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Final Exam Essay:

Comparison of *On Baile's Strand* and

“Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea”

William Butler Yeats often incorporated characters from Irish Celtic mythology into his literary works. Cuchulain is a character about whom Yeats has written several works, both poems and plays. Yeats has enriched the character of Cuchulain by adding to the existing mythology. However, Yeats has also added to the mystery of the character by making Cuchulain's personality, history and actions different in the different works. Yeats' play, *On Baile's Strand*, was published in 1904, and his poem, “Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea,” was published in 1893—eleven years earlier. In these two literary works, Yeats presents two very different visions of Cuchulain by offering diversity of literary media, narrative point of view, setting and plot details.

The first impression that I get regarding the treatment of Cuchulain in the play as compared to the poem is that the character seems different because of the change of literary medium from drama to poetry. Yeats was arguably a better poet than a dramatist. However, the use of dialog in the play, by Cuchulain himself and the other characters, gives us a more focused picture of Cuchulain's personality while the poem presents a more abstract, less personal image of the character.

In the play, Cuchulain appears coarse and manly, a warrior who is not afraid to say what he thinks or brag about his prowess—sort of like Beowulf:

It's well that we should speak our minds out plainly,
 For when we die we shall be spoken of
 In many countries. We in our young days
 Have seen the heavens like a burning cloud
 Brooding upon the world, and being more
 Than men can be now that cloud's lifted up,
 We should be the more truthful. Conchubar,
 I do not like your children—they have no pith,
 No marrow in their bones, and will lie soft
 Where you and I lie hard.

In the poem, we find a “kinder gentler” Cuchulain who, while valiant, is more noble and sensitive—more like Lancelot:

At last Cuchulain spake, ‘Some man has made
 His evening fire amid the leafy shade.
 I have often heard him singing to and fro,
 I have often heard the sweet sound of his bow.
 Seek out what man he is.’
 [. . .]
 After short fighting in the leafy shade,
 He spake to the young man, ‘Is there no maid
 Who loves you, no white arms to wrap you round,
 Or do you long for the dim sleepy ground,
 That you have come and dared me to my face?’

Both quotations are utterances attributed to Cuchulain, but are quite different.

Another important difference in the story of Cuchulain as told in the two works is that the narrative point of view is different; both the play and the poem are told by third-person omniscient narrators, but they are different omniscient narrators, who see things from different perspectives. Yeats, of course, created both narrators, but he created them to be quite different.

The narrative view in the play alternates between the interaction between the fool and blind man, and the interaction between Cuchulain, Conchubar, the other kings and the young man. The only exceptions to these two views both involve the women: once in a song

reminiscent of a Greek chorus, and one brief conversation between them. The two primary perspectives merge when Cuchulain interacts with the fool and blind man near the end of the play.

In the play, the young man only says that he is “of Aoife’s country,” and any information about his identity or history is unknown until the blind man reveals it to Cuchulain. The poem tells us more about the young man. In a part of the story that is only implied by the play, the young man’s mother discovers that her son’s father, who deserted her when she was pregnant, is living with another woman who is “sweet-throated like a bird.” The mother then sends the son to kill the father. Apparently, the young man is willing to defend his mother’s honor, and shares her hatred for his father.

The setting of the fight between father and son is different in the two works. In the play, they meet in “a great hall at Dundealgan,” but in the poem, they meet at “the Red Branch camp.” When father and son meet, in both the play and the poem, Cuchulain is hesitant and feels an unexplainable connection to the young man; however, that does not stop Cuchulain from fighting with him, and killing him. In the poem, the young man reveals his identity to his father with his dying breath; in the play, Cuchulain is given this information later by the blind man. In the play, Conchubar orders Cuchulain to fight the young man; in the poem, Cuchulain apparently does so simply because he was challenged. The play offers evidence that Conchubar is responsible for Cuchulain killing his son; however, it is in the poem that Conchubar is concerned that Cuchulain will attempt to kill not only Conchubar, but the other Druids as well when he returns from the sea.

The play and the poem have the same ending—Cuchulain hacking at the waves with his sword. Cuchulain has just discovered that he unknowingly killed his own son. Part of what

gives a man his sense of identity is having a son, and Cuchulain had felt incomplete for many years because of his lack of a son. Then he discovers just minutes after killing the young man, that he was the son he never knew he had. Cuchulain is understandably overcome with grief and retreats to the coastline, where he “fights the sea.” In the play, the fool and the blind man assume that Cuchulain is imagining Conchubar as he thrusts his sword into the waves.

I imagine something different. Cuchulain feels grief and anger, but he also feels shame and guilt. His sword, and probably his clothing and his body, are stained with his son’s blood. Cuchulain seeks cleansing by the sea—both literally and figuratively. He also goes to the sea to be alone—so that he can scream and cry. He has his “tough guy image” to uphold; he can hardly be seen crying around the other men, especially Conchubar. No one will know that he has cried when he returns drenched in salty surf. It will be better for them to think of him as eccentric or even a little crazy, than emotionally vulnerable. In my imagining of Cuchulain’s fight with the sea, he is acting instinctively—he is trying not to think—just allowing himself to feel.