

Aleel's Transcendental Vision in W.B. Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*

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Abstract

The Countess Cathleen is a short play in five scenes, set in sixteenth century Ireland. It is the first play, Yeats has written especially for the stage and the first play to be performed by the Irish literary. Theatre seated in the hall of the Ancient Concert Rooms in Dublin. It represents every aspect of the social and political life of the province (Frazier 1987,p.240). *The Countess Cathleen* [originally *Kathleen*] was written in 1889. Published in 1892, but produced on stage only in 1899, the play was written with Maud Gonne in mind, shortly after she met Yeats. The story of the play is based on a traditional tale of "the Countess Cathleen Oshea , a story, he has found and thought suitable for a poetic drama"(Jack1984,p.150), when he was preparing his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), and was intended for Maud Gonne to act in Dublin. The play has a simple episodic plot, the Countess Cathleen rejects her dreams for the reality of life; she opposes the efforts of two-demon-merchants to buy the souls of her starving peasants. She insists to sell her soul for a high price, in order to free her people's soul and save them from starvation. Aleel, the Countess's bard, tries to prevent her from fulfilling her will, but she prefers the world of responsibility and sacrifice rather than the world of dreams and love. In spite of Aleel's attempts to persuade her, she goes on to achieve her holy quest. The salvation of her people is her only wish, though; even she sold her soul to the demon-merchants. As a result she dies of grief for her own lost soul,"but, because her motives are pure, she is permitted to enter heaven"(Demastes 1997,p.403), the gates of heaven are described by the angel who is seized by Aleel.

Keywords: Aleel, *The Countess Cathleen*, W.B. Yeats, Transcendental Vision

Introduction

The Angel: The light beats down; the gates of pearl are wide;

And she is passing to the floor of peace,

...The light of lights

Looks always on the motive, not the deed,

The Shadow of Shadows on the deed alone.(Yeats 1982,p.50)

Yeats has written *The Countess Cathleen* out of a general ambition to create a great distinctive poetic literature out of Ireland's pagan legends so, it is a mixture of his personal thought and feeling with the beliefs and customs of Christian Ireland, besides it represents "the perennial Yeatsian conflict of dreams versus human responsibility" (Flannery 1976,p.143). In this play, Yeats longs for a one Ireland that is unified by one spirit and religion. The world of famine and misery is shown at the opening scene of the play. The dramatist portrays it throughout the peasants' family, the father Shemus, the mother Mary and the son Teique.

As a result of the starvation, they are in a hard situation, besides, they are incapable of bearing the burden of hunger and thirst. Shemus and Teique are described as blasphemous persons, because they are disturbed by Mary's prayers and patience;

Teique: What is the good of praying?...

God and the Mother of God have dropped a sleep.

Mary: You'll bring misfortune with your blasphemies

Shemus: I'm in no mood to listen to your clatter.

Although I tramped the woods for half a day,

I've taken nothing. (I: p.4)

At the same time, the Countess Cathleen, Aleel and her Foster-mother Oona appear on the stage, they lose their way towards Cathleen's castle. When Cathleen sees and hears about the peasants' agonies she decides to put all her wealth at the service of the peasants. Aleel's character, the poet in the play is not found in the original legend, as David R.Clark points out that Aleel is invented for dramatic purposes and through five revisions of the play, his role is [strengthen] and widened more and more.(Clark 1965,p.162). He represents the voice of passion and spirituality, and he longs for a world of peace and love, the same world, he invites Cathleen to, by his music and song. Throughout the character of Aleel and Cathleen, Yeats shows two kinds of realities, and two opposing worlds, the world of dream and imagination, that is depicted by Aleel's poetry and songs, and the world of materialism and exploitation of man's life and dignity, that is portrayed by Cathleen's sacrifice. The Countess Cathleen's conflict is deepened by the existence of Aleel, perhaps, he is regarded as the subconscious, which digs deep or tries to over control Cathleen's consciousness, in order to escape the world of responsibility. About the role of Aleel in the play, Peter Ure states that

