
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Female Figures and Cultural Anxiety: A Comparative Study of Yeats and Heaney

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| ABSTRACT

Female figures constitute a recurring poetic medium through which W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney negotiate Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, their representations take different forms under different historical pressures. This study compares the forms, cultural meanings, and historical functions of their female representations. It argues that Yeats primarily employs mythological female figures to evoke an idealized Irish cultural past and articulate anxiety over cultural loss, discontinuity, and the uncertain achievement of genuine political and cultural autonomy. Heaney, by contrast, constructs more corporeal, material, and historically situated female figures to express anxiety over the persistence and reproduction of historical wounds in Northern Ireland. Despite these differences, both poets remain entangled in the patriarchal and imperial structures underlying the feminization of the nation. At the same time, their female representations appropriate and redirect this inherited symbolic framework toward the affirmation of Irish cultural difference, revealing a distinctly de-Anglicizing dimension.

| KEYWORDS

Yeats; Heaney; Female Figures; Cultural Anxiety; Feminized National Identity

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1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) occupy singular positions in modern Irish poetry. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 and 1995 respectively, they wrote from markedly different historical moments but remained deeply engaged with questions of Ireland, its cultural inheritance, and its political condition. Yeats's career developed amid the Irish Literary Revival, nationalist mobilization, revolution, and the political upheavals surrounding independence, whereas Heaney's poetry emerged from a divided Northern Ireland marked by the legacy of partition and, later, the violence of the Troubles. Despite this historical distance, both poets repeatedly turned to female figures when writing about Ireland. The persistence of this poetic practice raises a question that deserves closer comparative attention: why does the feminine remain such a productive medium through which both poets negotiate Ireland, and how does its significance change across their different historical circumstances?

Female representation has long constituted an important strand of Yeats scholarship. Critical attention has frequently centered on the intersections among women, personal attachment, aesthetic imagination, and political commitment. Maud Gonne occupies a particularly prominent place in this field. Al-Rezali (2016), for example, emphasizes her formative presence in Yeats's poetic imagination, where desire, admiration, and ideological conflict repeatedly converge. Other studies have approached Yeats's female figures through broader questions of gender and poetic development. Xu (2019), drawing on the doctrine of the mask, traces changing configurations of women from silence in the early poetry to wisdom and rebellion in the middle and later periods, relating these shifts to Yeats's concern with women's position within patriarchal structures. Female imagery has also attracted sustained attention in Heaney studies. Youssef identifies a recurring tension in Heaney's representation of women, who may appear as objects of male desire and authority while also being associated with natural purity and domestic value. Cheng (2017) approaches Heaney's female imagery from a postcolonial perspective and connects gendered representation with Ireland's colonial experience.

Comparative attention has also been given to the female figures in the poetry of Yeats and Heaney. Cullingford (1990) provides one of the most important comparative accounts of the woman-Ireland tradition. She demonstrates that the feminization of Ireland is historically constructed rather than natural, and that the metaphor is shaped by intersecting discourses of nationalism, sexuality, sacrifice, and political power. More importantly, she shows that the feminization of the nation remains entangled with patriarchal structures even when it is appropriated for nationalist purposes.

Existing scholarship has consequently illuminated the biographical, gendered, postcolonial, and political meanings of female representation in Yeats and Heaney, while Cullingford has offered a substantial account of the sexual politics and ideological implications of feminizing Ireland. The historical persistence of this representational practice, however, opens another field of inquiry. The woman-Ireland association survives major changes in Ireland's political and cultural circumstances, from the revivalist and revolutionary world surrounding Yeats to the divided and conflict-ridden Northern Ireland confronting Heaney. Its continued presence therefore deserves attention alongside its changing meanings. The question concerns the capacity of an inherited feminine vocabulary allegory to remain culturally productive across different historical crises and the ways in which poets reactivate, modify, and redirect that allegory in response to changing forms of cultural anxiety.

