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by W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge

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For centuries Ireland has been a land of dispute, not just among the outside world but also within itself. The Irish have fought against their oppressors and amongst themselves, in the name of religion. The country is in turmoil and has no one identity of its own. W.B. Yeats, with the help of J.M. Synge, took it upon himself to provide that unifying factor, a national figure behind whom the Irish could rally. Through their literature, J.M Synge and W.B. Yeats created a mythical icon, the Irish Peasant, to provide the necessary catalyst for the unification of the people of Ireland in their quest to overthrow the British. Yeats and Synge go back to the very beginning of Irish history, to the people believed to be the first settlers. Richard Fallis writes in *The Irish Renaissance* that:

...The real history of Ireland begins with the Celts who arrived perhaps around 200 B.C... with their superior weapons, they soon ruled Ireland, and they established a pagan civilization which lasted for a thousand years and is still a fundamental part of the Irish experience. (17)

The Irish had always been a colonized people; the fact that the country is an island made it more vulnerable to invasion, first by the Celts and by the British. Irish
identity began with the Celts but as the centuries progressed that identity was slowly suppressed by conquerors until the British came to power and attempted to squash all remnants of an Irish identity. The British believed the Irish pagans were savages unable to rule themselves, and they set out to civilize the island and use the populace for its benefit. Declan Kiberd reports in *Inventing Ireland*:

...Colonialism took various forms; political rule from London through the medium of Dublin castle...an accompanying psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish, linked to the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture. (6)

The British pushed too far in their suppression of the Irish and this would be their downfall.

The British were proud of their colonial past and their previous successes in suppressing any nationalism of the conquered nations and they were caught off guard by the extremely passionate nature of the Irish. All attempts by the British to suppress the Irish only led to more violence and discontent. Richard Fallis believes the potato famine of the 1840’s finally brought the peasants’ anger to a head:

The 1840’s were hungry years in Britain, too, and the British Prime Minister, Peel, did not dare stop the export of needed grain from Ireland...hungry peasants had to watch as the grain was taken from their land to the seaport...to be sold for profit overseas. (15)

Exporting food from Ireland backfired; hungry and disenfranchised, the Irish were starting to gather against the British.
But, the Irish were divided on how to oust the British government, and their numbers were dwindling because most of the population was fleeing Ireland for wealthier countries overseas. Many writers and intellectuals like Yeats, Synge and Wilde, who would soon unite the country, also fled to nations with more intellectual cultures. The French were rebelling against their government and the English were unhappy with the horrible working conditions brought on by the Industrial Revolution; soon Paris and London became the epicenters of intellectualism. Two of Ireland’s greatest supporters, Yeats in London and Synge in Paris, would soon meet and change Irish history.

Yeats still maintained contact with Ireland while he was in London and he attached himself to a group of intellectuals nostalgic for pre-industrial society. James Frazier had published *The Golden Bough* and it was wildly popular among the intellectuals overseas, creating a surge of interest in the primitive peoples of various countries. Sir James Frazier had written *The Golden Bough*, an in-depth anthropological text linking “primitive” man to modern man. Dr. Carpentier writes:

> The slow triumph of Darwinian evolutionism had made a connection apparent between “primitive” and “civilized” humanity where none had been thought to exist, validating the study of primitive peoples in the new science of anthropology. [Darwin *Descent of Man* – 1871] (2)

Primitivism is the use of “primitive man” to create an ideal version of the past. The interest in the past began in Africa. The primitive tribes discovered in Africa by
Archeologists became the basis or example with which the European cultures began their comparisons. With Darwin and Frazer as the patriarchs of the Primitive movement the endless comparisons and search for the original European began. The Industrial Revolution had launched the search for a simple, pure life, where man was in control of his destiny not just a cog in the wheel of the factory. As the Nineteenth-Century drew to a close, rural communities were disintegrating as men fled to the cities for work, but this work was demoralizing and unfulfilling. Intellectuals in Europe were struggling to find an identity for their country and they latched on to the primitive to save the souls of their countries.

Ironically, the evolutionists whom Yeats “detested” for depriving him “of the simple-minded religion of [his] childhood” opened to his generation a whole new world of religious meaning more suited to their needs than Christianity: the world of primitive folktale, myth, and ritual.

(Carpentier2)

Yeats and Synge are examples of writers influenced by the Primitivist movement. They reshaped Irish history to construct an ideal Irish future. Marianne Torgovnick states:

Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces-libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. (8)
The statement, "Primitives are free," is key for Synge and Yeats. With so much imperialism in the world, the freedom represented by the primitive was appealing to the writers of this period. Torgovnick:

...The creation of specific versions of the primitive often depends on and is conditioned by a sense of disgust or frustration with Western values. The primitive becomes a convenient locale for the exploration of Western dullness and degeneracy, and of ways to transcend it, and thus functions as a symbolic entity. (153)

Synge and Yeats are responding to the degeneracy of the Industrial Revolution and the helplessness felt by the starving Irish people.

Yeats and Synge construct a symbolic Irish peasant to unite the Irish people and overthrow the British. Yeats is also responding to the dehumanization of the Industrial Revolution; the suppression of individuality implied by the use of machines and man's growing distance nature. Torgovnick writes:

The primitive's magical ability to dissolve differences depends on an illusion of time and sense in which the primitive is both eternally past and present. (185)

Yeats does just this; he uses the folktales to represent the past and incorporates Synge's analysis of the Aran Islands to represent the connection between the past and present. Primitive life is a "precapitalist utopia" (Torgovnick 9). Synge and Yeats are trying to create an Irish utopia to unite the country and they do it through their plays and collections of Irish peasant folklore. Combined with the nationalistic fervor from France
and this anthropological focus in literary circles, the primitive image of Ireland would
soon be used to unite and conquer British colonialism. By documenting the lives of the
peasants and their folklore, Yeats and Synge use this method to build a Celtic Mythology
that would unite the population against the British.

The Industrial Revolution had lost its allure at the time Yeats was in England and
his writings are often a reflection of the disposssession he saw. Mary Helen Thuente notes
in *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore*:

Yeats often wrote of his childhood repulsion for the nineteenth-century
materialistic world of progress, realism, intellect and science, for all of
which he considered England to be the prototype. The far away settings of
his early work illustrate his need for another world removed from the
actual world he despised. (5)

This nostalgia, for a simpler, united Ireland, would drive Yeats back to his childhood,
where he would find the inspiration for the Irish Revival. Yeats longed for the land of his
youth, Sligo, where he vacationed as a child with his family and listened to stories of
myth and folklore from his servants.

Yeats drew his influence from the works of Standish O’Grady and John O’Leary,
the latter whom he met at a club in Dublin when he was only twenty years old. Richard
Fallis believes that O’Leary’s influence on Yeats was huge:

As a medical student in Dublin, he [John O’Leary] had read the poems and
essays of Thomas Davis, a nationalist writer of the 1840’s. These had
changed his life, and soon he had turned to journalism and revolution. In
1865, as the editor of the revolutionary newspaper, *The Irish People*, he had been arrested and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. After five years he had been released and exiled, choosing to go to Paris, then the center of all kinds of European revolutionary activity. (3)

O’Leary was something of a hero to Yeats and became his protégé to be groomed as a future writer of the literary revival.

[O’Leary] had an excellent collection of Irish books, and he urged these on Yeats... Yeats soon became one of O’Leary’s enthusiastic disciples, and it is not really an exaggeration to say that the Irish Renaissance came out of that friendship... Yeats became the first great figure in modern Irish Literature and the chief organizer of a new and powerful literary movement. (Fallis4)

Yeats attached himself to O’Leary’s causes and began to prepare for a life devoted to the celebration of Irish literature. Yeats took O’Leary’s and James Frazier’s views one step farther; he decided to create a mythology surrounding Ireland and its people that the Irish people could rally behind and be proud of. Yeats went back to the beginning, to the first people of Ireland, and moved forward:

Like AE, Yeats believed the Celts had a special access to supernatural wisdom because they remained passionate and instinctive; in addition, they lived and thought in a symbolically charged world beyond the ken of urban civilization, a world that Yeats, with his elaborate symbolism, also inhabited. (Fallis61)
Yeats believed that if he started with the primitive Irishman and created a distinct world and heroic population of that world, the people would rally behind the image and overthrow the British and for this project he enlisted the help of J.M. Synge. Deborah Fleming notes:

One of the artistic aims of the writers of the Irish Revival, including W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge, was to reacquaint the Irish people with their lost culture, to restore to Ireland its sense of national unity through literature; that is, through themes borrowed from Irish folklore and ancient heroic stories. (8)

J.M. Synge was not as driven as Yeats. Synge started out as a critic of French literature and not a very successful one. He was living in France when he met Yeats and joined his new friend in the creation of an Irish literature. Synge was also influenced by the publication of The Golden Bough by Sir James Frazer. Tribal (primitive) communities interested Synge as an extension of Yeats' vision.

