



The Green Helmet (1910)

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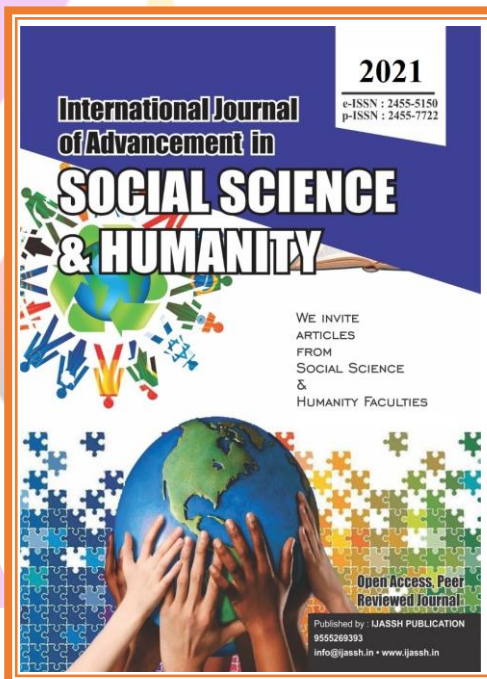
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INTRODUCTION

The play begins with the hero offstage, a dramatic device Yeats uses over and over again. The scene opens with Conall and Laegaire sitting in a little log house by the sea and speculating over their unemptied jugs of beer. The stage direction indicates :

A house made of log . There are two windows at the back and a door Through the door one can see low rocks which make the ground outside higher than it is within, and beyond the rocks a misty moon-lit sea. Through the windows one can see nothing but the sea . (P.223) .

Conall and Laegaire are in a state of fear and alarm. They are terrified by every sound. While they are talking a line runs like a refrain through their dialogue. Laegaire asks "Does anything stir on the sea?" and Conall assures him "Not even a fish or a gull: / I can see for a mile or two now that the moon's at the full." (P.224) .

Conall and Laegaire initiate the action by creating a feeling of suspense in the reader and a mood of expectancy.

Here we pause for a moment to look at the characterizations of Conall and Laegaire. Yeats took the mythological characters of Conall, Laegaire and Cuchulain, three Red Branch heroes, from Bricriu's Feast "one of the most fascinating, comical and fantastical of the stories in the

Ulster cycle."⁽ⁱ⁾ In adapting the characters of Conall and Laegaire for dramatic presentation Yeats modified them. In The Green Helmet Conall and Laegaire are not three dimensional characters. They are complementary and it is hard to distinguish Conall from Laegaire. Even the stage direction says nothing about their characterizations. All this is done intentionally by the playwright, the relationship between the two characters is not like that between the fool and the Blind Man in on Baile's Strand.

The Fool in the previous play is endowed with an intuitive imagination; has an impressive simplicity, and he senses everything but cannot tell it. But Conall and Laegaire have no spiritual talents. Throughout the play they join together to do one and the same work. They are depicted as clowns and are busy with jealousy and hypocrisy. Thus in this play, as Brigit Biersby points out, "Yeats has chosen to write a comedy, although otherwise he seemed to prefer tragedy." ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾. Hence we attempt to offer a close of the roles of Conall and Laegaire to reveal how they perform the thematic and technical functions of Yeats's fool.

When the hero, Cuchulain, returns from Scotland Conall and Laegaire surprise him by him by their state of fear and alarm. However, it is part of Yeats's dramatic

technique that he always keeps the audience in the know. Conall and Laegaire begin to expose the event's which have preceded the opening of the play and the home coming of Cuchulain. Consequently, Laegaire asks Conall : "Better tell it all out to the end;" and Conall replies "I'll lay the whole thing bare." (P.228) .

The story Conall and Laegaire are about to relate is parallel to the adventure of a stranger who challenges a knight with the game of head-for-head. The stranger to be beheaded on the condition that the same knight offers him his head next year. The stranger goes off carrying his head promising to come back in a year's time⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾.

This motif reminds us of the Old English Poem " Sir Gawayne and the green knight". Although Ellis-Fermor maintains that "there is no evidence which suggests that Yeats has read this poem"^(iv) .

Yeats took this motif from the aforementioned Celtic saga. The Feast of Bricriu. The stranger in Yeats's play is modlled on two figures from this Old saga.

The first figure is Bricriu called Poisontongue, "because his greatest pleasure was to use every possible chance strife and misunderstanding"^(v) accordingly he creates a strife among Conall, Laegaire and Cunchlain over the championship of Ulster.

