

12-2020

## Humanizing the Hero: Patrick Pearse's Reimagination of the Epic Hero for Modern Ireland

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Humanizing the Hero: Patrick Pearse's Reimagination of the Epic Hero for Modern Ireland

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in English  
British Literature

by

Chelsea Kristine Armstrong

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2014

December 2020

## Dedication

To my thesis committee: Dr. Doll, Dr. White, and Prof. Fink, without your support, I never would have completed this project. Thank you for believing in me.

To the Innsbruck Academic Year Abroad: I likely would not have discovered Patrick Pearse had it not been for the University of Innsbruck offering an Irish literature course—“The ‘Troubles’ in (Anglo-)Irish Lit and Film.” Who would have thought my love for Irish literature would start in Austria?

To my friends and fellow MAs: Taylor Amalfitano and Matthew Hester, thank you for welcoming me into your group. I love how unconditionally supportive we are of each other and so proud of all we’ve accomplished over the last two years. I couldn’t have gotten to this point without you both.

To my mom: You sacrificed so much of your own life and dreams so I could pursue mine. You taught me to never give up and to always ask for help when I need it, and I cannot thank you enough for the countless times over the last few months you have watched Elliot so I could finish this project.

Most of all, to my son: Elliot Pearse Rose, you have been patient with me while I chase my dreams, and I hope my determination and passion inspire you to find a path in life that you love and fight to make your dreams come true—no matter what. This thesis is for you, kid!

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## Abstract

In 1916 Ireland, a group of poets staged an insurrection against England that would become universally known as the Easter Rising. The leader and the face of the rebellion, Patrick Pearse, is mostly known for his political propaganda but not so widely known for his literary merit; however, throughout his poetry and nonfiction, Pearse created a new type of epic hero—one who would free Ireland from Britain's shackles. Regardless of whether the insurrection was successful or not, through his writings, Pearse created a Cúchulainn and Christ figure character who used militant force to stand against colonialism and who became a sacrificial lamb for Ireland's regained independence.

Keywords: Ireland, nationalism, freedom, liberation, literature, modernism

## Introduction:

In twenty-first century academia, most literary critics aim to separate the author from the narrator or protagonist they portray on the page; however, scholars struggle to separate Patrick Pearse the politician and nationalist from the Patrick Pearse he created as a literary figure throughout his works.

The most well-known, contemporary Pearse scholars include Ruth Dudley Edwards, Seán Farrell Moran, Joost Augusteijn, and Seamus Deane, and while each mention Pearse's writings in their scholarship, they largely discredit them as works of literature. In doing so, they do one of two things: 1) talk about his writings as political propaganda or 2) criticize their lack of literary merit. Edwards dedicated a chapter in *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* to Pearse's prose and poetry, focusing mainly on the literature that inspired Pearse rather than the literary merit of his own works. In addition, she discusses the importance of how Pearse wrote many of his works in Gaelic before translating them to English, so this chapter, while seeming to be about his literature, ends up delving more into his relationship with the Gaelic League and his desire to de-anglicize Ireland. Moran and Augusteijn dedicate less time to discussing Pearse's literature, and when they do, they talk about his writings and political propaganda, ignoring any literary merit they have. Irish author, critic, and historian, Seamus Deane, is one of the only critics to explicitly evaluate the quality of Pearse's writing:

As poems they are not particularly good. But the quality of the writing is a minor consideration against the fact that they were written at all, written *then*, an example of literature in service up to the last moment and, of course, in service to something more important than itself. For all his sentimentality and for all his literariness, Pearse is a

strictly utilitarian writer. He wrote to teach and move his audience. In that respect, he was successful. (74)

Even though Deane criticizes Pearse's poems, he steps away from the *good/bad* binary and extends his criticism to positively reflect not what Pearse put on the page but what came from what he wrote—education and inspiration.