Synge chose the Aran Islands because it was the closest thing to "primitive" Ireland had left, an Ireland untouched by the British monarchy and still clinging to a pagan past. When a country has been colonized by an outsider, maintaining traditions and cultural identity becomes harder and harder as time goes on.

Yeats began his quest by using stories that were circulating among the peasantry that had been documented by Lady Gregory. The Celtic Twilight, published in 1893, was Yeats's first attempt at creating a mythology surrounding the Irish peasant. Yeats went further adding flourishes to describe the storytellers, inserting himself into the narrative
and highlighting the faeries, banshees and supernatural creatures in those stories. Yeats incorporates his memories of Sligo with the legends about the storytellers, thus blurring the lines between fact and faction. Jan Plug stresses the importance of The Celtic Twilight and Yeats's motives:

The Celtic Twilight is of particular importance for a consideration of Yeats's understanding of the Irish nation and the possibility of a distinct Irish Literature not least because in that work he undertakes a description of the Irish, what he considers to be the Irish national character, in terms that are not strictly historical. (138)

How could a country with no distinct history and a language falling out of favor, attempt to overthrow the British? In Literature and the Changing Ireland Declan Kiberd states:

Yeats's poetic vision of an ideal Irish nation — one founded on the aristocratic, heroic and peasant ideals intrinsic in his poet's creed. This he, in his turn, developed from Irish models; from traditional myth, imagined values inherent in sections of the Irish people, and the pride he drew from his own Irishness. All of the efforts of Yeats's celebration of the Irish nationality were directed toward the spiritual ennoblement of Ireland, and to make the Irish people aware and proud of their nobility. (Connelly103)

In the preface of The Celtic Twilight, Yeats declares his purpose for writing the book:

I have desired, like any artist, to create a little world out of the beautiful, pleasant, and significant things of this marred and clumsy world, and to
show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people
who would look where I bid them. (32)

Yeats admits to creating the world he describes in the book, the ideal Ireland and the
honorable peasant. Yeats adds that every Irishman has been a part of this mythic world
and contributed to it:

The things a man has heard and seen are threads of life, and if he pulled
them carefully from the confused distaff of memory, any who will can
weave them into whatever garments of belief please them best. (32)

Yeats includes all of the Irish in his world, asking them to think through their past and
remember the mythic events they have experienced. By being Irish, all of the Irish people
have a mythology.

Yeats begins The Celtic Twilight with a description of Paddy Flynn, a local
peasant who discloses the tales included in Twilight:

Paddy Flynn, a little bright-eyed old man, who lived in a leaky and one-
roomed cabin in the village of Ballisodare, which is, he was wont to say,
‘the most gentle’—whereby he meant faery—‘place in the whole of County
Sligo. (34)

By noting the ‘leaky, one-roomed cabin’ Yeats sets the tone of the book and the character
of his narrator, a narrator engulfed in the mythology of Ireland, who may not be
monetarily wealthy but wealthy in the ways of Ireland.

The first time I saw him he was bent above the fire with a can of
mushrooms at his side...I thought I could see in his eyes (swift as the eyes
of a rabbit, when they peered out of their wrinkled holes) a melancholy which was well-nigh a portion of their joy; the visionary melancholy of purely instinctive natures and of all animals. (34)

Yeats has chosen to give Paddy Flynn animalistic qualities, thus giving him a closer association with nature and implying that he is more in tune with the world around him.

Paddy is a simple man, like an animal, happiest when out in the world; as observed by his poorly maintained home. Yeats describes Paddy's closeness to God thereby implying that Paddy is civilized, not a complete pagan savage.

In the next section of The Celtic Twilight, Yeats comments on a woman who does not believe in ghosts and faeries and presents the absurdity of her argument:

One woman told me last Christmas that she did not believe either in Hell or in ghosts. Hell was an invention got up by the priest to keep people good; and ghosts would not be permitted, she held, to go 'trapsin' about the earth at their own free will; 'but there are faeries and little leprechauns, and water-horses, and fallen angels.' (36)

Yeats includes this passage to portray the peasant as mystical and are more likely to believe in earthly creatures than a heavenly god. Yeats notes that police of the peasant countryside also believe in mystical creatures and are, in fact, an expert:

The local constable was applied to, and he at once instituted a house-to-house search, and at the same time advised people to burn all the *bucalam* (ragweed) on the field she vanished from, because *bucalam* was sacred to the faeries. (36)
Yeats has given validity to this tale of a girl kidnapped by faeries by including the local policeman. If the police believe in faeries then they must exist.

One hears in the old poems of men taken away to help the gods in a battle, and Cuchulain won the goddess Fand for a while, by helping her married sister and her sister’s husband to overthrow another nation of the Land of Promise. I have been told, too, that the people of Faery cannot even play at Hurley unless they have on either side some mortal... Without mortal help they are shadowy and cannot even strike the balls. (38)

Yeats chose the Irish game of Hurley to give them an Irish quality but they cannot play the game without the help of peasants. By stating that the Faeries need humans, he creates a deep connection between the peasants and Faery world.

One day I was walking over some marshy land in Galway with a friend when we found an old, hard-featured man digging a ditch. My friend had heard that this man had seen a wonderful sight of some kind, and at last we got the story out of him. (38)

Once again, the man with a Faery story is associated with the earth, and by digging a ditch he is associated with the peasantry. But the peasantry sees wonderful sights that normal bourgeois do not get to see. This particular peasant was privileged enough to see one hundred and fifty Faeries possibly playing Hurley, while at work, but their boss with a whip; “…made everybody work so hard that nobody saw what happened to the faeries.”(39) The modern work-a-day world does not see the faeries, or any mystical creatures because they are too busy working and not in tune with the world around them.
Only the peasant, at one with the natural world, takes the time to observe the world around him.

Yeats includes a poet in his book; "A young man came to see me at my lodgings the other night, and began to talk of the making of the earth and the heavens and much else." (40) This young man was a poet, but he feared the life of a poet was poor for him. As he recites his poems he keeps looking around nervously; "Do you see anything, X---?" I [Yeats] said. 'A shining, winged woman, covered by her long hair, is standing near the doorway,' he answered, or some such words. 'Is it the influence of some living person who thinks of us, and whose thoughts appear to us in that symbolic form?' I said; for I am well instructed in the ways of the visionaries and in the fashion of their speech." (40)

Yeats has made himself an expert in the ways of the faeries; thus including himself in the world of the mystical peasant. By having the young man come to him for advice, Yeats appears to be an expert, the king of the faeries. However, this young man is more attached to the actual faery world than Yeats will ever be:

His pleasure, however, was to wander about upon the hills, talking to half-mad and visionary peasants, or to persuade queer and conscience-stricken persons to deliver up the keeping of their troubles into his care... Sometimes visions came to him as he talks with them, and he is rumoured to have told divers people true matters of their past days and distant friends, and left them hushed with dread of their strange teacher, who seems scarce more than a boy, and is so much more subtle than the oldest among them. (40-41)
This peasant poet, does not want his name known, since a true peasant does not want fame, but anonymity. The peasant is humble to a fault, but by making the boy a poet, Yeats has included the poet in the mythology of the peasant, peasant and poet as mystical creature. Yeats goes on to describe the boy's poetry:

He had delighted above all in strong effects of colour; spirits who have upon their heads instead of hair the feathers of peacocks; a phantom reaching from a swirl of flame towards a star; a spirit passing with a globe of iridescent crystal — symbol of the soul — half shut within his hand... A winter or two ago he spent much of the night walking up and down upon the mountain talking to an old peasant who, dumb to most men, poured out his cares for him...(41-42)

Yeats has taken to adding the poet, the peasant poet, to his mythology, describing him as a caring mystic and one who can see into the souls of men; a man truly in tune with the people and the world around him would know that the old man was not intelligent, but to a man entrenched in the modern industrial world, he would appear simple minded. The modern world dulls a man's senses and isolates him from the world around him. Yeats is showing modern man that the world of yesterday had more humanity and spirituality and was more fulfilling.

