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Celtic Elements in Three Works by William Butler Yeats

In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, William Butler Yeats explains his conception of "*Anima Mundi*"; he writes that he "came to believe in a Great Memory passing on from generation to generation." He finds that his study "created a contact or mingling with minds who had followed a like study in some other age, and that these minds still saw and thought and chose" and later continues, "Our animal spirits or vehicles are but, as it were, a condensation of the vehicle of *Anima Mundi*." He refers to a similar concept which Henry More calls "the soul of the world." Yeats then asserts, "Yet after a time the soul partly frees itself and becomes 'the shape-changer' of the legends, and can cast, like the mediaeval magician, what illusions it would."[1]

The "shape-changer" of Irish legend is Manannan Mac Lir, who has been called "the greatest magician of the Tuatha de Danann,"[2] or faery people. Kuno Meyer describes several tales of Manannan's shape-changing prowess and also gives accounts which attribute the same powers to Manannan's son, Mongan, in *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living* (London, 1895). Manannan's wife, Fand, "dreamed herself into that shape" of temptress in Yeats's play, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and Cuchulain recognizes her as the hawk-woman of *At the Hawk's Well*:

> *I know you now, for long ago*
> *I met you on a cloudy hill*
> *Beside old thorn-trees and a well*
>
> (*The Only Jealousy of Emer*, ll. 239-241)

In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, Yeats alters the legend he uses as his source to attribute Cuchulain's swoon to his fight with the sea in *On Baile's Strand*.[3] Similarly, Yeats associates with the sea the Red Man who threatens Cuchulain in *The Green Helmet;* the Red Man appears out of the sea, "laughs like the sea," (l.114) and in leaving "splashed himself into the sea" (l.85). Moreover, the play is set against the physical backdrop of "a misty moon-lit sea." This element is also without foundation in the legend.[4] Yeats introduces the sea imagery in these plays to characterize death (in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* represented by Fand and in *The Green Helmet* represented by the Red Man) as connected with the sea.

In Yeats's poetry, the sea is a vehicle for escape to a happy otherworld, in the earliest poems (" 'What do you build with sails for flight,' " "The Cloak, the Boat, and the Shoes," l.6), as well as in the later "Sailing to Byzantium." In this capacity, the sea is inextricably connected with dreams, which can carry man off in the same way: "The sea swept on and cried her old cry still,/Rolling along in dreams from hill to hill" ("The Sad Shepherd," ll. 10-11). It is also close to death, the only real hope man has of traveling to another world: "I must be gone: there is a grave/Where daffodil and lily wave" ("The Song of the Happy Shepherd," ll. 45-46). The last word of this line has a double meaning, combining the grave's flowers with the legendary Country-Under-Wave of which Manannan is lord.[5]

Furthermore, that otherworld is often inhabited by lovers, so that it incorporates escape into all-encompassing love. These themes merge in "Under the Round Tower" where Billy Byrne lies, as he says, " 'On great grandfather's battered tomb' ":

> He stretched his bones and fell in a dream
> . . .
> Of golden king and silver lady,
> . . .
> Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,
> Hair spread on the wind they made. (ll. 10-22)

The couple in the dream is portrayed as if sleeping; indeed, many of the happy escape-worlds in Yeats's poetry have a sleepy ambiance (in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "peace comes dropping slow," l.5), and Byzantium is ruled by "a drowsy emperor" (IV,5). The "great-grandfather's battered tomb" not only provides the grave as the site for such a happy dream; it also suggests that the happy world is connected with the past, a concept which will be seen as central to Yeats's work.

It is consistent, then, that Cuchulain's "death" in *On Baile's Strand* results from a battle in which "the waves have mastered him," and that in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* his death is characterized as a temptation to follow a lovely maiden. Peter Ure senses the attractiveness of death in the play:

> But Fand's characterization as a temptress cuts across her role as "that which is not life," and what she offers is an immortal, if inhuman, love, where "nothing but beauty can remain" It might have been better if the Ghost's condition had been represented more neutrally, as a drawing away into some underworld of strengthless shades.[6]

Of course, the attractive lure of death is the point of the play and the source of its conflict, so it would hardly "have been better if the Ghost's condition had been represented more neutrally."

