The Heroic Journey in Yeats’s Cuchulain Plays

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Abstract

According to Joseph Campbell, there is always a similar pattern in the hero myth, which is called hero’s journey. The legends about Cuchulain, the great Irish warrior, also follow this pattern. W. B. Yeats adapts the legends into his plays with Cuchulain as the protagonist. This paper discusses the protagonist’s heroic journey in the five Cuchulain plays written by Yeats. In the five plays, Cuchulain grows, matures, weakens, dies, and resurrects, completing and meanwhile sublimating his heroic journey. In At the Hawk’s Well, Cuchulain shows potential qualities of a hero. The Green Helmet displays his self-growth through the depiction of his heroic merits which make him a true hero. In On Baile’s Strand, the hero suffers from the major frustrations and tribulations in his heroic journey and is stricken down consequently. The Only Jealousy of Emer reflects the hero’s inner struggle and vulnerability. The last play, The Death of Cuchulainn, marks the end and reincarnation of the hero’s life. Through the depiction of Cuchulain’s heroic journey in the five plays, his heroic qualities are well demonstrated. Meanwhile, Yeats’s views of heroism can be found as well.

Keywords: W. B. Yeats, Play, Cuchulain Cycle, Heroism, Heroic Journey

1. INTRODUCTION

There is always a similar pattern in the hero stories which can be summed up in two words: hero’s journey. The study of a hero’s myth pattern was introduced by Joseph Campbell. In his famous book The Hero with a Thousand Faces, he describes the narrative pattern as follows:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. [1,23]

In Campbell’s heroic journey, the hero embarks on a journey consisting of 3 stages. The first stage is about hero’s departure and separation with the call of adventure. At first, the ordinary world in which the hero lives is introduced. With the call of duty, the hero decides to leave his comfort zone and open a new scene. Stage 2 is about the hero’s adventurous experiences. The hero ventures into the unknown territory, the Special World, and is birthed into a true champion through various trials and challenges. Stage 3 is about the hero’s return, in which the hero gains abilities through growth and returns to the original world in triumph.

The legend of Irish hero Cuchulain follows the similar pattern of a hero’s journey. In Irish legends, Cuchulain is the central figure of the Ulster Cycle, a series of tales revolving around the heroes of the kingdom of Ulster in the
early 1st Century A.D. [2,28]. Among the heroes, Yeats chose Cuchulain as the most representative character in his plays. Based on the legend, Yeats writes Cuchulain’s life story in the five plays. Heroism, which is highly regarded by Yeats, runs through all these plays as the theme [3,55]. According to the chronological order of writing, the five plays are *At the Hawk’s Well*, *The Green Helmet*, *On Baile’s Strand*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *The Death of Cuchulain*. In *At the Hawk’s Well*, Yeats shows us Cuchulain’s potential heroic qualities, which are based on his sense of heroism to challenge the Guardian of the Well, even though the Old Man has repeatedly prevented him from doing so. *The Green Helmet* displays the hero’s growth and highlights his heroic merits such as the selfless courage and sacrifice for others. In *On Baile’s Strand*, the hero suffers from serious frustrations. Cuchulain kills a young man who comes to challenge him; it turns out that the young man is his son whose existence is not known by him. And when Cuchulain learns about the cruel truth, he is completely broken. The hero’s inner struggle and vulnerability are reflected in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, in which Emer, Cuchulain’s wife, renounces her husband’s love for her in exchange for his resurrection. *The Death of Cuchulain* marks the end and reincarnation of the hero’s life. In the five plays, Cuchulain, as the protagonist, follows the pattern of hero’s journey. He grows, matures, weakens, dies, resurrects, and completes his heroic journey eventually. And his heroic qualities are fully demonstrated at the same time.

