brought about by the syncretism of Catholic faith and paganism shared by many of the characters and not only the bard Aleel.

The superstitious nature of the peasants and the introduction of Celtic mythology in the war against the angels was a point of contention for those who opposed the play. This mixing of paganism and Catholicism as displayed in the peasantry of the West greatly interested Yeats. James Pethica comments on this feature of Yeatsian thought, highlighting the “imaginative value” of folklore for the

author. Yeats had an anthropological interest in the relationship between pagan and Christian beliefs in the peasantry, and would later see the origin of those beliefs, as well as spiritism, as emanating from a same source in his introduction to Lady Gregory's own collection of folk tales, *Vision and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*. Yeats's implication was that "Catholicism merely formed a veneer over deep-rooted pre-Christian values among the country people" (Pethica 140). Just as the comment on the "veneer" of Christianity was bound to arouse clerical opposition, this same feature in *The Countess Cathleen* would be one of the many sore points for an Irish audience.

The performance of the play in 1899 made it much more open to criticism than it had ever been in book form. *The Countess Cathleen* was part of Yeats's efforts to create what he first understood as Celtic drama, in an effort to represent a different version, and according to the proponents of the ILT, the right one, of the Irish people:

We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us. (Gregory 8-9)

The manifesto already shows some of the problems Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn faced as they began their enterprise and precludes the possibility of achieving its very aims. The ILT stage was to be a reaction against drama in England, whose realism Yeats despised. The representation of the Irish as sentimental, effeminate, as the hopeless drunkard was held even by Matthew Arnold's indictment of the unruly Celt (Webb 507). In alluding to "the political questions that divide us," the manifesto touches on a very important point, which for many determined why the ILT was a doomed project: the main figures in the Theatre, Yeats, Lady Gregory and later J. M. Synge (Martyn and Moore left soon after, given many controversies) were all Irish Protestants, and seen as part of the (then decadent) Protestant Ascendancy. Despite being active nationalists of sorts, Yeats and Lady Gregory were hardly identifiable as the typical Irish: Catholic, nationalist, and republican. In confiding in the support of "all Irish people," the ILT founders purported to represent the essential Irishman or person on stage.

These considerations are crucial to understand the seemingly exaggerated reaction that *The Countess Cathleen* received even before it was staged and why

Yeats decided to place police officers in the theater for the opening night, and advertise the fact (Schuchard 25). The first ILT presentation was in fact an event of national importance given the high claims such as the ones seen in the manifesto and the public characteristic of the Theatre. As the “Biographical and Historical Appendix” of the *Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* puts it, “heterodoxy in books of comparatively small Irish circulation held no immediate danger to faith and fatherland, but the same ideas spoken from a public stage to a popular audience rendered them far more disturbing and disrupting” (CL2 673). This is definitely augmented by the ILT’s claims of representation and of nationalism.

The sources of controversy in the play are many, ranging from the theological to the political. Surprisingly, the main points for which it was attacked were not only related to its unorthodoxy, but for what was perceived as its un-Irishness. In “Souls for Gold!” (reprinted in CL2), Frank Hugh O’Donnell attacked the play in a letter to the *Freeman’s Journal* on 1 April 1899 and later in a pamphlet dropped in mailboxes all over Dublin. The version he used for his attack was the original 1892 version, which was being amended for publication in *Poems* (1899). Many other letters by Catholic patriots that followed similar arguments later followed these. Despite the opposition, the play opened to a wide public, and the occasional booing was silenced by applause, as reported by the Dublin theater-going figure Joseph Holloway (7). It can be said that the controversy benefited the ILT as long as it fostered discussion, although it inevitably brought to the open Yeats’s difficult acceptance as a national figure.

The analysis of “Souls for Gold!” is a relevant case study for what the popular resistance to *The Countess Cathleen* amount to, and what it saw as the play’s inherent vices. Not all of these were solidly based on the readings of the Bible, and were indeed refuted by Catholic supporters of the play. The arguments can be summarized as this:

1. The play was to be a Celtic drama, but the tradition portrayed was the bartering of Faith for Gold, something the Irish peasantry would never deal. The play did not represent the Irish accurately, painting a terrible picture of their piety.
2. Blasphemy. The characters of Shemus and Teigue Rua are blasphemous and in an excised scene kick the shrine of the Blessed Virgin to pieces. Their language is foul and they are blasphemous in the use of the Holy Name.

3. The countess's salvation despite her selling her soul, which may be seen as an inducement to "all good little Irish girls to go and do likewise". In this, O'Donnell sees "the saving creed of freedom of conduct combined with excellence of intention," which would excuse repentant and well-intentioned sinners (CL2 675).
4. The historic inaccuracy of the peasants depending on an aristocrat rather than on their chiefs and clansmen, on the monastic foundations and other Irish institutions that should provide relief.
5. The syncretism of Christian and pagan beliefs displayed by the peasants and in the figure of Kevin/Aleel, the Christian ideas and civilization being only the "thinnest veneer" on their belief system.

The first and second arguments have to do with the structure of the play, its choice of theme and characterization. It does not take into account that Shemus and Teigue Rua are portrayed as corrupt and definitely the antagonists, an example not to be followed. As we can see by the low prices fetched, the peasants who actually sell their souls are those who, like the Rua men, are already corrupt. The alternative exists for those who do not sell their souls, or those who die like Mary. The play does not condescend to those peasants who choose to sell their souls, bringing forth only the more or less morally corrupt. The fourth argument also fails to acknowledge the dramatic needs of a play: had circumstance not created the dire needs in the starving population, the dramatic crux would not be possible. If aid had come to these peasants, the merchants of souls would not have a good enough market to make their appearance. Only the third and fifth arguments bear on theological discussion.

Before O'Donnell published his indictment of the play, the problem of Cathleen's salvation had been brought to Yeats's attention by a concerned Edward Martyn, a pious Catholic who probably learnt from his religious adviser Father Cyril Ryan of the heterodoxy in the play's *deus ex machina* solution. Apart from being one of the founders of the ILT and a playwright by own rights, Martyn was the main financial supporter of the venture. Threatening to withdraw support, he had to be assured of the correctness of the play, which was achieved when Yeats consulted other Catholic authorities, who endorsed the play.

One such authority is the Reverend William Barry, who, in a letter dated 26 March 1899, writes admiringly of the play and furnishes Yeats with some of the most

substantial arguments he would hold against those that denounced the play as blasphemous and heretical:

Obviously, from the literal point of view Theologians, Catholic or other, would object that no one is free to sell his soul in order to buy bread even for the starving. But St. Paul says “I wished to be anathema for my brethren,” – which is another way of expressing what you have put in your story. (CL2 383)

The Reverend William Barry refers to the unavailability of the soul, which, as part of the complete being of man, is indissociable from it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* thus analyzes this unavailability:

In Sacred Scripture the term “soul” often refers to human *life* or the entire human *person*. But “soul” also refers to the innermost aspect of man, that which is of greatest value in him, that by which he is most especially in God’s image: “soul” signifies the *spiritual principle* in man. (par. 363)

Renouncing the soul – the spiritual principle in man – equals renouncing spirituality and thus God Himself. More importantly, the soul, which is the “‘seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material,’ can have its origin only in God” (par. 33). If the soul is immaterial, it cannot be sold for material goods, nor, having God as its origin, can it truly belong to man to dispose of it. As the Reverend William Barry indicated, selling one’s soul is not a theological option; even the intention of selling it configures a crime and perjury against God.

The quotation from St. Paul can be understood in the context of the play as an impulse for personal damnation if that is to lead to salvation of kin. Joseph Gignac in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* thus interprets this passage:

In the New Testament anathema no longer entails death, but the loss of goods or exclusion from the society of the faithful. St. Paul frequently uses this word in the latter sense. In the Epistle to the Romans (9:3) he says: “For I wished myself to be an anathema from Christ for my brethren, who are my kinsmen according to the flesh”, i.e. “I should wish to be separated and rejected of Christ, if by that means I would procure the salvation of my brethren.”

In selling her soul, the Countess Cathleen does not procure death (though, for dramatic reasons, she has to die soon so that the battle for her soul ensues), but gives

away her greatest good. She does not feel excluded from the society of the faithful, and as Yeats later commented: “The Countess sells her soul but is not transformed. If I were to think out that scene again to-day, she would, the moment her hand has signed, burst into loud laughter, mock at all she has held holy, horrify the peasants in the midst of their temptations” (*Au* 319). This transformation is much more in tune with Yeats’s preoccupations in 1934, when he wrote the essay *Dramatis Personae* (published 1935) in the aftermath of Lady Gregory’s death. It points out, however, to the fact that the selling of the soul, of becoming anathema, is not dramatized in the play.