Yeats continues describing peasants, not as farmers, but as "turners of the earth" and that they are "so different are these from us." He continues by describing the quaintness of the peasant villages in a romantic nature:
History has in no manner been burdened by this ancient village, with its crooked lanes, its old abbey churchyard full of long grass, its green background of small fir-trees, and its quay, where lie a few tarry fishing-luggers. (43)

The use of the word "ancient" equates the village with a history of the mystics and the legends that are similar to ancient Rome. The villagers are a hardy group, not easily scared or unsettled. A visitor needs to be alert and cautious when entering this sacred place. This, in Yeats's view, is a mythic village, not ruined by the modern world, and modern man does not know how to navigate around it:

A man was once heard complaining, "By the Cross of Jesus! How shall I go? If I pass by the hill of Dunboy old Captain Burney may look out on me. If I go round by the water, and up by the steps, there is the headless one and another on the quays, and a new one under the old churchyard wall. If I go right round the other way, Mrs. Stewart is appearing at Hillside Gate, and the Devil himself is in the Hospital Lane. (43)

This village has everything, even the devil, and no modern city has the history or mythology of this one. This village became Yeats's Eden and the peasants are the only ones allowed to enter, for they know the way around the mystical beings of the land.

There is a farmer of great importance in this village who tells of supernatural experiences; "There is a farmer at H--, Paddy B-- by name, a man of great strength, and a teetotaler."

(45) The tale describes his encounter with a white cat that was following him and he turn
and ran away. It turns out the cat was the ghost of Mrs. Stewart who had been beaten by her husband. This village is full of specters:

I know some who believe they have seen the headless ghost upon the quay, and one who, when he passes the old cemetery wall at night, sees a woman with white borders to her cap creep out and follow him... These are a few of the open-air spirits; the more domestic of their tribe gather within-doors, plentiful as swallows under southern eaves. (47)

Yeats gives the spirits a quaint quality and shows that they are not evil or very destructive. Yeats applies his supposed expertise in the area of specters, thus admitting himself into the land of Eden: “The house ghost is usually a harmless and well-meaning creature. It is put up with as long as possible. It brings good luck to those who live with it.” (48) Yeats continues to inject himself into the mythical lives of the peasants:

I have some acquaintance among the ghost-seers of western villages... The people who tell the tales are poor, serious-minded fishing-people, who find in the doings of the ghosts the fascination of fear. In the western tales is a whimsical grace, a curious extravagance. The people who recount them live in the most wild and beautiful scenery under a sky ever loaded and fantastic with flying clouds... They do not fear the spirits too much to feel an artistic and humorous pleasure in their doings. (48)

Yeats’s primary concern in the last village involves the oral traditions of the peasants. The oral traditions of the peasants are another link to their “primitive” nature. Yeats describes an old peasant woman he met in his travels:
She sang the poem to a friend and to myself in Irish, and every word was audible and expressive, as the words in a song were always, as I think, before music grew too proud to be the garment of words, flowing and changing with the flowing and changing of their energies. ...I think it [poem] has more of the simplicity of the Irish verses than one finds in most translations...(50,53)

Yeats highlights the simplicity and power of the woman’s music and notes that it is not “too proud”, implying that the older ways are better due to their humility. The peasant poems have a purpose and deeper meaning than just entertainment. G.J. Watson comments on Yeats’s work:

...The image he creates in his work of a people dignified by an easy commerce with a mythology and folklore alive yet reaching back into antiquity was a powerful national appeal...it gratified the Irish wish to believe that the successful neighbor nation was soulless, and that Ireland herself retained in spite, or because of, her history of defeat, a moral and spiritual superiority. (98)

Yeats is trying to prove that even the lowest peasant has more beauty and spirituality than the most intellectual industrialist. The poems of the peasantry are linked to their actual lives and the beauty is more authentic: “These poor countrymen and countrywomen in their beliefs, and in their emotions, are many years nearer that old Greek world, that set beauty beside the fountain of things, than are our men of learning.” (54) This is perhaps the most telling statement of Yeats’s text; not only does it associate the peasant with the
Greek gods, it implies that modern intellectual man is missing the dignity and basic knowledge of humanity. This is Yeats's ultimate goal, to create a mythology on the scale of the Greeks and to get the intellectuals and modern man to worship and rally behind them in the ultimate goal of overthrowing the British government. "Fable makes all things perfect in their kind..." (54) Yeats uses fable to make the peasant perfect; this he freely admits. Yeats continues to craft a myth around the peasant:

His poetry was the gift of the Almighty, for there are three things that are the gift of the Almighty: poetry and dancing and principles. That is why in the old times are ignorant man coming down from the hillside would be better behaved and have better learning than a man with education you'd meet now, for they got it from God... (54)

Not only are poets gifted by God [Almighty], of which Yeats belongs, they are better than the educated masses. Yeats inserts himself into this privileged class; but there is a contradiction since Yeats was in fact an educated man. Is he exempt from his own observations? Probably, because he is so in tune with the peasant and they trust him enough to tell him their stories. Yeats believes that fables can raise the peasant to the status of icon.

The peasants' belief in the supernatural and in the faery stories is pure and of good intention only:

In Ireland we hear but little of the darker powers, and come across any who have seen them even more rarely, for the imagination of the people dwells rather upon the fantastic and capricious, and fantasy and caprice
would lose the freedom which is their breath of life, were they to unite them either with evil or with good. (62)

The peasants are so attached to the mystical world they would die without it; it is part of them, almost as if they themselves are “fantastic and capricious.” This unity adds to the mythic qualities of the peasant that Yeats is trying to create; but Yeats admits that not everything in the book is truthful; “I am not giving the exact words, but as accurately as I can the substance of our talk.” (63) This statement gives him a little leeway as he continues to describe his experiences with the fantastic, “I struggled hard against their [warlocks] influence, and my head began to ache.” (63) His direct contact with the warlock not only makes it real and valid, it includes Yeats in the mystic experience and as his previous statement suggests, it must be true. Deborah Fleming comments on Yeats’ motives:

Thus the relationship between autobiography and history in Ireland became inextricably interwoven; and a good many Irish writers not only wrote their lives as history but endeavored to create history as well. (9)

Yeats subtly blends fact with fiction and successfully blurs the lines. Yeats now inserts himself into the lives of the peasants and is even more knowledgeable than they are about spiritual matters:

My old Mayo woman told me one day that something very bad had come down the road and gone into the house opposite, and though she would not say what it was, I knew quite well. (65)
Yeats has become the expert to whom peasants turn when baffled by the fairies and spirits; he has joined them as an earthly icon.

Yeats turns his attention to an exceptional villager whom he meets on his travels:

There is, however, a man in Galway village who can see nothing but wickedness. Some think him very holy, and others think him a little crazed, but some of his talk reminds one of those old Irish visions of the Three Worlds, which are supposed to have given Dante the plan of the *Divine Comedy*. (68)

This man is closely linked to the Greek gods, and is even thought to be Dante’s inspiration for one of the greatest books ever written. Even the poorest of the poor had a God in their heart, as well as a poet. Yeats uses a peasant names Michael Moran to illustrate this point. Michael was born without sight and was considered one of the greatest poets of Ireland. Even without his sight a peasant has more poetry in his heart than the average upper classmen. Yeats brings his point home with the following story:

Once an officious peeler arrested him as a vagabond, but was triumphantly routed amid the laughter of the court, when Moran reminded his worship of the precedent set by Homer, who was also, he declared, a poet, and a blind man, and a beggar-man. (74)

Yeats directly relates Moran with Homer, one of the greatest Greek poets. Now the Irish have their own Peasant Poet Hero of mythic proportions. Yeats had set up the countryside as the setting of mythology and now Moran is his anchor in the mythic realm. Moran is one of the few distinctive names Yeats writes in his text; usually the names of the
peasants are kept generic or not told at all. This is because the peasants believed that the faeries would seek retribution for stories told. Mary Thwaite has another theory as to why Yeats did not name names:

By not tying his material to a specific informant Yeats also enhanced their mystery, which because they could possibly be traced to innumerable people and places in the West of Ireland, seemed all the more general and universal. (128)

This gives the average Irishman a sense of inclusion in the mythology Yeats is creating.

