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# **Crime of Men, Punishment of Nature and Voice of the Irish: A Study on W. B. Yeats' 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows'**

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## **Abstract**

Ecocriticism analyzes literary texts from environmental perspective to show the changes and impacts of nature upon people and their lives. William Butler Yeats uses elements of nature and blends history with legend in 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows' where history says, Hamilton burnt Sligo Abbey in 1642 and legend says, a troop of Hamilton got lost in the deep fog and a man on a white horse misled them, which caused their doom. Yeats' story contains a plot marking a revenge taken by nature. According to some scholars, natives of colonies are a part of nature. Killing native monks and consequently disturbing nature, Hamilton's troops committed a crime. Yeats ensures punishment of the criminal for this crime and hence he personifies elements of nature such as fires, shadows, horse and the moon. This paper interprets Yeats' 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows' in the light of ecocriticism in order to find out how natural elements contribute to promote Irishness and raise the voice of colonized Ireland against the colonizer. This research also aims to identify the ecocritical consciousness of Yeats and to discuss what means he receives to punish humans for their crime against nature. In short, this paper explores Yeats' rigorous use of nature and illustrates the crime of men, nature's punishment for that crime and the voice of the Irish portrayed with connotative shadows.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Colonialism, Nature, Natives and Irishness

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## **1. Introduction**

Environmental awareness is a crucial issue in twentieth first century. People of the world are looking for a balanced world where nature will not, at any cost, be harmed. In literature, writers illustrate nature in their works in such a way that increase geo-awareness. Sometimes they portray how nature is affected deadly and sometimes how it warms people with blessing. Literary critics and researchers examine effects and roles of nature to the world. The relation between humans and nature is discoursed in ecocriticism. In the history of English literature, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is a popular name who was one of Ireland's most lauded poets and whose greatest writing style was the portrait of Irish nature. He achieved the Nobel prize in 1926 for his great contribution to literature, especially for his poetry. In addition to his poetic endeavor, he was a great prose writer. He wrote many essays and stories. *Stories of Red Hanrahan- The Secret Rose-Rosa Alchemica* is his first collection of stories. One of the stories of the collection was 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows.' Yeats wrote this story on the basis

of colonial Ireland. History says, English civil wars, popularly known as great rebellion, took place in British Isles between supporters of the monarchy of Charles I (1600-1649) and opposing groups in each of Charles' kingdoms, including Parliamentarians in England, Covenanters in Scotland, and Confederates in Ireland. In August 1642, Charles I raised an army against the wishes of Parliament, ostensibly to deal with a rebellion in Ireland. During that time, a troop commanded by Sir Frederick Hamilton (1590-1647) attacked some places of Ireland, including Sligo Abbey. In this abbey, there were monks, who were shot and burnt by soldiers of Hamilton. Yeats uses this historical incident in his story, but with the mixture of a popular legend which says, after the burning of the abbey, the troops were informed that the defeated Irish sent two people who were coming to attack them. When they followed this instruction and went through a deep forest, they were led, rather misled by some shadows, and finally they slipped from the top of mountain and died. Yeats organizes the plot of his story from both history and legend and he uses elements of Irish nature. Here, colonized Ireland and their voice against the colonial behavior of the British are represented with the use of nature and Irish legend.

Yeats personifies parts of nature such as trees, shadows, horse and even the moon; thus, he upholds a voice of nature against all sort of injustice and crime which implies the voice of the Irish. Moreover, he guarantees poetic justice in his story but his medium are inanimate trees, shadows and so on. This research explores Yeats' rigorous use of nature and illustrates the crime of men, nature's punishment for that crime and the voice of the Irish portrayed with connotative shadows.