The present study takes this persistence and reconfiguration as its central comparative concern. It examines why Yeats and Heaney repeatedly turn to female figures in their poetic engagements with Ireland, how these figures register anxieties over cultural continuity, historical rupture, colonial inheritance, and political violence, and how the poetic forms and cultural functions of female representation are reshaped under different historical pressures. Cultural anxiety refers here to the poets' concern with the continuity, vulnerability, and future of Irish cultural identity when that identity is placed under pressure by colonial history, political transformation, cultural discontinuity, and violence. The study is therefore concerned with both what persists in the woman-Ireland tradition and what changes when that tradition is mobilized in different historical circumstances.

The analysis proceeds through close readings of selected poems in relation to the historical circumstances of their production. Particular attention is given to the textual construction of individual female figures, the cultural meanings they acquire within specific poems, and the historical pressures that make those meanings possible. In the selected texts, the feminine appears in different poetic forms, ranging from highly mythologized and symbolic figures to more corporeal, material, and historically situated representations. These formal differences provide a means of tracing how an inherited woman-Ireland association is repeatedly reworked to address changing cultural concerns. The comparison ultimately seeks to show how female representation functions as a durable yet adaptable poetic resource through which Yeats and Heaney respond to Ireland's colonial past, confront different forms of historical crisis, and participate in the continuing rearticulation of Irish cultural identity.

2. Female Figures and Cultural Anxiety in Yeats's Poetry

Yeats's long narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisín", first published in 1889, provides an early example of his use of a mythologized female figure to mediate questions of Irish cultural identity. Drawing on materials from the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology, the poem recounts Oisín's departure from Ireland with Niamh and his three-hundred-year sojourn in the Otherworld before his eventual return. Within Yeats's cultural imagination, Niamh and the realm associated with her can be regarded as an embodiment of an idealized Ireland rooted in myth, beauty, vitality, and cultural continuity. Such an interpretation is closely related to Yeats's broader engagement with "ancient Ireland" during the 1880s and 1890s, when Irish myth provided him with an important cultural resource for the creation of a distinctively Irish literature.

Oisín's recollection of his life with Niamh constructs this lost world through a series of sensuous and vigorous images:

O Patrick! for a hundred years
I chased upon that woody shore
The deer, the badger, and the boar.
O Patrick! for a hundred years
At evening on the glimmering sands,
These now outworn and withered hands
Wrestled among the island bands.
O Patrick! for a hundred years
The gentle Niamh was my wife;
But now two things devour my life;
The things that most of all I hate:
Fasting and prayer (Yeats, 1996, p. 364).

The repeated phrase "for a hundred years" gives Oisín's memory an incantatory quality and emphasizes the temporal distance separating the world he remembers from the world in which he now finds himself. Images such as the "woody shore" and "glimmering sands," together with hunting, fishing, wrestling, and the richly carved boats, construct the Otherworld as a realm of physical vitality, communal life, and aesthetic plenitude, showing the "harmonious relationship between art and nature" in the past (Sidnell, 1979, p. 7). The contrast becomes especially striking in the phrase "outworn and withered hands." The adjectives describe Oisín's aged body in the present, while simultaneously registering the enormous distance between his former vitality

and his present condition. His memory of "the gentle Niamh" gathers these associations into a female figure who remains inseparable from the lost world itself.

The repeated address "O Patrick!" further intensifies the sense of historical displacement. Patrick belongs to a Christian order that has replaced the heroic and pre-Christian world remembered by Oisín, and the closing opposition between his life with Niamh and the "fasting and prayer" of the present makes this cultural rupture explicit. The significance of the passage therefore lies in the temporal contrast structured around Niamh. The past remains vivid, abundant, and culturally coherent in memory, while Oisín inhabits a present from which that world has become inaccessible.

