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**The Quest for the Ideal: Romantic  
Escapism in W. B. Yeats's *The Land of  
Heart's Desire* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan***

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**Abstract**

This research paper argues that “romantic escapism” is a recurrent motif in Yeats’s early drama, with specific regard to his two plays – *The Land of Heart’s Desire* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The protagonists in both plays share a common romantic escapist attitude despite their mutual differences regarding the reasons beyond their escapism and the nature of the metaphysical ideal world they hope to escape to. They are quintessentially romantic seekers who hope to transcend their painful and boring realities to much more ideal worlds of liberty, immortality, spirituality, and happiness. Therefore, they set out on spiritual journeys, nourished by their romantic limitless imagination, to discover untrodden meta-realities ranging from that of the faeries to that of patriotism and martyrdom with the aim to break free from their mundane, tedious, and malignant physical realities. Through the use of the interdisciplinary approach, the researcher explores these psychological journeys within their social, religious, and political contexts with the aim to examine the theme of “the quest for the ideal” in the two plays under study, pinpointing the form that this theme assumes in each play.

**Key Words:**

William Butler Yeats; *The Land of Heart’s Desire*; *Cathleen ni Houlihan*; Romanticism; Romantic Escapism; Idealism

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In his 1931 poem, "Coole Park and Ballylee", the outstanding Irish poet, dramatist, and essayist William Butler Yeats declared that he and some of his contemporaries were the last Romantics: "We were the last Romantics – chose for theme / Traditional Sanctity and loveliness" (41-42). By aligning himself with the established romantic tradition of Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and Keats, he acknowledged his being affected by them in subject-matter, vision, and technique. As such, many of his early works are pervaded by romantic settings, tones, and, above all, the underlying "escape motif" – the romantic tendency to escape from the world of reality to more ideal worlds created through one's imagination. In the same way Wordsworth declared his boredom with the materialistic world in which he lived in his "The World Is Too Much With Us," Shelley pronounced his desire to be a natural element rather than being a human being in his "Ode to The West Wind," and Keats announced his preference of the happy ideal world of the nightingale to the miserable reality of his life in "Ode to the Nightingale," Yeats centered most of his poetry and early dramatic writings on the same "escape" motif. "Celtic Twilight," "Sailing to Byzantium," and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" are representative poems that tackle their different personae's romantic desire to escape into an ideal world of freedom, happiness, and immortality. On the other hand, *The Land of*

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*Heart's Desire*, *The Shadowy Waters*, and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* are plays that Yeats wrote in an early stage of his career to deal with the same theme. In these texts the protagonists are indulgent in a fervent search for an ideal world in which their souls enjoy liberty and pleasure not experienced in real life. They set out on spiritual journeys to discover metaphysical worlds ranging from that of the faeries to that of heroism and martyrdom with the aim to break free from their mundane realities. The main difference from the traditional romantic escapism of Keats's and his contemporaries' personae is that in Yeats's drama the protagonists, once they start their escapist journeys, never return to real life once more.

Out of the above-mentioned premise that there is a connecting thread between Yeats's early works and that of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantics, this research paper critically traces the romantic escapist journeys for the ideal in two of Yeats's early plays, *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). The researcher argues that the protagonists of both plays share a common romantic escapist attitude despite mutual differences regarding the reasons beyond their escapism and the nature of the metaphysical ideal world they hope to escape to. Accordingly, the present paper attempts to answer the following questions: What is escapism in general? What is meant by romantic escapism in particular? Why does the protagonist in each play desire to escape his reality? How are the contexts of the two plays similar and how are they different? What are the characters' motives behind their escapism? What is the nature of the ideal world the hero and the heroine seek? In what way do these ideal worlds function? How is romantic escapism in Yeats's drama similar to and different from the romantic escapism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics?

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Yeats's dramatic characters are romantic seekers who struggle to transcend the painful and boring life of the reality they live in to an ideal world of freedom, happiness, heroism and martyrdom. The heroine of *The Land of Heart's Desire*, for example, feels bored of the tedious tempo of the life she leads, a life that has nothing new in its long course but daily routine and everlasting stagnancy. Stereotypical female roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland like marrying, giving birth, upbringing children, caring for husband and children among others are all that are there in the heroin's life now she is newly-wed and later on when aged. As a result, she aspires to escape into an utterly different world, one full of freedom, happiness, immortality, and spirituality. Like all romantics, her imagination takes her far in search of this world till she finds it in the world of faeries.