## 2. Yeats' Use of Nature, Legend and History to Uphold Irishness

Yeats' use of nature, legend and history in his story marks Irishness and the colonized condition of the Irish. Firstly, Yeats' effort on nature is dignified by critics as they opine, "The Yeatsian art of storytelling consists in giving measure to this immeasurable prodigality of procreative nature" (Dibattista, 2007, p. 48). The setting of 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows' is an abbey surrounded with trees. Another setting was a deep forest and a mountain, both are situated in Ireland. He uses Irish country-setting to promote nature and its various reactions. When Hamilton sent the troopers to kill two men who were supposed to come from "north east between *Ben Bulbin* and *Cashel na Gael*" (Yeats, 2013, p. 123), "suddenly the first two horses neighed, and then stood still, and would go no further. Before them was a glint of water, and they knew by the rushing sound that it was a river" (Yeats, p. 124). Here the presence of a river is explored by horses. Again, when the troopers were going across a forest, "the tops of the trees began also to moan, and the sound of it was like the voice of the dead in the wind" (Yeats, p. 125). Thus, Irishness appears with the use of nature. In addition, using nature, Yeats depicts the exploitation of the colonized and addresses the exploiters as an enemy of nature since natives, above all humans are a part of nature. W. B. Yeats' 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows' deals with colonized Ireland where the Irish were struggling for their sovereignty from England. During the confederate wars, British king Charles I sent an army in Ireland to dominate the democratic Confederates. Sir Frederick Hamilton, with his troops, attacked different areas of Ireland, including an abbey. He shot many friars and burnt the abbey where there were white friars, representing Irish people. If this incident is interpreted in the light of colonialism, it can be said that Hamilton exploited Irish natives and therefore, he disturbed nature and committed a crime against it.

Secondly, Yeats uses Irish folks and legend. Dibattista (2007) says, "For Yeats, it was a 'thirst for unbounded emotion' that animated Irish folklore and Celtic mythology, a tradition that celebrated the life..." (p. 46). Ireland was full with its scenery, folklore, and supernatural legend and Yeats colors the setting of his stories with all these. Folklore can spread and uphold Yeats' philosophy and ideology that he wants to inject in his writing. A critic writes that Yeats was certainly inspired by Irish folklore and mysticism (Dhomhnaill, 2020). He uses a popular legend in 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows'. According to the legend, some troopers of Hamilton, the burner of Sligo Abbey were followed by a shadow and they were misled by an aged man on a white horse and it caused their doom. He uses this legend in this story to make justice for the white friars, worshippers of God in an abbey who had to die because of a fire set by troopers of Hamilton. The ending of the story is fictional but this fiction is based on a legend. This is how Irish legend and folklores are disseminated in his works to contain Yeats' Irishness.

Finally, Yeats' story is also based on a historical event. The context is the beginning year of the Irish Confederate Wars. This war would decide who would govern Ireland- the monarch or the democratic parliament. The war was not only political but also religious. With the change of governing parties, religious domination would also change. The Irish were basically Catholic but Hamilton, the commander of the troop and killers of white friars, was a Scottish soldier and a follower of Protestantism. On the contrary, Yeats loved the sovereignty of Ireland and was a Catholic. He had also sympathy for the democratic Confederates. His countrymen were attacked, shot and burnt and therefore he criticized the role of Hamilton and fictionally punished them to show his respect towards Ireland and Catholicism. Thus, he ensured justice to the Irish colonized people in his literary work with the use of nature, legend and history.

## 3. Interpretation of Personified Elements of Nature

W. B. Yeats' personification of nature contributes to punish the evil-doers and raise the voice of "the defeated Irish" (Yeats, 2013, p. 123). Personification refers to giving life to inanimate things or lifeless objects (Cuddon, 1998, p. 661). Usually things, ideas or objects are personified to indicate a deeper truth. In 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows', trees, shadows, horse and the moon are personified to take revenge on behalf of the victim, i.e. the dead and burnt friars. Personified elements of nature are interpreted with textual references.