The second figure is "Curoi, Son of Daire, judge of the championship of Ulster".^(vi) Yeats combined Bricriu and Curoi in one character, The Red Man, who is one of the main figures of the play. However, the Red Man is a supernatural being although he has the qualities of Bricriu and curoi .

Coming back to the roles of Conall and Laegaire, Conall begins to narrate how the Red Man challanged them with the game of head.

They accept his challenge Conall severs the Red Man's head from his body : "Till I could stand it no longer, and whipped off his head at a blow." (P.229).

Then the Red Man rises, walks off with his head promising to come back in a year's time to demand his debt. When Conall and Laegaire find that the Red Man is able to be beheaded without suffering harm they become frightend. And when the Red Man comes back after a year, they refuse to give their heads. Again the Red Man promises to return a year later. When the play starts it is time for the Red Man to come for the second time to demand a head in return for his that was cut off. Thus it becomes clear that Conall and Laegaire are now secretly waiting for the Red Man to come out of the sea .

While Conall relates the tale of the Red Man's challenge, the comments and questions of Cúchulainn serve throughout to sustain the continuity of Conall's narrative. For instance Cúchulainn asks "How could he whip off a head when his own head had been whipped away?" (P.229). Or when he comments : "Why this is a tale worth telling". (P.230).

Thus Conall and Laegaire, as Ernest A. Boyd notices, function "as chorus and Cúchulainn as interlocutor." ^(vii) .

In addition, in this part of the play the speeches of the characters amount to pieces of narrative.

For example :

Conall. How can you fight with a head that laughs
when you have whipped it off?

Laegaire. Or a man that can pick it up and carry it in his hand? (P231).

When they begin to tell their tale Conall promises to narrate it but it is obvious that Laegaire takes on part of the task :

Laegaire. Till he took it up in his hands

Conall. And splashed himself into the sea.(P.229)

And

Laegaire. But twelve months upon the clock

Conall. A twelve month from the first the first time_____

Laegaire. And the jug full to the brim: For we had been put from our drinking by the very thought of him_____

Conall. We stood as we're standing now_____

Laegaire. The horns were as empty_____

Conall. He ran up out of the sea with his head on his shoulders again. (P. 230) .

Conall and Laegaire collaborate on doing the same task and the above quotation reflects that they are dependent characters.

Also by examining the passage quoted above one can say that the main features of their speeches are : incomplete sentences pauses, repetitions and stichomythic exchanges. Friedman suggests that the dialogue "with its syncopation, looks forward to some of the parody vaudeville in Beckett's (especially Waiting for Godot)."^(viii).

However, Yeats does not treat language as the Absurdist do. Yeats does not devalue language but he continues to use it and shows a mastery of it.

The point is not that their conversation has no continuing thread to sustain it. In contrast Cúchulainn speaks full sentences. But Yeats reduces their speeches to absurd fragments and automatic

exchanges "to portray Conall and Laegaire as incomplete in themselves." ^(ix). This is why Yeats fragments a line of verse between Conall and Laegaire, i.e. , he uses meter for a dramatic end. The Green Helmet is one of Yeats's poetic plays.

It is worth noting to cite Yeats's comment on the poetry of this play in his essay "style and Attitude" : "when I wrote in blank verse I was dissatisfied ... but our Heroic Age went better, or so I fancied, in the ballad meter of The Green Helmet." ^(x) At any case our concern is to point out the most dramatic and theatrical moments in Yeats's ballad.

The Red Man puts shame of cowardice upon Conall and Laegaire by his supernatural powers . But as they confide their dilemma to Cúchulainn he agrees to stand with them " because of his innate valor and traditional courage." ^(xi)

The two scenes preceding the entrance of the Red Man shed light on the characters of Conall and Laegaire. Therefore, it would be necessary to present a full analysis of these .

Before the return of Cúchulainn from Scotland and while Conall and Laegaire are waiting for the Red Man to appear they try to inspire themselves with courage. So they engage in telling lies. They assume that they have carried out a series of adventures with

monstrous creatures which keep a hidden hoard of gold in Connacht. ^(xii) They claim that they have killed a large number of these creatures and brought the gold. Thus they pretend to be heroic. But later they themselves undercut the credibility of these adventures and dismiss them as product of drunkenness and dream as Laegaire tells Conall :

Laegaire. What is that – I had thought that I saw
 though but in the wink of an eye, A cathead man out of Connacht
 go pacing and spitting by; But not that could not be
 Conall. You have dreamed it there's nothing out there (P.224).

