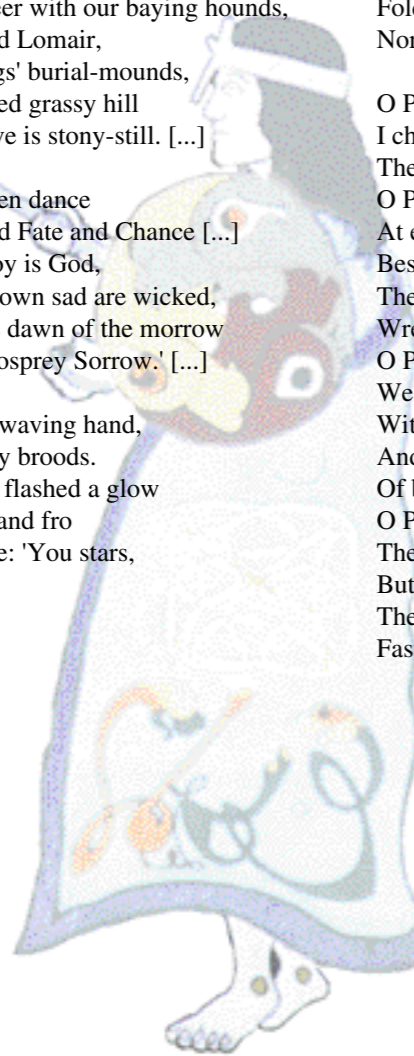


"The Wanderings of Oisín"

It was W. B. Yeats who in his work drew heavily on old Irish historical and folk materials and thus contributed notably to what came to be called the Celtic Revival. "The Wanderings of Oisín" is a mystical narrative poem about Oisín, the poet of the Celtic Fionn cycle who spends 300 years in the pre-Christian Otherworld. After returning from the Otherworld he has a passionate conversation with St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, in which he is full of praise for the pagan values he has experienced there. – W. B. Yeats, "The Wanderings of Oisín" in *W. B. Yeats, The Poems* (revised), ed. by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 355; 363ff.

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| <p>1 <i>Oisín</i>. Sad to remember, sick with years,
The swift innumerable spears,
The horsemen with their floating hair,
And bowls of barley, honey, and wine,
5 Those merry couples dancing in tune,
And the white body that lay by mine;
But the tale, though words be lighter than air,
Must live to be old like the wandering moon.</p> <p>10 When we followed a deer with our baying hounds,
With Bran, Sceolán, and Lomair,
And passing the Firbolgs' burial-mounds,
Came to the cairn-heaped grassy hill
Where passionate Maeve is stony-still. [...]</p> <p>15 And in a wild and sudden dance
We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance [...]
Sang, 'God is joy and joy is God,
And things that have grown sad are wicked,
And things that fear the dawn of the morrow
20 Or the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.' [...]</p> <p>We flung on high each waving hand,
And sang unto the starry broods.
In our raised eyes there flashed a glow
Of milky brightness to and fro
25 And thus our song arose: 'You stars,</p> | <p>Across your wandering ruby cars
Shake the loose reins: you slaves of God,
He rules you with an iron bond,
Each one woven to the other,
Each one woven to his brother 30
Like bubbles in a frozen pond;
But we in a lonely land abide
Unchainable as the dim tide,
With hearts that know nor law nor rule,
And hands that hold no wearisome tool, 35
Folded in love that fears no morrow,
Nor the grey wandering osprey Sorrow.'</p> <p>O Patrick! for a hundred years
I chased upon that woody shore
The deer, the badger, and the boar. 40
O Patrick! for a hundred years
At evening on the glimmering sands,
Beside the piled-up hunting spears,
These now outworn and withered hands
Wrestled among the island bands. 45
O Patrick! for a hundred years
We went a-fishing in long boats
With bending sterns and bending bows,
And carven figures on their prows
Of bitterns and fish-eating stoats. 50
O Patrick! for a hundred years
The gentle Niamh was my wife;
But now two things devour my life;
The things that most of all I hate: 55
Fasting and prayers.</p> |
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William Butler Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923. Working together with Lady Gregory and John M. Synge, he was the director of Ireland's National Theatre Society, better known as the Abbey Theatre company. His first rather patriotic plays *The Countess Cathleen* (1892) and *Cathleen ní Houlihan* (1902) were mainly written during the time of his long liaison with Maud Gonne who strengthened his enthusiasm for Irish nationalism.

Vocabulary

Intro/1 to draw on (v.): to use s.th. for a particular purpose - **Intro/5 pagan** (adj.): /'peɪgən/ pagan religious beliefs and customs do not belong to any of the main religions of the world, and may come from a time before these religions - **4 barley** (n.): a plant that produces a grain used for making food or alcohol - **12 mound** (n.): a pile of earth or stones that looks like a small hill - **13 cairn** (n.): a pile of stones, esp. at the top of a mountain, to mark a place - **18 wicked** (adj.): behaving in a way that is morally wrong - **20 osprey** (n.): a type of large bird that eats fish (Fischadler) - **22 brood** (n.): a family with a lot of children - **26 ruby** (adj.): deep-red - **27 rein** (n.): a long narrow band of leather that is fastened around a horse's head in order to control it - **32 to abide** (v.): to live somewhere - **33 unchainable** (adj.): not to be chained to s.th. - **35 wearisome** (adj.): making you feel bored, tired, or annoyed - **40 badger** (n.): an animal which has black and white fur, lives in holes in the ground, and is active at night (Dachs) - **40 boar** (n.): a wild pig - **44 withered** (adj.): a withered person looks thin and weak and old - **49 prow** (n.): /praʊ/ the front part of a ship or boat - **50 bittern** (n.): a brown European bird with long legs that lives near water and makes a deep sound (Rohrdommel) - **50 stoat** (n.): a small thin animal with brown fur that is similar to a weasel, and kills other animals (Hermelin) - **55 to fast** (v.): to eat little or no food for a period of time, esp. for religious reasons