Firstly, shadows are personified by Yeats to represent the conscience of the killers and nature's disturbers. The troops "saw a man covered with dust who came running towards them. Two messengers, he cried, have been sent by the defeated Irish to raise against you the whole country about Manor Hamilton, and if you do not stop them you will be overpowered in the woods before you reach home again! They ride north east between *Ben Bulbin* and *Cashel na Gael*" (Yeats, p. 123). Without identifying and confirming the identity of the dusted man, Hamilton ordered his troops to "mount quickly, and ride through the woods towards the mountain, and get before these men, and kill them" (p. 123). The narrator of the story never clarifies the identity of the character. But as the title indicates, it can be assumed that this is also a shadowy character. This shadow might indicate the personification of their conscience.

Another type of shadows refers to illusion and internal fear of the wrong-doers. During journey, troops came closer and gossiped just to avoid their fear. All on a sudden, one of them stopped and said that he had seen something, "it may have been of the shadows" (p. 123). Again, they saw a woman standing in the middle of a river. She said, "Did you see my son? He has a crown of silver on his head, and there are rubies in the crown" (p. 124). The troopers also attacked her and suddenly she got disappeared. "The woman vanished, and though he had thrust his sword into air and water he had found nothing" (p. 124). The woman is also personification of nature which embodies the killers' illusion and internal fear.

Another shadow is found when troops saw an old piper. They compelled him to lead them. He along with a white horse led them to the zenith of the mountain. Five troops with their horses jumped from the mountain but not the old man with his horse. The man and his horse represent the victim natives of Ireland.

In addition to the personification of shadows, trees are also attributed human qualities in the story. Yeats writes, "The tops of the trees began also to moan, and the sound of it was like the voice of the dead in the wind" (p. 125). Again, the narrator writes, "The moaning grew louder and louder" (p. 125). The trees of the forest reacted against their misdoing as they killed many people by burning and then, they are wandering to kill two more people who might be attacking them. So, these people are hankering after killing and the trees cursed them and reacted accordingly. They got panicked but paid no attention; what they did was just getting closer and started talking about their heroic doings.

This type of personification of trees is also noticed in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. An ash-tree became a part and parcel of the Morel family, the tree reacted with the reaction of the family. "In front of the house was a huge old ash-tree. The west wind, sweeping from Derbyshire, caught the houses with full force, and the tree shrieked again. Morel liked it" (Lawrence, 2007, p. 84). Both Mr. Morel and William were very aggressive to each other and they were quarrelling. The ash-tree reacted against their cruelty. Here the tree is not merely a tree, rather a live character, a personified character with human qualities. Another line from the text will make it clearer. "Then he [William] heard the booming shouts of his father, come home nearly drunk, then the sharp replies of his mother, then the bang, bang of his father's fist on the table, and the nasty snarling shout as the man's voice got higher. And then the whole was drowned in a piercing medley of shrieks and cries from the great, wind-swept ash-tree" (Lawrence, 2007, pp. 84-85). So, trees, in personified mood, represent human qualities, human emotion and feeling. In both 'The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows' and *Sons and Lovers*, trees reacted against what was going on in the setting. The trees of the forest were moaning as the killers are going through them, likewise, the ash-tree was moaning as the Morels were quarrelling.

Lastly, the moon, a satellite of the earth, is also personified by Yeats. He writes, "the dance of the white moon fires more and more rapid" (Yeats, p. 125). The moon can never dance, rather because of giving human qualities, that the moon danced rapidly seemed live to the eyes of the troopers. Another personification of the moon is found at the end of the story while the guide was leading the troopers toward the mountain. "The moon had already set" (p. 126). When the troopers were in their way to catch two men, the moon was shining and showing them the way. But when they were on the top of the mountain and about to proceed from the zenith of the mountain, the moon, like a wise man, stopped giving her light so that they can easily be misled and they can go without any clear idea about their destination. Thus, Yeats personified various elements of nature to stand by the people of Ireland and against the brutality of the British.