Another theological aspect criticized by the Catholic opponents of the play relates to the loyalty the peasants have toward the countess, in another excised passage. The passage has the peasants who had stolen from the estate (only mentioned as the stealing of cabbages in the canonical version) sell their souls to pay back the goods. By selling their souls to pay back the stolen goods, the peasants reveal themselves more faithful to the countess than to their faith, and this aspect is strongly criticized. Despite having as setting of the play an ahistorical past, Yeats hints at feudalism. In the 1892 version, he had the play set in the sixteenth century but later removed this reference, as he perceived that the story had a recent origin and was not “indigenous Irish folklore,” and based on Barry’s contention that the play was like an *auto sacramentale* in the manner of Calderón, which, being symbolic, “has little to do with any definite place and time” (*IDM* 145). Nevertheless, establishing this distant past was supposed to have the effect of creating a reality in which aristocracy and peasantry interacted peacefully, a situation described by Alex Zwerdling:

The peasant and the aristocrat, on the other hand, create a bond of mutual dependence which eliminates the commercial middle classes entirely [. . .]. Once again this bond is best represented in *The Countess Kathleen* where the country people worship their great lady, and the great lady reciprocates by respecting and appreciating them enough to sacrifice her own life and property for their welfare. (78)

This uncomplicated and traditional relation of mutual appreciation is, according to Jerome Joseph Day, the antithesis of the historical situation between tenants and the Ascendancy landowners during the Famine of the 1840s, the memory of which, he argues, shapes much of the play’s reception, even to this date. In his introduction to



the volume *Hungry Words: Images of the Famine in the Irish Canon*, George Cusack discusses what goes beyond semantics in “famine”:

The word “Famine” presents a similar epistemic challenge. To mention “the Famine” in any context related to Ireland is to evoke an instantly recognizable concept, and yet the boundaries of that thing signified as “the Famine” are remarkably hard to locate. Is the Famine a historical period, like the Victorian Age, or a series of interrelated events, like the First World War? (2)

Yeats, ignoring such tensions and the already established use of the Famine by nationalist propaganda, was forced to eat his own “crazy salad” (*VP* 404).

Another fact of famine history Yeats failed to acknowledge was “souperism,” an exploitation of the peasantry supported and led by the Anglo-Irish caste Yeats identified with, and was certainly identifiable with the aristocrat Countess Cathleen. Souperism was brought about by evangelical Protestants who saw the Famine as a result of God’s judgment on a “backward and superstitious people.” This providentialist take on what was national catastrophe ascribed the Catholic majority the blame for their own disgrace and resulted, according to Christine Kinealy, “in the hunger and desperation of the people being exploited for the purposes of religious conversion” (8), hunger relief being conditioned to conversion. The irony of the inversion of the role of the Ascendancy further complicates Yeats’s use of the Famine.

Though the widespread famine brings the onset of the merchants’ activities, what tempts the peasants is the money rather than food. Money can of course be used to buy food, but considering how the crops had failed and the almost total absence of game in the land, one wonders how that money would in fact relieve hunger. Barbara Ann Sues focuses on what she identifies as Yeats’s greatest critique in *The Countess Cathleen*: materialism, especially the one identified with the budding Catholic bourgeois class in his contemporary Ireland. Zwerdling calls attention to the title given to the Devil:

It is no accident that Yeats pictures these devils quite clearly as merchants, bargainers, men of business. [. . .] It is difficult to miss the obvious barb in one of the speeches of the First Merchant: “We travel for the Master of all merchants,” in which the Devil becomes the God of the new class. (76)

Suess also points out Teigue's "propensity for capitalist interests" in finding that one third of his lines related to his "concern with his lack of money and desire to obtain it" (132). The uses he finds for the pile of gold are not buying food, but rather a coach (line 71). The Rua men, as noted before, are certainly the greatest source of evil in *The Countess Cathleen*, even more than the merchants are, since they are much more active in the recruitment of willing peasants. Furthermore, they are not outsiders like the merchants (in their exotic oriental dress), but represent "betrayal amongst one's own kind" (Suess 135). This change from the religious toward a more social evil, although present in this play, will be made more astringent in Yeats's later plays, and will be included in my discussion of *Purgatory*.

A categorization can be established in separating what evils were to be perceived in the play according to Yeats in the role of the author, and those actually perceived by his real audience. The discrepancy between these two views happens given Yeats's very particular understanding of good and evil.

In the context of *The Countess Cathleen*, and considering Yeats's extratextual comments on the play and its themes, evil is present in the figure of the merchants, agents of the devil and those who first propose selling souls as a way out of the Famine. They can be seen as evil personified, acting as the devil's emissaries, or what Bernard Stanley Oldsey in an otherwise misled article calls the "supernatural machinery" (74). The absence of the Fiend as a character parallels the absence of God, whose influence can also be seen in his emissaries, the angels in the end of the play. Yet these foreign exploiters get less attention than Shemus and Teigue Rua, whose motivations and interests are made clearer in the play given their longer exposure. Shemus and Teigue Rua are sinful before the merchants appear, but different from the other already sinful peasants portrayed in the play, they are active in the damnation of others, advertising the merchants' market of souls.

It is unclear from the play if the Famine is to be considered a natural evil, its origin lying in God's abandonment. That the Rua men express this view further highlights the possibility that this opinion is biased and a failure to see the bigger picture. The omens (monstrosities, nature-defying feats) related by the Rua men support only their view. Nevertheless, as Moore points out in *Masks of Love and Death*, the good that came out of the evil of the Famine may only be the countess's salvation, which, although truly miraculous in the context of the play, may be considered a rather feeble excuse for the suffering of so many. Yeats does not address

this question, given that his focus is on the countess rather than on the population in general.

These evils are opposed to what is considered good in the play: Mary's piety, in preferring death over selling her soul; Cathleen's sacrifice of herself for others, as opposed to the Rua men's selfish goldlust; her heroism and self-abandonment. Aleel's love, although on a lower plane than the countess's also protects him from selling his soul, and can be considered a form of self-abandonment.

The heroic effort is all but lost to some of Yeats's contemporary audience, whose focus is shifted to other forms of evil. The famine itself seems divested of religious implications as it is seen as result of neglect, and source of further exploitation of the starving Catholics. The bargaining of the souls in the play is then seen as metaphorical form of soupierism: the Catholic poor are forced to relinquish their faith in exchange for food offered by the evangelical Protestants. The parallel is an extrapolation in which conversion to Protestantism equates selling one's soul to the devil. The representation of this complicated issue onstage was not considered a good end to the self-entitled national theater of Ireland, and the representation of essentially sinful Irish peasants an attack on national pride. Furthermore, the intermingling of pagan and Christian belief in the play implied lassitude and lack of moral force, making the stage Irishman as barbarous as the English claimed he was. For the Catholic and nationalist audience, a play that set out to reinforce such representation of the Irish people was in itself evil, and did not serve the purpose of creating a national feeling. For an audience that valued nationalism, Catholicism as the religion of the majority, the virtues of the Irish, propaganda, and national character, *The Countess Cathleen* was doomed to fail in its unorthodox take on good and evil. Yeats's discontent at the disconnection between his ideals and that of his audience is expressed in the grim views of Irish society represented in *Purgatory*.

## “My Father and My Son on the Same Jack-Knife”: Crime and Sin in *Purgatory*

*Purgatory*, which was published posthumously in *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939), can be seen as the last poetic statement made by Yeats in his long career. Although *The Death of Cuchulain* was in fact the last play he wrote, in the arrangement he supervised for the publication of this last volume, *Purgatory* was placed last. Yeats's concern for the arrangement of his volumes of poetry, which he saw as organic units rather than mere collections of individual poems, has led to the long-standing discussion between the editors Warwick Gould and Richard J. Finneran (Gould 101). It may be argued that, thematically, a play dealing with the after-life should follow the play dealing with the death of the hero Yeats portrayed throughout his life, not only in the Cuchulain Cycle of plays but also in several poems. It can also be argued, more convincingly, that *Purgatory* represents a less allegorical statement about what Yeats saw as the state of affairs in his native Ireland and in contemporary society as a whole. The story of the Old Man, through a series of textual clues, can be historically linked to Yeats's present, as opposed to Cuchulain's mythical past. Even if Yeats, especially in the opening speech of the raving (also named) Old Man in *The Death of Cuchulain*, links this past, the end of that era, with his present, *Purgatory* does not need that extra step to represent his more pressing concerns with what he identified as a decaying age; though trapped in time, the Old Man is much closer to the audience than most characters in Yeats's plays. John Rees Moore elaborates on this distinction:

The difference between *Purgatory* and the other later plays is not a matter of theme or idea primarily—it has obvious similarities to *The Dreaming of the Bones* in its use of the ghost theme, and the Old Man's ideas have a good deal in common with those of Swift in *The Words upon the Window Pane*—but of structures and language. And however striking and integral its use of the supernatural is, the brutality and terror are specifically modern and Irish in their background and meaning. (*Masks* 316-17)

The comparison with *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919) and *Words upon the Window Pane* (1934) is an apt one. Apart from the use of the ghost theme, *Purgatory*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and *Words upon the Window Pane* discuss the relation between the world of the living and the world the dead – and the possibility of interaction between them.

The possibility of interference of the living in the world of the dead is mentioned nowhere in the philosophical writings of Yeats and occurs only in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, from whose lines I take the title for this thesis. In the play, the two lovers, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, are caught in a purgatorial cycle comparable to that enacted in *Purgatory*, and, on finding a Stranger (in fact a rebel hiding in the mountains), ask him to forgive them so as to break the cycle. He cannot bring himself, being a nationalist, to forgive them because, according to legend, their love caused the Normans to enter and conquer Ireland. They are thus condemned to never be united.