The sea, then, may function in Yeats's work as a metaphor for the vehicle to an otherworld which is associated with the perfect worlds of sleep, dream, love, and the past. Simultaneously, Yeats seems to associate the sea with his conception of the force which unites men's minds:

> Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea. Henry More's *Anima Mundi*, Wordsworth's "immortal sea which brought us hither," and near whose edge the children sport, and in that sea there were some who swam or sailed, explorers who perhaps knew all its shores
>
> ("*Anima Mundi*," ll. 70-76)

The remainder of this paper will be devoted to a close analysis of three works in which Yeats develops these themes connected with his concept of the sea. These three, "The Wanderings of Oisin," *The Shadowy Waters*, and "Three Songs to The One Burden," are the only verse works in which Yeats specifically mentions the sea god by name. A detailed study of these works will illustrate how this metaphor functions in three different verse forms, epic poem, verse play and lyric.

In lines quoted previously, Yeats writes, ". . .in that sea there were some who swam or sailed, explorers who perhaps knew all its shores." Two such men are the heroes of "The Wanderings of Oisin" and *The Shadowy Waters*. In his 1906

revision of the 1900 verse play, Yeats removes the reference to the son of the sea. This omission lends some credence to the hypothesis that he finds it unnecessary to name the god, as his force is otherwise felt.

"The Wanderings of Oisin," published in 1889, tells of Finn's son and his trip to Tirnanog (a happy otherworld) with Niamh, the immortal daughter of Aengus and Edain, who resides there. After spending three centuries in three different regions of that world, Oisin returns to find an Ireland three centuries older than the one he left, and a world in which Christianity has gained dominance. The long narrative poem is in the form of a dialogue between Oisin, now old as he has left his everlasting youth in the land over the sea, and Saint Patrick. The poem constitutes a poignant confrontation between the Fenian hero and the cleric.

Traditionally, the Irish otherworld is presided over by Manannan Mac Lir, and it is generally associated with what is now called the Isle of Man. Although Yeats does portray an island which Oisin reaches by sea, he prefers not to make Manannan its lord. Alfred Nutt writes of "Angus, of the fairy mound, within which is an enchanted palace,"[7] and one can assume that this figure is the ruler Yeats assumed for Oisin's Tirnanog, since Niamh is the daughter of Aengus (Yeats's spelling).

Aengus is particularly apt for this role in Yeats's poem because he is the god of love; it is for love of Niamh that Oisin undertakes his journey to the otherworld. The otherworld may be seen as a metaphor for perfect love in "The Wanderings of Oisin" and it can be seen as the dominant aspect of that metaphor in *The Shadowy Waters*. In addition, as Morton Irving Seiden notes, "Tirnanog . . . is implicitly equated, I think, with Anima Mundi [sic]," since there "the soul escapes from the sorrows of human life."[8] This second aspect of the sea metaphor functions concomitantly with the first, as it also does in the verse play.

Seiden, continuing his explication, points out a third aspect:

> I take the four islands to be the cosmic quarternaries; the opposition of Tirnanog and Ireland, the cosmic antinomies; and Oisin's journey into and out of Tirnanog, the cyclical movement of human life.[9]

However, there is an opposition not only of Tirnanog and Ireland, but of the Ireland which Oisin leaves in his youth and the Ireland to which he returns as an old man. This opposition is embodied in the two characters of Oisin, the hero from the past, and Patrick, the Christian saint representing society in Christian Ireland. Oisin rails against the change that has taken place in his absence:

> We sang the loves and angers without sleep,
> And all the exultant labours of the strong.
> But now the lying clerics murder song
> With barren words and flatteries of the weak.
> ("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book II, 201-204)

He refuses to rescind his blasphemy and threatens to

> . . . go to the Fenians, O cleric, to chaunt
> The war-songs that roused them of old; they
> will rise, making clouds with their breath.
> ("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book III, 180-181)

Patrick tells him that the Fenians are irrevocably lost in hell, and Oisin vows to join them wherever they are. His professed confidence, however, is belied by his inability to act on his threat or to recall the Fenians. The poem becomes a lament for the passing of the old heroic times.