#### 4. Ecocritical Reading of Men's Crime against Nature

Behind the personification of nature, Yeats intends to show how humans commit crime against nature. Discussion of crime against nature is an area of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism- also called green studies, environmental studies- is the study of literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, where literature scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. Mambrol (2016) writes, ecocriticism refers to "the relation between humans and the natural world in Literature". Cheryll Glotfelty (as cited in Barry, 2010) writes that "Simple defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment".

This is a literary movement, though used in many writings even before the discovery of this term. "Ecocriticism...takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth-century American writers whose work celebrates nature, the life force, and the wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau" (Barry, 2010, p. 240). W. B. Yeats never claimed that he was an ecocritical writer but later many elements of ecocriticism were found in his writing.

Natives are compared to nature by a critic named Nayar (2010) who writes, "During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this 'civilization' was tied up with two other 'movements', colonialism and capitalism. Both regarded nature as something to be exploited by humans. In the case of colonialism, a further angle developed. Natives in the colonies were seen as a part of

nature: savage, primitive, meant to be improved by European influence.” Thus, the natives of Irish colony are considered to be dominatable and therefore are exploited by the British colonizer, as nature is exploited by humans.

In the story of Yeats, natives are seen to be shot and burnt, above all exploited. As a part of nature is exploited, other parts of nature take revenge to make justice for the victim. In the story, Yeats uses elements of nature like fires and shadows to ensure justice. Theoretically, burning affects nature and therefore it is considered as a crime. By killing many religious natives and burning the abbey, the killers basically committed a crime. In the light of colonialism, killing the monks and burning the abbey are a crime against nature. Scientifically, burning causes environmental pollution. Humans are burning an abbey full with friars. By burning a part of nature unnecessarily, they are polluting and disturbing the environment. Burning emits different types of toxic gas and deadly chemicals in the atmosphere. Martin et al. (2016) write in ‘Environmental Impact of Fire’ that “there are a wide variety of chemicals and particulates emitted during fires that have been identified as having a negative impact on the environment” (p. 4). Wisconsin department of natural resources opines, “All open burning poses risks to the environment and public health. Smoke pollutes the air we breathe. Ash pollutes our soil, groundwater, lakes, rivers and streams. Burning anything in the outdoors can cause a wildfire.” So, burning the abbey and some humans ecologically created one sort of imbalance in nature. The legend used in the story says, because of heavy fog, troops of five fighters lost their way in the forest. The heavy fog is a natural consequence caused by pollution. In short, it can be said that personified nature illustrates humans’ crime against nature.

### 5. Punishment of Nature for Men’s Crime

After crime against nature, a question regarding punishment becomes very relevant. Nature punishes humans for the crime against it and rewards the victims by doing justice to them though it might be after their death. The idea of rewarding the good and punishing the bad is called poetic justice. Abrams (2006) writes, poetic justice is a term that is used “to signify the distribution, at the end of a literary work, of earthly rewards and punishments in proportion to the virtue or vice of the various characters” (p. 203). If any character commits any harm to nature or to some other humans, writers punish him or her at the end of the work. If not possible with earthly things, supernatural or sometimes paranormal things can also happen just to ensure it. Basically, poetic justice is used to “convey the idea that the evil are punished appropriately and the good rewarded as they should be” (Cuddon, 1998, p. 681). This definition indicates that to spread the lesson of morality and justice, writers ensure poetic justice in their writing; this is why they punish the main culprit and reward the victim. In almost all writings both fictional and non-fictional, justice is done to those who are deprived. In fiction, justice is done in many ways. Sometimes some heroic people are presented and they do for the voiceless people. Sometimes the victims become violent and take revenge just to ensure justice for their people. When these are not possible, the writers present some magical characters to do so. As the story of W. B. Yeats is not a magic realist story, he did not do so by picturing magical characters, rather he turns parts of nature into characters and they ensure justice to the victim. Parts of nature include fog, trees, rivers, piper and the shadowy characters or *sidhe*.

