

Tristan Steffe

Drum Travel Award Application

9 March 2020

Identity in Legend

My purpose for visiting Ireland would be to assess the influence of Cuchulain and W.B. Yeats as national heroes on modern Irish people and cultural outsiders. Cuchulain is a legend of the Ulster Cycle. He defended the people of Ulster with his skills as a warrior until he was killed in battle. Tales of his heroism and self sacrifice have significantly influenced nationalist movements throughout Irish history. Many saw Cuchulain as a symbol of independence during the revolts against Great Britain in the early 20th century. Prior to these revolts, artists of the Literary Revival referred to these legends in their work. W.B. Yeats specifically associated Cuchulain with national identity. He wrote several poems and plays involving Cuchulain that regarded the importance of reflecting on the literary culture of the past to progress in the present. However, in his later pieces, Yeats commented on the problem of forcing tradition. It seems that, to Yeats, the reverence of past legends began to hurt national progress towards prosperity and identity. Yeats's final poems, *The Death of Cuchulain* and *Cuchulain Comforted*, display this defeatist message and comment on his own role in establishing an elegiac mood in Ireland.

I hope to research if this elegiac mood is still prevalent amongst the Irish. Do they look to the stories of Cuchulain with hope or melancholy? Has Yeats himself become a legend as impactful as Cuchulain? I also want to find how I might connect to these icons. As a cultural outsider, can their national influence be the same on me as it is on each citizen? The answers to

these questions will, critically speaking, help me establish how a hero evolves over time to others.

In order to answer these questions, I would stay in Sligo, Ireland during its annual Tread Softly Festival. The festival is a celebration of Sligo literary culture associated with W.B. Yeats. There are readings, discussions, and hikes that are constructed around Yeats's work and the legends he referenced. This would be a great opportunity to see how Yeats and Cuchulain are viewed by Irish who are well-versed in the literary culture. I would also like to visit several sites across Ireland connected to the Ulster Cycle, such as: Emain Macha, Chlochafamore, and Caherconree Fort. These locations would allow me to experience the origins of the stories of Cuchulain firsthand. I could then form my own connection with this hero singularly rooted in Irish nationalism.

With these findings, I would write a short story of fantasy fiction. My piece would be thematically relevant to my findings, detailing the construction of a national hero and the accompanying impact on a variety of people. I would ground my work in my love for *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Both establish an elegiac image of heroism and history. Particularly, the poem *Beowulf* shows how a hero's own status affects their actions as they progress into legend. I would create a piece inspired by this theme, detailing how a hero of the past affects the audience of the present.

Word Count: 513 words

Works Cited:

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