As one of the gods who Patrick says is now dead, Manannan Mac Lir is associated with that past age. This alone explains the otherwise inexplicable and depressing Book II of "Oisin." At the beginning of his second century in the otherworld, Oisin travelled with Niamh to find "dark towers" which "rose in the darkness." Surely these are not a sight which one would expect to find in the happy land of Tirnanog. As the pair enter the underwater world of the "Country-under-wave," the scene is desolate and ugly. They rise "between/The seaweed-covered pillars" on a dark pathway," to find a lovely "lady with soft eyes like funeral tapers." The imagery alerts the reader that all is not well here. The lady "with a wave-rusted chain" is "tied/To two old eagles," and Oisin is powerless to save her. Waves that cause rust indicate that the sea is no longer benevolent and beautiful. The path into the tower is covered with "green slime" and shows "prints of sea-born scales." This is the atmosphere in which Niamh finds "a sword whose shine/No centuries could dim" with the word in Ogham, "Manannan," which he gives to Oisin.

Manannan's sword shines in the darkness; it is the last remnant of the god who apparently once inhabited the tower. The god himself has vanished. The narrative relates that after the sea god built the "dark hall" he "cried to all/The mightier masters of a mightier race," but,

> . . .at his cry there came no milk-pale face
> Under a crown of thorns and dark with blood,
> But only exultant faces.
> ("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book II, 129-131)

These lines imply that Manannan expected Christ to answer his call. Indeed, Christ is the God who replaces him in the Irish people's faith. Manannan's absence from his tower is then a metaphor for his disappearance in Irish belief. Ireland, bereft of the Fenians and left to Patrick, is paralleled and symbolized by Manannan's tower, abandoned to the "demon dry as a withered sedge," the opposite of the sea god. Oisin cannot destroy the demon whose continual self-renewal and changes "through many shapes" is grotesquely analogous to Manannan's shape-changing. This foreshadows his inability to defeat Patrick on his return to Ireland.

Pehaps the weakening of faith in the old gods creates a gap which is then filled by Christianity. Yeats implies this:

> 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 the 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. No thought of mine had prepared me for this emotion, for I had been preoccupied with Aengus and Edain, and with Manannan, Son of the Sea.
> (*The Celtic Twilight*, "A Voice," II 1-10)

The nearness of the marsh and the wood, and the sense of loss at not being able to believe in the deities which had comforted his forebears, could account for Yeats's sudden need of some supernatural being to believe in. Similarly, in "The Wanderings of Oisin," the people's loss of faith in the old gods and heroes may explain their acceptance of Patrick and his creed.

The death of Manannan in Book II, then, is a metaphor for the tragic loss of the ancient gods and hence the heroic Irish past. It is all the more tragic because the sea is traditionally so important to the Irish. Yeats writes, "I am certain that the water, the water of the seas and of lakes, of mist and rain, has all but made the Irish after its image" (*The Celtic Twilight*, "Earth, Fire and Water"). He makes this point in *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*, by portraying Cathleen, who is Ireland, as a shape-changer (from old woman to young). The young man, Michael, who follows Cathleen ni Hoolihan, behaves as Oisin does when he follows Niamh and forgets all his earthly connections at the sight of the enchanting woman. Thus the sea may be seen as a metaphor for the attraction of a great love, as well as a heroic past. The metaphor functions in "Oisin" to foreshadow and underscore the tragedy of the loss of those otherworlds.

The Shadowy Waters is more optimistic than "Oisin." In this work, too, the hero sets out over the sea to go to a happy otherworld. However, *The Shadowy Waters* concentrates on a short episode in which Forgael and Dectora meet on the

seas, apparently close to the otherworld, and determine to travel on to it together. The sea provides the setting for the play and acts as a central metaphor.

S.B. Bushrui gives a detailed account of the changes Yeats made when he revised this play in 1906 and again in 1907 in *Yeats's Verse-Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910* (Oxford, 1965). Without altering the theme, he molded the work into better drama by eliminating unnecessary symbolism and rhetoric, and by differentiating the various characters more carefully. Two versions will be referred to here, the original and the 1906 version.