When nature is affected, it punishes those who affect and even in postcolonial ecocriticism, those who affect nature must be brought under punishment. In colonies, if natives faced torture of the colonizers, it is also considered as a crime and therefore demands punishment for them. In Yeats’ story, no living natives are found who can ensure punishment for the dead; hence nature reacts, makes a shadowy character, coming from the burning area to inform the troopers about the arrival of two persons and thus misleads them for the first time. As the troopers, by affecting nature, are criminals, nature such as trees moaned during their journey. Even they faced some more shadowy characters and therefore lost the expected way. Thus, they were forced by nature to take the help of shadowy characters and consequently faced the punishment of nature. They were climbing upon a mountain following a shadowy guide and in the dark, the horses jumped. The set of the moon and climbing up on the mountain and jumping from the zenith- everything is designed by nature as nature is determined to punish those who affect it. Similar reaction of nature is also found in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. When King Lear was in trouble, it rained heavily. This rain symbolizes the inner anguish of the character.

To sum up, Yeats punished the troops who shot and burnt the white friars illegally. These white friars epitomize Irish nationality. People of another country who attacked the friars for the sake of securing the throne are enemies to them and this team of foe was misled by nature leading to death. Thus, with the use of elements of nature, Yeats ensured punishment of nature for their crime and did justice for the victims.

### 6. Raising the Voice of the Irish

Yeats upholds the voice of the Irish in ‘The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows’. The title of the story suggests that there are curses of fires and shadows. In the story, some characters are found that are shadowy, for instance, a man coming from the burning abbey with dirt, a woman with her dead son and an aged man with a white horse. There are two types of shadows; first type of shadows refers to the troopers. The first sentence mentioning the word shadows is “the white lights from the altar threw the shadows of the troopers up on to roof and wall” (Yeats, 2013, pp. 121-22). Here the shadows are the troopers. The troopers are again mentioned as follows: “The dance of the shadows passed away.” (p. 122). This type of shadow is satanic as they set fire on the abbey.

On the contrary, another shadow comes when the abbot was about to die. He said, the killers will be governed by some “ungovernable shadows” as a curse. While the abbey was burning, “they [the troopers] saw a man covered with dust who came running towards them” (p. 123). In the story, his identity is not clear but he warned about two men who were coming to attack the troopers. He was coming from the death-valley where the fire was still too hot and therefore, must be none but a shadow. When the troopers followed the instruction of the shadow and started to stop and kill those men, unknowingly that they were running to meet their death. During this journey, they faced a female shadow with her dead son. She was seeking justice for her dead son, one of the troopers tried to kill her and “the woman had vanished” (p. 124). Here, traces of two more shadows are found. Finally, the troopers lost their way.

All on a sudden, they heard, someone was piping a pipe that produced a wonderful melody. They found an old man sitting in a hollow and piping there. “In the midst of the hollow was an old man with a red cap and withered face. He sat beside a fire of sticks, and had a burning torch thrust into the earth at his feet, and played an old bagpipe furiously” (p. 125). Seeing the old man in the cave, one of them said, “I fear he is one of the *Sidhe*” (p. 125). The troopers compelled him to guide them. Noteworthy to mention, he was a shadow and ready to guide, rather misguide them. This intension of misguiding a troop is to do justice for the downtrodden dead white friars. He guided them, led them to the zenith of the mountain and fell from the top of that. “The six horses sprang forward, and five screams went up into the air, a moment later five men and horses fell with a dull crash upon the green slopes at the foot of the rocks” (p. 126). Here one thing needs more attention that six horses sprang forward but only five of them fell with a crash, so a question raises, what happened with one more horse, the sixth one? It has been said in the title that there will be found shadows in the story. Not only the old man is a shadow, but also the sixth horse, the horse of the old man.