[Aleel] is the poet, dreamer, and lover who urges Kathleen's retirement to dreams and the Druid forest, to self-absorption, and the subjective life of peaceful beauty, away from responsibilities and the objective life of self-sacrifice and war; he is wrought into a successful symbol (which has many links with Yeats later verse)

of "the un christened heart", the messenger of Aedh and Aenqus.(Ure 1967,p.23)

Aleel cannot be distributed by the terrible situation of the peasants, while they are busied by their troubles, he is singing and playing his lute. Once, he answers Shemus who cannot bear his music and songs, "who mocks at music mocks at love" (I: p.8), and he reveals his feeling of love, and shows his unawareness of the peasants misfortune:

Aleel [singing], were I but crazy for love's sake,
I know who'd measure out his length,
I know the heads that I should break,
For crazy men have double strength.
I know all out to leave or take,
Were I but crazy for love's sake, (I:p.8)

Thus, Aleel, as a poet who plays a crucial role, is not only "a non-Christian celebrate of primal joy, but also as Cathleen's would-be lover"(Rosenthal 1997,p.38). He begs her to go off with him, "And live in the hills/Among the sound of music and light" (III: p.25). As a Yeatsian poet, his world is inhabited by visions and prophesies, for he prophesies the coming of a disaster, "For who say what walks, or in what shape/Some devilish creature flies in the air, but now/Two grey horned owls hooted above our heads" (I: p.9). Cathleen, according to Aleel's idea is a symbol of the unity of the country, of religion and love, if she dies, he will lose the spirituality of everything. Cathleen's sorrow and sadness lead Aleel to keep her mind in peace. Because she rejects the world of dreams in favour of responsibility, this desire weakness the force of her attraction to Aleel. Moreover, Aleel is disturbed by Oona's speech and interpretation, when he sings about the dancers, and their physical and spiritual joy:

Aleel [sings]
Lift up the white knee;
Hear what they sing.
Those young dancers
That in a ring
Raved but now
Of the hearts that broke
Long, long ago
For their sake. (II: P.19)

He struggles to attain this world, but by Cathleen's sacrifice, he will not achieve it. Ultimately for Aleel this dream-world is not simply "a negative escape from the world of reality but a positive assertion of a different order of reality altogether" (Knowland

1983, p.11). He grasps Cathleen's sorrow and fear, he tries to release her by his songs and speeches, but Oona does not give him time, and she regards him as an unchristian man. Oona tries to distract Cathleen from Aleel's profane thoughts, "What Queen Maeve thinks on / when the moon is pinched, / And whether now...as in the old days the dancers/Set their brief love on men" (II: P.18). Oona answers him that "these are not thoughts for any Christian ear" (I: p.18), while Aleel ignores her, picks up his lute, and sings a song to Cathleen

inviting her to forget her moral burdens and take Queen Maeve as her model. Aleel wants Cathleen to be as Queen Maeve in her behavior, who has the ability to forget the name of her lover, so, Cathleen should forget her supposed duty. The poet calls for both spiritual and national art instead of subjugating "himself to the hopeless martyrdom of religion, he has chosen to give his soul, in love to the Christian Cathleen"(Clark ,p.161), which the devil cannot take from her. Aleel-Oona debate reveals Aleel's knowledge, which is richer than Oona's knowledge that is chained by religious prohibition:

Aleel: I thought to have kept her from remembering

The evil of the times for full ten minutes.

But now when seven are out you come between.

Oona: Talk on; what does it matter what you say,

For you have not been christened?