In a similar way, the hero in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* suffers from the meaninglessness and pointlessness of his life despite the should-be happiness that looms over his life at the beginning of the play as it starts with the preparations for his wedding. The causes of the protagonist's boredom with his life, however, differ from that of his counterpart in *The Land of Heart's Desire*. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the main reason is a national one: the British occupation of Ireland. Accordingly, the ideal goal that the central character seeks is different from that in *The Land of Heart's Desire*. No sooner does he hear of the news of the arrival of the French troops at Killala to liberate "Mother Ireland", than he escapes into the dreams of heroism and martyrdom with their underlying values of romanticism, idealism, spirituality, and immortality of the soul after death. In the same way the heroine of *The Land of Heart's Desire* dies at the end of the

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play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* ends with the expected death of the hero in an act of self-sacrifice for the sake of his country.

The rationale behind choosing these two dramatic texts, in particular, from Yeats's oeuvre is twofold. First, these two works, among other plays such as *The Shadowy Waters* (1900) and *Where There Is Nothing* (1902), belong to the early stage of Yeats's dramatic writings. By choosing representative texts from this period, the researcher hopes to shed light on the motif of romantic escapism and show how the quest-for-the-ideal theme dominates Yeats's dramatic works in such a stage of his theatrical production. Second, these two plays, though common in theme, represent two different destinations of escapism and two dissimilar reasons beyond it. Though the two central characters in both plays share an overwhelming desire to escape from their mortal condition into immortality, the motives behind their escapism and the aspired-to directions differ. As mentioned above, the monotony of life is the major cause of the heroine's escapism in *The Land of Heart's Desire* and the world of faeries is her destination, whereas the British occupation of Ireland as a cause and the ideal world of patriotism and martyrdom as a target are the case for the hero of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The aim beyond selecting two escapist dramas that have different grounds and dissimilar destinations is to assert that the quest for the ideal is a recurrent theme in Yeats's drama regardless of the form it may assume.

Since romantic escapism is a recurrent theme in most of Yeats's poetry and early drama, with specific regard to the two plays in question, the researcher finds it necessary to adopt a critical approach that helps trace this theme within its different social, political, and religious contexts. Accordingly, the researcher adopts the *interdisciplinary*

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*approach* of literary criticism which best suits the nature of the study. By exploiting this critical method, the writer aims at exploring the theme of the quest for the ideal in the two plays under study, pinpointing the different form that this theme assumes in each play as a result of the different context of each.

Escapism is defined in *English Oxford Living Dictionaries* as “The tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy.” *Collins English Dictionary* provides a similar definition of the term: “An inclination to or habit of retreating from unpleasant or unacceptable reality, as through diversion or fantasy.” Common to these definitions is the existence of an unpleasant reality that the escapist struggles to avoid and that fantasy is the character’s medium of this escape towards a more ideal world in which the maladies of real life are transcended.

Escapism in the previous sense is not a new concept, for “mankind’s innate dissatisfaction with existence,” as Andrew Evans argues “is probably almost as old as existence itself” (qtd in Krehan 1). However old it is as a human passion, escapism remains a quintessential Romantic literary motif par excellence. In its article on Romanticism, *Encyclopedia Britannica* highlights the centrality of escapism in the Romantic Movement: “Romanticism can be seen as a rejection of the precepts of order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality.” On the other hand, it emphasizes “the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.” Phrased differently, Romanticism is against what is real, tedious, and rational and

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is on the side of whatever is imagined, metaphysical, and supernatural. In a nutshell, the Romantic Movement itself may be described as a move from reality towards meta-reality, a better world that celebrates the spiritual values of the soul.

Imagination is at the centre of such an escapist tendency. It is the “gateway to transcendental experience and spiritual truth” (Romanticism, Britannica). Since it is impossible to escape the reality one lives in on any realistic level, the individual finds an outlet in one’s boundless imagination; in the same way Keats and Shelly flew on the wings of imagination to the worlds of the nightingale and the west wind, one can tread through fantasy untrodden worlds he has never been to before. With the body on earth, the soul can loom high in utopian worlds in which it finds relief and comfort from the tiring tediousness of reality that holds the soul in its traps.

Through the gateway of imagination, most Romantic poets of the first half of the nineteenth century with whom Yeats showed affinity trod fantasy worlds in which their souls were set free from the chains of the body. Wordsworth wrote ‘The World Is Too Much With Us’ which is considered the “keynote of escapism in the English Romantic Movement” (Jochem i). In his poem, Wordsworth expresses his boredom with the overwhelming materialistic wave of the modern age and the corrupted mechanical life of modern cities with which the spirit of man is at odds:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our  
powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
(1-4)

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He, also, wrote “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and “London” in which he expresses much more dissatisfaction with modern life. Similar to Wordsworth, Coleridge wrote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in which he escapes into the world of mystery and the supernatural. Keats did the same when he wrote two famous odes, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in which he contrasts what is ideal with what is real, what is beautiful with what is mundane. Last but not least, Shelley wrote “Ode to the West Wind” in which he expresses his unity with the natural world around him by wishing to be a mere leaf or seed transferred by the wind from place to place rather than living the misery and pain of everyday life.