In *Words upon the Window Pane*, the interaction between living and dead happens in a disturbed séance. Despite the medium's and the other participants' desire for the séance to yield much more earthly fruit (advice from a dead husband, tips for races, etc.), the strong passions of the spirit of Jonathan Swift has been interrupting the process. Swift's spirit is "a character in horrible play" that the medium enacts in front of the terrified séance-goers. Although they are unaware of who the spirit is and the circumstances of his suffering, all present can feel his anguish. Like the Old Man's mother in *Purgatory*, Swift's ghost is caught in a web of repetition whose passion is so strong it erupts into the living world.

*Purgatory*, like most of his late plays, is frequently seen in relation to *A Vision*, which was first published in 1925 and suffered strong revisions before it was reprinted in 1937. It is also read as the transposition to the stage of many of the sometimes outrageous statements made in his political pamphlet *On the Boiler* (1938), but that reading is more typically undertaken by critics who want to expose Yeats's supposed Fascist sympathies and his interests in eugenics (see, for example, Harrison). On a letter commenting a discussion she had with Yeats about the play, Dorothy Wellesley shows that Yeats himself might not take the whole system at face value:

He had been talking rather wildly about the after life. Finally I asked him: "What do you believe happens to us immediately after death?" He replied: "After a person dies he does not realize that he is dead." I: "In

what state is he?" W.B.Y.: "in some half-conscious state." I said: "like the period between waking and sleeping?" W.B.Y.: "Yes." I: "How long does this state last?" W.B.Y.: "Perhaps some twenty years." "And after that," I asked, "what happens next?" He replied: "Again a period which is Purgatory. The length of that phase depends on the sins of the man when upon this earth." And then again I asked: "And after that?" I do not remember his actual words, but he spoke of the return of the soul to God. I said: "Well, it seems to me that you are hurrying us back to the great arms of the Roman Catholic Church." He was of course Irish Protestant. I was bold to ask him, but his only retort was his splendid laugh. (Vendler 195)

Helen Vendler, in *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays*, comments on the comic effect of the conversation, which for her is like a game rather than a serious theological conversation, and what she sees as Wellesley's "naïve characterization of Yeats as 'Irish Protestant.'" Considering that Wellesley had been a friend of Yeats throughout the later half of his life and certainly aware of his rather occultist persuasion, the comment does not seem naïve but rather part of the game in black-and-white. Teasing him on what was the development of years of occult studies, by implying that he had come full circle to the most fundamentally established religion in Ireland, the contrast with Yeats's Protestant origins seems intentional on her part. Fleeing the Protestant orthodoxy into winding occultist paths, Yeats has produced a system that conforms to an easily available option: Catholicism. Of course there is much more to his Purgatory than the Catholic Purgatory, with the many stages including *Meditation* (Dreaming Back, Return, Phantasmagoria), *Shiftings* before *Beatitude* and *Purification* that are allowed to occur, but that could easily been seen as a development or extension of available theology, similar to Dante's treatment of it in *Divina Commedia*.

The reading of the play, therefore, does not seem to depend on a deep understanding of the system in *A Vision*. It can certainly be glossed by it, but the play is self-explanatory in many ways. Despite being very compressed, in a style Henry Popkin identifies as characteristic of Yeats's development as a dramatist (77), the Old Man is allowed enough exposition to explain the general situation in terms that an audience unfamiliar with Yeats's beliefs about the afterlife can understand.

The Old Man is the leading force in *Purgatory*. Though he may seem crazy and rambling at times, asking for the company of books and such, the audience is not

supposed to be as quick in dismissing him as the Boy, his son, does. This power that is given the Old Man, as the one important mouthpiece in the play, makes for competing views on evil to be allowed in the play: what I consider the general view – what more or less informed readers would have on the play's events, the initiate view – a view informed by Yeats's system, and the Old Man's own view, which in the end turns out to be rather misguided.

This general view, which of course presupposes a suspension of disbelief in order to accept the purgatorial situation as at least an allegory, reveals two basic facets of evil. The first, in the metaphor of the crime, would be the double murders committed by the Old Man; he announces having killed his father at age sixteen, and kills his sixteen-year-old son on stage. More than a homicide, it is also a crime against descendant and ascendant. The special status of these crimes, together with regicide, genocide, fratricide, and others, is palpable in the existence of the very words that describe them; patricide and filicide being the stuff of tragedy, from *Oedipus Rex* to Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* (1904). Yeats was certainly interested in Oedipus's story, having translated Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, in 1928 and 1934, respectively, but his focus is much more on the effects of that crime and Oedipus's family relations than on the action itself. It has been said that this results from Yeats's own technique, and that "his passion for compressing, for concentrating materials, is evident even from his translations of two plays by Sophocles, *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which he tightens the already tight structure of Greek tragedy" (Popkin 77). This compression adds to the claustrophobic effect of the crime in *Oedipus*. In *Purgatory*, however similarly compressed, the Old Man is given space to ramble and theorize. This is an important distinction between these two characters' reaction to their crimes and relates to the Old Man's view on evil.

Before discussing the Old Man's view, it is important to contrast the treatment of the other crime he commits, that of filicide. Here, again, we find an echo of the same crime but in another play by Yeats, the aforementioned *On Baile's Strand*. In this play, Cuchulain, on a fit of rage and pressured by the pedestrian King Conchubar, to which he was then bound by a pledge of allegiance, unwittingly kills a young man who turns out to be his son to the fierce warrior-queen Aoife. Even if Cuchulain did not objectively know that the boy was his son, he perceived in him a similitude, a face that looked friendly and reminded him of her, or of himself. Had he trusted his instincts, he would not have fought the boy and killed him. His guilt, then, is for

submitting to the wills of others as well as killing his only known descendant. Inconsolable and uncontrollable, he fights the waves of the sea as if it were an army attacking him; as a result, he enters in a coma-like state. Cuchulain does not blame Conchubar any more than he blames Aoife for sending the boy to fight him, but internalizes all the guilt almost to his death. The parallels are many and, according to Popkin, part of Yeats's "dramatic multitude":

Yeats achieved complexity in yet another way by selecting myths that echo in our imaginations and in our memories. Each myth he used has its parallels in other literatures. Together they suggest a sort of eternal recurrence – a deliberate effect, since the idea of eternal recurrence is the cornerstone of Yeats' theory of history and since this idea is closely linked with Yeats' firm belief in the unity of all folklore. The death of Cuchulain's son at his father's hands is therefore all the more meaningful because Rustum has killed Sohrab, because Theseus, too, has decreed the death of the son a warrior-maiden bore him, because, with different results, Odysseus fought by the sea with his unacknowledged son. Brief as it is, *Purgatory* tempts the critic into making a game of parallel-counting, for here we have a doomed house, as in the *Oresteia*, and a man who has killed his father, and in *Oedipus Rex*. If the central event of the play, the old man's murder of his son, recalls Cuchulain and other heroes who thus ended their own lines, surely this, too, is part of Yeats' intention. (78)

I believe, however, that this last parallel, between Cuchulain and the Old Man, serves the purpose of contrast rather than of identification. Cuchulain's reaction to his crime is one of desperate realization, and he almost dies in consequence of this realization. The Old Man's, on the other hand, is one of hope. His is a premeditated crime, one that he is rather proud of, and which he carries out like a ritual, using the same knife to perpetrate both crimes and thus linking them. Donald Pearce sees irony in this recast version of filicide: "This is an ironic version, quite in Yeats' later manner, of Cuchulain's slaying of his son, with all the corresponding details – e.g. beggar for hero, jackknife for great sword blade, etc." (74n20). Even the weapon of murder is thus banalized, since the knife of the murder is "[t]hat knife that cuts my dinner now" (l. 99). This ironic parallel shows how this is very different stuff from what the heroic age of Ireland was made of.



The premeditation and the remorseless response to the killing of the son (as opposed to the killing of the father, which could have been a spur of the moment idea), makes this crime evil in the general view. In addition to that, we will also see that it is purposeless, as the father had no real motive for killing the son (unless one considers self-defense, in response to the Boy's rather feeble threats), except his own misguided view of evil.

The initiate view and the Old Man's view correspond in many ways but differ in the most important aspect: that which gives meaning to the crimes he commits. According to the Old Man, the original crimes were those that led to the destruction of the house and all that it represents: "But he killed the house; to kill a house / Where great men grew up, married, died, / I here declare a capital offence" (ll. 73-75). And the perpetrator of that crime, according to this passage, is he, the Old Man's father. Moore does not see the Old Man's mother as a perpetrator at all; according to him, she 'is not even cruel except involuntarily or inadvertently [sic]' (311). Although not so forgiving, it would also seem that the Old Man does not see his mother so much as an accomplice and leaves the legal terms for more theological ones. What she did was more of a sin than a crime, because lust drove her: "This night she is no better than her man / And does not mind he is half drunk, / She is mad about him" (ll. 133-35). Her love comes through the eyes as sensual passion and the binaries of sex and death, pleasure and remorse, and body and mind occupy his mind when he thinks about her sin. As Maeve Good contends, there is in Yeats a "revulsion from life, humanity and 'the crime of death and birth' (*CP* 310). They [the plays] are concerned with frustration, remorse and desolation seen in terms of the sexual act" (98). The Old Man expects nothing more than remorse at his mother sexual act and its consequences in terms of the crime in his birth, but is surprised to see her pleasure in the act.