Aleel: Old woman, old woman,

You robbed her of three minutes' peace of mind,

And though you live unto a hundred years,

And wash the feet of beggars and give alms,

...you shall not be pardoned. (II: P.19)

Yeats believes that Ireland can be united through the superiority of art, and he is not against the Christian doctrine but against the religious prohibition and Man's tyranny. In spite of Oona's protest and accusation, and Cathleen's resistance to Aleel's appeal, he goes on to his goal. In scene three, when Cathleen is kneeling in front of the alter in the oratory, he talks to her about his dream, "My dream became a fire; and in the fire/One walked and he had birds about his head" (III: P.25). The god with "birds about his head", that appeared to Aleel is Aenqus who is described by Yeats elsewhere as the poetry ancient Celtic 'master of love', who reigned in Tir-nan-Oge, the pre-Christian paradise, where Aleel wishes Cathleen to fly with him:

Cathleen: I have heard that one of the old gods walked so.

Aleel: It may be that is angelical;
And, Lady, he bids me call you from these woods.
..., and live in the hills,
Among the sounds of music and the light
Of waters, till evil days are down.
For here some terrible death is waiting you,
Cathleen: No, not angelical. (III: P.25)

Actually, Cathleen realizes that Aleel is speaking for another set of values. Aenqus is "not angelical" in the sense that "he does not share the orthodox Christian belief in sacrifice and shared burden of sin" (Clark & Knowland 1975, p.15). Aleel's possession of poetic vision and his capacity for love presume the ultimate supremacy of the spiritual world over the material one. Cathleen describes the life that Aleel invites her to as a happy life:

Cathleen: Although I weep, I do not weep
Because that life would be most happy and here,
I find no way, no end, nor do I weep
Because I had longed to look upon your face,
But that a night of prayer has made me weary. (III: P.26)

The poet argues that the maker of mankind is responsible for what happens, therefore, Cathleen should get rid of her quest; "let Him that made/mankind, the angels and devils/ And death and plenty, mend what he has made" (III: P.26). He thinks that what he has seen in dream is divine and not like the old god who lingered in Ireland, he identifies the god as an angelical being by his spirituality and inspiration. Cathleen refuses Aleel's love, not because of their difference in social class and religion, but because she has become like 'an empty pitcher. J.J. Cribb remarks that Cathleen has become an empty vessel because she has chosen a path of self-destruction rather than one of such as that of the pagan poet [Aleel] or of the Irish mother [Mary]. (Cribb 1981, p.178). The hero's frustration of gaining his quest leads to selling his soul to the demons, "Here, take my soul for I am tired of it/I do not ask a price" (V.p40). He sells his soul out of love, as opposite to Cathleen's behavior, who sells her soul out of duty. Aleel cannot stand forcefully to change Cathleen's decision, she moves towards the oratory door, he simply lets his clasped hands, which he holds out beseechingly to her, fall, and moves towards the door through which the wood can be seen. Many critics interpret that Aleel's behavior is regarded as a kind of passivity which is due to his failure or the inability to express his love strongly, such as Brenda S. Webster who states that

Aleel fails to convey a sense of heroic or creative abundance and is almost as unable to love or at least to express his love forcefully as the Countess's goodness, which makes him feel unworthy and by fear of his own energy impulses. (Webster 1973,p.47)

In fact, Aleel accompanies Cathleen in different situations, he uses all his means to prevent her, firstly he soothes and comforts her, then he faces and discusses Cathleen's situation with Oona. Secondly, he expresses his love to Cathleen by his poetic and imaginative language. In addition, he has an inner power which is seen by the two demon-merchants; "His gaze has filled me, brother,/ with shaking and a dreadful fear" (v: p.41). This kind of premonition leads to the demons final defeat, that is interpreted by Aleel "at the end of the play in the artist's vision of an ultimate reality"(Clark & Knowland,p.15). The demon-merchants stand against the idea of buying Aleel's soul, for Aleel's love is enduring him with power, the effect of which, is to envelop his heart with a shield too strong even for the devils to penetrate. Truly, he is the only person who is saved from the demon's temptation. He tells himself:

Aleel: Impetuous heart be still, be still,
Your sorrowful love can never be told,
Cover it up with a lonely tune.
He who could bend all things to His will
Has covered the door of the infinite fold
With the pale stars and the wandering moon. (IV: P.36)

In this last attempt, he tries to recover his power and persistence, when Cathleen leans forward to sign the pact. Aleel rushes towards Cathleen and snatches the pen from her, and addresses her "leave all things to the Builder of Heaven" (v. p.44). She answers him by her saying "I have no thought; I hear a cry-a cry" (v: P.44). Cathleen sees him as a man who sang about the dancer of the woods/ That know not the hard burden of the world" (v: p. 48). Aleel's world seems as a world of irresponsibility, he shows that his world is worthier than the world that Cathleen will sacrifice her soul. He becomes loyal to his principal of love, beauty and transcendental reality. Yeats depicts Aleel as a man "who prophesies [Cathleen]'s death, at the fulfillment of that prophecy, sees the vision of Hell, a pagan Hell "(Stallworthy 1969,p.3).The playwright combines the pagan world with the Christian one. Both worlds are threatened by the demons. The hero, a pagan poet describes the pagan hell and a Christian heaven, the pagan hell is peopled by "ancient Irish mythical personages superficially like Milton's demonized deities. But it exists without reference to anything like Lucifer's revolt against heaven or original sin"(Rosenthal,p.41).

Aleel: The brazen door stands wide, and Balor comes
Borne in his heavy car, and demons have lifted

The age-weary eyelids from the eyes that of old
Turned gods to stone; Barach, the traitor, comes
And the lasevisious race, Cailitin,
That cast a Druid weakness and Decay
Over Sualtim's and Old Dectora's child;
When he killed Naoise and broke Deirdre's heart;
And all their heads are twisted to one side,
For when they lived they warred on beauty and peace.
With obstinate, crafty, sidelong bitterness. (v.p.45)

The poet portrays the conflict between two groups of old Irish legendary characters, Balor is the leader of hosts of darkness in "the decisive war between good and evil. He is a one eyed demon who had a role in the death of Naoise who eloped with Deirdre who was the beloved of Concubar"(Clark&Knowland ,p. 175).The poet's visionary world is depicted fully in the play. Aleel as a visionary is one "whose mind is smitten of God" (v: p.49). His vision becomes real, he prophesies the defeat of demonic power and the triumph of the divine order in his new vision;

Aleel:I have seen a vision under a green hedge,
A hedge of hips and haws-men yet shall hear
The archangels rolling Satan's empty skull
Over the mountain-tops. (v: p.44)

He seizes one of the angels and asks him about the fate of Cathleen, the angel's answer reveals that Cathleen is now on her way to heaven. Naturally, it is Aleel's pagan imagination "which conjures a vision of Christian angels made real upon the stage"(Parkin 1978,p.73).The poet is satisfied by his loyalty to ancient art and beliefs, in the same sense, he is a rebel, and Cathleen who rejects the lure of the past in favour of loyalty to an Irish present. Perhaps, Cathleen's sacrifice is justified by Aleel's actions; he is ready to abandon his soul to the demon without any price, when he is rejected by Cathleen. The same as Aleel, Forgael in *The Shadowy Waters* is an equally crazed visionary who is steadfast in his quest 'through the waste places of the great sea' for the love of an immortal woman, while Cathleen has rejected Aleel, Dectora, in the end of the play decides to sail with Fragael away from the experience of an earthly world into the world of eternal shadows.

Balachandra Rajan states that the Countess Cathleen "is clearly a statement of responsibility, with Aleel representing the temptation of dream"(Rajan 1965,p.25).

She expresses the uncertainty of Aleel's world. She is haunted by the idea of saving her people, also she reveals to Aleel that if the economic or political situation is changed the old tales about "Queens have wed shepherds" are true, and he will become more than kings, and not as his situation now. Aleel gives up his quest especially when Cathleen goes straightforward towards her mission. When he holds his clasped hands towards her for a moment hesitatingly, and then lets them fall beside him, Cathleen says:

Cathleen: Do not hold out to me beseeching hands.