This paper presents Cuchulain’s different life stages and his complete heroic journey through the detailed analysis and interpretation of the five plays written by Yeats. Yeats’ five Cuchulain plays follow Campell’s theory on heroic journey faithfully. Since few researchers study Yeats’ five Cuchulain plays from the point of view of heroic journey, this paper attempts to apply the heroic journey pattern to Yeats’ five plays which depicts Cuchulain as a chief Irish hero. And the nature of the hero that Yeats thought is examined.

2. THE HEROIC JOURNEY IN YEATS’ S CUCHULAIN PLAYS

2.1 The Hero-To-Be

*At the Hawk’s Well* is the first play in the series of Yeats’s Cuchulain plays. This play conforms to the first stage of Campbell’s hero’s journey, in which Cuchulain is still a young warrior. He leaves his ordinary world and begins his heroic journey. One day, he comes to the sacred well. It is said that people could become immortal after drinking the water in the well. But most of time the well is dry. People cannot predict when the well will fill. And it dries up immediately when it is full. At the well, Cuchulain meets an old man who has been waiting there for 50 years with the wish to drink the water so as to obtain the immortality. However, the old man is hostile to him and asks him to leave, but Cuchulain insists on waiting and makes a promise to the old man.

We shall both drink,
And even if there are but a few drops,
Share them. [4,409]

And the old man replies:

But swear that I may drink the first;
The young are greedy, and if you drink the first
You’ll drink it all. [4,409]

In addition, the old man says that a curse will fall on those offending the Guardian of the Well who always gives the cry of the hawk. However, the young Cuchulain is not frightened at all and says:

I am not afraid of you, bird, woman, or witch.
Do what you will, I shall not leave this place
Till I have grown immortal like yourself. [4,409]
Then the Guardian of the Well begins to dance, and the old man falls into sleep again as usual. Cuchulain is puzzled by the dancing, but he goes out to fight against the guardian. When he hears the water plash, Cuchulain drops his spear and goes for the water, but he only finds that the well gets dry again. At the end of the play, the old man continues to wait in vain at the well, yet Cuchulain “goes out, no longer as if in a dream, but shouldering his spear and calling”:

I will face them.
He comes! Cuchulain, son of Sualtim, comes! [4,412]

Now, Cuchulain starts his heroic journey.

In this play, the old man represents the selfish and greedy ordinary people who only care about their own interests. In contrast, Cuchulain, who could not be called as a hero at that time, has shown his inherent nature of the hero with a noble morality and a willing mind to share, which, for heroes, is neither about winning them fame nor obtaining the spiritual self-triumph but an access to their self-realization. It is the willingness to give anything they have that leads them to do so, but it has nothing to do with self-interest. Meanwhile, by comparing the old man’s passive waiting with Cuchulain’s active fighting, Yeats shows us his view of heroism: it is better to fight than to wait, and the real immortality is achieved through the constant challenge [5,94]. The body dies, but the spirit lives forever [6,59]. Typically one can be a hero only when his courage and martial arts overcome his opponents and earn him the honor of immortal fame. In this play, however, the qualities that Cuchulain shows are somewhat different: such as the strong will, willingness to share his good luck, extraordinary courage, and the faith in victory.

2.2 The Hero’s Growth

_The Green Helmet_ starts with Cuchulain’s coming back from Scotland. He finds out that one of his fellow warriors has played a game named “A head for a head” [4,429] with a Red Man who is actually a supernatural force. One year ago, the Red Man offered the game and let his head be whipped off, and he took it up in his hand and went away laughing. Twelve months later, the Red Man comes back “with his head on his shoulders again” [4,431] and calls for “his debt and his right” by cutting off one of the warrior’s head [4,432]. Meanwhile, the Red Man claims that he has brought them a gift—a green helmet and only the bravest among them is qualified to wear it upon. Then a fierce quarrel breaks out because both of Cuchulain’s friends state that they are the best and want to take up the helmet. Cuchulain also expresses that he will take it, but he says that his intention is not to “keep it” for himself but to “give it to all” [4,437]—to all of them three. However, his friends wouldn’t agree, and their wives are also involved in the quarreling. At last, Cuchulain calms down all the arguments and quarreling. And when the Red Man “demands the debt that’s owing” [4,451], he decides to keep the promise and offers to pay back his friends’ debt even if it will cost him his own life.