The destruction of the house and the begetting of a polluted race are evils that both the Old Man and the initiates can see in this play. The imagery of the house and the tree as symbols for tradition can also be seen in "The Tower":

I pace upon the battlements and stare  
On the foundations of a house, or where  
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;  
And send imagination forth  
Under the day's declining beam, and call  
Images and memories

From ruin or from ancient trees,  
For I would ask a question of them all.

The link between the house and the tree brings the notion of the organic relation of soil and human construction, a long tradition that links the land to the landed.

The desecration of this tradition and passing on of pollution is a concern that Yeats expresses elsewhere and is part of Yeats-lore. This knowledge lends itself to political readings:

No one has suggested that they [Yeats's three last plays, *The Herne's Egg*, *Purgatory*, and *The Death of Cuchulain*] are in any sense a trilogy; yet they are closely similar in mood and attitude and have, at bottom, a common theme – a crying out against the desecration by vulgar hands of something held to be sacred, or at least, supremely noble. If, as I propose to do, one takes this “something” to be Ireland (in the special sense of the land of Yeats' desire) the three plays cease to look like burlesque pieces, or mere nonsense satire, and become, instead, savage indictments of modern Ireland. (Pearce 67)

I find this a very valid reading, but I would add to the idea of the Ireland “of the land of Yeats's desire” as a very particular portion of Ireland. It is the Ireland, mostly, of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a land of knowledge and books, and of figures such as Jonathan Swift and Henry Grattan. Although this is a highly aestheticized and mostly invented past, it has as it heirs the more palpable Protestant Ascendancy aristocratic families and finds embodiment in estates such as Coole House, over which presided Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats's patron and in many ways an example of this kind of learning and of the cordial relations between Protestants and Catholics, landowners and tenants. Zwerdling describes why Yeats found the ideal of the Great House so congenial:

The Great House, on the other hand, epitomizes the virtues of the aristocratic life, since it generally forms from a miniature but almost totally self-sufficient unit, a small community providing for its own necessities and uniting a small group of people into a mutually dependent, hierarchical organism. The house itself constantly brings to mind the previous generations of the family who own it. A walk through its rooms is a kind of voyage into the past, which is evoked by

every portrait and every book, by the furniture and the blackened  
fireplace, by the views of lawns and trees from the great windows. (89)

The Great House provided unity, order, and a sense of past that were inherent to its existence. Coole Park, as the Lissadel of his youth, provided him with the example of this kind of idealized organicity. His regret for the destruction of that house after Lady Gregory's death is expressed in "The New Faces," first published in 1922:

If you, that have grown old, were the first dead,  
Neither catalpa-tree nor scented lime  
Should hear my living feet, nor would I tread  
Where we wrought that shall break the teeth of Time.  
Let the new faces play the tricks they will  
In the old room; night can outbalance day,  
Our shadows rove the garden gravel still,  
The living seem more shadowy than they.

Though composed before the house fell into ruin, the poem expresses a similar discontentment with the following generation: the living that now inhabit the houses are less material than the ghostly shadows of those that inhabited it before. Differently from the Old Man in *Purgatory*, Yeats does not go to the "accursed site," which shows more detachment from the tragedy than the Old Man is capable of feigning. In "Meditations in Time of Civil War," Yeats represents the idealized Irish aristocracy in two symbols: the seashell and the fountain. Zwerdling relates these symbols to the different roles aristocracy assumed in Yeats throughout his life:

The fountain, with its eternal vitality, its perpetually self-renewing abundance, mirrors Yeats's earlier, optimistic roles for the class. But the sea-shell, though it is precious and beautiful, is empty and dead. It has only the shape and form of the life which it once contained. Its life, its force are now of the past, and the shell is nothing but an empty reminder of these things, a museum piece ejected by the stream of life and cut off from the source of vitality. (97)

The ruined house in *Purgatory* is like the empty shell not only because it survives as a ruin, but also because it is an emblem of the past, as is the dead tree. "To kill a house" is a capital offence whose apprehension is available for both the Old Man and the initiate. For Yeats it means the killing of a tradition, the end of the aristocracy by the agency of those who should be loyal to it, the end of an age of learning, of books and

a personal library, and a disruption of the social order, given that it is the gamekeeper who later has to teach the master of the house – the Old Man as a boy.

Although identifying with the evil that occurs with the destruction of the house, the initiate view cannot concur with the evil the Old Man commits in response to it. Even if Yeats, in *A Vision* and elsewhere, sees violence as an important impulse and paramount for the production of change, the Old Man's violence and his response still configure a crime and an evil. The Old Man, however, sees himself amply justified. His father is killed after he burns down the house and thus rather deserved it for all he did. The son is killed in order to stop what the Old Man sees as their polluted race, before he "struck a woman's fancy." He sees his own birth as monstrous because of the lack of correspondence between bride and groom: "he was not her kind" (l. 173). For the very much caste-oriented mind of the Old Man, the mother, heiress of a cultural if not economically powerful past, belongs to a greatly distant category from his father's, a stable groom who did not know his place. Moore sees him as "the product of sin, and the sin consisted in a mismating of bodies for which the Old Man holds his father responsible" (311). Once more, the critic is too condescending to the mother: she is responsible for her fate, and should have known better, as the Old Man concludes her own mother did, by never again talking to her. Peter Ure refers to the crime the Old Man's mother committed and the consequence it brought "upon themselves" as ground for the remorse her spirit suffers. The Old Man's description of the bridal night reveals the debasement of the mother's nature as he sees her drunk and lustful. Furthermore,

The woman cannot be freed from that aspect of her crime which is the equivalent to her self-degradation. For this [sexual] act, even after death, brings with it pleasure as well as remorse, as the old man suggests. The remorseful spirit must, in order to be free of it, repeat, explore, or dream through the crime which it committed during life; but in this case, the renewal of the act, because of the nature of the act, renews the self-degrading pleasure that accompanied it. Thus the very consequence from which release is sought – self-degradation – is entailed upon the mother's spirit each time she lives through her transgression. (Ure 107)

The mother cannot possibly free herself from this entanglement, as long as she (or the Old Man) considered the sexual union with the inferior stable groom an act of degradation.

The Old Man's ideas seem an exaggeration of Yeats's own, who did indeed believe in eugenics and who wrote, in the same volume *Last Poems and Two Plays*, of those "All out of shape from toe to top,/ Their unremembering hearts and heads / Base-born products of base beds" ("Under Ben Bulben" ll. 71-73). Yet, in *Purgatory*, the problem is more the mixing of the two bloods than the begetting of foul with foul. Although the Old Man tells the Boy that he has "the education that befits / A bastard that a pedlar got / Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch" (ll. 87-89), his crime is not the creation of a monster-son, but only the continuing of the lineage whose blood was cursed by the union of two unequals. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to assume that the Old Man's view perfectly coincides with Yeats's. In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Yeats's persona proclaims that

Fair and foul are near of kin,  
And fair needs foul,  
[ . . . . . ]  
But Love has pitched his mansion in  
The place of excrement  
For nothing can be sole or whole  
That has not been rent. (*CP* 294-95)

This belief of the complementary nature of fair and foul is present elsewhere, namely in the Swineherd's songs in the play *A Full Moon in March* (1935), and can be seen as an extension of Yeats's antinomies, and especially of good and evil.

It is thus that the more perceivable metaphor of evil of the play, crime, happens. Justified as he thinks he is by a situation he did not create, the Old Man looks to "end all consequence" with his acts. In this aspect, an understanding of Yeats's system and of *A Vision* can shed further light in the Old Man's actions, if not justify them.