Vocabulary Info-Box

Beara /'bɛərə/ (Hag of Beara): symbol of Ireland in distress - **Cúchulainn** (Cú Chulainn): /'kʊ:kʊlɪn /'kʊ:xu-/ hero of many Irish legends

Explanations

Oisín /ɒ'ʃiːn/ or Ossian: legendary Irish poet and warrior; member of the mythical Fianna /'fiːnə/ band and son of Fionn mac Cumhaill /fɪn mə'ku:l/, the hero of the Fenian or Fionn cycle of legends - **9 Caoilte**: /'ki:lɪtɪ mk'rəʊnən/ Caoilte Mac Ronáin was Fionn's favourite warrior - **9 Conan**: 'kɒnən maɪl/ Conan Mail, a Fenian warrior who is always bragging - **9 Finn**: Fionn, the leader of the the Fianna or Fenians - **11 Bran and Sceolán**: /brən 'skəʊlən/ Fionn's cousins; Lomair was one of their three dogs - **12 Firbolgs**: /'fɜːrbɔlgz/ prehistoric invaders of Ireland - **14 Maeve**: /meiv/ also Medbh, famous queen of the Red Branch cycle. Supposedly a goddess in Irish mythology - **52 Niamh**: /niːv/ Oisín's wife in the Otherworld



Grianán Ailigh – built by the Dagda, a legendary king, in 1700 B. C.

The Celts

Irish history begins with the coming of the Celts (from about 300 B.C. onwards) who lived in clans headed by a king or chieftain. They had a well-developed social and legal system, a common Celtic language, and a rich orally-transmitted culture. Among their religious beliefs, the Otherworld, a land of eternal youth and happiness, played an important role. – The picture on p. 28 shows a Celtic warrior. He is originally part of a Belfast mural painting which also shows a text in Gaelic. Translation:

"I am Ireland
I am as old as the woman of Beara
Great is my glory, me who gave birth to brave Cúchulainn
Great is my shame
whose own family sold its mother
I am Ireland
I am as lonely as the old woman of Beara"

AWARENESS

- 1 Do you enjoy fantasy games, stories or films? Give reasons why you do or do not enjoy them.
- 2 When you hear the term 'pagan' what do you think of?

COMPREHENSION

- 3 What age is Oisín when he tells his tale? Why does he tell it?
- 4 How does the poet – Oisín – describe pagan Ireland?
- 5 Who was Oisín together with?
- 6 According to this extract, what did Oisín do while he was in the Otherworld?
- 7 How does Oisín see Christian Ireland?

ANALYSIS

- 8 Formulate a key sentence which states what each stanza is about.
- 9 How does Oisín see life in the Otherworld? Pay special attention to his choice of words when describing the Otherworld.
- 10 Analyse the situation of the stars and compare their situation with that of Oisín and his companions.
- 11 Explain the use of the colour 'grey' in l. 20 ("the grey wandering osprey Sorrow").
- 12 Show how language is used to develop the visual element in the poem.

OPINION

- 13 Comment on the statement that the Otherworld is 'a man's world'. Discuss whether this term is valid in our world today.
- 14 How do you expect St. Patrick, Oisín's partner in the conversation, to react?
- 15 In the 19th century, which was a period of considerable political and economic hardship and misery for most of the Irish people, their literature was almost entirely devoted to historical topics. "The heroic past must be retrieved to provide the inspiration for a tolerable future while blotting out the indignities of a miserable present." (Augustine Martin, *Anglo-Irish Literature* [Dublin: Government of Ireland, 1980] p. 31.) Do you see a danger in referring back to the past of a nation or national traditions or is it in fact necessary as a means of gaining an identity or feeling of belonging? And again – is this necessary in a multicultural world? Explain the Belfast mural painting in this context (see picture on p. 28 and extra information on p. 29).
- 16 Poetry as a form of human articulation has survived over the centuries. What do you think is the reason for this? Will modern communication and entertainment technologies like the film, multimedia computers or the Internet replace it in times to come? Justify your answers.

PROJECTS

- 17 Write your own poem or story about a past event. Give some thought to its presentation and atmosphere.
- 18 'The Celts' – research the history of this race, their culture and mythology and organise an exhibition in your school within, if possible, the framework of an interdisciplinary project. Particular interest should be focused on the Celts in Ireland.

INTERNET PROJECTS

- 19 Collect enough information about the Celtic Age in Ireland to be able to make a presentation in your class, i.e. find information, fotos, maps, etc. Go to www.wesleyjohnston.com/users/ireland/past/pre_norman_history/iron_age.html to start with.
- 20 Find websites that inform you about the beginning of Christianity in Ireland. Which role did St. Patrick play?
- 21 Legend, myth and fantasy – search the internet for answers to the question why people are so deeply interested in stories like, for example, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* or J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or even the life story of Jesus. Go to www.crossroad.to/articles2/rings.htm or www.kingarthursknights.com/knights/default.asp to start with. On the basis of your findings write an essay on this question.
- 22 In groups, compile information on mythological heroes such as Hercules, Siegfried, Lancelot or Cúchulainn, the Irish "Hound of Ulster", and others. You can start visiting the website www.eliki.com/ancient/myth/camelot/lancelot/, for example. With the help of a poster gallery present your results to your class.