Yeats continues to romanticize his surroundings: “We talked of the Forgetful People, as the faery people are sometimes called, and came in the midst of our talk to a notable haunt of theirs, a shallow cave amidst black rocks...” (77) The mystical exists all around Ireland and Yeats guides the reader on a tour with a young woman who is reputed for her ability to communicate with them:

I then bade her call out to the queen of the little people to come and talk with us. There was, however, no answer to her command. I therefore repeated the words aloud myself, and in a moment she described a very beautiful tall woman, who came out of the cave. (79)

If Yeats can contact these supernatural beings, this validates the peasants’ beliefs. Yeats returns to the land to which the peasants are so connected:

Last summer, whenever I had finished my day’s work, I used to go wandering in certain roomy woods, and there I would often meet an old countryman, and talk to him about his work and about the woods, and
once or twice a friend came with me to whom he would open his heart more readily than to me. He had spent all his life lopping away the witch elm and the hazel and the privet and the hornbeam from the paths, and had thought much about the natural and supernatural creatures of all the wood.

This peasant is directly connected to the earth, having spent his life clearing away the woods; this behavior, according to Yeats, leads to contact with the faeries. Working in a factory or other job unrelated to the earth will not lead to the Sidhe. Yeats invites his readers to look at the world more closely and they will find the enchanted: “And now I will at times explore every little nook of some poor coppice with almost anxious footsteps, so deep a hold has this imagination upon me.”

Yeats highlights the mysterious creatures in the woods of the countryside and they are just as mystical as the griffin or minotor of Greek mythology:

There are marten cats and badgers and foxes in the Enchanted Woods, but there are, it seems, mightier creatures, and the lake may hide what neither net or line can take. These creatures are of the race of the white stag that flits in and out of the tales of Arthur, and of the evil pig that slew Diarmuid where Ben Bulben mixes with the sea wind. Obviously Yeats invokes the Arthurian myths as a reference for the great Irish legends that he is trying to get the average Irishmen to embrace. He is trying to raise the tales to mythic proportions.
Yeats's association with these peasants has increased his awareness and ability at finding the faeries himself:

One day I was walking over a bit of marshy ground close to Inchy Wood when I felt, all of a sudden, and only for a second, an emotion, which I said to myself, was root of Christian mysticism. There had swept over me a sense of weakness, of dependence on a great personal being somewhere far off yet near at hand. (90)

It's interesting that he brings up the Christian persuasion. Until now, he had only been commenting on the pagan aspects of the peasants. Ireland does have a large Catholic history but Yeats chose to highlight paganism to find a common Irish religion. He was trying to heal the divisiveness caused by the Catholics and Protestants:

It is one of the great troubles of life that we cannot have any unmixed emotions. There is always something in our enemy that we like, and something in our sweetheart that we dislike...if we could love and hate with as good heart as the Sidhe do, we might grow to be long-lived like them. (97)

Yeats returns to the use of the land and sea as a common denominator in the lives of the peasants:

I am certain that the water, the water of the seas and of the lakes and of the mist and rain, has all but made the Irish after its image...Even to-day our countrypeople speak with the dead and with some who perhaps have never died as we understand death; and even our educated people pass without
great difficulty into the condition of quiet that is the condition of vision.

(100)

The dead are still a part of the world around them. Yeats continues to reinforce the connection between the Irish, the land, and the ancient gods of times gone by. He paints a pastoral image of the waters creating the Irish; of the Irish being here at the creation of time, an image with truly mythic overtones. This time, Yeats goes one step further by including the educated in the mythic world. Even an Irishman not connected with the soil can have a vision, because the blood of the Irish is so in tune with the other world.

Yeats points out that the peasants are wise, in part because of their pagan roots. Once again Yeats leaves out the Catholic background of the peasant. Only paganism fits into his vision of an “ideal peasant”. Paganism is linked to both the primitive and mythological worlds:

In Ireland this world and the world we go to after death are not far apart...Indeed there are times when the worlds are so near together that it seems as if our earthly chattels were no more than the shadows of things beyond. (118)

Yeats almost connects Ireland to a Christian Heaven; thus connecting the peasants to God:

The peasantry expect to have beyond the grave houses much like their earthly houses, only there the thatch will never grow leaky, nor the white walls lose their luster, nor shall the dairy be at any time empty of good milk and butter. But now and then a landlord or an agent or a gauger will
go by begging for bread, to show how God divides the righteous from the unrighteous. (118)

Death for the peasant is just like life but justice is served in their favor.

Yeats paints a picture of the peasant as close friends with the supernatural. There is a mutual respect between the two. "For in Ireland there is something of timid affection between man and men and spirits." (124) The Irish peasant has even helped the faeries fight; "In Ireland warlike mortals have gone among them [faeries], and helped them in their battles, and they in turn have taught men great skill with herbs, and permitted some few to hear their tunes..." (125) There is a distinct interaction between the two worlds and both help each other out on occasions. This adds to the noble traits of both that Yeats is trying to highlight.

Later in the book, Yeats starts to comment on the sad state of industrialized society, especially London: "There are too many over one another in London. They are getting tired of the world." (127) Yeats points out the unhappiness and overpopulation of the industrialized world. But the man of simplicity, the peasant, is happier and he explains why:

Those that see the people of Faery most often, and so have the most of their wisdom, are often very poor, but often, too, they are thought to have a strength beyond that of man, as though one came, when one has passed the threshold of trance, to those sweet waters where Maeldun saw the disheveled eagles bathe and become young again. (135)
Yeats embellishes the wisdom of the Irish peasant to make them more mythic than they are by rationalizing that if a person can see the faeries they must possess something special. "The story, which I am going to tell just as it was told, was one of those old rambling morallless tales, which are the delight of the poor and the hard-driven, wherever life is left in its natural simplicity." (140) Yeats makes a point of saying that the peasants live in a natural simplicity and even though they are poor they contain wisdom in the form of great tales.

Yeats discusses his belief in the power of folk-art:

Folk-art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought, and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the generations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted. (154)

Yeats has brought his Irish mythology full circle; he has placed the writing of the peasant on the same level as the aristocracy because of their link to the "soil where all great art is rooted." Yeats continues to praise the Irish Peasant:

In a society that has cast out imaginative tradition, only a few people-three or four thousand out of millions-favoured by their own characters and by happy circumstance, and only then after much labour, have understanding of imaginative things, and yet the imagination of the man himself. (154)
The disappearance of man's imagination in the world is seen as a detriment by Yeats and he again points out how privileged the peasants are to have the ability to see the faeries. Yeats sums up his feelings on the impact of the Irish peasant:

Here at last is a universe where all is large and intense enough to satisfy the emotions of man. Certainly such stories are not a criticism of life but rather an extension, thereby much more closely resembling Homer than that last and most admirable phase of 'the improving book', a social drama by Henrik Ibsen. (155)

The Irish peasant lives in the only place in the world where the mixture of soil and air leads to a complete human being, one with the emotions and wisdom to accept the ways of the world, faeries and all.

It is perhaps, therefore, by no means strange that the age of 'realism' should also be the harvest-time of folklore. We grow tired of tuning our fiddles to the clank of this our heavy chain, and lay them down to listen gladly to one who tells us of men hundreds of years old and endlessly mirthful. (155)

Yeats is preaching to the British here, warning them that the Irish will only sit by idly for so long until their long history of pride and action will spur them to throw the British out.

J.M. Synge continues Yeats' work by expanding on a different text of Lady Gregory's. Lady Gregory had already been to the Aran Islands and written down the stories the islanders told amongst themselves but she had not
documented the people with much detail. After Yeats recruited J.M. Synge for
the literary revival, Yeats encourages him to take a trip to the Aran
Islands and document the islands' inhabitants in great detail. By documenting a
"primitive" Irish people, Synge's book is a perfect compliment to Yeats's Celtic
Twilight. Deborah Fleming comments on both Synge and Yeats's literary styles:

Both writers used peasant speakers to create a sense of primitive -- to
them, universal -- emotion, and celebrated what they perceived to be the
peasants' liveliness, individuality, and relationship to nature, imagination,
and dialect. (10)

Synge even begins his text in the same manner as Yeats; trying to erase any doubt that
the following text has been fabricated:

In the pages that follow I have given a direct account of my life on the
islands, and of what I met with among them, inventing nothing, and
changing nothing that is essential. (3-4)

However, he does imply that he has changed some things in the book, leaving him the
option of fabricating or embellishing certain things. Synge begins by setting the tone of
the islands; "I am in Aranmor, sitting over a turf fire, listening to a murmur of Gaelic that
is rising from a little public-house under my room. The steamer which comes to Aran
sails according to the tide..." (5) His description of the house is one of warmth and
quaintness and arrivals to the island are only admitted with Mother Nature's permission.
He describes the island as "small flat fields of naked rock." (6) He has "seen nothing so
desolate", and is about to show the beauty that lies on this desolate island. "The rain and
cold seemed to have no influence on their vitality, and as they hurried past me with eager laughter and great talking in Gaelic, they left the wet masses of rock more desolate than before." (6) The tone has an almost faery tale quality and the islands seem to take on the role as an Eden in the modern world.