Niamh consequently gives a poetic form to Yeats's anxiety over cultural continuity. She embodies an imagined cultural wholeness whose value becomes most visible at the moment of its loss. Oisín can remember the Otherworld, yet he can no longer return to the life it represents. For Yeats, writing in a late-nineteenth-century Ireland deeply affected by British political and cultural domination, this distance between an idealized mythic past and an altered present carried particular significance. Irish mythology supplied a language through which cultural distinctiveness could be recovered imaginatively, while the very necessity of such recovery also registered anxiety over the erosion and discontinuity of that inheritance. Niamh thus becomes a feminine medium through which Yeats articulates both his attachment to an idealized Irish cultural past and his uncertainty about whether such cultural continuity can still be restored in the present.

If Niamh gives Yeats's cultural anxiety the form of loss and cultural discontinuity, "Leda and the Swan" relocates that anxiety within a violent moment of historical transformation. Composed in the political instability surrounding the aftermath of the Irish Civil War and first published in 1924, the poem emerged at a moment when the political meaning of Irish independence remained deeply unsettled. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 established the Irish Free State with Dominion status comparable to that of Canada, while retaining a constitutional relationship with the British Crown and Commonwealth. The settlement divided the nationalist movement sharply. Michael Collins defended the Treaty as providing "freedom to achieve freedom" (Kee, 1982, p. 193), while its opponents rejected the continuing constitutional connection with Britain, the oath, and the compromise surrounding partition. The political division developed into armed conflict between pro-Treaty forces and the anti-Treaty IRA in 1922-1923. This historical context is crucial to an understanding of "Leda and the Swan". In this poem, Yeats draws on the Greek myth of Zeus, who assumes the form of a swan and rapes Leda. In the mythological sequence invoked by the poem, this act of violence leads to the birth of Helen and Clytemnestra and ultimately sets in motion the Trojan War, the destruction of Troy, and the death of Agamemnon.

The poem begins by concentrating overwhelming force upon Leda's body:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast (Yeats, 1996, p. 214).

The opening phrase "A sudden blow" gives the encounter the force of an assault before either figure has been fully identified. The swan is constructed through "great wings," "dark webs," and the act of catching Leda's nape in his bill, while Leda appears as "staggering" and physically constrained. The possessive pressure of "he holds her helpless breast upon his breast" brings the asymmetry of the encounter into the body itself. The second quatrain develops this imbalance through the questions surrounding Leda's "terrified vague fingers," whose inability to push away the "feathered glory" marks the disproportion between human vulnerability and overwhelming power.

Read against the Irish political context, this radically asymmetrical encounter can be understood in relation to the structures of colonial power. Leda may thus be read as a feminized figure of Ireland subjected to overwhelming force, while the swan evokes the authority of British imperial power (Kiberd, 1996, pp. 313-314). Crucially, the consequences of this domination do not end with the act of violation itself. The violence inflicted upon Leda becomes historically generative, setting in motion a sequence of events whose effects extend from the individual female body to the destruction of an entire historical order.

This expansion from bodily violence to historical catastrophe occurs abruptly in the sestet:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead (Yeats, 1996, p. 214).

The verb "engenders" is crucial. A moment of sexual violence becomes generative: from Leda's violated body emerge Helen and Clytemnestra, and through them the destruction of Troy and the death of Agamemnon. The "broken wall" and "burning roof and tower" refer directly to the fall of Troy, yet their imagery of destruction would have acquired particular resonance in the Ireland of the early 1920s, where political independence had been followed almost immediately by civil conflict. Yeats thus joins intimate violence and historical transformation within a single causal movement. Political birth and political destruction become disturbingly entangled.

This structure is especially significant in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. British rule had shaped Ireland through centuries of unequal power, while the political settlement that emerged from the War of Independence produced a Free State alongside partition and a bitter division within Irish nationalism. In this context, the poem allows colonial coercion and internal political violence to be imagined as parts of an unsettled historical inheritance. The swan's assault need not correspond mechanically to

the Civil War itself; the myth instead provides Yeats with a form through which to contemplate how a new historical order may emerge from force and how violence may continue to shape what follows.

