

HS: Irish Drama

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Minutes for Session 6. William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory, **18 June 2009**

Texts: Yeats: *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), Lady Gregory: *The Rising of the Moon* (1907) and *The Gaol Gate* (1906)

We started with an oral report about the life of Lady Gregory by Marion Rheiner. The report on the Abbey Theatre could not be given because the person who was to present it was ill. Marion pointed out that, for a long time, Lady Gregory has stood in the shadow of Yeats and her role in the Irish revival has not been recognized in literary criticism, although she helped to launch Yeats's career. The same is true of Eugene O'Neill and Susan Glaspell. Glaspell also helped to launch O'Neill's career, but the difference is that Glaspell has always been recognized as historically important in US literary criticism. The reason why Lady Gregory is not accepted as a major author in the same way is that Lady Gregory is not a feminist writer like Susan Glaspell. Therefore, she is not taken into consideration by feminist critics. Another reason is that Lady Gregory's plays are very short; it is difficult to stage them because they cannot be easily integrated in the customary full-length evening performance. One would have to combine several plays in succession in order to have an evening performance, which is neither popular among directors nor the audience.

It has been pointed out that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was co-authored by Lady Gregory. The reason why she never emphasized her own work more is that she was probably a modest person. She might have feared that someone could accuse her of monopolizing the Abbey Theatre completely, as she was the founder and main contributor of the latter. Another reason is that Lady Gregory has received negative criticism by her contemporaries because of her ascendancy class background. Both her father and her husband had been involved with the British Empire and Lady Gregory was thought to belong to the wrong party. However, as Professor Fludernik explained, Lady Gregory analyzed colonialism in India and South Africa. One can conclude from her diaries¹, which were published in 1996, that she must have been very critical of colonialism and of her own family. Therefore, she can be regarded as a legitimate nationalist.

The next question we discussed was to what extent the three plays we read were political plays and how we could categorize them. Our brainstorming resulted in the following definition: a political play has a strong impact on the audience and leads to political activism. In an argumentative way, two points of view are discussed and either a favoured position is presented or the solution of the discussion is denied. Political issues are represented by two opponents who have different opinions. Usually, there is an agent of change and a preserver of power, like Cuchulain and Conchubar in *On Baile's Strand* by Yeats. A famous

¹ Gregory, Lady Isabella Augusta (1996) *Lady Gregory's Diaries 1892-1902*. Ed. James Pethica. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe.

example of a political play would be Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*, in which the French Revolution is discussed, or Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, which is about Antigone's and Creon's different views on the nature of power, fate and choice.

We agreed that the decision to what extent a play can be categorized as a political play depends on how much one knows about the political background at the time and on the political background of the audience/the reader. We also agreed that neither of the plays is as argumentative as *Danton's Death*, but that all of the plays are about problems that result from political conflicts and have argumentative parts, e.g. when the fugitive convinces the sergeant in *The Rising of the Moon*, or when *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* persuades Michael to join her.

The main problems discussed in all the plays are poverty, colonialism and nationalism. We moved on to some group work.

In *The Gaol Gate*, emigration is discussed as one possibility to escape colonialism, and the advantages and disadvantages of this possibility are pointed out, with the result that only home is considered to provide real happiness. The focus of the play is also on the community, where people stand together and help each other in conflicts. The community plays such an important role that betrayal seems to be regarded as more severe than murder. Denis Cushin's behaviour has consequences for the status of the women in his family: They might end as outcasts if Denis has betrayed his friends. The community turns out to be corrupt, which shows the members of the community in a bad light. The poor do not preserve their morality and authenticity in this play, although the tragedy can be

put down to poverty and lack of education. The women are too late to say goodbye and bury Denis because they could not read the letter which would have informed them about Denis's execution. This situation mirrors Matthew 27:54 in the Bible, when Mary weeps because Jesus is dead, as the women are both called Mary and both women make Denis a martyr. The play can be read as an indication of what will happen when the British leave the country: there will be a civil war when the Irish will fight against each other, just as everybody in the corrupted community, and mothers and wives will suffer most.

In *Cathleen Ni Houhlan*, poverty is not idealised, either. The family wants to escape poverty by marrying their son Michael to a rich girl, Delia. For the family, this marriage is a bargain: "Yes, I made the bargain well for you, Michael" (4)². It can be regarded as immoral for this reason, but it is also mentioned in the play that Michael likes Delia. Nevertheless, it is a pragmatic marriage. Here, Yeats criticizes the family as too greedy and favours the peasants who are less greedy in his view. Ireland is personified by Cathleen, because "four green beautiful fields" (7) are taken from her, which are the four Irish provinces that are occupied by the British. The play can be considered both as nationalistic and non-nationalistic. In the end, Cathleen, or Ireland, easily convinces Michael to come and fight for her. With his decision, Michael frees himself from his everyday sorrows and his poverty. This means that a rebellion against the British will make

² All quotes from the plays are based on the anthology: *Modern Irish Drama*. Ed. John P. Harrington. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.

the lives of the Irish easier. Here, we have another allusion to the New Testament: Jesus also asked his disciples to leave everything behind for a higher purpose, Michael is asked to leave his family. The powerful, religious language of martyrdom, the continuous cheering in the background and the increasing tension caused by the unknown woman attracts nationalists and rebellious people. However, it is shown that Michael's decision has negative consequences for Delia and that Michael sacrifices himself to rejuvenate Cathleen/Ireland. His brainless attraction towards Cathleen demonstrates how fanatic the rebellious movement in Ireland can be. His love for the country seems to be greater than his private love and happiness.

In *The Rising of the Moon*, the witty Irish rebel outwits the stupid sergeant who works for the British occupying power. This is a national stereotype which we find often in Irish plays. The fugitive persuades the sergeant to let him go because he reminds him of his youth, when the policeman still believed in an Irish nation. The fugitive brings this memory to the light by singing old songs about the Irish rebellion, like "The Rising of the Moon". The song, which is the title of the play, might refer to the quote by Macartney: "this vast empire on which the sun never sets". *The Rising of the Moon* might refer to the time of the meeting with other conspirators, but could as well indicate a future rebellion, and the end of

empire and colonialism.³ As both characters in the play are Irish nationals, this shows the exchangeability of their roles: One could be in the other one's place: "If it wasn't for the sense I have, and for my wife and family [...] it might be myself now" (59). The policeman might be criticized by his family for not letting the fugitive escape. This scene illustrates that it is wrong to categorise people working for the British as collaborators. However, the complicity of Irish people like the sergeant makes the oppression of the Irish possible. From a British perspective, the stereotype that Irish people are stupid will be confirmed as the sergeant misses the 100 pounds reward when he lets the fugitive off. The last question "I wonder now, am I as great a fool as I think I am?" (62) is a rhetorical question, leaving it up to audience to decide if the play is a farce or not.

In the next session (Thursday June 25th), we will have two brief presentations about Synge and about Irishisms in drama. We might also have the missing report on the Abbey Theatre. Texts for next week are John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* and Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News*, which can both be found in the anthology *Modern Irish Drama*.

³ Macartney, George (1773) *An Account of Ireland in 1773 by a Late Chief Secretary of that Kingdom*. 55; cited in Kenny, Kevin (2006) *Ireland and the British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 72.