The main story teller on the islands is an old blind man; Synge validates this man by listing his acquaintances:

He told me that he had known Petrie and Sir William Wilde, and many living antiquarians, and had taught Irish to Dr. Finck and Dr. Pedersen, and given stories to Mr. Curtin of America...As we talked he sat huddled together over the fire, shaking and blind, yet his face was indescribably pliant, lighting up with an ecstasy of humour when he told me anything that had a point of wit or malice, and growing somber and desolate again when he spoke of religion or the faeries...(7)

Synge's descriptions of the blind man have a Homeresque quality similar to Yeats's use of the blind poet in his book. This personalization with the faeries adds validity to the old man's stories. "As I moved on a boy and a man came down from the next village to talk to me, and I found that here, at least, English was imperfectly understood." (9) These people are so isolated that English had not taken hold here; the true Irish speak Gaelic. The little girls of the island speak "with a delicate exotic intonation that was full of charm".

A little later when I went down to the kitchen I found two men from Inishmaan who had been benighted on the island. They seemed a simpler
and perhaps a more interesting type than the people here, and talked with
careful English about the history of the Duns, and the Book of Ballymore,
and the Book of Kells, and other ancient MSS., with the names of which
they seemed familiar. (11)

These people are more sophisticated or in tune with the true, Irishman of the past with
their knowledge of the old Irish texts. Synge decides to move to more primitive settings:
“...I have decided to move on to Inishmaan, where Gaelic is more generally used, and the
life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe.” (11) Synge clearly states his
intentions of searching for the primitive and moves the remainder of the text to
Inishmaan. Synge, like Yeats, begins by showing the connections between the people and
the faery world:

Later in the day, as the old man talked continually of the faeries and the
women they have taken, is seemed that there was a possible link between
the wild mythology that is accepted on the islands and the strange beauty
of the women. (12)

The women of the island are immediately connected with the mythological world of the
past and by describing their beauty as strange, Synge adds to the mystery surrounding
these islanders. Declan Kiberd points out that Synge was ahead of his time in the
documentation of women:

At a time when the wild, passionate and masterful women of the ancient
Celts were being rediscovered by scholars, Synge put the debate about
rural womanhood back on the agenda in the persons of Nora Burke and Pageen Mike. (179)

The man relaying the tales Synge documents is described as having an “earthly humour”; everything about Mourteen is connected to the earth and Synge identifies him as primitive and a “true Irishman.” These islanders may be primitive, but Synge is careful to point out that they have quite a bit of culture and romantic notions to balance it out:

Then [Mourteen] sat down in the middle of the floor and began to recite old Irish poetry, with an exquisite purity of intonation that brought tears to my eyes though I understood but little of the meaning. (12)

Synge points out that the best poetry does not have to come from the modern world. Scholars should look to Ireland’s past for the most inspirational and those are creating intense poetry of the nation and it closest to the land.

Synge briefly notes the Catholic background of the Islanders but only as it relates to the faeries; “On the way home he gave me the Catholic theory of the faeries... from this he wandered off into tedious matters of the theology...” (12) Catholicism is of little interest to Synge, this is a sign of the modern world; Paganism is associated with the primitive world and that is what he wants to document. In Synge, A Critical Study of his Plays, the author notes:

Profoundly agnostic himself, [Synge] wanted to see them [Islanders] not as the devout Catholics they no doubt were, but as people whose orthodox Catholicism barely covered primitive pagan attitudes. (31)
To offset the Catholic influence of the peasants, Synge immediately describes Mourteen’s face as “puckered with a gleam of pagan malice.” (13) It is as if Synge faltered in his observations and brings it back to the pagan focus. Gene Plunka notes the lack of Catholicism in Synge’s text:

Most of the rites, rituals, traditions, and beliefs are of pagan origin (Synge hardly mentions church activity of the Aran Islands), yet the Roman Catholic idiom accrued from interaction with the mainland suggests Christian history and tradition. (132)

Christianity does not fit into the mythology that Synge and Yeats wish to construct. It is not connected enough with the land and it is not mystical enough.

Synge begins to play up the mythology of the islands:

After that Mourteen described the feats of poteen drinking and fighting that he did in his youth and went on to talk of Diarmid, who was the strongest man after Samson, and one of the beds of Diarmid and Grainne, which is on the east of the island... a fragment of mythology that may connect Diarmid with the legend of Hercules, if it is not due to the ‘learning’ in some hedge-school master’s ballad. (14)

Yeats also used references to Greek mythology and applied them to the Irish peasant. This adds to their mystique and Synge is following in Yeats’s footsteps as a documenter of Irish mythology.

Synge returns to picturesque descriptions of the island and its people, for example, his cottage has a continual “drone of Gaelic” downstairs. “It gave me a moment
of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went on the sea.” (14)

Synge reinforces the primitive peasant myth and takes it one step further, to that of the original and first men of the world.

The homes of the Islanders have an earth floor, as close to nature as you can get, and the kitchen is full of “beauty and distinction.” Synge goes on to romanticize about the islanders:

Every article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of mediaeval life. The curaghs and spinning-wheels, the tiny wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware...are all full of individuality, and being made from materials that are common here, yet to some extent peculiar to the island, they seem to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is about them. (16)

Even the tools of the peasants are special; they are as unique as the people who make them. They have a mythical quality like the Golden Fleece of the Greek myths.

Synge points out the “civilized” nature of the peasants to contrast with their simplicity; “The courtesy of the old woman of the house is singularly attractive, and though I could not understand much of what she said-she has no English—I could see with how much grace she motioned each visitor to a chair, or stool, according to his age, and said a few words to him till he drifted into our English conversation.” (17) The woman may be primitive but she has grace and dignity and good manners.
Synge introduces a new storyteller, Pat Dirane, a man with similar characteristics to Mourteen and both men know each other. Synge describes him; "He spoke English with remarkable aptness and fluency, due, I believe, to the months he spent in the English provinces working at the harvest when he was a young man." (19) Pat goes on to tell a story about two farmers and Synge ponders the origins of such stories; "It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations." It seems strange to Synge that such stories could have made it to the islands.

The shoes of the Islanders "consist simply of a piece of raw cow skin, with the hair outside, laced over the toe and round the heel with two ends of fishing-line that work round and are tied above the instep." (25) Synge tries on a pair of pampooties, as the shoes are called, and has to relearn the "natural walk of man" that the islanders have. This reference to the natural walk of man is another way Synge makes the islanders the original man, i.e. Adam and Eve. Synge continues his analysis of the islanders as primitive:

The absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem, to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies-who are bred artificially to a natural ideal—...but here a touch of the refinement of old
societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild
animal. (25)

Synge, like Yeats, ties the peasant to the wild animal and that the animals are much more
“civilized” than the aristocracy which possesses an artificial refinement. Synge is
implying that the natural way of life and adaptation is preferable to the modern way. One
of the most modern items, a clock, does not even exist on the islands. Even time is
primitive on the islands:

The general knowledge of time on the islands depends…on the direction
of the wind…the general ignorance of any precise hours in the day makes
it impossible for the people to have regular meals. (26-27)

Mother Nature and her whimsical ways dictate to the lives of the islanders. This does not
seem to upset the locals only, Synge, an outsider, that is visiting.

Synge notes that; “Troops of red cattle, driven mostly by women, were coming up
from several directions…”(28) In Pagan societies, women and men shared the work;
there was no direct division of labour. Synge “noticed one extraordinary girl in the throng
who seemed to exert an authority on all who came near her. Her curiously-formed
nostrils and narrow chin gave her a witch-like expression, yet the beauty of her hair and
skin made her singularly attractive.” (28) This is another Pagan reference that Synge uses
to reinforce his myth of a primitive race. Synge describes the Pagan forts, but neglects to
talk about any of the Catholic structures on the island, it does not fit into his new Irish
mythology.
Synge returns to Pat Dirane and his folktales after highlighting the natural beauty of the islands. This tale is about a man testing the faith of his wife and fakes death in the process. Infidelity is not tolerated even in a primitive setting such as this. But they do engage in the vice of drinking:

One cannot think of these people drinking wine on the summit of this crumbling precipice, but their gray poteen, which brings a shock of joy to the blood, seems predestined to keep sanity in men who live forgotten in these worlds of mist. (34)

Synge implies that the drinking is what keeps them on the island, not the joy of living there.