According to Yeats, who believed in reincarnation, there is a period between lives. In her notes, Vendler thus schematizes the six states through which a soul can go through:

- 1) *Vision of the Blood Kindred*
- 2) *Meditation*

- a. Dreaming Back
  - b. Return
  - c. Phantasmagoria
- 3) *Shiftings*
  - 4) *Beatitude*
  - 5) *Purification*
  - 6) *Foreknowledge*. (267n8)

These states have to be understood as stages that not every soul reaches, and the time spent at each state, differently from Yeats's outright assertion, has varied durations. I am concerned only with the first two as they are the truly purgatorial states. *Vision of the Blood Kindred* is the last look on reality as the living perceived it. It is still full of the kinds of prejudices a partial understanding yields. *Meditation* is the core of Book III in *A Vision*. Dreaming back has to do with the corporeal, past situation of the soul, what Yeats calls the Passionate Body. It would be the bodily dimension. According to Yeats, "in the *Dreaming Back*, the *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that most moved it" (AVB226). Compare with the Old Man's speech:

OLD MAN. But there are some  
 That do not care what's gone, what's left,  
 The souls in Purgatory that come back  
 To habitations and familiar spots.  
 BOY. Your wits are out again.  
 OLD MAN.                                Re-live  
 Their transgressions, and that not once,  
 But many times; they know at last  
 The consequences of those transgressions  
 Whether upon others, or upon themselves;  
 Upon others, others may bring help  
 For when the consequence is at an end  
 The dream must end; upon themselves,  
 There is no help but in themselves  
 And in the mercy of God. (ll. 28-41)

The new aspect here is the idea of consequence. Vendler dismisses this idea as partly a dramatic expedient (199). Peter Ure also sees the possibility of intervention in both

*Purgatory* and *The Dreaming of the Bones* somewhat extrinsic to the general arrangement present in *A Vision*:

It seems to be in accord with Yeats's thought that the remorse of the dead may be lessened by some intervention on the part of those descendants of the dead man who have been affected by unforeseen consequences of his original crime. [. . .] But in other ways, it makes for incongruity by allowing us to glimpse beyond this play a play with a different structure, one which admits both a purgatory and a peripeteia. (96-97)

The possibility of the reversal caused by human interference goes against the idea of the extinction of passion, necessary in the later stages delineated in *A Vision*, but I feel that it is akin to the intervention needed from those in Phase 15, in order to achieve Unity of Being; it is an extrapolation of that idea to the realm of Purgatory. It also makes sense when one thinks of the aforementioned understanding of Yeats that the many beliefs were connected, and this kind of link between tortured souls who need the intervention of human (living human, that is) action is pervasive, having reached even our contemporary pop culture in Hollywood movies such as *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*. Yeats himself explains the plot and its connections to other cultures: "I think the dead suffer remorse and re-create their old lives just as I have described. There are medieval Japanese plays about it, and much in the folklore of all countries" (qtd in Moore, *Masks* 317). Although never a very accomplished scholar, Yeats is probably referring to the same play he describes in *A Vision* when explaining the state of Phantasmagoria:

I think of a girl in a Japanese play whose ghost tells a priest of a slight sin, if indeed it was a sin, which seems great because of her exaggerated conscience. She is surrounded by flames, and though the priest explains that if she but ceased to believe in those flames they would cease to exist, believe she must, and the play ends in an elaborate dance, the dance of her agony. (233)

The linking of personal responsibility and individual remorse is central to Yeats's understanding of this play. Here, as elsewhere, thus describing an effect on a play in Noh drama, or Japanese drama in general, Yeats searches for what he already believes in, in what he has already created. In the poem "The Man and the Echo," the poet

cannot let go of remorse and guilt, which may be an exaggeration similar to the Japanese girl:

I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right.  
[.....]  
Could my spoken words have checked  
That whereby a house lay wrecked?  
And all seems evil until I  
Sleepless would lie down and die.

Where the poem presents death as an end to guilt, in the world of *Purgatory* it may only be the beginning.

For a soul on its way to purgation, each reliving will lead to a greater detachment until the soul can reconcile with it. Thomas R. Whitaker explains the process in less esoteric terms: “In order to avoid the self-deceiving rhetoric of moral accusation, he must explore the fallen world in his own person and raise it, through purgatorial contemplation, to a Last Judgment” (156). In terms of *A Vision*, when a soul gets to the Return stage, it can understand the full implications and metaphorical meanings of its life; Phantasmagoria is akin to Dreaming Back and relates to the emotions. Yeats writes, “[I]f the life was evil, then the *Phantasmagoria* is evil, the criminal completes his crime.” This would relate to the reliving of the spent passions.

The play has a further complication: whose crime? The mother’s and the Old Man’s father, certainly, but what about the Old Man’s own? Critics do not agree on whether the Old Man is a living man observing the macabre theater of his own conception as his mother’s remorse erupts into life, or whether he is himself dead and caught in purgatorial cycle similar to the one he believes he sees his mother in. Ure, together with Moore, considers the Old Man a living person. Ure recognizes in the Old Man’s knowledge of purgatory a dramatic necessity:

His speech, therefore, [. . .] explains all that the spectator needs to know about the condition of the dead in the play. But it could not have been spoken by an entirely naturalistic character. If the old man really “knew” all that, he would not have acted the way he does, or at least would not have been surprised that his action was ultimately without effect in the releasing of his mother’s shade from its dream. (108)



To Ure, this knowledge is a “carelessness” that spoils an attempt at orthodox realism. This knowledge, however, is not so surprising if the Old Man himself is dead and caught on the purgatorial cycle without knowing it himself; he thinks she is a living person who is capable of watching his mother reenact the night of his conception and that it is she who is trapped in the cycle. Maeve Good is among those critics who believe the Old Man himself is caught in purgatory (134). I will explore both possibilities and their repercussions.

In the first configuration, the Old Man is a spectator of the macabre theater of his mother’s purgatory. He does not question why he is allowed to see it; it is justified in terms of the consequences it brought upon him. Yet, he wonders at the Boy not being able to see the mother, as the Old Man thinks he should, being also part of the consequence; the Boy only sees his grandfather. Peter Ure devises an explanation for the distinction, relating the boy’s evil nature to his grandfather’s own, which creates a link between the Boy and the “degenerate element in the family-story.” The boy’s inability to see the mother is explained in that “his evil nature cannot ‘dramatize’” the apparition (104). Despite the plausibility of this explanation, it seems to me that the Boy is unable to see the mother because he is not willing to listen to his father’s rambling at first.

The other possibility has the Old Man (and the Boy with him) trapped in their own purgatory, and two other options present themselves. On the one hand, there may be only one drama happening here: the Old Man obsessing over his mother’s past and his killing father and son. On the other hand, there might be two interlocked dramas, like Chinese boxes, the mother’s drama figuring inside the Old Man’s. The implication of the first is that it may all be of the Old Man’s own making, and his mother is possibly purged and no longer trapped in a purgatorial cycle. This possibility makes the Old Man even more vulnerable and unlikely to be freed from the cycle. In imagining his mother’s trapping, he is not considering his own situation with the kind of detachment Yeats saw necessary for the enlightenment and progression through the various steps. The other possibility is also harrowing because it implies that just as he cannot save his mother through his agency (as he certainly tried in life, before being trapped), no one can save him either. It is up to “themselves / And the mercy of God.”

The first possibility opens the question of whether those souls that were part of the evil happening are themselves dragged into the purgatorial cycles or if the images

are there just for the reenactment of one tortured soul. If the former, the crimes have much more far-reaching consequences, and it can be conjectured that the evil action creates ripples all through the system, both among the living and the dead. Moore argues that the Old Man cannot see the figure of his mother (her “purified image”) because the father has destroyed it. Always writing as if the Old Man and Boy were not trapped in the cycle, he claims:

Now man and boy have returned to the scene of the crime [the Old Man’s crime against his father? His father’s crime against the house? His mother and father’s crime against themselves?]. Perhaps the Old Man can force his son to see *his* vision of things. And in a way he succeeds, though when the boy *does* see, all he sees is the incomprehensible horror of “A dead, living murdered man!” (312)

I disagree that the horror is incomprehensible to the boy. Moore’s is a misquotation because of the exclamation mark, absent in Yeats’s text. The Boy sees clearly, and can identify what his reality is and what he sees: “My God! The window is lit up / And somebody stands there, although / The floorboards are all burnt away” (ll. 175-78). Even the statement on the status of the ghost he sees, in its beautifully oxymoronic structure, reveals a rather learned understanding of the situation, certainly beyond the Boy’s schooling, as the references point, alternatively, to human life and to death: “A dead (death), living (life), murdered (dead) man (living, not a ghost)”. Taken as the statement that it truly is, the Boy’s realization is rather a perspicacious one. What bothers him is the anachronism of the vision: “A body that was a bundle of old bones / Before I was born. Horrible! Horrible!” (ll. 187-88). David L. Vanderwerken correlates the Boy’s ability to see the scene only from the moment of his attempt at his father’s purse to the recapitulation of a past event; he has entertained the idea of killing his own father and in that manner incorporated his father’s “subjective imaginative reality” (264), something that he as the “complete representative of objective man at the end of an objective age” (261) would be unable to perceive. David R. Clark, too, perceives all the events under an effect of simultaneity:

It is almost as if, at the moment of the knife thrust, one might view all these actions happening together in a timeless instant: the conception of the child who would grow to be the old pedlar, the death of the mother in childbirth, the “killing” of the house, the murder of the

father, the conception of the pedlar's son, and the murder of that son by his father. (88)

Moore, in *Masks of Love and Death*, however, accepts the Old Man's statement on the possibility of intervention and analyzes why it is a doomed enterprise:

Once both his father and his son are dead, the Old Man hopes that the way has been cleared for a guiltless communion with his mother, but the Old Man has no right for a priestly office, and what he has done to his son turns out to be simple murder, not a proper sacrifice. [. . .] He tries to see the poor ruined tree as an image of his mother's liberated soul and explains to her how he has ended all the evil consequences of her original mistake. But he has failed to break the purgatorial cycle, as the returning hoofbeats remind him. (312)

Moore's analysis of this and other plays in his study does not take into account Yeats's system, and *A Vision* is directly quoted only twice in the length of the book. To a reader informed by the philosophy there contained, the idea of the "priestly office" seems rather out of place. It is justified, however, by what it represents: the Old Man has no agency in the resolution of his mother's purgatorial cycle because it is something her own soul has to come to term with – if she is indeed trapped in the cycle. Conversely, if she is not and this is solely the Old Man's purgatory, he cannot end it because it is a mistake, an error of judgment, that has done nothing but generate more evil. The crime he has committed cannot be justified and he cannot be spared of what he did.