This reveals that they are themselves aware of the incredibility of what they say .

Equally important is the scene where Conall and Laegaire confront Cúchulainn at the door of the house. While they wait Cúchulainn comes down through the rocks and the hazels. Conall and Laegaire fail to recognize that he is Cúchulainn, their friend. They take him for a Young Man. Conall says that the young man must not be allowed to enter the house and shouts : "A law has been made that none shall sleep in this house tonight". (P.226).

As Cúchulainn asks who has made that law it turns out that Conall's claim is a mere lie. In addition, Conall assumes that they are

guarding the house against shape-changers :
"a reference to the frequent changes of
shapes in Gaelic mythology"^(xiii) .

Once more they pretend to be heroic.
In all this Yeats treats heroic materials
ironically.

In the scene in question Conall and
Laegaire stand together and block the door
against Cuchulain. But Cuchulain surprizes
them. He pushes past them and goes into the
house.

Them they attempt to make him go
away but Cuchulain asserts him physical
power. He forces up Laegaire's arm, passes
him and puts shield on the wall over the
chair. Through this device Yeats stresses
their smallness beside Cuchlian. Hence they
join together and work as a pair.

Although the scene in question is
farcial it has its significance. It celebrate a
Cuchulain's supremacy over Conall and
Laegaire. Also, as a purely theatrical scene it
enhances the play.

Again the supernatural in this play
comes to the fore. The Red Men is a spirit
from Country-Under-Were : "Tir-fa-tonn
(Tir-fo-thoinn), one of the old Irish
conceptions of the other world"^(xiv). But the
hero willingly confronts the supernatural the
Red Man. Although Conall and Laegaire
show a kind of earthy realism in the face of
supernatural and advise cuchulain :

Conall. Go into Scotland again, or where
you will but begone.

From this unlucky country that was made
when the
Devil spat. (P.227).

But Cuchulain stays and decides to face the
Red Man.

When Conall alerts them to the signs
of the Red Man's appearance the dramatist
again stresses the subordination of Conall
and Leagaire. Cuchulain arranges their
defence : "Come and put all your back to the
door". (p.231).

Cuchulain individually confronts the
Red Man [a tall red-headed, red-cloaked
man ... He leans upon a great tow-handed
sword] (P.231) .

Throughout the play the independent
hero, Cuchulain, is contrasted with the
dependent and servile characters, Conall and
Laegaire. The fact that Conall and Laegaier
are dependent on Cuchulain as manifested
when Cuchulain undertake the challenge
accepted by Conall and Laegaire in his
absence and this makes Cuchulain's heroism
more effective.

But something unexpected happens.
When Cunchlain faces the Red Man, the
latter declares that he is only joking and
leaves a green helmet-which gives the play
its title, on the floor with his challenge : "I
will lay it [Green Helmet] there on the

ground for the best of you all to lift. "(P. 232). Making the Green Helmet the hero's prize, the Red Man exits.

When the Red Man leaves the Green Helmet the action reaches a turning point. The tone shifts greatly and a new episode begins. Obviously there is no clear division of scenes but Laegaire sings a song :

Laegaire [singing with a swaggering stride]

Laegaire is best;
Between water and hill,
He fought in the west,
With cat-heads, until
All fell by his sword
And he carried away
Their hidden hoard.

[He seizes the Helmet . (P.233).]

Obviously Laegaire's song marks off the beginning of the second episode and reflects the shift in tone. The theme of Laegaire's song is that he to be recognized as the champion of Ulster and this is why he boasts of his strength. Flannery notices that the songs in The Green Helmet "lend a brio and a verisimilitude to the comic characters"^(xv).

After that the scene becomes one of pure physical farce. Conall and Laegaire quarrel as to who should wear the Green Helmet the symbol of primacy. Cuchulain settles this question by an ingenious idea. He fills the Helmet with ale and suggests

that they share it equally among them. Conall and Laegaire then begin to quarrel about the order in which they should drink from the Helmet. Another brawl breaks when the chatioteers, stable boys and cooks run in shouting each in favour of his master and they drown each other's voice. It is worth noting that they hold kitchen utensils like horns and ladles and ladles and this undermines the heroic association. Cuchulain during this scene stands in the centre, as Moore puts it, "as a moral pillar of strength surrounded by the squabbling of fools"^(xvi). Eventually, Cuchulain takes Helmet and fling it into the sea.