At a funeral the women perform the keening for the dead, or wailing for the deceased:

In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peat of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women...This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native on this island. (37)

This is a picturesque moment by Synge; these peasants are connected to nature by their paganism and their plight on this earth. Keening is distinctively pagan and attached to the past. “There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by
voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation." (37) Synge makes a point to show that Catholicism is in the background to the pagan ways of the island.

Transportation on the island is also primitive, "there are no wheeled vehicles on this island..." They do grow potatoes on this island, but it is very hard labor. The islanders must carry kelp up the cliff sides and then let it decompose in order to grow the potatoes. They also sell the kelp to make a living:

Apart, however, from this primitive babble, the dexterity and power of the men are displayed to more advantage than in anything I have seen hitherto...He [hooker owner] seemed able to hold up a horse by his single weight... (41)

The islanders have exceptional dexterity and superhuman strength, as compared to Synge who represents modern man. This adds to their mythic stature.

Synge returns to the topic of faeries and Pat Dirane.

He [Pat] has seen a good many of them [faeries], he says, in different parts of the island, especially in the sandy districts north of the slip. They are about a yard high with caps like the 'peelers' pulled down over their faces...The faeries are more numerous in Mayo than in any other county, though they are fond of certain districts in Galway... (42-43)

Pat tells Synge a story about an officer taken by the faeries and poor farmer who receives wheat from them. "When he ended his story the old man told me that the faeries have a tenth of all the produce of the country, and make stores of it in the rocks." (43) Every so often Synge reminds the readers of the "faint murmurs of Gaelic" he hears while on the
island. Another language adds to the mystique of the Islanders. Pat Dirane tells another story about the son of a widow that kills giants and eventually wins the princess. This is similar to the faery tale of the tailor that kills seven flies with one blow and them gets recruited to kill a giant because his bragging is misunderstood.

The islands are under British rule but there are no lawmen on the island, this seems more civilized to Synge. When the lawmen do attempt to reach the island, the islanders use their pagan ways to rectify the situation:

Two recent attempts to carry out evictions on the island came to nothing, for each time a sudden storm rose, by, it is said, the power of a native witch, when the steamer was approaching, and made it impossible to land.

(51)

This is another reference to paganism and the power of nature the islanders seem to control. When the lawmen do get onto the island, Synge is unhappy at their presence:

This impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west. It seems partly due to the association between justice and the hated English jurisdiction, but more directly to the primitive feelings of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime, that a man will not do wrong unless he is under the influence of a passion which is as irresponsible as a storm on the sea. (59-60)

Synge believes that primitive people are more innocent and pure. Synge comments on the honesty of the people:
Some time ago, before the introduction of police, the people of the islands were as innocent as the people here remain today. I have heard that at that time the ruling proprietor and magistrate of the north island used to give any man who had done wrong a letter to a jailor in Galway, and send him off by himself to serve a term of imprisonment. (60)

There is honor among the islanders, even towards the criminal. Everyone maintains his or her dignity, "...they think the claim of kinship more sacred than the claims of abstract truth..." (61) The islanders have more mystical ideas about law and crime; Synge implies it is a more noble way of dealing with things.

In part two Pat Dirane is dead when Synge arrives for his second trip to the islands. "The complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a peculiar charm..." (71) The islanders are like children in that way. Synge's mood has changed a bit from last year:

This year I see a darker side of life in the islands...It seemed like a dream that I should be sitting here among these men and women listening to this rude and beautiful poetry that is filled with the oldest passions of the world. (72-77)

Synge meets a girl on the islands:

At one moment she is a simple peasant, at another she seems to be looking out at the world with a sense of prehistoric disillusion and to sum up in the expression of her gray-blue eyes the whole external despondency of the clouds and sea.... In our talk, which is sometimes full of the innocent
realism of childhood, she is always pathetically eager to say the right thing and be engaging... (79-80)

Synge gives credit to these primitive people and again adds to the mysticism that surrounds them; “It is hard to believe that those hovels I can just see in the south are filled with people whose lives have the strange quality that is found in the oldest poetry and legend.” (81) The islanders have a respect for nature and its powers; “A man who is not afraid of the sea will soon be drowned... for he will be going out on a day he shouldn’t. But we do be afraid of the sea, and we do only be drowned now and again.” (83) Mother Nature seems to shine her light on the islanders from time to time; so close is the connection between man and nature.

Part four is Synge’s final trip to the islands about a year later. This visit, Synge concentrates on the music of the faeries, “From ordinary music we came to talk of the music of the faeries, and they told me this story...” (127) One of the women on the island asks Synge, “Isn’t it great danger and sorrow is over every one on this island.” (131) Synge tells another folktale that he hears and the finality of their lives seems to hit Synge the hardest on this visit; it is a direct connection to primitive man, since the men don’t live very long.

Synge highlights the extraordinary language of the island:

Then he gave us an extraordinary English doggerel rhyme which I took down, though it seems singularly incoherent when written out at length. These rhymes are repeated by the old men as a sort of chant, and when a
line comes that is more than usually irregular they seem to take a real
delight in forcing it into the mould of the recitative. (143)
The poetry of the islanders is almost biblical in nature, Synge retells the poetry of "the
ark with Noah, of Moses riding through the red sea...for a few verses he is with Juda
and Maccabeus the Great, with Cyrus, and back again to Babylon." (144-145) Synge
writes down another translated poem about faeries. Synge admits that the poems lose
some of their eloquence in English. "Well as I seem to know these people of the islands,
there is hardly a day that I do not come upon some new primitive feature of their life."
(154) An old man tells Synge about the islands; "Long ago we used all to be pagans, and
the saints used to be coming to teach us about God, and the creation of the world." (155)
"A little later when the party broke up downstairs my old men got nervous about the
faeries—they live some distance away—and set off across the sand hills. The next day I left
with the steamer." (162) Without much fanfare, Synge leaves the island.

As a continuation of his peasant mythology, Yeats incorporates playwriting, a
modern form of the tribal storyteller, into his plans for Irish unity. His play, The Countess
Cathleen, contains all the elements of peasant mythology. The characters of the play
include two demons, angelical beings, a poet, and the mythical Countess Cathleen. These
characters appear to embody the Celtic Twilight, peasants, demons, poets and a noble
Irishman. As in the Celtic Twilight, the poet (Aleel) provides guidance, knowledge, the
voice of reason and common sense. Aleel is a continuation of Yeats from the Celtic
Twilight; he has noble characteristics and is seen as omnipresent and all knowing. The
poet is the rock of the play; he grounds it. The peasants are seen as superstitious and
believe in the supernatural. In this play the peasants are shown to be poor and hungry, they are willing to sell their souls to the devil for food and/or money. This devil could be seen as representing England and the English people with the Irish peasant selling their identities (their Irish ness) for food. Or it could represent that the British have stolen their souls and the most noble Irish, in touch with their Irish identity (Countess Cathleen) is willing to sacrifice her identity for the greater good, she is saving the peasants identity.

Yeats sets the play in Ireland, sometime in the past. Mary is a forty years old peasant and Teigue, her son, sets the tone of the play immediately by declaring, "The graves are walking...A woman met a man with ears spread out, and they moved up and down like a bat’s wing." (2) This is his explanation as to why the chickens are fluttering and it establishes a link between the Irish peasant and the supernatural. Mary seems unfazed by such activities and just wonders where her husband is. But Teigue does see something of interest to her outside:

In the bush beyond, there is two birds-if you can call them birds-I could not see them rightly for the leaves-but they’ve the shape and color of horned owls. And I’m half certain they’ve a human face. (3)

When Teigue sees the devil creatures he begins to question Christianity, "...What is the good of praying? Father says. God and the mother of God have dropped asleep. What do they care...?" (3) With the devil in front of him, Teigue feels that God has left the island of Ireland. Evil is surrounding the peasants, or as can be implied, the British (outsiders) are haunting the Irish. His mother, Mary, will not tolerate such thoughts; "You’ll bring misfortune with your blasphemies, upon your father, or yourself, or me." (3) Mary is still
a believer. She ignores the outside omens of impending doom, thinking that everything will work out.