For Yeats, those Romantic Poets “constituted a pantheon of writers he admired, imitated, and reacted against throughout his career” (Yeats & the Romantics). And among what he admired and imitated were the romantic themes and motifs, including romantic escapism, along with the Romantic language, settings, and techniques that pervaded his early works whether in verse or in prose. Accordingly, “It is fair to say that,” Dan Mulhall argues, “Yeats’s early work was part of the tradition of English Language Romantic poetry.”

Central to this romantic tradition to which Yeats belongs is his boredom with whatever is mortal, physical, or rational. Conversely, he celebrates whichever relates to the spiritual domain, be it love, imagination, escapism, myth, and supernatural. In his *W. B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist*, Heather C. Martin highlights Yeats’s heightened spirituality:

Yeats deplored the widespread acceptance at the end of the nineteenth century of the



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scientific (rationalistic) explanation of life which negated the spiritual life, not only in the other worlds, but in this world, and within human beings themselves. He was especially concerned with the degree to which this world view permeated even the arts, and often reiterated that the sterility of modern art in general and modern drama in particular was due to its divorce from myth and religion. (xii)

For this reason, Yeats's drama is pregnant with supernatural, mythical, folkloric, and mystical elements which are but "a means of rediscovering the spiritual and imaginative truths ... which were largely lost in the modern world through an overemphasis on the mind and rational faculties" (Martin 3).

Out of this romantic stress on the spiritual rather than the physical, Yeats conceives drama as "a picture of the soul of man, and not of his external life" (qtd in Martin 14). Drama, thus, should centre on the plight of man's soul within man's mortal condition. It should picture the spirit's never-ending journey towards an ideal meta-reality that transcends the limitations of physical existence. The protagonists in Yeats's plays, with specific regard to his early ones, are, therefore, represented as romantic questers, restless at heart seeking worlds different from their real ones, worlds through which they can gratify their deeply-rooted cravings for the ideal. "Yeats increasingly identified heroic subject-matter with imaginative endeavour," Matthew Gibson argues, "and delighted in the notion of the hero as romantic quester" (15). In the same way, Richard Taylor maintains that Yeats's early plays are mainly about characters aspiring for an ideal, spiritual world to escape into: 'The early plays celebrate an idealized spiritual existence which is the unchallenged,

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although sometimes unconscious, aspiration of the world-weary characters” (180).

Most of Yeats's early plays, thus, dramatize the spiritual journey of the dreamy characters towards their aspired-to worlds. Martin argues in this regard:

The plays chart the bittersweet, conflict-ridden journeys of mortals through human lives. Many of Yeats's protagonists are wanderers at heart, and their various journeys have distinctly spiritual tones – many of these characters echo Paul Routledge's sentiment in *Where There Is Nothing* that “As I can't leap from cloud to cloud I want wander from road to road ... Did you ever think that the roads are the only things that are endless ...? They are the serpent of eternity.” In alternate terms, they long for voyages and adventures of the type glorified by the Grail legends. (19)

As such are all the Yeatsian protagonists: romantic seekers who “all seek, though through different paths, the same unattainable objects” (Martin 20). The main aim beyond such journeys is to set one's soul free from the fetters of the mortal body, and the target is an ideal world that transcends the imperfections of reality.

However, the nature of such an ideal world differs from one dramatic work to another. It is the world of the faeries in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, whereas it is that of patriotism and nationalism in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. In the first drama, the fantasy world is presented as “a miraculous intrusion into the physical reality, an intervention from above,” where in the second it is “a manifestation or development from within the consciousness of the individual” (Taylor 180). Yet, both

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worlds share the same function, an escape from one's physical reality. In such a way, the two plays represent two sides of the same coin in which "the heart-shattering call of Mother Ireland" in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* "substitutes for the heart-shattering call of the faery world" in *The Land of Heart's Desire*. "Both plays emphasize the small-mindedness of rural life and dramatize the allure of some more ardent possibility" (Ross 314-315).

*The Land of Heart's Desire* is Yeats's first professionally-performed play. It opened on the Avenue Theatre in London in 1984 and lasted for six weeks. For the sake of simplification, the play is about the newly-wed Maire who is fed up with the daily domestic chores and is deeply concerned over the issue of aging. On reading an old book about the world of faeries, she gets so charmed by this world that she pleads with the faeries to take her to their chanted world of freedom and spontaneity. A young faery child soon arrives and succeeds through singing and dancing in enticing her into the faery world. In spite of her husband's entreatment for her to resist the temptation, she surrenders to the allure of the ideal by finally answering the faery call. The play ends with the physical death of the heroine, giving in her soul to the faeries in search of immortality.