Bushrui sees *The Shadowy Waters* as concerning a "metaphor for happy love — which also applies to artistic perfection." The first idea is not new to us; the second introduces a new dimension to our understanding of the otherworld. Allen R. Grossman, in *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats: A Study of THE WIND AMONG THE REEDS* (Charlottesville, 1969), interprets the adjectival expression "pearl pale" as "reflecting the affinities to death of the poetic impulse." This epithet, used repeatedly to describe Niamh in "Oisin," can also apply to Dectora. Thus the attraction to a perfect love, to a dream world, to the past, to death, is the same attraction that the poet feels to his art: the lure of losing oneself in an otherworld. This aspect of the metaphor is especially invoked by the figure of Aengus, whom the sailors report having seen in *The Shadowy Waters*. In his poem, "The Song of Wandering Aengus," Yeats has the speaker go "out to the hazel wood" and "cut . . . a hazel wand" before he sees "a glimmering girl" who attracts then eludes him, causing him to wander endlessly after, in search of her. Bruce A. Rosenberg demonstrates that Aengus' quest, like Oisin's and Forgael's, is for "some ineffable thing related to eternal youth and its vigor and strength, or to immortality — with its suggestions of life at its fullest and richest." But furthermore, he shows that the hazel wand is the badge of the poet, and he relates Aengus' search to Sinend's journey to a well containing the hazels of poetry, in order gain inspiration. Aengus is attracted to the maiden because her "beautiful singing partakes of unageing intellect."[10] Rosenberg directs the reader to Yeats's preface to *Gods and Fighting Men* where he explains that the sun and moon are two kinds of artistic inspiration; Yeats writes, "I myself imagine a marriage of the sun and the moon, respectively. Thus, *The Shadowy Waters* evidences the extension of the otherworld which is reached by the sea, to include the perfect world of poetic inspiration. *Waters* evidences the extension of the otherworld which is reached by the sea, to include the perfect world of poetic inspiration.

Another interpretation of the nature of Forgael's expedition is explicit:

> For it is love that I am seeking for,
> But of a beautiful, unheard-of kind
> That is not in the world.
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 183-185)

Forgael continues to explain his dissatisfaction with the kind of love that is in this world:

> But he that gets their [earthly women's]
> love after the fashion
> Loves in brief longing and deceiving hope
> And bodily tenderness, and finds that even
> The bed of love, that in the imagination
> Had seemed to be the giver of all peace,
> Is no more than a wine-cup in the tasting,
> And as soon finished.
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 188-194)

Forgael compares earthly love with wine. In "Discoveries," Yeats says that "wine is emotion," and emotion "grows intoxicating and delightful after it has been enriched with the memory of old emotions, with all the uncounted flavours of old experience." Thus, when Forgael pretends to be Dectora's slain king, he also connects himself with a greater, ancient experience, and she is intoxicated with a love that is, at last, immortal:

> Do you not know me, lady? I am he
> That you are weeping for.
> . . .
> Listen to that low-laughing string
> of the moon
> And you will recollect my face and voice,
> For you have listened to me playing it
> These thousand years.
> . . .
> *Dectora.* Have I not loved you for a
> thousand years?
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 317-327, 357)

The disappearance of a traditional notion of time and its replacement with an eternity, in which time is protracted, corresponds to the confusion of time which Oisin experiences in Tirnanog when he asks, "Were we days long or hours long in riding?" "A beautiful young man" tells Oisin,

> Then mock at Death and Time with glances
> And wavering arms and wandering dances.
>
> ("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book I, 264-265)

In Tirnanog, dancing and laughter (note Forgael's "low-laughing string") banish Death and Time. But in *Waters*, while time clearly disappears for Forgael and Dectora, death is strangely present, seemingly synonomous with the happy world they are headed for.

Grossman writes of "Forgael's search for the love which is synonomous with death." Although early in the play Forgael says, "And yet I cannot think they're leading me/To death," when Aibric asserts, "It's certain they are leading you to death," the hero replies,

> What matter
> If I am going to my death? — for there,
> Or somewhere, I shall find the love they
> have promised.
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 224-226)

Dectora undergoes a similar acceptance. Near the end of the play, she too speaks of having been "promised" "an unimaginable happiness." Aibric warns her, too:

> And if that happiness be more than dreams,
> More than the froth, the feather, the
> dust-whirl,
> The crazy nothing that I think it is,
> It shall be the country of the dead,
> If there be such a country.
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 464-468)

Dectora protests, "No not there," and demands of Forgael, "Is that true?" He answers unreassuringly, "I do not know for certain," but she determines to go on with Forgael.