He played and paid with his head, and it’s right that we pay him back,
And give him more than he gave, for he comes in here as a guest;
So I will give him my head. [4,451]

However, when Cuchulain kneels down, the Red Man places the Green Helmet on his head instead of cutting it off. It turns out that the Red Man’s real identity is “the Rector of this land” [4,453], and what he has done is just a test to find out who the true hero is [6,66]. And the Red Man is so deeply impressed with Cuchulain’s selflessness and fearlessness that he decides to reward Cuchulain with the championship of all Ireland [5,98].

People are not born as heroes. They have to go through all the hardships and trials before becoming heroes. In this play, the selflessness and bravery Cuchulain displays contrasts sharply with the selfishness and cowardice of his two friends. What’s more, his willingness and fearlessness to sacrifice himself is respectable. Cuchulain overcomes the obstacles and realizes his self-growth. And all the qualities that he shows make him a true hero at the end of the play, and now he is recognized so in the society. However, Cuchulain’s heroic journey is far from end, and he will face more difficulties and challenges in the following journey.
2.3 The Hero’s Tribulation

In the next play, *On Baile’s Strand*, Cuchulain, who has grown to be a mature and well-known hero, comes to his middle age. The opening scene begins with a conversation between a fool and a blind man, which, as a kind of the subplot, outlines what is going to happen in the whole play. Conchubar demands an oath of allegiance from Cuchulain so that the latter would use his rational will to control his natural and free will. Conchubar thinks “That the wild will of a man could be oath-bound” [4,495]. Cuchulain, who has triumphed in Ireland after so many years of living freely and unruly and hence is resentful of giving up his will to obey the High King’s will, will not consent [6,72]. After repeated verbal tussles, however, under pressure from other small kings and the cause of national defense, Cuchulain obeys.

I swear to be obedient in all things
To Conchubar, and to uphold his children. [4,499]

At this moment, a young man comes to challenge Cuchulain. The High King orders Cuchulain to kill the young man who comes from the hostile country, “Aoife’s country” [4,501]. The Young Man tells that he has come alone “to weigh this sword against Cuchulain’s sword” [4,502]. But Cuchulain feels friendly in the young man’s appearance. The young man reminds him of Aoife. She is a legendary Scottish queen, and she challenged Cuchulain to a duel. He won, and she became his lover and bore a son to him. He came back to Ireland without knowing the existence of his son. She raised his son to hate his father and sent him to Ireland to challenge him in a single combat. The Young Man does not tell his name and his family background.

I am under bonds
To tell my name to no man; but it’s noble. [4,502]

Cuchulain asks him: “Have you no fear of death?” [4,504] And the young man replies: “Whether I live or die is in the gods’ hands” [4,504]. Cuchulain is impressed by his courage and confidence and wants to keep the young man with him. He imagines that in the future they could “hunt the deer and the wild bulls” [4,505] and even fight together. By exchanging gifts, Cuchulain develops a spiritual father-son relationship with the young man and tells him that:

Boy, I would meet them all in arms
If I’d a son like you. [4,510]

Cuchulain’s good feeling towards the young man is built on the identification of heroism such as selflessness, courage, honor, etc. However, Conchubar orders Cuchulain to kill the Young Man, and all the other kings agree. Having sworn the allegiance, he has no choice. In the end, he fights and kills the young man. When he learns that the young man is his son, he trembles all over and goes mad, shouting that he will plunge his sword into Conchubar’s heart. He keeps on plunging his sword into the waves of the sea, imagining that every wave is the crown of Conchubar. The play ends with his falling down and getting up again and again by the sea. Finally “the waves have mastered him” [4,525].