Forgiveness seems unattainable in this bleak play. Maeve Good compares *Purgatory* to other works:

The impossibility of forgiveness lies at the centre of *Purgatory*. It seems to me that there are two themes operating together perhaps uneasily. One theme is Ireland and its house devastated by civil war and petty strife which has attacked both good and bad with indifference. The other is the theme of disgust, disgust at the human race and the paradoxical act of love which engenders it. [. . .] My argument is that in this play Yeats puts before us all that he can of his Vision of Evil. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" Yeats's disgust is tempered with mercy and renewal. For Crazy Jane love not only destroys but also redeems us. Except in so far as the Old Man's prayer

at the end implies the faintest possibility of release, Yeats offers no glimmer of light here. (133)

The Old Man's attempts at forgiveness, as feeble and misguided as they are, go against a supernatural force he cannot overpower. This is why I disagree with Ure in his indictment of the Old Man's exposition as carelessness of the author: I believe the Old Man is aware of his purgatorial situation, he knows he cannot reverse it; yet he tries. In his decision to take action, he becomes somewhat heroic.

A. S. Knowland sees the contradiction between what the Old Man knows and his attempt to act by killing his son. He thus justifies the Old Man's actions:

Because, like Caliban, although he has knowledge, he lacks understanding [. . .]. His condition, trapped in contradictory elements of his own nature, is at once dramatized as his brutality dissolves into a complex of emotions in which can be observed the unbalancing pressures of his mind, tenderness for his mother, and the sense of his own pathetic inability to cope with the situation. (234)

Being born of fair and foul, the Old Man is but half-degenerate, unlike the Boy. Knowland finds in him a second-rate Oedipus, whose energy of mind drives him to act. Similarly, Richard Taylor identifies a heroic strand in the Old Man, who fails in his attempt to save his mother but whose failure is heroic, even tragic in the classical sense of that word. The old man is remorseless and independent of common morality, resigned to follow the predestined pattern of his life (166).

These seem like an exaggeration of the Old Man's intentions. Zwerdling discusses the complications in the Old Man's characterization: "The civilization which is left looks back at this arson with wild regret but can not really understand what it has lost. It can only use the merchant's measure in an attempt to describe it (books 'by the ton'); and all it knows of the books themselves is that their bindings were costly" (99). Even though he displays the "tenderness" toward his mother's suffering, he is only capable of acting because her actions have brought consequence onto him. If he is himself trapped in a purgatorial cycle, ending all consequence means more than releasing his mother: it would release himself. This idea dismantles some of his self-righteous rhetoric and reveals that his actions may be more self-serving than he is willing to admit.

In fact, the Old Man was fashioned into this potential savior only in later versions of the play. Sandra F. Siegel comments on the movement from an

undisguised and self-knowing evil Old Man to what we encounter in the play's final version:

The complexity of the play's "theology" – by which I mean the way in which the relation between evil and knowledge is understood either by Yeats or by the Old Man – increased rather than decreased with successive revisions, particularly as it bears on the figure of the old Man. Yeats shaped and reshaped the Old Man, who in the scenario thinks of himself as evil, as the pollutant. In the final version [...] instead, he is presented as a man who thinks of himself as a savior.

(5)

Seen in relation to the idea of decreased knowledge of the Old Man, seeing and casting himself as a savior is an instance of self-delusion, an attempt at glorifying himself, more *hubris* than heroism.

The purgatorial cycle may not always be terrible like the Old Man's. One may be trapped in a cycle for pleasures and such more agreeable circumstances, bearing in mind that this Dreaming Back revives the "passionate moments." This means that even if the Old Man had indeed saved his mother, he would maybe still be trapped in such a drama because the crime is certainly one that involves passion – a passionate crime and a crime of passion. This, however, would not fit the general mood of the play, which, although an indictment of modern Ireland, does not condone the crime. There seemed little way out of the situation for Yeats and not much human agency could do but go on living and waiting.

Yet, there is another side to this coin. Whereas the play feels very pessimistic and it certainly is, one must bear in mind that in Yeats's system, before the coming of the new 2,000-year cycle, in which the more congenial to him Antithetic forces will once again dominate, our Primary, Christian cycle must go its downward slope. The general ugliness that represents that degradation is somehow to be welcomed if not borne with patience, as the new dispensation is nearing. From poems such as "The Second Coming," we cannot be sure of what this new dispensation will bring, but things must get very bad before the turning point of the gyre is reached. In this sense, Yeats might exult on a situation such as the one described in the play because it signals the nearing of a new cycle. This violence is precise such an expression, according to F. A. C. Wilson: "*Purgatory* is particularly concerned with the condition of humanity at a reversal of the gyres, and Yeats's conclusion is that as a cycle nears

its end, brutality, violence, and terror are to be expected” (149). When compared to the beginning of the Christian era, it was preceded by the fall of Rome and the violence of the barbaric hordes. The impossibility of order in this stage of history is graphically described in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”:

Now the days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery  
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

The horrors of the crimes perpetuated by the Black and Tans, the ensuing Civil War, and the escalating tension that led to WWII are terrible portents of the violence Yeats sees as a historical necessity.

In *Purgatory*, Yeats presents a somber take on what he sees as the decline of a race, of a nation, of an époque. Even if he shares some of the Old Man’s ideas on the killing of houses, on blood purity, and on the desecration of what was noble, it cannot be said that he exults in the crimes committed by the Old Man. Evil pervades the play, but there are different types of evil: some historical, some personal. Whitaker draws a parallel between Yeats’s system and Nietzsche’s “eternal recurrence”:

Yeats could almost say with Nietzsche: “I perform the great experiment. Who can bear the idea of Eternal Recurrence? He who cannot bear the sentence, ‘There is no redemption,’ ought to die out.” In not enduring that sentence, in seeking violence to annihilate history (and thus embodying Yeats’s own moments of rage against Irish degradation, rage “to end all things”) the old man succeeds only in perpetuating it through another crime. It is “action: / The struggle of the fly in marmalade.” (272)

In dismissing Yeats’s moments of rage, the critic does not comprehend his Vision of Evil, and passes judgment on the idea that all the evil, all the violence, is a step to a new age, and should be, in this case, indifferent to the larger arrangements of history.

## Conclusion

In drama, Yeats found one of the most conducive media to express his naturally dualistic way of perceiving reality and even metaphysics. Throughout his dramatic career, he explored the ways in which he could bring his vision to the stage – be it the stage of the Abbey, where he sought to popularize his cultural ideas, or on the type of private drawing room theater he would later devise. A. S. Knowland sees the theater as a natural depository of Yeats's efforts:

It should not be a matter for surprise that so much of Yeats's energy, both practical and creative, was expended on theatre, for the simple reason that his imagination was essentially dramatic. Just as in his lyrical poetry he was to find a way of embodying his conviction that conflict was at the root of life, so in his drama he was to develop techniques that enabled him to shape that vision itself into actable form. (1)

It is thus not a matter of surprise either that we can see in both plays I analyzed, the early *The Countess Cathleen* (1882) and the late *Purgatory* (1939), a focus on conflict and on the consequences of the resolution of conflicts. The two plays enact the antinomies of choice versus fate, of the natural versus the willed, of passivity versus activity, of duty versus personal freedom, of salvation versus damnation, of, finally, good versus evil. Despite being widely different plays, exploring greatly differing techniques, and displaying varied degrees of mastery of the theater as a medium, the representation of these conflicts can be seen as a constant in Yeats's plays. The movement that can be perceived is one of simplification, from the extended, overpopulated five acts of *The Countess Cathleen* to the one act, two (living) characters of *Purgatory*, at the same time that the plot itself is complicated: much of the action in *Purgatory* is to be seen as allegorical, however rooted in the almost naturalistic particulars. Similarly, where in *The Countess Cathleen* evil was seen from a religious and sometimes moral standpoint, in *Purgatory* it is pervasive and encompasses everything in the play, including the protagonist. What seem at stake are no longer the souls of a certain population under the Famine, but the whole future of a nation or even of a civilization.

In *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats is still struggling to write drama that can be performed and retain the “literary” side that he emphasized in *Beltaine* and *Samhaim*, the Irish Literary Theatre’s pamphlets. Yeats reacted against drama that did not focus on these intensified moments and on the inevitability of certain outcomes. In this first play, he was already trying to put into practice his beliefs on the nature of theater and the many revisions the play went through testify to the fact that this was not an easy task. In *The Countess Cathleen*, Yeats was experimenting more with the content as opposed to the form, but in *Purgatory*, the form seems to be completely in tune with the content – even if it is less stylized than the dance plays.

The dance plays were a result of Yeats’s distancing from popular theater, a move that was precipitated by the *Playboy of the Western World* riots. In reflecting on the play’s reception in “J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Times,” Yeats concluded that the kind of play Ireland most needed to see was precisely the plays it was not willing to accept. In retrospect, he compared the *Playboy* riots and the reception of *The Countess Cathleen* in 1899: both plays were rejected because they challenged the Irish people’s views of themselves.