These exchanges, which occur in the 1906 revision, indicate that the characters sense that their quest is for death; although the materialistic Aibric comprehends this clearly and with revulsion, Forgael and Dectora (when she is won over to the dream) apprehend it only vaguely and with a longing for the lasting satisfaction that it offers. In the 1900 version, this aspect is expressed less directly when Forgael says, "My love shakes out her hair upon the streams/Where the world ends." The sea, then, carries the hero and heroine to love and to death — the happy death offered by Fand in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*.

Bushrui notes, "*The Shadowy Waters* of 1900 marked the culminating point in Yeats's nostalgia for a dream-world." This nostalgia has been seen in a number of poems about dream-worlds reached by the sea, by dream, by death, or by combinations of these vehicles or states. "The Indian to his Love" says, "The island dreams" where,

> . . . we will moor our lonely ship
> And wander ever with woven hands.
>
> ("The Indian to his Love," ll. 6-7)

It is significant that although Forgael and Dectora both feel sure they are going to a place (Forgael says, "there,/Or somewhere, I shall find the love they have promised," and Dectora says, "O carry me/To some sure country"), no tangible place comparable to Niamh's islands is shown in the play; neither is there any indication that such a tangible place exists. The reader is left somewhere between the blissful couple and the skeptical sailors in his attitude toward the destiny of the pair of lovers. Furthermore, while Osim is courted by a semi-divine immortal, Forgael and Dectora are both mortals.

Forgael is looking for an immortal lover, and he is therefore disappointed when he first sees Dectora:

> Why do you cast a shadow?
> Where do you come from? Who brought you
> to this place?
> They would not send me one that casts
> a shadow.
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 311-313)

She also assumes that the endless happiness Forgael promises can only be offered by a deity:

> Is it not true
> That you were born a thousand years ago,
> In islands where the children of Aengus wind
> In happy dances under a windy moon,
> And that you'll bring me there?
>
> (*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 363-367)

The fact that neither is actually divine, and that no enchanted place is portrayed in the play, suggests that there is no world of the gods, or that it no longer exists. However, the fact remains that both are in some way enchanted; Forgael is led on his journey by mysterious birds, and the sailors tell of having seen a magical couple, presumably Aengus and Edain. Similarly, Forgael's reiteration that happiness has been "promised" him (he uses the expression five times), and Dectora's adoption of the same word when she becomes a party to the vision, suggests an association with the Land of Promise, one frequent name for Tirnanog.[11] Yeats must have intended this, since he included all the occurrences of the word in his revision of 1906.

The resolution of this seeming paradox, the simultaneous existence and nonexistence of a happy otherworld-heaven, may lie in the poem which precedes the original version of *The Shadowy Waters*. This poem may also hold the clue to the significance of the sailor's request for a tale of Manannan (spelled in this instance "Mananan") in the same version, and the god's inexplicit influence on the subsequent version as well.

The untitled introductory poem begins, "I walked among the seven woods of Coole," and continues for sixteen lines to name and describe those woods, including "Inchy wood." Then:

> I had not eyes like those enchanted eyes,
> Yet dreamed that beings happier than men
> Moved round me in the shadows, and at night
> My dreams were cloven by voices and by fires;
> And in the images I have woven in this story
> Of Forgael and Dectora and the empty waters
> Moved round me in the voices and the fires.
>
> (ll. 17-23)

The situation and vision described here are strikingly reminiscent of the section previously quoted from Yeats's "A Voice." There Yeats wrote of walking "close to Inchy Wood" and feeling suddenly a "dependence on a great personal Being somewhere far off yet near at hand," which he took to be the "root of Christian mysticism." This came to him when he "had been preoccupied with Aengus and Edain, and with Manannan, Son of the Sea." Then he tells of waking that night, hearing a voice and seeing "the loveliest people I have ever seen," "a young man and a young girl" (in *The Celtic Twilight*, "A Voice").