Meanwhile the dispute is going on, the Red Man stands in the midst of the house with a great sword and Helmet accompanied by the black cat-headed men. The cat-headed men are shape-changers, i.e., supernatural beings. At any case, the Red Man puts an end to the brawl by declaring that unless they find somebody ready to sacrifice himself they would be in a sorry plight. Thus the tone shifts and becomes deadly serious. This too is a new episode. Conall and Laegaire cower before the Red Man. Cuchulain without hesitation lays his head on the Red Man's block. Instead of severing Cuchulain's head the Red Man declares that he is worthy of the championship and places the Helmet on Cuchulain's head. The Red Man turns out to be the god of concord and the judge of the

championship of Ulster and declares that he is "the Rector of this land". (P.243).

Yeats was presumably writing about the legendary past but he applied his play to contemporary Ireland. Some biographical facts may cast light on the reason behind the satirical tone of the play.

It is worth noting that Yeats wrote this play first in a prose version under the title The Golden Helmet (1908) in the period immediately following the riot over John Millington synge's (1871-1908) *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). Yeats's play, as Flannery demonstrates, "was a grotesque saeiro on the bitter quarrels which arose the performances of synge's play"^(xvii). The audience rioted synge's play at the Abbey Theatre on the basis that its plot was a slander against the reputation of Irish peasantry and the purity of Irish womanhood.

Yeats poured in this play his contempt for the mobs who interrupted the performances of synge's play^(xviii). Hence he used grim humour to satirize the low type of common mind. For instance, he depicts society as drunken, brawling, and barbatic. Thus the brawlers who disrupted the performances, as skene demonstrates, "of synge's play provided a model for the quarreling pack of charioteers and stable boys"^(xix). The final speech of the play

praises the aristocratic virtues of reckless courage, generosity, and nobility.

Many speeches in the play reflect Yeats's sense of alienation from Ireland which was the result of the result of the rejection of Synge's play. Thus he makes a reference to an Irish tendency :

Here neighbor wars on neighbor, and why there is no man knows,
And if a man is lucky all his luck away,
And take his good name from him between a day and a day (P.225).

Here Yeats satirizes the exaggerated and distorted sense of humour by which Irishmen excuse their quarrelsomeness.

It is also worth noting that Yeats subtitled the play "An Heroic Farce". Although the subtitle is seemingly a paradox but it encompasses Cuchulain who is heroic as well as Conall and Laegaire who are farical. The subtitle suggests the farcical behaviour of Conall and Laegaire such as: lying, quarreling, bluster and also their domesticity. They rely on their wives to boast their strength.

The from bravery. The Red Man reveals the gap be what Conall and Laegaire think they are and what they really are. In addition, the Red Man's appearance unmasks the pettiness, fear and bravado of Conall and Laegaire on the hand, and the heroic stance of Cuchulain on the other

hand. Thus Yeats juxtaposes the farcical and the heroic; the comic and the serious with the result that the comic animates the serious subject.

Commenting on the function of the supernatural, Taylor suggests that "direct contact with the supernatural is shown to satirize the theme of personal jealousy and intrigue"^(xx). A case in point is the squabble over the Helmet. When the Red Man threatens the peace of the country and demands a head as a condition to end the strife :

I demand the debt that's owing. Let some man
kneel down there
That I may cut his head off, or all shall go to
wrack. (P.242)

Cuchulain immediately stretches his head before the Red Man and thus he sacrifices himself for the peace of the country without thinking of material gain for himself or for anyone else.

Consequently his sacrifice is an act of pure heroism by which he keeps the integrity of his country and his magnanimity.

Conall and Laegire are only concerned with themselves. Each demand the Green Helmet as his own. But Cuchulain takes it, as he says, not "to keep it-[sic] the Red Man gave it for one, / But I shall give it

to all-to all of us three or to none;" (P.233). Cuchulain alone is able to arise above personal considerations of personal distinction and prestige. But Conall and Laegire demand the Red Man's prize and life gratuitously. Eventually Cuchulain wins the championship by an act of sacrifice and not by conquest ; not as the strongest but as the one who I without fear. The jealousy, pettiness and fear of Conall and Laegaire serve as a contrast to Cuchulain's heroic stance and greatly enhance it.

To sum this point up Conall and Laegaire embody the bourgeois world. They are only concerned with securing their rights and prerogatives. Consequently, Yeats satirizes their human weakness and folly. Cuchulain embodies the heroic and the aristocratic world. Hence the final speech-mentioned above, praises the values of reckless courage, generosity and the role of the hero as a guarantor of the land.