Interwoven within the threads of this plot is the juxtaposition of two competing worlds with their different associations, that of humans and that of faeries. The real world of rationality, tediousness, and mortality is compared to the imagined, metaphysical world of spontaneity, impressiveness, and eternity. The protagonist, in her turn, is torn between the two realms unable to the last moment in the play to choose decisively for herself. Physically, Maire Bruin belongs to the world of reality she lives in. Spiritually, however, she aspires to a different ideal world in which all

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her thwarted dreams of liberty and immortality can be fulfilled. She finds such a world in an old manuscript written by her husband's grandfather that narrates the story of a princess that was lured into the world of faeries on May Eve. The newly discovered fantasy world lures Maire into its "irrational realms of dream and delirium ... of folk superstition and legend" to the extent that she does not want to get up from her dream (Baldick 223).

Maire's fascination with the utopian reality of the faeries is augmented by her age. Still in her early youth, her heart is "wild as be the hearts of birds" (Yeats, Heart's Desire 6). Her romantic, passionate nature cannot feel at rest with the everyday marital burdens attached to housewives in this historical period in Ireland. Father Hart summarizes these tasks and pinpoints how, by the passage of time, they put out the fiery nature of youth:

My colleen, I have seen some other girls  
Restless and ill at ease, but years went by  
And they grew like their neighbours and were  
glad  
In minding children, working at the churn,  
And gossiping of weddings and of wakes;  
For life moves out of the red flare of dreams  
Into a *common* light of *common* hours,  
Until old age bring the red flare again. (Yeats,  
Heart's Desire 9)

This "commonality of light and hours" that Father Hart stresses as the intrinsic nature of life is what deeply anguishes Maire. She cannot stand the stagnancy of life around her. She aspires to a world "Where nobody gets old and godly and grave, / Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise, / And where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue"

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(Yeats, Heart's Desire 8). Yet, she is stumbled by the reality of her life, where aging and commonality thwart every wild dream of hers. In a sincere moment, she complains to Father Hart about what disappoints her. She encapsulates her complaint in four main statements, each of which refers to one of the characters around her that, in its turn, represents a specific force in life:

Father, I am right weary of four tongues:  
A tongue that is too crafty and two wise,  
A tongue that is too godly and too grave,  
A tongue that is more bitter than the tide,  
And a kind tongue too full of drowsy love,  
Of drowsy love and my captivity. (Yeats,  
Heart's Desire 15)

In her complaint, Maire attacks four things: wisdom, religion, cruelty, and love. For her, they are but shackles on her potential as a free dreamy spirit. The four values are embodied respectively by her father-in-law, the village priest, her mother-in-law, and her husband. The four persons are stumbling blocks in Maire's life, for they always endeavour to drag her back from her wild dreams. On a much more symbolic level, they represent four meanings that hinder the journey of the soul towards immortality and idealism.

In the play, wisdom is a restraint on the heroine's fantasy as it is used to rationalize reality and show her dreams and aspirations as irrational deviations from the familiar. Maire's father-in-law attempts to lure her back into common life through his pretended wisdom more than once in the play, yet in vain. Firstly, he endeavours to dazzle her with his wealth: "Come, sit beside me, colleen / And put away your dreams of discontent, / For ... when I die / I will make you the wealthiest hereabout" (Yeats, Heart's Desire

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12-13). When his attempt fails, he resorts to another mechanism, showing fake sympathy towards her cause. He claims that all young people are the same kind of person as she is when they are still in their youth, but on getting old they become wiser and more contented with their lives. The goal is to encourage her to return to the normal course of life:

When we are young  
We long to tread a way none trod before,  
But find the excellent old way through love  
And through the care of children to the hour  
Forbidding Fate and Time and Change  
goodbye. (Yeats, Heart's Desire 13)

Religion is also a restriction on one's free spirit. For Maire, the role of religion is to limit the individual's freedom of the soul via depicting one's attempts to escape into ideal worlds, different from their earthly ones, as heretical and blasphemous. As such, Father Hart, the representative of the religious institution in the play, attempts to distract Maire away from her emerging dream of joining the world of faeries. He attributes Maire's craving for escapism to some "wrecked angels" who "set snares, / And bait them with light hopes and heavy dreams, / Until the heart is puffed with pride and goes, / half shuddering and Half joyous, from God's peace" (Yeats, Heart's Desire 8). In so doing, Father Hart exploits religion in the same way the Elizabethans used the Great Chain of Being to uproot the seeds of dissatisfaction from people's hearts lest they should grow into rebellion. The priest, with his ready-made religious explanations of everything, tries to root Maire's rebellious thoughts out and bring her back to the commonality of everyday life.