The poem's final question carries this cultural anxiety to its most complex point:

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop (Yeats, 1996, pp. 214-215)?

The question changes the emphasis from Leda's physical helplessness to the uncertain consequences of her encounter with power. "mastered" confirms the violence of her subjection, yet "knowledge" introduces a possibility that the earlier description leaves unresolved. Yeats asks whether the experience of overwhelming power has transmitted any knowledge to Leda before she is abandoned by the "indifferent beak." However, the poem offers no definitive answer, leaving the possibility of "knowledge" suspended within the question itself.

In light of the political instability that followed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, this unresolved relationship between knowledge and power acquires a deeper significance. The establishment of the Irish Free State involved a substantial transfer of political authority, but that authority emerged from a history shaped by colonial domination, revolutionary violence, partition, and civil war. Yeats's final question can therefore be viewed as expressing an anxiety over whether the acquisition of political power is accompanied by the knowledge necessary to exercise it responsibly: can a society emerging from prolonged domination transform its violent historical inheritance into political self-understanding, or will earlier patterns of violence continue to reproduce internal division within the new political order? The significance of this question lies in the way it moves beyond the issue of whether Ireland has acquired political power to the more difficult question of how that power will be exercised.

Leda consequently acquires a significance that exceeds that of a static emblem of a victimized Ireland. Her body becomes the site at which domination intervenes in and generates historical change, while the unresolved question of "knowledge" registers uncertainty over what a nation can learn from a violent process of historical transformation. Through the female figure, Yeats gives concrete poetic form to his cultural anxiety at a moment when Ireland's political identity had undergone profound change while its future remained unsettled. The poem ultimately raises a deeper question: whether historical transformation alone is sufficient to produce genuine political and cultural autonomy.

3. Female Figures and Cultural Anxiety in Heaney's Poetry

Among Heaney's female representations, the figure of the bog woman provides a particularly important means of articulating his cultural anxiety about the historical continuity of Ireland. Bogs, a defining feature of the Irish landscape, are deeply embedded in Ireland's historical and cultural memory. Their capacity to preserve bodies and material remains allows the past to survive physically within the present, making the bog a repository in which different historical layers coexist. Heaney makes this historical function explicit in "Bog Queen," where the gemstones of the buried woman fall into the peat "like the bearings of history" (Heaney, 1976, p. 33). The bog therefore functions simultaneously as landscape and historical archive. It preserves traces of the past while exposing them to gradual transformation and decay.

This association between landscape and history acquires particular significance in North, published in 1975 during the Troubles, when Northern Ireland was marked by political division and recurring violence. Heaney, who grew up in a Catholic family in Northern Ireland, repeatedly understood landscape as bearing the traces of the region's divided history. In *Preoccupations*, he describes his childhood home, Mossbawn, as symbolically situated between "the demesne" and "the bog," while the mixed linguistic origins of its name provide him with "a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster" (Heaney, 1980, p. 35). "Bog Queen" draws upon a similarly divided spatial vocabulary. The poem was inspired by the remains of a woman discovered in a bog on Lord Moira's estate in County Down. By giving this buried female body a first-person voice, Heaney transforms the archaeological remains into a medium through which the persistence and vulnerability of historical memory can be explored.

The poem begins with the Queen locating herself in an in-between space:

I lay waiting
between turf-face and demesne wall,
between heathery levels
and glass-toothed stone.
(Heaney, 1976, p. 32)

The repetition of "between" is significant. The Queen lies between the natural landscape of the bog and the enclosed space of the "demesne," between "heathery levels" and the man-made boundary suggested by "glass-toothed stone." Her position is therefore defined by division and historical layering. The spatial opposition also recalls Heaney's own description of Ulster as situated between the "demesne" and the "bog" (Heaney, 1980, p. 35). The female body is embedded within this contested landscape and becomes inseparable from the history accumulated around it. At the same time, the opening phrase "I lay waiting,"

which recurs later in the poem, suggests that the past has not disappeared. It remains latent beneath the surface, awaiting its return to the present.