This heart shall never waken on earth

I have sworn,

Aleel: [who has risen] when one so great spoken of

Love to one

So little as I: though to deny him love,

...knowing how greatly

They have overdared?

Cathleen: If the old tales are true,

Queen have wed shepherds...

God's procreant waters flowing about your mind

Have made you more than king's or Queen's and no

You. (III: P.27)

He explores "altruistic motives in his attempts to restore the peace of the Countess. He sees her as destroying her chances for both peace and love without necessarily gaining anything more valuable in return"(Webster, p. 43).Yeats calls for the 'ultimate insight' which connects him with "redemption from the pressure of time and chance through the exercise of the poetic imagination"(Dennis &Mulryne 1965,p.124). The peasants are redeemed by Cathleen's sacrifice, Aleel redeems his soul by Cathleen's spiritual regeneration. He dislikes Cathleen's world of incarnation, but, when she is dead, and she enters heaven instead of hell, Aleel's insight and spirituality achieve its fullness. He prophesies and recognizes the heavenly end that is waiting Cathleen. Though, he curses "Time, Fate, and Change" (v: p.49). T. Bronowski equates Cathleen's purpose fully sacrifice with the "imaginative arts". He points out that it is not sympathy alone which wins grace for the countess Cathleen. It is not enough for her to forgive her people like Prometheus, or to bless them unaware like the ancient Mariner. She plans to save the people whom she loves as purposefully as the 'imaginative arts' are planned; and it is

the planned and active, the purposeful deed which wins grace for her.(Bronowski 1939,p.230)

This idea is supported by Yeats's saying that Blake believed that "the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commended by Christ"((Ibid., p. 231). Cathleen's self-annihilation is an act of love beyond self, at the same time, she represents the social responsibility of art strongly against the responsibilities of the individual. J. J. Cribb assumes that Cathleen represents the spirit of the artist that knows no compromise with nationality, language, or religion.(Cribb, p. 176).

Cathleen recognizes the richness of Aleel's world, and feels sorry about it. The voice of duty is the only voice, she hears . Unlike Forgael and Dectora in *The Shadowy Waters*, who achieve an immortal world. Forgael's supernatural world is intermingled with Dectora's natural world to attain spiritual world. In *The Countess Cathleen*, neither Aleel tries to enter Cathleen's world, nor she enters his world. The starving peasants seem her only object. She also becomes responsible of saving them from the famine and demons. Perhaps, she symbolizes Ireland as a whole. The country is exploited and occupied by the British's occupation. Ireland is in need to regenerate its power and position through art and beauty. The poet represents the superiority of art and poetry. This shows Yeats's goal in all his life, he calls for an independent life and art. At the end of the play, Aleel's subjective world is inspired by Cathleen's objective world. The play becomes a subject for different interpretation, most of them are mentioned in this study. One of them is about the role of Aleel, as Brenda S. Webster states that Aleel lacks a heroic tendency. In a sense of objective life, Cathleen seems a heroic character. In the subjective life, Aleel is a hero of his own world. The hero's character is endowed with a mysterious power. Aleel is unlike Forgael, who knows the effect of his power. Aleel ignores his ability, while the Demon-Merchants feel fear of his strange gaze. He defends his world strongly. In his conversation with one of the peasant, he defends his music and love. With Oona, he discusses his philosophy of peace and his altruistic love of Cathleen. Like Cathleen, he is ready to sacrifice his life, but out of love. Apparently, Yeats makes the two worlds divine, the world of sacrifice and the poet's world of imagination.

Cathleen's death becomes as a source of Aleel's regenerated insight. As Terence Brown remarks that a poet's idealistic vision of an Ireland in harmony as a result of spiritual sacrifice.(Brown 1949,p.126). Aleel's transcendental world unifies with Cathleen's world of renunciation and duty.

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