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Love is also presented in the play as a constraint on one's free spirit. When one falls in love, he/she is supposed to make his/her love a happy one. To do so, one should be indulged in the necessary demands of life without which life ceases to be beautiful anymore. To make her lover happy, for example, Maire needs to turn her attention to the common tasks of marital life: preparing food, making the beds, cleaning the house, giving birth, and raising children. Tasks like the aforementioned ones exhaust the soul in the routine duties of everyday life and leave it but a little chance to dream of and search for a much better world. For this reason, Shawn Bruin shows unfailing love for Maire from the beginning to the end of the play. The aim is not love in itself, but love as a trap that shackles his beloved's unlimited imagination. For this reason, Father Hart encourages Maire to return the love of Shawn to allow salvation of her, which in this case is the abandonment of her wild dreams, to occur. When her husband stretches his hand towards her, the priest encourages her to take it explaining in religious terms the power of love that Shawn attempts to communicate in a more secular tone:

Good daughter, take his hand – by love alone  
God binds us to himself and to the hearth  
And shuts us from the waste beyond His peace,  
From maddening freedom and bewildering  
light. (Yeats, Heart's Desire 16)

Cruelty, opposite to the three previous forces – wisdom, religion, and love, plays a different role, yet a complementary one. While the first three are used to restore the protagonist smoothly to the world of reality, cruelty is used by Bridget to harshly shock Maire back to the duties of daily life. The heroine is stricken every now and then by such tough words of her mother-in-law as “You are a good-

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for-nothing wife” and “You are the fool of every pretty face” so as to bring her back to reality. However, the result comes opposite to expectations. Instead of keeping her boundless dreams in check, Maire’s family contributes to her eruption that culminates in her impassioned plea for the faeries to rescue her:

Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!  
Let me have all the freedom I have lost;  
Work when I will and idle when I will!  
Faeries, come take me out of this dull world,  
For I would ride with you upon the wind,  
Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,  
And dance upon the mountains like a flame!  
(Yeats, Heart’s Desire 15)

To her own astonishment, her call is answered immediately by the arrival of a faery child at the cottage. With the arrival of the mythical child grave conflicts take place on different levels in the play. There is an ideological conflict between the authority of religion represented by Father Hart and the authority of the supernatural represented by the child. Comparably, there is another conflict between the power of love and that of freedom. On a third level, there is a deep conflict within the walls of Maire’s own character between her desire to fulfil what she has always dreamt of and her commitment to her real life demands. The three conflicts, however, can be encapsulated in the more inclusive conflict between the world of reality and the world of the ideal.

In *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, the faery child “represents spontaneity and freedom and anarchic loss of control” in face of what is artificial, tedious and rationalistic (Ellis 268). On her arrival at the Bruins’ cottage, she does



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her best to entice Marie into her world. In the same way the shepherd offers his beloved simple, yet thrilling, gifts from the natural world he lives in in Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love", the faery child offers Maire breathtaking rewards in case she submits her soul to the faeries. The first of such awards is the joy to be found in the newly untrodden world in contrast to the monotony of real life. In the utopian life of faeries, there are no sufferings or sorrows; only continual celebrations and constant pleasures are to be found: "There is one here who must away, away / To where the woods, the stars, and the white streams / are holding a continual festival" (Yeats, Heart's Desire 18-19). It is the land "Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood, / But joy is wisdom, Time an endless song" (Yeats, Heart's Desire 28).

On noticing that Marie is still torn between her love of Shawn and her aspiration for the ideal world of the faeries, the child keeps offering her irresistible gifts. She motivates the protagonist to settle the conflict in favour of her aspired-to dream through making the comparison between the two worlds unfair:

You love that great tall fellow over there:  
Yet I could make you ride upon the winds,  
Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,  
And dance upon the mountains like a flame!  
(Yeats, Heart's Desire 15)

To further shatter her fragile inclination to her physical reality, the supernatural being responds seductively to the four complaints she made at the beginning of the play. She addresses the heroine decisively:

But I can lead you, newly-married bride,  
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,  
Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,

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Where nobody gets old and bitter of the  
tongue,  
And where kind tongues bring no captivity,  
For we are only true to the far lights  
We follow singing, over valley and hill.  
(Yeats, Heart's Desire 29)

In spite of all these seductions, the protagonist is still hesitant to make the decision, maybe because she is still unable to break off the shackles of the working forces around her – the power of love, religion, wisdom, and regularity of life. Though she is the one that has summoned the faeries and has always dreamt of their company, she is now afraid to espouse her dream to the end. Ironically enough, she seeks refuge from her own romantic dreams in the same powers she has always sought to escape from. Firstly, she resorts to love as a redeeming power as she seeks help from her husband. On hearing the call of faeries, she falls back on her lover searching for protection: “Did you [Shawn] hear something call? O, guard me close, / Because I have said wrecked things tonight” (Yeats, Heart's Desire 17). When matters aggravate and the power of love fails to protect her, she seeks protection in religion instead: “Queen of Angels and kind Saints defend us” (Yeats, Heart's Desire 26).