Shamus, the father, comes home empty handed after trying to find food..."I've taken nothing, for the very rats, badgers, and hedgehogs seem to have died of drought, and there was scarce a wind in the parched leaves." (3) Shamus even tried to beg for food but the other beggars chased him away, this is Yeats's way of highlighting the poverty of the Irish peasant. Mary believes that God will come through for them and provide food but, Shamus feels, "His kitchen's bare, there were five doors that I looked through this day and saw the dead and not a soul to wake them." (4) Shamus saw that God had no food to spare for the peasants of Ireland and has come to the conclusion that God has abandoned them.

Shamus damns the rich but Mary defends them, "God's pity on the rich!" (4) She feels they are hard and unhappy. After this utterance the wealthy arrive, in the form of Countess Cathleen, Aleel and Oona. Countess Cathleen enters their house and immediately blesses it, for they are lost in the woods and cannot find their way home. Cathleen realizes that this house, like so many in Ireland is also without food: "So you are starving even in the wood, where I thought I would find nothing changed. But that's a dream, for the old worm O' the world can eat it's way into what place it pleases." (5) The worm can be read as a reference to the British and their immense ability to colonize even the farthest reaches of the globe. The British have not only entered the city and created havoc but they have also ruined the countryside, thus the poverty of the Irish peasant. Cathleen gives money to Shamus and his family; "I have passed but starving men and
women all this day.” (5) Yeats paints a depressing picture of the Irish Peasant. Oona, the Countess’ nurse, lets on to some foreshadowing of what is to come: “Sorrows that she’s but read of in a book weigh on her mind as if they had been her own.” (5) The Countess feels the pain of the Peasant; she could represent Ireland as a whole.

Yeats shifts gears here and uses Aleel, the poet, as a mystic who can channel the supernatural. The poet is an all-knowing character whose supernatural warnings should be heeded: “Shut the door before the night has fallen, for who can say what walks, or in what shape some devilish creature flies in the air; but now two gray horned owls hooted above our heads.” (6) Yeats used the poet in a similar fashion in The Celtic Twilight, the poet as the knowledgeable center among the peasants. Shemus dismissed him as a foil, and Teique thinks the prediction of evil is directed at the poet and his company. Shemus wants the door left open but Mary agrees with the poet: “When those that have read books, and seen the seven wonders of the world, fear what’s above or what’s below the ground it’s time that poverty should bolt the door.” (6) It is interesting that Mary describes themselves as poverty and not peasants or she equates being a peasant with poverty. Shemus says he will welcome anyone and Teique replies in that as long as the visitors have money he does not care who calls.

Teique is hoping for some supernatural intervention because farming has not provided them with the necessities for survival. He relays a story of how it you hit a pigeon or seagull, “it clangs as though it had been made of brass, and that it you dig down where it was scratching you’ll find a crock of gold.” (7) He even thinks that if you dream
of gold you will receive it. Shemus is skeptical but more open to the theories than Mary; she feels money is from the devil, a subtle foreshadowing by Yeats.

Shemus and Telique invite the devil in, or at least his lackeys. Mary does not want them in the house and states, "God help us all!" (7) She is the antithesis to Shemus and Teique. Shemus believes God has left them: "Pray if you have mind to. It's little that the sleepy ears above care for your words..." (7) God can be related to the British empire and the empire has failed to provide for the Irish peasant; it represents the failure of the modern world (since Christianity is associated with the modern world, and the Irish peasant is generally Pagan in Yeats' view), God and Christianity as compared to the Gods of the Pagans. Two men enter, sit on the floor and start counting their money. Shamus offers them dinner but Mary will not cook for them, she knows they are the devils men for they "travel for the master of all merchants." (8) Shemus then charges them more money for dinner. Mary argues, "I will not cook for you because I know in what unlucky shape you sat but now outside this door...If you are not demons, and seeing what great wealth is spread out there, give food to the starving poor." (9) The merchant responds: "If we knew how to find deserving poor we'd do our share." (9) The merchant represents the British, they take from the starving peasant without guilt because they feel the Irish are savages and beneath them. During the potato famine the British still took food from the Irish even though the Irish were starving. The merchants add insult to injury by stating, "We know the evils of mere charity." (9) This is an ironic jab at the poor plight of the peasant. Mary believes that at times of famine it does not matter what the person is like they should be helped. The merchants will help but for a price; "If each
one brings a bit of merchandise, we’ll give him such a price he never dreamed of... For there’s a vaporous thing—that may be nothing, but that’s the buyer’s risk—a second self, they call immortal for a story’s sake.” (9) Shemus: “They come to buy our souls?” (9) Téigue is willing to barter his soul: “Why should we starve for what may be but nothing.” (9) Mary is against the idea but Shamus responds with his contempt for God; “What has God poured out of his bag but famine? Satan gives money.” (10) The British Empire has driven the Irish to sell their souls for food.

The first merchant tells them to spread the word, “You’ve but to cry aloud at every crossroad, at every house door, that we buy men’s souls and give so good a price that all may live in mirth and comfort till the famines done, because we are Christian men.” (10) The Christian men reference seems a bitter (ironic) jab at the British. The modern invaders of Ireland were Christian men that brought terror and horrible living conditions for the Irish. The Christians stole the very identity of the Irish, Pagan souls of the peasant. The merchants eat the last chicken Shemus have; Yeats uses this as a symbolic gesture, that of the Irish caving into the English and the English taking everything, their food, houses and souls.

In Scene two the Countess Cathleen is roaming the countryside: “Surely this leafy corner, where one smells the wild bee’s honey, has a story too?” (11) Yeats points out that every part of Ireland, no matter how small, has a story and a history that should be preserved. The wealthy Cathleen understands this and she, representing the wealthy of Ireland, has the money and power to preserve it. Aleel the poet knows all of the stories of the houses and land; he is the preserver of Irish history. Yeats uses the poet as the Savior
of Irish history and folktales, very similar to his role as poet in *The Celtic Twilight*. The poet of this play harkens back to the medieval minstrel and storyteller of Arthurian times. Aleel even provides comfort to the distressed Cathleen, who has been worrying herself sick with the plight of the peasant: "I thought to have kept her from remembering the evil of the times for full ten minutes..." (13) Aleel shows the distress the rich ruling class feels; even they are not immune from the evils of British rule. Cathleen is shown to be very sympathetic; when some cabbage is stolen from her property she justifies the action by saying "...maybe they were starving." (13) She has now united herself with the poor. She even feels that the deed is a sinless one because of the dire situations the person must have been in.

Shamus and Teigue run into Cathleen’s house and announce that two men had bought their souls and they are laughing and showing off their money. Cathleen is aghast and offers to buy their souls back for them. But they refuse; Shamus and Teigue do not seem to think a soul exists at all. This is similar to the Irish, some of their own countrymen have bought into the demonization of the Irish peasant, they do not believe that a noble, pure and dignified Irish peasant can exist, but a few, like the Countess Cathleen (Yeats) do believe. Cathleen is horrified that they would sell their identity for mere money: Cathleen believes, “but there’s a world to come.” (15) Yeats believes a unified Ireland can chase away the British “demons” and a wonderful future is waiting for a united Irish. But, Yeats has an uphill battle since the British have money to offer the poor peasant. Shamus responds to Cathleen’s protests, “And if there is [another world], 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.” (15) Shamus would rather join the British that have the money to pay than support the poor disenfranchised Irish and maybe starve to death.

Cathleen has decided to rally all the peasants and make them see the error of their ways and not give in to the temptations of the devil’s henchman, “Till I have changed my house to such a refuge that old and ailing, and all weak of heart, may escape from beak and claw…” (15) Yeats shows that the aristocratic Cathleen believes in the Pagan Gods, “I have heard that one of the old Gods walked so.” (16) The gods she speaks of appeared in Aelel’s dream that had predicted Cathleen’s death. Cathleen remains unfazed. Cathleen believes the old gods were benevolent, “No, not angelical, but of the old gods, who wanders the world to waken the heart — the passionate, proud heart — that all the angels, leaving nine heavens empty, would rock to sleep.” (19) The old gods are pure of heart and a comfort to those that believe in them unlike the cold Christian deities. With the pagan gods by her side, Cathleen confronts the two merchants, “There is something in you that I fear; a something not of us; were you not born in some distant corner of the world?” (22) The other peasants gather around Cathleen and the merchants. Cathleen prays for the peasants; “Pray for all men and women mad from famine; pray you good neighbors.” (22) Yeats believes that the Irish are not thinking clearly due to the potato famine, but if they think with their hearts and minds, not their stomachs, they can vanquish their oppressors (British). The peasants are blinded by the thought of all that gold; the first peasant believes that gold is “the most beautiful thing under the sun, that’s what I’ve heard.” (22) The demons’ beautiful exterior blinds the peasants.
In Scene five, Mary is dead and the two merchants are talking about the grain and cattle that should be arriving in three days. Irish survival is just within the peasants’ grasp but they are too blind to see it and the demons (British) are withholding their necessities. Shemus responds to his wife’s death: “This is my wife. She mocked at my great masters, and would not deal with them, now there she is; she does not even know she was a fool.” (23) Teigue responds: “She would not eat one crumb of bread bought by our masters money…” (23) With the death of Mary more peasants sell their souls to the merchants. Mary has become a martyr for the Irish but the other peasants are not willing to make that sacrifice. The first merchant entices them: “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.” (25) The peasants might as well sell their souls because they are sinners anyway undeserving of heaven. This is the typical British observation of the Irish peasant.