The preservation implied by this "waiting," however, is accompanied by continual physical deterioration. The Queen describes her body as "braille/for the creeping influences," while "the seeps of winter/digested" her and "illiterate roots" entered the "cavings/of stomach and socket" (Heaney, 1976, p. 33). The metaphor of "braille" turns the female body into a surface on which time and landscape inscribe themselves. Her body can be read as a record of history, but the historical record preserved there is continuously altered by the very environment that sustains it. The verb "digested" is especially revealing: preservation in the bog does not imply historical intactness. The past survives through a process that simultaneously preserves, absorbs, and transforms it.

This tension between survival and erosion becomes more explicit when the Queen recalls the decay of her royal ornaments:

My diadem grew carious,
gemstones dropped
in the peat floe
like the bearings of history.
My sash was a black glacier
wrinkling, dyed weaves
and phoenician stitchwork
retted on my breasts'
soft moraines.

(Heaney, 1976, p. 33)

The "diadem" initially signifies status and sovereignty, yet the adjective "carious," suggesting decay from within, deprives this emblem of permanence. The gemstones do not simply vanish, and they sink into the peat "like the bearings of history." The image captures the peculiar condition of historical memory in the poem. The past remains materially present, but its elements have been displaced, buried, and deprived of their original coherence. A similar process occurs in the Queen's clothing. Her "sash," "dyed weaves," and "phoenician stitchwork" retain traces of cultural richness, yet they are gradually "retted" and incorporated into the landscape of her body. The Queen thus embodies a past that survives without remaining intact. It is this unstable form of survival that gives the poem much of its cultural anxiety.

The act of recovering the Queen from the bog introduces another form of violence:

Which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turfcutter's spade.

(Heaney, 1976, p. 33)

In the original historical account, the body was disturbed during peat cutting, and parts of its hair and clothing were subsequently removed. Heaney intensifies this process through the verbs "robbed," "barbered," and "stripped." The excavation of the past therefore does not constitute a simple act of historical recovery. Bringing the Queen back into the present also subjects her remains to further fragmentation. In a landscape already marked by the historical tension between bog and demesne, the language of robbery and stripping inevitably carries broader resonances of dispossession. Yet the importance of the scene lies particularly in the paradox it creates: historical memory can become visible again only through an act that also damages what has survived.

The final emergence of the Queen develops this paradox further:

And I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank.

(Heaney 1975, p. 34)

The verb "rose" appears to promise recovery after the repeated "I lay waiting." He (2006, pp. 90-95), for example, interprets this emergence as suggestive of a reawakening of Irish national consciousness. Such a reading is supported by the movement from burial and waiting to renewed visibility. The condition in which the Queen rises, however, complicates any fully affirmative interpretation of resurrection. What emerges from the darkness is "hacked bone," "skull-ware," "frayed stitches," "tufts," and only "small gleams." The accumulated nouns present the recovered body as a collection of damaged fragments. Her return therefore restores historical presence without restoring historical wholeness.

It is precisely this coexistence of persistence and damage that gives "Bog Queen" its particular form of cultural anxiety. The bog preserves the Queen across time and her body remains available to be recovered and read. Yet preservation has also involved corrosion, displacement, and fragmentation, while the act of recovery produces further injury. Heaney's concern consequently centers on the uncertain survival of historical memory in a Northern Ireland whose cultural identity had been shaped by colonial inheritance and was being subjected to renewed political violence during the Troubles. The question raised by the Queen's damaged return is whether the past can still provide a viable sense of cultural continuity when that past reaches the present only through scars, fragments, and contested forms of remembrance.