There is an important question that poses itself now: Why is Maire afraid to pursue her dream to the end? The answer to this question lies in the romantic nature of the heroine. As most romantic questers, she dreams of a better world of which she depicts an ideal image in her own imagination. She imagines and pursues it in her day-dreams, but she is unable to live it on any realistic level, maybe because it is too ideal for her. In the same way, the romantic personae in both “Ode to the West Wind” by Shelley and

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“Ode to a Grecian Urn” by Keats come back from their imagined utopias towards the end of their psychological journeys, the protagonist in *The Land of Heart’s Desire* wants to come back from her dreams lest she should not be up to living her dream truly.

However, the conflict between the powers of love and religion, on the one side, and the power of the ideal, on the other side, is settled by a final comparison held by the child:

Stay, and come with me, newly-married bride,  
For if you hear him [Father Hart], you will  
grow like the rest:  
Bear children, cook, be mindful of the churn,  
And wrangle over butter, fowl, and eggs,  
And sit at last there, old and bitter tongue,  
Watching the white stars war upon your hopes.  
(Yeats, Heart’s Desire 28-29)

On imagining her life after the passage of time and getting old, Maire finally makes her mind to go with the child by declaring that “I will go with you [child]” (Yeats, Heart’s Desire 30). The play, hence, ends with the triumph of the power of the supernatural, transcendent, and ideal over that of religion, love, and commonality of life.

In the same way Maire is at odds with her condition of living, Michael of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is anguished by it, yet with a slight difference. In Maire’s case her boredom with her reality appears from the very beginning of the play, whereas Michael’s weariness of his life keeps dormant till a later stage when the old woman awakens it in him. A radical difference between the two cases, however, lies in the source of both characters’ dissatisfaction with their lives. In Maire’s case it is a domestic one, but in Michael’s it is national in essence.

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*Cathleen ni Houlihan* is about Ireland's fight for independence and self-rule. The main event in the play is the arrival of a French troop at Killala to help the Irish people get rid of the British rule. Mother Ireland is sketched in the drama as an old weary woman who roams Ireland's districts motivating young people to join the revolution to get back her usurped lands. The more young men she succeeds in gathering, the more energetic and youthful she becomes. As such, on managing to convince Michael to join the revolutionists by the end of the play, she turns into a young girl that "had the walk of the queen."

Within this nationalistic context, Michael's romantic escapism could be understood. Despite the fact that the play begins with the preparations for the hero's wedding, he does not show any sign of enthusiasm towards the event. The father is the one who executes the dowry bargain with the bride's family and the mother is the one who takes care of every minute detail of the wedding from the cleanness of the cottage to the tidiness of the wedding garments. The reason beyond such seeming indifference may be attributed to the romantic nature of the protagonist that cannot be in harmony with the materialistic tendencies of those around him. He, for example, does not show any sign of genuine pleasure towards the dowry that his father managed hardly to guarantee for him. The father highlights this romantic trait of his son when he says that "It's likely Michael himself was not thinking much of the fortune either, but of what sort of the girl was to look at" (Yeats, *Cathleen* 182). Commenting on his father's remark, Michael reveals much about his idealistic, romantic thinking when he expresses his opinion about marriage and women: "Well, you would like a nice comely girl to be beside you. The fortune only lasts for a

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while, but the woman will be there always” (Yeats, Cathleen 182).

Out of this idealistic nature of the hero he feels restless with the commonality of life around him and is absorbed, instead, in the dreams of heroism and martyrdom on seeing the old lady. Richard Allen Cave argues in this regard that “The quiet round of births, marriages, deaths which define the expected existence of the peasant characters of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) is disrupted and set at risk by the arrival of the Old Woman with her fierce and mesmeric patriotism which excites Michael ... to be her next champion” (98). On meeting Cathleen ni Houlihan, Michael’s fragile dreams of marrying and having children come to an end. He finds out his real dream: to liberate his soul from the restraints of flesh. In this way, he resembles all the other Yeatsian protagonists in most of the early plays with specific regard to Maire in *The Land of Heart’s Desire*. “Most mortal protagonists know themselves to be spirits temporarily residing in human form, many long to shed the mortal body,” Martin notices about the Yeatsian major characters (15).