Literally the troops lost their way in the mid of the forest; historically they got lost due to heavy fog; but connotatively they lost their sense of morality by fighting against native people. Losing the way indicates that they basically lost the way how to love humanity and human beings. They lost the way of morality. As they killed human beings, specially friars who worshipped God, God got angry with them and they were punished for their crime, rather for their sin. As they have lost their way, they have to be punished. They are punished here not by any human beings but by shadows; but by the curse of the shadows. These shadows represent nature. So, it can be said that nature punished humans for their crime. Curse is a passive word. When people can do nothing against a crime or a sin, they blame and curse. Here neither any people nor any relatives are blaming. The fires that are burning the people are cursing the fire setters. This fire made the shadows, or even it might be, they are created by the nature itself to ensure justice.

These shadows are symbol of illusive conscience of the killers. These characters depict the steps adopted by nature to express its thinking. They can be examined with some other characters created by some great writers. In *Dr. Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), there are two angels; one is good and another one is bad. None but Dr. Faustus could see them. Critics said about them that they were none but the conscience of Dr. Faustus himself. A researcher writes, “Critics have made them intelligible for the twentieth century reader by stressing their psychological function: they are projections of Faustus's inner conflicts... John Barton ... showed the Angels as mere aspects of Faustus's consciousness, entirely dependent upon him” (Lunney, 1990, p. 3). When one argues with oneself, (s)he can find two identities within him or herself. One self says it should be done, another self says, it is bad and it should never be done. This is the exact thing that happened with Dr. Faustus. So, these two characters of the play are not merely characters, they are illusive characters created by the conscience of the protagonist. Even in Shakespeare's many tragedies including *King Lear*, a character named Fool is found. This character talks to none but only to the tragic character who is going to face the tragedy. It is a fool, it entertains him, sometimes criticizes but never talks bad. According to many critics, this character is also a creation of the conscience of the tragic character. So, it can be said about this story titled ‘The Curse of the Fires and the Shadows’ that the shadows are nothing but the illusive conscience of the troopers and the illusion is the implied voice of the Irish. The troops commanded by Hamilton killed many innocent people and therefore they were in a mental dilemma. They were suffering from mental restlessness and this is why, these bold and “heroic” heroes fought against the shadow floating in the river, and following a shadowy old man with a horse. They could not see the truth and reality. So, their conscience created some shadows that they were following, they were trying to kill the female shadow but she vanished. Because of their guilty conscience, they saw that trees were moaning. Everything indicates that they lost their way because of the curse of the fires and the shadows. They confronted the illusive shadows due to their attack against the Irish. As they created the fires, so did they the shadows. One was visible, later one was invisible and they were driven by this invisible force. Thus, Yeats pictures these shadows which symbolize the voice of the Irish as they counter those who attacked Ireland and the Irish.

## 7. Conclusion

W. B. Yeats' ‘The Curse of the Fires and of the Shadows’ contributes a lot to environmental awareness. Yeats shows deadly reaction of nature when nature, including its parts, for instance an abbey and natives, are burnt and thence affected. This paper discovers Irish nature, legend and history in Yeats' story. Elements of nature are attributed human qualities to ensure punishment for those who affect and harm nature. Humans commit crime against nature by affecting it unnecessarily and therefore are punished by nature. Nature and natural elements i.e. connotative shadows used in the story portray the voice of the people of Ireland. Since no humans were capable of raising their voice against the torture of monarchical Britain, Yeats used natural elements and punished them. To ensure this penalty for those troopers who burnt the abbey and harmed nature, Yeats mixed

history and legend in his story, misled the soldiers and ensured poetic justice. By doing so, he upholds Irishness and Irish voice against all sort of injustice. However, the essence of the story cannot be confined within the border of Ireland or it cannot be said that this revenge of nature is only on behalf of the Irish people, rather it raises a voice which resembles the voice of the world who are undergoing these problems.

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