The poem which introduces *The Shadowy Waters* seems to be a poetic remaking of the experience recounted in "A Voice." The story of Forgael and Dectora may then be Yeats's imagination at work on the lovely couple he saw that night. The connection in his mind of this experience with "Christian mysticism" may account for the fusion of the Irish legendary aspects of the play's dream with a Christian type of heaven. The presence of Aengus and Edain in the play certainly relates to Yeats's association of his vision with his concurrent thoughts to them. Furthermore, Yeats calls his play a "story/Of Forgael and Dectora and the empty waters." The waters, then, are a form of Manannan, Son of the Sea, the third figure in his thoughts that day.

The poem continues to inquire about the nature of the land of "beings happier than men," calling it "Eden," making the connection with Christian belief explicit:

> Is Eden far away, or do you hide
> From human thought, as hares and mice and
> coneys
> That run before the reaping-hook and lie
> In the last ridge of the barley?
> . . .
> Is Eden out of time and out of space?
> And do you gather about us when pale light
> Shining on water and fallen among leaves,
> And winds blowing from flowers, and whirr
> of feathers
> And the green quiet, have uplifted the heart?
>
> (ll. 30-40)

Grossman poses an answer to these questions, based on his reading of *The Wind Among the Reeds: "Eden is in the Self."* We may enlarge this, however, in the light of Yeats's conception of *Anima Mundi:* it is in the self whose soul is in communion with other souls, as when Forgael plays to Decotra as one who has been playing to her "These thousand years."The poem suggests that Eden is conjured by a "whirr of feathers"; thus the birds which lead Forgael symbolize, in Bushrui's words, "the means of communication between the 'Anima Mundi' and Forgael."

Yeats asks, in the poem, whether Eden hides "From human thought, as hares" that run before a reaping farmer. This recalls numerous hares which tantalize men seeking happiness, most notably Yeats's Red Hanrahan who chases an enchanted hare into a life of wandering when he wants to run to his beloved. Lady Gregory, Yeats's close friend to whom the introductory poem is dedicated, writes in her *Gods and Fighting Men* of Manannan leading Conchubar to Deidre, "running with the appearance of a hare before the hounds of the men of Ulster to bring them there."

The association of Manannan, the shape-changer, with the hare in Yeats's poem is natural, since it is the sea which carries Forgael to Dectora, and the sea is the only site depicted for their happy world, "the empty waters" which Yeats refers to as the third subject of his play. Moreover, Yeats questions Eden's hiding from "human thought," implying that when it is found, it resides there. It has been seen that Yeats associates thought with the sea, seeing "our daily thought" as mere "foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea," which, in its depth, is *Anima Mundi.* Manannan or the sea, is the "vast luminous" place where Forgael and Dectora merge into *Anima Mundi.* That they seem to face death in the vast sea is fitting, for, to continue Grossman's analysis, "Eden is in the self; the only proper metaphor of that self is the timeless and absolute Ideal; the only moral act equivalent to the greatness of the self so conceived is death."

The part that Manannan plays in *The Shadowy Waters* is great, and it has been seen that Yeats was aware of the sea god as one inspiration for the work. Thus, in the original version the author places the god in the work by having one of the sailors request a tale about him:

> *Another Sailor* And tell how Mananan sacked
> Murias

Under the waves, and took a thousand women
When the dark hounds were loosed.
(*The Shadowy Waters*, ll. 377-379)

The sailor's interest in the sea god is very understandable, since Manannan traditionally protected seafarers, and the reference to his taking women and plundering is evidence of the sailors' lusts which serve as the opposing pole to Forgael's spiritual quest. However, in the 1906 version, Yeats employs more explicit expressions of the sailors' lusts ("I am so tired of being a bachelor/I could give all my heart to that Red Moll/That had but one eye") and omits the dramatically inappropriate request for a tale at a time when they are busy themselves plundering. Just as he eliminates the introductory poem which makes the play's meaning explicit, so he abandons the direct reference to the sea god. Manannan's force is felt, however, as strongly as the play makes clear its own meaning without explicit hints.