Through the Bog Queen, Heaney gives material form to this anxiety by locating history within a female body embedded in the Irish landscape. Her survival demonstrates the persistence of cultural memory, while her decayed and fragmented condition reveals its vulnerability. "Bog Queen" thus activates the inherited association between woman, land, and Ireland as a means of confronting a specifically historical problem: how a divided society might recover a connection with its past when the very processes of history have left that past damaged and unstable. The poem leaves the possibility of cultural continuity open, but it refuses to imagine such continuity as an uncomplicated restoration of what has been lost.

Alongside the bog woman whose body is embedded in the Irish landscape, Heaney also turns to a more immediately recognizable and corporeal form of female representation to articulate cultural anxiety. In "Act of Union," the female figure is constructed through bodily experiences familiar from intimate and reproductive life, including sexual contact, pregnancy, pain, and physical injury. Although she remains closely associated with the Irish land, her significance is conveyed through an embodied female figure rather than through a named mythological identity. Her back becomes a coastline, her body contains a "heaving province," and the political consequences of Anglo-Irish history are imagined through pregnancy, bodily pain, and wounds. By giving political history such a tangible bodily form, Heaney transforms the abstract relationship between Britain and Ireland into an intimate experience inscribed upon and within the female body.

Published in North in 1975, "Act of Union" belongs to the same historical moment of the Troubles discussed above in relation to "Bog Queen." Its title, however, extends the poem's historical horizon much further back. It evokes the Act of Union of 1800, which came into effect in 1801 and formally united the Kingdom of Great Britain and the Kingdom of Ireland as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The union abolished the separate Irish Parliament and incorporated Ireland into a new constitutional structure centered on Westminster. By the time Heaney wrote the poem, this political arrangement had undergone profound transformation: most of Ireland had achieved political independence, the island had been partitioned, and Northern Ireland remained within the United Kingdom. The poem therefore brings different historical moments into relation with one another. The political union of the nineteenth century is reconsidered from the perspective of a twentieth-century Northern Ireland in which the consequences of Anglo-Irish history remained entangled with partition and political violence.

As Andrews (1988, p. 102) observes, in "Act of Union" England and Ireland are once again represented as "a man and a woman lying together". Heaney first establishes this allegorical relationship by mapping the female body directly onto Irish geography. The male speaker addresses the woman: "Your back is a firm line of eastern coast" (Heaney, 1976, p. 49). Here, the female body functions simultaneously as a human body and as the geographical body of Ireland. The "back" becomes the "eastern coast," while the references to "arms and legs" and "gradual hills" extend the correspondence between bodily form and landscape. Ireland is therefore rendered in immediate physical terms. The political relationship between two countries is translated into an intimate bodily relationship between a man and a woman, making the asymmetry of political power perceptible at the level of physical experience.

This more concrete and bodily mode of female representation is particularly significant to Heaney's treatment of cultural anxiety. In comparison with Yeats's frequent recourse to named mythological women such as Niamh and Leda, Heaney constructs a female figure who can be recognized through the ordinary bodily experiences of intimacy, sexuality, pregnancy, and pain. The male speaker declares, "I caress/The heaving province where our past has grown" (Heaney, 1976, p. 49). The verb "caress" belongs to the language of intimacy and erotic contact, while "province" immediately shifts the image into a political and geographical register. The phrase "our past has grown" further joins personal intimacy with historical development. The relationship appears intimate, yet that intimacy is already structured by unequal power. Heaney consequently makes political domination felt as something physically close and emotionally familiar.

The inequality of this relationship becomes still more explicit when the speaker defines his own position: "I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder" (Heaney, 1976, p. 49). The phrase "tall kingdom" combines political authority with bodily scale, while "over your shoulder" gives the male figure a spatially dominant position above the woman. The imagery turns Britain's political superiority into a physical posture of domination. This connection between masculinity and imperial authority becomes unmistakable in the second part of the poem when the speaker describes himself as "still imperially/Male, leaving you with the pain" (Heaney 1975, p. 50). The juxtaposition of "imperially" and "Male" explicitly connects political power with gendered power.