In this play, the hero Cuchulain suffers a major blow in his life, indicating that the hero’s journey is never easy, which is full of all kinds of hardships and obstacles. The young man’s death makes his hero’s journey impossible, showing that how difficult it is to become a hero. He is in danger of losing his life at any time. As a heroic figure, Cuchulain seldom has negative emotions such as worry, grief, fear, and greed in his life, and what impresses people most is his positive actions and passionate pursuit of honor and ideals. And he does not care much about the restraint and evaluation of external ethics, but he basically allows himself to be driven by the natural and free will which makes him a hero, but it also can ruin him. Yeats’s depiction of Cuchulain’s frustrations in this play is very thought-provoking. The hero needs to challenge the authority with the power of passion and impulse, but he also should be alert to the danger and threat of excessive free will.

2.4 The Hero’s Inner Struggles
Different from four other plays, *The Only Jealousy of Emer* centers on the female character. In this play, Cuchulain’s wife Emer has to renounce her husband’s love for her to save the husband’s—-the hero’s—-life. Her resolution is not sudden. In *The Green Helmet*, she shows her great and sacrificial love: “It is you, not your fame that I love” [4,452]. She longs for her husband to survive even if she loses love: “Live and be faithless still” [4,452]. Cuchulain appears in this play with two opposite identities revealing the hero’s inner struggles and conflicts. One is the Figure of Cuchulain, who represents the voice of power forcing Emer to sacrifice herself; the other one is the Ghost of Cuchulain, the representative of the hero’s vulnerability.

The play opens with Cuchulain lying on bed, and the musicians introduce him as dead or in coma. Emer asks her husband’s mistress, Eithne, to come beside the bed to wake him up. Eithne asks why Cuchulain lies on bed. Emer says that he was so heartbroken because he has killed his son by mistake that he struggled endlessly with the waves until they swept over him. Then Eithne talks to Cuchulain who speaks in a different identity—-Bricriu, the Figure of Cuchulain. With this identity, he tells Emer how she can save her husband from death:

I do not ask
Your life, or any valuable thing;
You spoke but now of the mere chance that some day
You’d be the apple of his eye again
When old and ailing, but renounce that chance
And he shall live again. [4,545]

But at first, Emer gives an absolute refusal.

I have but two joyous thoughts, two things I prize,
A hope, a memory, and now you claim that hope. [4,545]

During the course of their conversation, Bricriu repeatedly asks Emer to take the oath, yet Emer says again and again that she will never renounce his love. Then Bricriu exclaims the urgency of the matter:

Cry out that you renounce his love; make haste
And cry that you renounce his love for ever. [4,557]

To save her husband’s life, eventually Emer renounces his love for ever. And at that moment, the real Cuchulain wakes up.

In contrast, Cuchulain’s other identity in this play, the Ghost of Cuchulain, different from the strong initiative of the hero, shows passivity and weakness. He is always immersed in memories. He expresses his guilt for Emer and believes that it is his infidelity and death that has brought misfortune to his wife. In face of the Woman of the Sidhe, the Ghost of Cuchulain with little willpower couldn’t completely get rid of her temptation. As a result, he is led by her to give up his uneasiness and love for his wife and the idea of returning and attempts to go after her [5,114].

This play illustrates that the hero faces the most critical moment in his life. Now he has to choose whether to give up or continue his heroic journey. Yeats uses the two opposite images—the Figure of Cuchulain and the Ghost of Cuchulain—to show us the hero’s self-contradiction. Through the depiction of Cuchulain’s dead body and wandering soul, the hero’s inner fragility is revealed as well. In face of inner struggles and confusion, the hero could also feel powerless and helpless. Due to Emer’s sacrifice, the hero is waken up at the end of the play and continues his heroic journey, which also reflects Yeats’s firm faith in heroism.