Religion in *The Countess Cathleen* is not Catholicism as the audience was accustomed to practice. The mixture of paganism but also of philosophy was easy to be dismissed as heresy and this shock between what the audience expected and what it actually witnessed may have caused the uproar. Moreover, the play was set in a famine for which no blame is ascribed, either on the political level (British recklessness and laissez-faire) or on the metaphysical level (God’s wrath or the Devil’s doing). In fact, one of the characters suggests that God’s ignorance permitted the Famine to exist. Even if this suggestion comes from the mouth of one of the villains in the play, no other explanation is given.

The Rua men can easily be classified as villains because the play, as many other of Yeats’s plays, deals with types. Yeats employs types not because characters are uncomplicated but because the focus on his drama is never so much on character (or even plot) development but rather on moments of heightened emotion. Types allow Yeats to achieve the kind of compressed expression he seeks in his plays.

As types, the characters in *The Countess Cathleen* can also be grouped according to their religious/moral views. The Rua men are amoral and pragmatic, rationally concluding that God must be bad because He has brought about the Famine. Mary Rua is pious but passive, and despite being led to her death by her piety, she



remains steadfast in her belief of God. Oona is pious but unimaginative, the kind of practical piety Yeats criticizes in poems such as “To a Wealthy Man Who Promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if It Were Proved that the People Wanted Pictures.” It is a piety of empty rituals rather than one full of feeling. The countess’s decision, on the one hand, is precisely the kind of decision based on feeling rather than intellect that seems lacking in Oona. On the other hand, the countess can understand religion intellectually and quote from Thomas Aquinas in her justification of the hungry men’s right to steal. This kind of intellectual understanding, rather than one of repetition of received truths, is also a quality that sets the countess apart from other more pedestrian Christians in the play – and it is one of the qualities that make her a heroine in Yeatsian terms.

Her heroism and her goodness certainly add to her soul’s value. Hers is the most valuable soul in the play – it is valuable enough to buy back all the other souls and have a surplus with which to buy more food. An important measure of virtue is the soul’s value; in the market of souls, sin makes a soul less pricey. The demons’ logic is that someone very sinful is already likely to end up in hell. The range of sins found in the peasants includes lust, greed, adultery, and thieving.

These peasants’ sins are written in the demons’ book, which includes not only deeds but also thoughts, past and future. This deterministic stance is present in many other aspects of the play: there is certain fatalism everywhere in the plot development. It is a necessity that, despite all her attempts to save her people by selling her land and her goods, the countess will have to sacrifice much more than her material goods.

Differently from the heroine’s sacrifice in *The Countess Cathleen*, the sacrifice offered by the Old Man in *Purgatory* does not lead to salvation – and in the tightly bound world of the play might actually lock him in his own purgatorial cycle. In the article “Cuchulain, Christ, and the Queen of Love,” John R. Moore qualifies the different types of sacrifice:

It is only in his earlier plays like *The Countess Cathleen*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and *Deirdre* that sacrifice is “romantically” justified; in these it is a relatively painless act of deliberate choice, no matter how harrowing the dramatic circumstances may be. But as Yeats himself experienced disillusion, the disillusionment which had always been a literary attraction for him deepened, and sacrifice became more poignant, grimmer, and more shocking. (156)

Even if the Irish audiences of *The Countess Cathleen* were shocked by her choice, the shock of the killing of the Boy onstage is much greater – especially because it leads to nothing.

Despite lacking such clear agents of evil as in *The Countess Cathleen*, *Purgatory* is enclosed in evil. Earlier versions of the play, in fact, used the word “evil” to describe the setting, the Old Man, and the mother (Siegel 4). Even if the word itself was excluded from later versions, the situation described by the Old Man, the mismatched marriage that led to his birth and the destruction of the house, is seen by him as a “capital offense,” a crime that determines his mother’s damnation in an ever repeating dreaming back of those circumstances. His is a monstrous birth: he does not fit in the category of the young master of the house nor is he, like his son, merely “A bastard that a pedlar got / Upon a tinker’s daughter in a ditch” (89-90). The Boy’s origin is certainly base, according to the Old Man, but it does not make him the ambiguous figure the Old Man is.

Nevertheless, in this ambiguity many critics have seen traces of the kind of heroism most commonly associated to Cuchulain in Yeats’s plays. The Old Man’s search for appeasing of the sins is valuable in itself, but the crimes he is led to commit because of this resolve only highlight his lopsidedness. Unlike Cathleen, he is no saving martyr, and especially so because he seeks salvation in the annihilation of others rather than in self-sacrifice. Moore sees that in *Purgatory* heroism becomes impossible:

Two plays in particular show Yeats’ doubt that heroism is possible in Ireland at all – *The Herne’s Egg* and *Purgatory*. Written in the last years of Yeats’s life (they immediately preceded *The Death of Cuchulain*), they offer Yeats’ grimmest comments, though their modes greatly differ. *The Herne’s Egg* is a farcical parody of Yeats’s own poetic “tragedies”; *Purgatory* is a tragical parody of ritual sacrifice. (154)

As a parody of ritual sacrifice, the Old Man’s action cannot lead to his or his mother’s salvation.

The move from personal salvation or damnation, to the salvation or damnation of a whole culture, is based on conflict and on how the main characters in the play make their choices. The theme of responsibility is ever present in Yeats, and it is understood that although characters may not always be free to choose, their choices or

what is chosen for them enact moments of truth the audience is able to recognize and even sympathize with – or take the blame for.

More frequently than not, as with the Japanese girl in the Noh play Yeats alludes to, remorse is exaggerated and suffering self-created. Maeve Good discusses the “landscape of suffering” in relation to both *Purgatory* and *Words upon the Window Pane*:

This play and *Purgatory* introduce us to a mental landscape of suffering, a heightened state of intensity in which the central figure utters an apocalyptic vision of darkness and loss. [...] What is important here is a redefinition of good and evil. The spirit world or the landscapes which the spirit inhabits are self-chosen and self-created. (124-25)

In these later plays, the responsibility the characters have toward their own actions shift toward their reactions to these actions. The Old Man’s obsession about the night of his conception molds the kind of purgatory he finds himself in.

The Old Man’s obsession with his mother’s sin, her lust and her desire for the groom, further distances him as a character and as a mouthpiece in the play for Yeats and his ideas. Just as Yeats embraces evil as a necessity, he attributes to sin central importance in art. In the poem “Vacillation,” written in 1932, we have a dialogue between Platonic-Plotinian Soul and Yeatsian Heart:

*The Soul*. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.

*The Heart*. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?

*The Soul*. Isaiah’s coal, what more can man desire?

*The Heart*. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!

*The Soul*. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.

*The Heart*. What theme had Homer but original sin?

The countess, differently from Aleel, is no singer, and therefore cannot be struck dumb by the purifying fire; the countess is a saint, not a poet. Her world, as opposed to the Old Man’s of lust and rage, is one of abstention and sacrifice; the proximity with salvation is not something to be scared of. The Old Man, on the contrary, is no saint and in fact is pushed away from salvation by his inability to accept the mother’s sin.

Because of responsibility, agency becomes a central concern in both plays. In *The Countess Cathleen*, it is complicated due to the many revisions the play suffered.

In earlier versions, the evil in the land and the action of the merchant demons were supervised by the Devil himself:

In Act I, the First Merchant, having bought Shemus and Teig [sic], now sends them in their way with a clear directive about advertising gold for souls; at the end of the act, in three added lines, the action's cosmic significance is spelled out in terms of a diabolical ambition to destroy the world. (Sidnell & Chapman liv)

This, according to Michael Sidnell and Wayne Chapman, makes “the play's conflict a little more external and traditionally Christian, less personal and tragic.” However, even with the later changes, *The Countess Cathleen* retains much of this external conflict as the basis of the play. The famine, whether brought about by the devil (as in the original tale), or by God's indifference (as hinted at by Teigue), or merely to provide a way for the Countess to prove herself and be saved (the only result of the Famine, according to John Rees Moore), is a reality which none of the characters seem to be able to control. According to Thomas R. Whitaker, “[I]n raging against themselves, Yeats's subjective heroes and birds have been declaring and measuring a more than personal evil. They are, as Yeats said of Swift, victims of their own phase of history” (295). The evil of the land is external to the main characters and rather shapes their behavior (even if in confirmation of who they were) rather than causes any changes. The peasants were already divided in the demons' book: some were good, like Mary, and would never enter the bargain, or would shriek from it, some were bad, already accumulating a condemning list of sins.