In a similar way to how the faery child uses dancing to lure the heroine into her world, the old lady uses singing as a mechanism to capture Michael’s attention. On hearing her singing a melancholic song about Donough, a mythical hero who sacrificed his life for the sake of his motherland many years ago, Michael’s heroic dreams are triggered for the first time. The song goes as follows:

I will cry with the woman,  
For yellow-haired Donough is dead,  
With a hempen rope for a neckcloth,  
And a white cloth on his head, ...  
I remember him ploughing his field,  
Turning up the red side of the ground,

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And building his barn on the hill  
With the good mortared stone;  
Oh! We'd have pulled down the gallows  
Had it happened in Enniscrone! (Yeats  
Cathleen 185)

On hearing the song, Michael comes immediately from the door, as the stage directions indicate, showering the lady with a series of probing questions that reveal his celebration of heroism: "What is that you are singing, ma'am?" "What was it brought him to his death?" "Is it long since that song was made? Is it long since he got his death?" (Yeats, Cathleen 185, 186) The sudden interest in what the old woman says and the following questions he asks expose the latent romantic nature of the hero that adores heroism and aspires to idealism.

Triggering his dormant dreams of nationalism and patriotism, the old lady now begins the luring process in a similar way to what the faery child does in *The Land of Heart's Desire*. Shrewdly she invites Michael to sit beside her, enticing him into the world of martyrdom through a flood of patriotic stories about "the O'Donnells from the north, and a man of the O'Sullivans from the south, and there was one Brian that lost his life at Clontarf by the sea, and there were a great many in the west, some that died hundreds of years ago, and there are some that will die tomorrow" (Yeats, Cathleen 186).

The luring process continues and more rewards are presented to whoever joins Mother Ireland in her long pursuit for freedom. To make matters mysteriously irresistible, she offers immortality as the biggest and greatest award for whoever sacrifices his life for her. Since eternity is the target of every romantic quest for the ideal and

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transcendent, be it either immortality of the soul, values, or dreams, Cathleen dazzles Michael's eyes with a short but significant song about the rewards awaiting those who give themselves to her:

They shall be remembered for ever,  
They shall be alive forever,  
They shall be speaking forever,  
The people shall hear them forever (Yeats,  
Cathleen 189).

Yet, these gifts have an expensive price that should be paid in advance and the price should be given once and as a whole. "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all," the old woman stipulates in advance (Yeats, Cathleen 187). Though the condition may seem fearfully repulsive, it appeals much to the romantic nature that is in an ever state of fascination with whatever is mysterious, heroic, and daring, on the one side, and whatever liberates it from the fetters of the body, on the other side. Yeats's protagonists including Michael, Martin argues, "are generally spiritual seekers, embarked on an upward or inward journey in which they struggle to escape the bonds of the mortal conditions and to regain a higher spiritual existence" (19). Those who deserve the reward of immortality are, then, those who give in the price contentedly, however costly and difficult it is. Cathleen determines the cost precisely in the following speech:

It is a hard service they take to help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes, will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child

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will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid. (Yeats, *Cathleen* 189)

On hearing the exorbitant cost and the tempting reward, Michael falls under hypnosis of the martyrdom dream. He decides impetuously that "I will go with you" (Yeats, *Cathleen* 187), motivated by the nationalistic and patriotic zeal that the words of the old woman generate in him. The influence of the ideal world that now looms in front of his two eyes is so tempting that he has forgotten everything about his wedding. In a futile attempt to draw him back from his fantasy to the world of reality, the mother reminds him of the wedding preparations and the beautiful lady who is going to be his bride tomorrow. However, in the same way the attempts of Maire's family in *The Land of Heart's Desire* fail to bring her back from her day-dreams, Michael's mother's effort fails to attain its promised goal. In response to his mother's appeal for him to free his mind of such nationalistic ambitions by keeping reminding him of the approaching marriage, he absent-mindedly answers, "What wedding are you talking of? What clothes will I be wearing tomorrow? ... I had forgotten that" (Yeats, *Cathleen* 189).

The final scene of the play, however, dramatizes a grave inner conflict within Michael. Similar to the protagonist in *The Land of Heart's Desire* who is unable to finally decide whether to go with the faeries or not despite the fact that she is the one who called them, the hero of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* hesitates for a while about whether to join the French and, thus, achieve his dreams of heroism and martyrdom, or to complete his marriage and, hence, betray



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his life dream of an ideal world in which the soul finds refuge from the burdens of the body. Part of this hesitation is due to the influence of those around him. The son falls prey to the nagging of his mother who wishes him to stay, "Look here, Michael, at the wedding clothes," the father who pleads him, "Come over to me, Michael," and his fiancée who begs him, "Michael, Michael! You won't leave me! You won't join the French, and we going to be married" (Yeats, Cathleen 189, 190)! A great part of Michael's indecisiveness, however, refers to the costly price he is to pay in return for the fulfilment of his dream.