2.5 The Hero’s Death and Deification

*The Death of Cuchulain* is the last one in the series of Cuchulain plays. It tells the story of the hero’s death and deification. At the beginning of the play, Yeats depicts that the armies of Queen Maeve burst upon the border and burn the home of Cuchulain. Cuchulain’s mistress, Eithne, by the trick of Bricriu, appears as a traitor and messenger of his wife. She gives the false message of Emer to Cuchulain asking him to fight at once [8,323]. Although he
understands that Emer’s real message is to stay and wait for the reinforcements, he still speaks to Eithne in a forgiving manner:

You put them there yourself;
You need a younger man, a friendlier man,
But, fearing what my violence might do,
Thought out these words to send me to my death, [4.1055]

In spite of knowing the truth, he decides to fight and gets wounded, when Aoife shows up binding him to the stone with her veil. The memories that she brings make Cuchulian in a state of misery. Although Aoife claims to have come to kill him, she leaves without doing anything. Then the Blind Man comes along and says:

...if I brought Cuchulian’s head in a bag
I would be given twelve pennies; [4,1060]

The entrance of the blind man makes Cuchulain realize the approaching of his death. Being accustomed to seeing life and death at the same level, he is not crushed and despaired but accepts calmly the fact that his death is coming near. The Blind Man begins to feel Cuchulain’s body to cut his neck. Then the stage darkens. At that moment, Emer runs in and begins to dance wildly before the head of Cuchulain that the Morrígú placed on the ground after she triumphantly alighted on Cuchulain's shoulder as he died from wounds received in battle [7,264-5]. Her dance shows her extreme rage to the murderers and then moves towards the head of her husband. She moves as if in adoration or triumph [4,1062]. She crawls in front of the head, stands up, and remains still in the silence. Suddenly, “a few faint bird notes” symbolizes the reincarnation of Cuchulain’s soul.

With his death, Cuchulain has completed the hero’s journey. His death is more like a sacrificial ritual, and he is not scared of death at all, which can be proved by his trying to die upon his feet. He asks Aoife to help bind him to the stone.

I have put my belt
About the stone and want to fasten it
And die upon my feet, but am too weak.
Fasten this belt. [4,1057]

From the above, it can be seen that Cuchulain chooses his death voluntarily and proudly. He is proud of being able to die upon his feet and remains with great dignity till the end of his life. In face of the person who is about to take his head, he does not look startled or beg for mercy but shows the true character of a fearless hero. Before the Blind Man cuts Cuchulain’s neck for “twelve pennies”, Cuchulain sees “My souls’ first shape, a feathery shape” [4,1060], and he says “it is about to sing” [4,1061]. Cuchulain, as a hero, has come to see death as a part of life, without which life will be incomplete. He overcomes and transcends the fear of death [9,98].

Now, Cuchulain has completed his heroic journey. The resurrection of Cuchulain’s soul predicts the hero’s return. And the hero comes back a different person compared with the one when he started out. He has gone through the various trials, difficulties, and challenges and is much more grown and mature as a result of the adventurous journey. Heroes die, but their spirits are immortal. And the heroic journey is to be continued and never ends.

3. CONCLUSION

Yeats’s view of heroism is fully embodied in the five Cuchulain plays. Cuchulain is entitled all the qualities of a hero, such as courage to challenge his fate, sacrifice for fellow countrymen, forgiving mind for his traitor, and will to overcome the fear of death. Through detailed text analysis on Yeats’ five Cuchulain plays, the author confirms the perfect compatibility between Cuchulain life stages and Campbell’s heroic journey. Consequently, the author originally and creatively presents the Cuchulain cycle of a heroic journey.

It is enjoyable to know a hero. Furthermore, to feel and understand the cycle of a hero is more significant.
He grows, matures, weakens, dies, and resurrects, completing and meanwhile sublimating his heroic journey. From Yeats’s perspective, everyone is born with his own will and destiny, but what makes the difference between the ordinary people and the heroes lies in the fact that the latter can exert their potentials through dauntless courage and constant fighting against all the obstacles of their destiny without any fear and hesitation. Through the heroism of the Cuchulain cycle of a heroic journey, Yeats encourages Irish people to fight for independence and freedom. Heroes die but never fade away. Their spirits are immortal as one of the most precious treasures of human beings.

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