The male body becomes a concrete embodiment of imperial authority, whereas the female body bears the physical consequences of that authority.

The speaker's language also exposes the contradictions within this relationship. His assertion that "Conquest is a lie" appears to deny the violence of conquest, yet elsewhere he acknowledges "The rending process in the colony" (Heaney, 1976, p. 49). The language of denial therefore coexists with the language of injury. The verb "rending" suggests tearing or splitting apart, bringing colonial history once again into the register of bodily damage. The female figure's suffering consequently acquires both physical and historical significance: the injury inflicted upon her body also evokes the divisions produced within Ireland by a prolonged history of unequal political relations.

The second part of the poem further connects this bodily relationship to the internal political divisions within Ireland. In the phrase "The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column" (Heaney, 1976, p. 49), the "fifth column" suggests the persistent forces of division within Ireland. For Heaney, writing North in the context of the Troubles, the image resonates with the sectarian and political antagonisms that continued to fracture Northern Irish society. Rather than treating such internal conflict as an isolated contemporary phenomenon, "Act of Union" traces it back to the historical ruptures produced by colonial domination. In this sense, the unequal relationship between Britain and Ireland has not remained confined to the past; its consequences continue to manifest themselves through internal divisions within Irish society. Heaney's cultural anxiety therefore concerns not only the suffering produced by British domination, but also the persistence and reproduction of historical wounds within the society itself. This anxiety becomes particularly evident in the image of the unborn child: "His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum/Mustering force" (Heaney, 1976, p. 50). The female body, conventionally associated with intimacy, reproduction, and the generation of new life, becomes here the site in which violence is anticipated and reproduced. Although "heart beneath your heart" initially evokes the familiar image of a mother carrying her child, the subsequent metaphor of the "wardrum" radically transforms its meaning. The unborn child does not signify peace, renewal, or hope. Instead, his heartbeat becomes a "wardrum" that is already "Mustering force." The juxtaposition of these two images turns the female body into a space where the private and the political, as well as reproduction and violence, converge. What should be an intimate and life-giving relationship is thus shadowed by the possibility that the violence of the past will be carried into the future. Heaney consequently presents history not as something completed, but as an active force capable of reproducing conflict across generations. What's more, The closing lines of the poem make this anxiety even more explicit--No treaty I foresee will salve completely your tracked/And stretchmarked body, the big pain/That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again (Heaney, 1976, p. 50). The metaphor of a "stretchmarked body" vividly conveys the enduring scars left by colonization and conflict. These wounds, both physical and cultural, are depicted as incurable, reflecting Heaney's pessimism regarding Ireland's ability to fully recover from its historical trauma.

4. The Ambivalent Politics of Feminized Ireland: Yeats and Heaney in Comparison

Both Yeats and Heaney repeatedly employ female figures as symbolic representations of Ireland or Northern Ireland, yet the forms these figures assume differ significantly according to their historical circumstances and poetic concerns. As the preceding analyses have shown, Yeats frequently turns to mythological women such as Niamh and Leda, whereas Heaney more often constructs female figures through corporeal, material, and historically situated forms, as exemplified by the Bog Queen and the female figure in "Act of Union." This difference is not merely a matter of poetic preference. Rather, it reflects the different forms of cultural anxiety confronting the two poets. Yeats wrote during the Irish Literary Revival and the political upheavals surrounding independence, when the recovery of a distinctive Irish cultural past was closely connected with the project of cultural revival. Heaney, by contrast, wrote in a Northern Ireland marked by partition, political division, and the violence of the Troubles, making contemporary social conflict and the fragility of cultural continuity more immediate concerns. Their different choices of female figures therefore reveal two different ways of reworking the inherited association between woman and Ireland. Yeats tends to place Ireland within a mythological and idealized temporal framework, while Heaney brings the national symbol into the material and bodily realities of contemporary history. This distinction between Yeats and Heaney is closely connected with the different objects of their cultural anxiety. Yeats's mythology allows him to confront the loss of an idealized cultural past and to imagine a distinctive Irish identity through mythic continuity. Heaney's more corporeal female figures, however, emerge from a historical landscape in which cultural identity has already been fractured by colonial inheritance, partition, and sectarian conflict.