The greatest obstacle in the way of achieving Michael's and Maire's dreams, however, lies in how much they are chained by their own reality. Both characters imagine it is easy to break off the fetters of their mortal condition; yet, when the moment of deciding approaches, they discover that they are trapped in their realities to the degree that they are unable to take the decision. Being so chained to his reality, Michael, though fascinated by the idealism of losing one's life for the sake of one's nation, is torn between the world of reality and that of heroism. Though he seems to have made up his mind earlier in the play by announcing that "I will go with you," he is still hesitant in the deep recesses of his heart. At times he seems insistent on the new world he has just discovered, yet at other times he shows a sentimental inclination to his old life. When his mother reminds him of his wedding ceremony, for example, and asks him to try the wedding clothes, "he looks at the clothes and turns towards the inner room, but stops at the sound of cheering outside" (Yeats, Cathleen 189). In a last scene when his fiancée does her best to tempt him back from his dreams, "he turns towards her as if about to yield," the stage directions indicate (Yeats, Cathleen 190). The old lady, like the faery child in

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*The Land of Heart's Desire*, however, does not surrender easily; if the supernatural child uses dancing as a luring mechanism, the woman here utilizes songs for accomplishing the same goal, i.e., to draw the hero to her world. "They shall be speaking for ever, / The people shall hear them for ever," she sings in a final attempt to remind him of the glory and greatness that wait for him in case he sacrifices his life for the sake of his nation (Yeats, *Cathleen* 190). In a final moment of hesitancy, "Michael stands for a second at the door, then rushes out, following the old woman's voice" (Yeats, *Cathleen* 190). Here the door represents an important symbol in the play; it is the dividing line between two clashing worlds: that of everyday life and that of idealism. In traditional realistic drama, the door is a mere theatrical prop that allow the dramatic characters to get in and out, but in Yeats's drama it acquires a much deeper meaning; it functions in T.S. Eliot's language as "a point of intersection of the timeless with the time." In other words, the door has become a dramatic symbol (Cave 97). For that reason, the protagonists in both plays stand most of the time by the door. This position signifies that they are looking forward to a new world in the horizon, but at the same time it illustrates their hesitation and indecisiveness to espouse it since they are neither in nor out; they are, rather, by the threshold looking outside, yet living inside. Stephen J. Pocock highlights the significant position of the threshold in Yeats's drama, in general, and the two plays in question, in particular, as follows:

Several of Yeats's early plays indicate a character's artistic leanings by nearness to the threshold: in *The Land of Heart's Desire*, Mary Bruin ... lingers near the open door,

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making her susceptible to the allure of the faery world. Not only a position of vulnerability, the threshold also indicates power; from its vantage point a character can narrate outside events to those inside. ... In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the Old Woman stands in the doorway after entering, and returns to that position ... for her final song and eloquent speech. Michael mirrors her movements, watching her from the door until she begins singing; sitting beside her at the hearth; and gradually following her toward the threshold at the end. (105-106)

The stage directions describe Michael as rushing out to follow Cathleen ni Houlihan; this “rush” concretizes an utter state of internal conflict that can only be resolved by an act of “rush” so as to resist the pulling force of either competing sides of the conflict. For Yeats, the everlasting struggle between the ideal dreams and the personal ties cannot resolve itself but through a daring act that does not submit to the logical reasoning of the mind. The play may have ended differently from its current end as Pocock suggests:

The original end would have left Michael in a powerfully ambivalent position, free to choose between a number of options. He could have chosen to turn back inside to marriage and family, to follow the Old Woman's song to a self-sacrificial death, or to maintain a balanced, artistic unity, his position enabling him to relate the heroic events outside to those left inside. (106).

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However, Michael finally chooses by “rushing” himself out of the world of reality to the world of nationalism, heroism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom.

The protagonists in Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* are, thus, romantic seekers who are indulged in a fervent search for the transcendent that can liberate their souls from the restraints of the body and the burdens of everyday life. However, on finding these transcendental worlds that they spend their lives searching for, they fall prey to hesitation and indecisiveness. The decision to join the faery world or to sacrifice one's life for the sake of a patriotic national ideal is not an easy one to take. Rather, it requires either character to be pushed towards it by the aid of an external force, be it a supernatural being in *The Land of Heart's Desire* or a metaphoric historical figure in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. In a nutshell, the central characters in Yeats's two dramas show typical romantic escapism that was characteristic of many literary figures in the Romantic period in literature. Both the Yeatsian characters and the Romantic personae set out on a spiritual journey towards the ideal and immortal, yet with one significant difference: the Romantic characters usually come back from such journeys whereas the Yeatsian protagonists never do.

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