Similarly, the countess's goodness is a given from the beginning of the play, from her entrance and her blessing of the house, her courtesy and her charity in giving away her purse – now empty for all she had already given. Mary Rua's steadfast refusal to sell her soul in the face of almost certain death is also shaped by the evil she witnesses, but has very little impact in bringing about any change. In *Purgatory*, however, the movement is from inside out: internalized evil (lust, greed) reflects in the world of the play. For the Old Man, his mother's lust for the greedy groom in the training stable originates her torment – and, by extension, his. Sandra F. Siegel, in her introduction to the Cornell *Purgatory*, making explicit the relation between evil and knowledge in the play, comments on the effects of evil on the soul of the characters:

When Yeats revised the scenario on the verso of its second page, introducing the word “transgressions,” he opened the possibilities that

became, in later versions, a means of accounting for the suffering of the mother as a result not merely of the evil she set in motion but also the transgressions she committed against herself, or her soul. (5)

In the analogy with Irish society, it is the evil in people's actions and beliefs that bring about and is translated to the evils this society experiences. Joseph Chadwick in his essay "Violence in Yeats Later Politics and Poetry" questions Yeats's use of violence: "That intense focus, whether trained on macroscopic apocalyptic moments or in microscopic irruptions of violence, tends to throw shadow even in the historical narrative of cyclicity through which Yeats tries to explain such moments' origins and ends" (888). Violence, expressed in the crimes in *Purgatory*, seems to become more than a historical necessity in the later plays.

Just how much of this inner evil is a matter of choice is a question that raises another conflict: that of free will versus fate. The Old Man's conception as the product of a mismatch determines much of his character; so much so that he himself believes this and says that his son got the education that befits a bastard. Determinism is expressed in birth, the Old Man's and the Boy's, and in the countess's aristocratic position. The duties the Countess Cathleen has in relation to the peasants are determined by her social position and precede even the duties she has to herself (self-preservation), and it is thus that she becomes heroic. In his study *Yeats and the Heroic Ideal*, Alex Zwerdling compares Yeats's ideal of a social savior with Nietzsche's *Übermensch*:

Both writers stress the hero's abandonment of the way of life and the common ideals of the world in which he lives. Both present the idea of a natural aristocracy among men, and both picture the ideal culture as one in which the noble personality is recognized and accepted as its unquestioned leader. The great evil, in the eyes of both men, is the spread of the democratic ideal. [. . .] It must have been the example of the German philosopher, and particularly of his "outrageous" idea of the existence of two codes of morality, a "master morality" for the heroic individual, and a "slave morality" for the rest of the world, which provided the final impetus for Yeats's abandonment of the Victorian ideal of the social savior. (21)

The world of *The Countess Cathleen*, set "in Ireland and in the old times," is the type of world where one such aristocrat can still be a social savior in the sense Yeats

meant. The existence of such “master morality” can be distinguished in her salvation, despite her sin. Selling her soul not only turns out not to be a sin (unlike the other peasants who without her intervention would go straight to hell) but the only option available to her if she was to act according to the ideal of a heroine. Contrastingly, the world of *Purgatory* is set when this kind of world, whose ruin is somehow announced in the mercantilist figures of not only the demon merchants but also in the aspiring middle-class mentality of Shemus and Teigue Rua, is really part of a long gone “old time.” In this world, a man such as the Old Man can only be a parody of the type of savior the countess embodies.

The question of the countess’s duty is closely related to another conflict: that between passivity and activity. Aleel offers the countess an escape from the actions she has to take, an escape in art and contemplation. This passive life, despite its certain allure, is rejected as the countess decides to actively take matters into her hands – even if such decision seems inevitable from the point of view of her fate. Passivity and activity are extremes in which the characters are balanced: Aleel is passive in his role as the artist as much as Mary Rua is passive in bearing hunger until death. The countess can be seen as passive in the beginning of the play, as she is looking for a place to be a recluse. But whereas Aleel can “balance personal freedom against the complexities of good and evil” (Sidnell&Champmanlii), Cathleen has to will herself into action. For Peter Ure, the decision to act the heroic step that determines all else in the play:

Already, when the Countess listens to Oona’s tales and songs, the possibility of a choice between dream and action, self-absorption and self-sacrifice, her own “good” and her own “evil”, is hinted at. The scheme of the play, which shows her final sacrifice as an act of uncomplicated exaltation, seems to suggest that once she has made that sacrifice of the self entailed upon her by taking action at all, all other sacrifices, even the surrender of her soul, unresistedly ensue. (24-25)

Passivity befits the artist as activity befits the hero, and it is in his will to act that we can see the Old Man as a somewhat heroic figure. His defeat is the apotheosis in terms Yeats described in *Wheels and Butterflies*, a collections of essays published in 1935: “I prefer that the defeated cause would be more vividly described than that which has the advertisement of victory. No battle has been finally won or lost” (98). The parallel with the heroine’s apotheosis in *The Countess Cathleen* is striking, but

the Old Man is no hero in the ordinary sense. Whitaker identifies a change in dramatic perspective in early and later Yeats: “the madness and death of the heroic are seen from the vantage-point of the unheroic and the utilitarian milieu which mirrors ourselves” (206). The proximity created by the naturalistic setting of *Purgatory* binds the heroic action to the ground of commonness. The Old Man cannot expiate the sins of others in the same way Cathleen does, and his situation reflects the kind of downward spiral Yeats identifies in his contemporary society.

This brings us to one of the aforementioned conflicts: that between salvation and damnation. The Countess is saved regardless of her sin whereas the Old Man is damned together with those he was trying to save. The many things that account for this difference can be seen in terms of Yeats’s deterministic system, in terms of the opposing ages, and in terms of his growing pessimism.

Yeats’s pessimism begs clarification: it identifies the degradation of values and escalating violence but not without some hope: the hope for the end of this era. In Yeats’s cyclical system, one era must necessarily follow the other, and cataclysms are not an effect of God’s wrath but merely a necessity of history. It is shocking to some (Yvor Winters was one to gasp at his exultation of the “rough beast” [10]) that Yeats would welcome the tide of violence and the spread of evil, but in the terms of his system, this kind of evil is just another facet to the total experience and one which needs to be transcended. Whitaker distinguishes perfection from completeness:

But there remains a crucial question about any path that leads towards “completeness” rather than “perfection.” Though a less Gnostic branch of alchemy (to which Blake is somewhat closer) conceives of the Great Work as a psychological *imitatio Christi*, Yeats clearly sought to reconcile Christ and Lucifer, the self-giving with the self-asserting.  
(50)

The search of one’s opposite is a matter of will, of willing oneself to be more complete through the search of the Mask. Whitaker highlights the characteristics that make Christ and Lucifer opposed in Yeats’s system, and those can be applied to the two protagonists in *The Countess Cathleen* and *Purgatory*: the countess is like Christ in that she gives away her own soul for the salvation of the peasants, and the Old Man is like Lucifer in that he questions the order of things (the eternal recurrence of his mother’s original sin) and takes matters into his hands, investing himself of power he

does not really have and through that assures his own damnation. In the end, his appeal to God is an acknowledgment of his failure.

The movement toward unity can also be perceived in terms of the metaphysics in both plays. Whereas in *The Countess Cathleen* Yeats was struggling to get the composite Catholic/pagan religion of the peasantry and of Aleel, in *Purgatory* all mystical inquiry seems unified: the Old Man explains the purgatorial situation with great authority and it fits the context of the play, making it believable. It seems that this kind of authority could hardly be reached before Yeats managed to unite all his beliefs in the system of *A Vision*, even if the play can be understood without reference to the volume.

In this thesis, I have proposed to analyze the representation of evil in two of Yeats's plays: *The Countess Cathleen* and *Purgatory*. The idea of evil is central to Yeats and is part of one of his most disputed terms: the Vision of Evil. Evil, in this sense, is seen as the complementary opposite of Good, one that must be faced in order to achieve a complete understanding necessary for transcendence. This evil is, then, the other side of the coin of good, and thus welcomed. There are, however, other understandings of evil in Yeats's works: that which hinders the achievement of Unity of Being, for instance. In this sense, evil can be seen as an obstacle to be conquered and therefore a chance for a soul to evolve. We find this kind of evil in *The Countess Cathleen*: the Famine is an evil that brings out the best in her and leads her to her final sacrifice, one that will ultimately assure her place in heaven. As a drama focused on the heroine, this solution works for the play, but is ultimately questioned by critics such as Moore. Another type of evil is the crimes we see in *Purgatory*. Despite being justified in terms of the Old Man's attempt to "end all consequence" of his mother's original sin, they are nonetheless evil and bring out no good: the Old Man cannot stop her mother's remorse. Similarly, there is condemnation of the mother's sin, and the effect is overwhelming: it leads to the end of a house, to the end of a line, to the end of a time, to the end of a civilization. As the Old Man puts it, it is a capital offence.

This research could be expanded with the study of other plays such as *The Land of the Heart's Desire* (1894), in which the supernatural presence of fairies is opposed to comforts of Catholicism; *On Baile's Strand* (1904), which presents the crime of filicide, but with completely different results; *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), which also explores the possibility of human interference in the forgiveness of past sins; *The Words upon the Window Pane* (1934), in which the spirit of Jonathan



Swift is channeled by a medium and enacts his purgatorial theater; and *The Death of Cuchulain*, in which the Old Man's raving speech describes the evils of the present age, as opposed to the mythical past of Cuchulain.

A study of evil in *A Vision*, in both the 1925 and 1937 versions, would also enrich the discussion of evil in Yeats and could yield a full-size study in itself. Many of the tenets in *A Vision* do not find their way into the plays, or the poems, but live as a background from which Yeats uses many of his ideas. The distinction between the different types of evil in *A Vision* would lead to a better understanding of evil in Yeats as a whole.

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