"Three Songs to the One Burden" is a relatively short poem comprise of three parts, each containing three verses and each devoted to a different speaker. The style of the poem is as different as might be expected from the rather loose narrative of "Oisin" and the poetic verse of *The Shadowy Waters*, since it was published thirty-three years after the revision of the play.[12] It employs the "passionate speech" which Yeats had come to favor when he wrote in his essay, "Modern Poetry," that "Poetry must resemble prose, and both must accept the vocabulary of their time."

The theme of "Three Songs," however, is not far divergent from the theme of "Oisin." Oisin is an anachronous, vital hero stranded in a decadent world. "Three Songs" presents Mannion and Middleton, a "Tinker" and a recluse, railing against the decay they see around them much as Oisin rails against Patrick's Ireland.

When Oisin returns to Ireland and sees "a small and a feeble populace stooping with mattock and spade," he says, "Went the laughter of scorn from my mouth like the roaring of wind in a wood." This is the same scornful "roaring" that Mannion exhibits when he gives as his name, "The Roaring Tinker," and the same show of strength he admires when he says of Manannan,

His roaring and his ranting
Best please a wandering man
("Three Songs to the One Burden," I, 16-17)

The Tinker traces his heritage back to the sea god ("All Mannions come from Manannan"), and this accounts for his separation from the other people of his time whom he calls "the common sort," and whom he beats up, according to his own boast ("I knock their heads about"). Oisin's strength surpasses that of the men he finds when he reaches Ireland after his absence:

And there at the foot of the mountain, two
carried a sack full of sand,
They bore it with staggering and sweating, but
fell with their burden at length.
Leaning down from the gem-studded saddle, I
flung it five yards with myhand,
With a sob for the men waxing so weakly, a
sob for the Fenians' old strength.
("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book III, 185-188)

Similarly, when Mannion fights, he can "Take on half a score." Just as Book II of "Oisin" showed a desolate tower where Manannan no longer ruled, so in "Three Songs" Mannion speaks of Manannan in the past tense ("He never lay," "He had," "Nor ever made"), and wishes vainly for his rebirth:

Could that old god rise up again
We'd drink a can or two,
And out and lay our leadership
On country and on town,
Throw likely couples into bed
And knock the others down.
("Three Songs to the One Burden," I, 21-26)

This vain wish corresponds with Oisin's:

. . . for I go to the Fenians, O cleric, to
chaunt
The war-songs that roused them of old; they will
rise, making clouds with their breath,
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay
underneath them shall pant,
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled
beneath them in death.
("The Wanderings of Oisin," Book III, 201-204)

This theme, which Seiden calls "the degenerating process of history," corresponds with Yeats's feeling that the past world was a happier one.

Part of "Three Songs" is narrated by Henry Middleton, a character whom Jeffares identifies as a cousin of Yeats.[13] Middleton is not a pugnacious figure like Mannion and Oisin; he lives in "A small forgotten house" and,

The post and garden-boy alone
Have keys to my old gate.

He has locked his gate on the world because he shares the other characters' scorn for it:

I pity all the young,
I know what devil's trade they learn
From those they live among.
("Three Songs to the One Burden," II, 11-13)

He, too, is strong, in a sense, because he is connected with an earlier age:

Memories of the talk
Of henwives and of queer old men
Brace me and make me strong.
("Three Songs to the One Burden," II, 22-24)

Thomas R. Whitaker in *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Chapel Hill, 1964), suggests "Mannion and Middleton, who spit comically into the face of time, present the Dionysian vitality and Antaean widsom in Ireland's 'heroic wantoness.' " Earlier, the same critic writes that Manannan himself is, for Yeats, "not only a Protean shape-changer but also a Dionysian spirit of vitality." Thus the sea god appears in the poem as a symbol of vitality, or, according to the interpretations previously demonstrated, communion with *Anima Mundi*, which Ireland (or the modern world) has lost.