On the point of crowning Cuchulain with the Helmet, the Red Man affirms that Cuchulain wins the championship not as the mightiest but as the most comely-hearted. Therefore the Red Man stresses this aspect of Cuchulain's character:

And I shall choose the laughing lip
That shall not turn from laughing, whatever
rise or fall
The heart that grows no bitter although
betrayed by all; (P.243).

While Cuchlain laughs cheerfully even in the face of death, throughout the play Conall and Laegaire are the butt of humour and laughter. In the beginning Conall confesses to Cuchulain that they hide the story of the Red Man's challenge from everybody lest they would be laughed at. Upon his return from Scotland Cuchulain mocks Conall and Laegaire when he finds them sitting at a table with full jugs and empty cups. Connected with this also Cuchulain at the account which conall gives of the Red Man", "with half-shut foxy eye", and Conall also says that the Red Man is great enough to drink the sea (P.228). moreover Cuchlain laughs at their incredible adventure with cat-headed men and

attributes it to drunkenness. Thus in this play Yeats experimented, as Taylor observes, "with comedy as a means of integrating the rich variety of actual human experience with the ennobling values of ideal aspirations and actions"^(xxi).

The three episodes discussed so far celebrate Cuchulain's heroic spontaneity and magmanny and satirize folly in the lesser characters. Yeats presents Cuchulain's heroic attitude and actions as a model of human conduct to be followed. Finally The Green Helmet explores the nature of true heroism. Conall and Laegaire serve as an ironic counterpoint to Yeats's ideal hero, Cuchulain.

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- (i) Birgit Bjersby, The Interpretation of the Cuchulain Legend in the works of W.B. Yeats (Upsula : A.B. Lundequista Bokhandeln, 1950) P.32 .
- (ii) Ibid. , P.33 .
- (iii) Lord Raglan, The Hero : A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama (New York : Vintage Books, 1956), P.93 .
- (iv) Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London : Me thuem and Co. Itd, 1965), P.10-11 .
- (v) Birgit Bjersby, The Interpre tation of the Cuchulain Legend in the works of W.B. Yeats, P.31-32 .

At great celtic festivals it was customary to bestow the so-called champion's portion on the foremost hero, and with this fact in mind Bricriu wrought his machinations-with flattering words and praise he asked the three most famous Ulster champions, Cuchulain, Laegaier and Conall separately to demand the

champion's portion The sog goes on to tell us the different trials the three heroes are put to-that which is of interest in Yeats's case, is the last and decisive trial invented by CuRoi .

(vi) Ibid., P.32 .

CuRoi in disguise went to Emain Macha to challenge the Ulster men. One of them was allowed to cut CuRoi's head off, if next day, on CuRoi's return, the same hero offered him his head in return Only Cuchulain, however, dares to accept the second condition of the agreement. CuRio reveals his identity, and instead of severing Cuchulain's head from the body, he declares him and nobody else worthy of the championship of Ulster.

(vii) Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, P.81 .

(viii) Friedman, The Cuchulain Cycle of W.B. Yeats, P.77.

(ix) Ibid., P.75 .

(x) W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, P.523 .

(xi) Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, P.84.

(xii) A Commentary, P. 97.

Connacht : one of the ancient Kingdoms in Ireland, in Cuchulain's day ruled over by Ailill and his queen, Maeve.

(xiii) Ibid., P. 104.

(xiv) Ibid., P.15 .

(xv) Flannery, W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre, P. 94 .

(xvi) Moore, Masks of Love and Death, P. 158.

(xvii) Flannery, W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre, P.225.

(xviii) Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement, P.13-14.

The Irish Literary Society emerged in 1891, and grew in due course into the Irish Literary Theatre. The Irish Literary Theatre combined in 1992 with a company of actors the direction of William and Frank Fay. The new organisation calles itself the Irish National Theatre Society. Yeats was president, Maude Gonne, Douglas Hyde and George Russel, vice president.

In 1904, a wealthy English friend of their own.

The Abbey Theatre. In 1906, the Irish National Theatre Society was reorganised and Yeats, Lady Gregory and John syngue were established as directors with wide powers for setting the policy of th organization.

(xix) Skene, The Cuchulain plays of W.B. Yeats, P.80.

(xx) Taylor, The Drama of W.B. Yeats : Irish Myth and Japanese No, P.139.

(xxi) Ibid., P.78 .