The poet, Aleel, remains noble and offers his souls for nothing as a sacrifice for Cathleen. But the merchant cannot take it: “We cannot take your soul, for it is hers.” (25) The merchants offer 1,000 crowns for a woman who has confessed her bad deeds and gone to church every Sunday. But when she utters God’s name she screams out in pain. The peasants begin to question their deal with the devil. Countess Cathleen enters and offers her soul: “The souls you have bought must be set free…. I offer my own soul.” (27) Cathleen signs away her soul; the peasants gather round and kiss her dress. Aleel is left alone and tells the tale of Deirdre of the Sorrows, a legend of the Irish peasant (and soon to be play of J.M. Synge). Cathleen dies, she has sacrificed her soul for the peasants. Yeats wants the ruling class of Ireland to sacrifice for the good of the country. As
enticement Yeats shows Cathleen being taken by angels. The angel says: “The light beats down; the gates of pearl are wide; and she is passing to the floor of peace…” (31)

Cathleen has gone to heaven for sacrificing her soul for Ireland. Yeats is smart to point out the rewards of so great a sacrifice. If every person in Ireland makes a sacrifice then a great future lies ahead for Ireland. This is Yeats’s ultimate goal, the unification of Ireland through the Irish peasant. Yeats cannot achieve this goal alone so he enlists the talents of his friend J.M. Synge.

J.M. Synge’s Riders to the Sea is not as mystical as Yeats’s play; his play is taken directly from his experiences while on the Aran Islands. Synge experienced the harsh and bleak conditions of the peasant during his stays on the islands and he chose to highlight their resilience and determination to prevail in the face of such adversity. Unlike Yeats, Synge does not use the past or supernatural as a foreshadowing technique when choosing a setting and setting up the cast. The play begins in what appears to be a very normal day in the lives of the average Irish peasant. The first glimpse of the Irish peasant is one of domestic production, baking and wool spinning. Nora enters Cathleen’s cottage with a small bundle under her arm, given to her by the priest, containing the clothes of a “drowned man in Donergral…We’re to find out if it’s Michael’s they are…” (83)

Cathleen does not believe they are Michael’s because they have floated too far from where he was lost. The priest is not a character in the play but his presence is felt throughout the play. Nora quotes the young priest’s opinion of Michael’s disappearance:
The young priest says he’s known the like of it. “If it’s Michael’s they are,” says he, “you can tell herself he’s got a clean burial by the grace of God…” (83)

God’s presence is always on the island, every act is blessed or cursed and always has some religious or pagan consequence. Every little move by Mother Nature causes anxiety, when a small gust of wind blows open the cottage door Cathleen looks about anxiously. The peasants of Synge’s Ireland have the fear of God and nature. This fear surrounds the peasants with an air of stoic nobility; they are duty bound to God and perform their daily tasks with reverence.

The other male of the household, Bartley, is about to leave for the fair, where business must be conducted, regardless of his brother’s fate. Life goes on in the household, even if one life might no longer exist. Nora does not attempt to stop him: “Herself [Maurya] does be saying prayers half through the night, and the Almighty God won’t leave her destitute…with no son living.” (84) By Nora’s logic God also respects the peasant; he would not leave a woman without any man in the house to do the farming, etc. God is benevolent if one prays; this is Synge’s foreshadowing of things to come.

Cathleen asks Nora if the seas are rough and Nora responds yes with a very specific description of the tides. Synge knows that the sea dictates the lives of the Islanders and that their lives revolve around it’s every movement. Cathleen and Nora decide not to open the bundle of clothes and find out if they’re Michael’s because they do not want to upset Maurya. Cathleen thinks Bartley might go to Connemara. Maurya disagrees: “He won’t go this day with the wind rising from the south and west. He won’t
go this day for the young priest will stop him surely.” (85) Maurya believes that Bartley
will give in to the two most powerful forces on the island, God and nature. Nora,
however, believes that Bartley will go. Cathleen concedes and lets him go, taking with
him some rope “by the white boards…. for the pig with the black feet.” (85) The white
boards and black pigs feet are symbolic: “…to provide the audience with clues to
anticipate Bartley’s death. The white boards to be used for the coffin serve as a visual
reminder of the omnipresent threat of death and coincide with the ominous white rocks of
the sea and Maurya’s tossed white hair…”black” is used to such an extent that the
audience is subliminally prepared for Bartley’s death.” (Plunka138) Maurya is aware of
the omen and wants Bartley to leave the rope because: “If Michael is washed up
tomorrow morning, or the next morning, or any morning in the week, for it’s a deep
grave we’ll make him by the grace of God.” (86) She wants the rope used for her other
son, not Bartley. Bartley ignores her pleas and takes the rope. Maurya mourns: “It’s a
hard thing they’ll be saying below if the body is washed up and there’s no man in it to
make the coffin, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you’ll find in
Connemara.” (86) She is trying to talk some sense into Bartley but loses. Bartley has
more knowledge of the sea and feels he can handle it, he instructs the woman on what to
do in his absence: “If the west wind holds with the last bit of moon let you and Nora get
up weed enough for another cock for the kelp. It’s hard set we’ll be from this day with
noone in it but one man to work.” (86) This activity is also contingent on Mother Nature.
Daily survival is hard and unpredictable yet the peasants take it in stride and overcome.
They are not as dependent on the supernatural like Yeats’s peasants, their lives are
ddictated by hard work and a belief in the help of a higher being.

Bartley leaves and Cathleen chastises Maurya: “Why wouldn’t you give him your
blessing and he is looking round in the door?” (87) When Maurya does not do the
religiously devout thing and bless her son she is punished. This superstition is a powerful
one. Cathleen sends Maurya out after her son: “You’ll see him then and the dark word
will be broken, and you can say “God speed you,” the way he’ll be easy in his mind.”
(88) While Maurya is gone, Nora and Cathleen look in the bundle and find what they
think is Michael’s clothes. Cathleen laments their loss and the fact that Michael will have
“noone to keen him.” (91) The act of keening is the pagan ritual of wailing for the dead.
Synge encountered this tradition while on the Aran Islands and is deeply rooted in the
Irish past.

Maurya reenters the cottage distraught that she had not blessed her son when he
passed her by because “something choked the words in my throat.” (93) Nora tries to
cheer her up by reminding her that the priest said she would not be left sonless. But
Maurya blows her off: “its little the like of hifi knows of the sea…”(93) Maurya feels
that even God is second to powers of Mother Nature. Her pagan beliefs overpower the
modern worlds’ Christian God. After the loss of her sons Maurya surrenders to the sea:
“They’re all gone now, and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me…I’ll have no
call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south…” (96)
Maurya blesses the clothes with holy water and speaks her relief about no longer having
to pray for the safe return of her sons. She then discusses who will make the coffin and
how. Maurya asks for mercy from the Almighty God to show mercy on all six of her
son's souls: "What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and
we must be satisfied."(97) Synge chose to highlight the nobility of the peasant and the
sacrifices they made and accepted as a member of the Irish race. If a poor peasant woman
could sacrifice her six sons then surely the modern Irishmen could make some sacrifices
for a unified Ireland.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, Yeats and Synge have constructed an Irish
identity with the Irish peasant as the focal point, through their literary achievements. The
Irish peasant is now a mythical icon worthy of the Greeks. Yeats and Synge with the help
of Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre did achieve a national literature worthy of the
Irish people. The struggle for a unified Ireland still continues.
Works Cited


Works Cited