The third and last part of "Three Songs" has no identified speaker; presumably, the poet himself is speaking in one of his poetic characterizations. He addresses a world whose denizens are "players all" to ask them to "praise Nineteen-Sixteen," the year of the Irish uprising which might parallel in modern times the Fenians' heroic glory. But even Connolly, the "Commandant in the Post Office during the uprising," is called a "player."[14] Just as Oisin's comrades passed away without ensuring the glory of their descendants, the modern Irish rebels cannot prevent the sufferings of their descendants:

For Patrick Pearse had said
That in every generation
Must Ireland's blood be shed
("Three Songs to the One Burden," III, 24-26)

Each verse of "Three Songs" ends, "*From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.*" Jeffares suggests that this line is

> possibly a memory of the horsemen described by Mary Battle, the servant of George Pollexfen, Yeats's uncle who lived in Sligo. She described mysterious women as like "the men one sees riding their horses in twos and threes on the slopes of the mountains with their swords swinging. There is no such race living now, none so finely proportioned."[15]

This explanation of the source of the line is plausible. There may also be an association with Manannan, who had "a horse called 'Splendid Mare,' which was swifter than the spring wind, and travelled equally fast on land or over the waves of

the sea."[16] In Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, the hero tells of being attacked " 'from the backs of horses' " by " 'the people of Manannan, son of the sea.' "In Yeats's play, Emer says, "Old Manannan's unbridled horses come/Out of the sea, and on their backs his horsemen."

In either case, or in both cases, the refrain lends an air of legendary or mythological mystery to the poem, appearing like the sword of Manannan in "Oisin" as a painful and useless remnant and reminder of the age that is past, mocking the present age. In Mannion's verse, the "fierce horsemen" seem to represent the speaker's vain dream of riding with the sea god to rout the "common sort." In Middleton's, the line is like an echo of the "memories" which give him strength but make him bitter against the world outside his gate. In the last part, the ever-riding horsemen become symbolic of the futility of heroism in an unheroic age, as well as the endless call for "Ireland's blood."

In the three works in which Yeats mentions Manannan Mac Lir, "The Wanderings of Oisin, *The Shadowy Waters*, and "The Three Songs to The One Burden," the sea god represents an old, vital and admirable race of gods, and he is associated with the ancient Irish heroism which reigned when those gods were believed in. Since he is the son of the sea and its god, Manannan is often synonymous with the sea, a major metaphor in Yeats's work, especially as the vehicle to a happy otherworld which is complex in associations and connections, and certainly expresses Yeats's conception of *Anima Mundi;* Manannan's shape-changing ability and the texture of the sea itself lead Yeats to associate them with minds of men. In each of the works discussed, Manannan figures in a way which reinforces the theme and tenor of the work. In other works, although the sea god may not be mentioned by name, the presence of the sea or other shape-changing forces contributes to the development of the metaphor of the otherworld.

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Footnotes

[1]W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd, 1959), pp. 345-346, 350-351, 355.

[2]W.Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (London, 1911) p. 299.

[3]Lady Gregory, "The Only Jealousy of Emer," *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (London, 1902) The sea is not mentioned in this tale; Cuchulain is merely lured to "a country, bright, free, where no lies are spoken, and no bad thing" p 237.

[4]Lady Gregory, "Bricriu's Feast," *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* In this legend, the sower of discord is merely a bitter-tongued Irishman, and the scene is his house in a wood.

[5]Alfred Nutt, "The Irish Vision of the Happy Otherworld and the Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth," in Kuno Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal to the Land of the Living* (London, 1895), p 299.

[6]Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (New York, 1963), pp. 76-77.

[7]Nutt, p. 233.

[8]Morton Irving Seiden, *William Butler Yeats The Poet as a Mythmaker 1865-1939* (Michigan State U. Press, 1962), p. 55.

[9]Seiden, p. 56.

[10]Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Irish Folklore and 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' " *Philological Quarterly*, XLVI, 527-535.

[11]This name of Tirnanog is found in most accounts of Celtic mythology including Nutt *passim* and Wentz, p 333 I have the strong conviction that I have seen it in Yeats's own writing, although I am presently unable to locate any example.

[12]A Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W B Yeats* (Stanford, 1968), p. 488. Jeffares notes, "the date of composition is not known; the three songs first appeared in the *Spectator* (26 May 1939) "

[13]Jeffares, p. 488.

[14]Jeffares, p. 229.

[15]Jeffares, p. 488.

[16]Charles Squire, *Celtic Myth and Legend, Poetry and Romance* (London, n.d), p 60

Tannen, Deborah. "Celtic Elements in Three Works by William Butler Yeats." Folklore and Mythology Studies 2(1978).30-35.