Despite the differences in their choice and construction of female figures, both Yeats and Heaney remain entangled in the patriarchal and imperial discourses underlying the feminization of the nation. In British colonial discourse, colonized nations were often feminized and represented as irrational, capricious, and in need of governance, while the colonizer was associated with masculine qualities such as rationality, strength, and authority (Chen, 2012, p. 130). By representing Ireland and Northern Ireland through female bodies, therefore, both poets inherit, to some extent, the gendered binary embedded in colonial discourse: the nation is positioned as feminine, vulnerable, and subjected to external power, while political authority is implicitly coded as

masculine. The feminization of the nation thus remains closely tied to a patriarchal structure in which the female body serves as the symbolic object through which national experience is articulated. In this sense, the present study agrees with Cullingford's observation that the literary tradition of representing Ireland as a woman does not fully escape the binary logic of patriarchy, even when it is employed in the service of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance (Cullingford, 1990, pp. 1-21).

At the same time, the female figures in Yeats's and Heaney's poetry possess a distinctly de-Anglicizing dimension. Rather than reproducing the colonial image of the feminized nation as weak, irrational, or culturally inferior, both poets invest their female figures with qualities such as beauty, endurance, cultural vitality, and historical significance. Yeats's female figures contribute to the recovery of a distinctive Irish cultural identity, while Heaney's more historically and materially grounded women preserve traces of cultural memory and resilience in the face of colonial inheritance and political violence. Although these representations do not completely escape the structures of imperial and patriarchal discourse, they nevertheless appropriate and redirect the feminized image of the nation toward the articulation of Irish cultural difference. This tension can be further understood through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry is an ambivalent strategy: it serves the colonial project of "reform, regulation and discipline," yet the difference produced through being "almost the same, but not quite" can also unsettle colonial authority (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 121-131). In a similar sense, Yeats and Heaney appropriate an inherited gendered representational structure that is historically entangled with colonial discourse, while simultaneously redirecting it toward the affirmation of Irish cultural identity. Their feminized representations of the nation are therefore neither wholly resistant nor wholly submissive. Rather, they reveal the ambivalent politics of a representational strategy that operates within an inherited patriarchal and imperial framework while attempting to transform its cultural meaning.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney employ female figures to articulate cultural anxiety under different historical conditions. Yeats's predominantly mythological women and Heaney's more corporeal and historically situated female figures respond to different cultural pressures, yet both become important poetic means of confronting cultural loss, colonial inheritance, historical violence, and social conflict. Through these representations, the two poets not only register anxieties surrounding Ireland and Northern Ireland but also expose the damaging consequences of colonial domination and political division.

More importantly, their shared reliance on female figures reveals the ambivalence of the woman-Ireland tradition itself. This mode of representing the nation remains shaped by patriarchal and imperial discourse, since the female body is repeatedly associated with vulnerability, suffering, and subjection. Yeats and Heaney therefore cannot completely escape the gendered structure inherited from earlier representations of Ireland. At the same time, they do not simply reproduce that structure. By associating their female figures with cultural memory, vitality, endurance, and historical significance, both poets redirect the inherited feminine image toward the affirmation of Irish cultural difference and resistance to cultural domination. Yet this cultural resistance remains inseparable from the ideological constraints of the representational form through which it is expressed. Because the feminized image of Ireland is itself historically shaped by patriarchal and imperial discourse, their affirmation of Irish cultural difference continues to bear traces of the structures they seek to challenge.

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