Like Deane, literary critics in general do not celebrate Pearse as a writer, which is baffling considering his writings comprise five volumes, and most Pearse scholars are historians and biographers, not literary critics. Even though he was a prominent political figure who, with the help of other poets and revolutionaries, led the 1916 Easter Rising Rebellion, he wrote much literature that is worth respecting and analyzing as art. Leading up to the events on April 24, 1916, Pearse wrote speeches, plays, short stories, and poems in order to promote nationalism and call for his Irish brothers and sisters to fight for Irish independence. During his life, Pearse inspired nationalism, encouraged revolutionary action from youth and civilians, and martyred himself for Ireland. However, prior to his death by firing squad, Pearse created a fictionalized version of himself—one inspired by the supernatural warrior Cúchulainn and the half human, half divine Christ—who would fulfill his destiny as Ireland's modern epic hero, successfully saving Her from oppression.

Biography:

“The spirit of political freedom often beats  
most fiercely in the hearts of poets.” (McCafferty 12)

Patrick Pearse's desire to embody the heroic spirit started at a young age. As a child, Pearse began immersing himself in literature and became captivated by the heroes he encountered there, specifically Irish Gaelic folk heroes like Cúchulainn. As an educated,

working-class Irish man, he did not fit the general characteristics that make up the heroes he read about. He was not born into nobility, but rather, he was the son of a self-educated stonemason.

Much of his educational influence came from his maternal aunt who

filled him with stories of Irish heroes and martyrs. She became his teacher at home, “The woman to whom I owe all my enthusiasms.” He became more interested in Irish history than in playing with other children. In fact he seemed to shun other youngsters, playing no games in his youth. His mind ran in the direction of Irish studies; he even purchased an Irish grammar [book] when only seven years old. He was preparing for the future.

(McCafferty 15)

The education he received from his aunt was not the type he would have obtained from formal schooling, largely due to the fact that instruction in Ireland was becoming increasingly more English. Thus, Pearse struggled to engage in formal education because “[he believed] that the English educational system in Ireland ‘does more violence to elementary human rights of Irish children than would an edict for the general castration of Irish males’” (McCafferty 15). Toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, those striving to preserve Ireland’s rich cultural and literary traditions began making efforts to reinstate Gaelic culture into the curriculum as can be seen with the founding of the Gaelic League. However, Pearse did not believe that the Gaelic League was doing enough to revive nationalism throughout Ireland. To him, their efforts were too passive. What Ireland needed was an uprising, so he abandoned the Gaelic League and took matters into his own hands.

In 1908, Pearse founded a secondary school for boys—St. Enda’s School—with the goal of creating an Irish education not plagued by English colonialism. In a letter to Gaelic revivalist



and politician Eoin MacNeill, Pearse outlined the goals of his school, and according to the editors of *Handbook of the Irish Revival*:

[Pearse] was keen to replace colonial modes of education that promoted rote learning and fetishized examination success. Instead he encouraged more liberal ideas, placing value on individuality and imagination. Pearse's interest in early-Christian Ireland and in the heroic deeds of Cúchulainn was reflected in the curriculum. The increasing involvement of staff members in military organisation was also mirrored in the distinctive form of patriotic masculinity encouraged at St. Enda's. (editor's marginal note in "Pearse's letter" 98)

The St. Enda's school would become not only an educational institution to promote an Irish-centered education but would also become a military training location for building an Irish youth army to fight alongside other radical groups against England. Pearse continued to inspire nationalism among his students along with the adult Irish population until he and his fellow revolutionaries set their rebellion into motion.

On April 24, 1916, after years of preparation, multiple Irish nationalist groups—the Irish Volunteers led by Pearse, Irish Citizen Army led by James Connolly, and the Irish nationalist youth organization, Fianna Éireann—openly rebelled against the British government into action. In doing so, they proclaimed that Ireland should be an independent nation. The leaders of the rebellion were teachers and poets who had little or no formal military training; thus, the Easter Rising is also commonly known as the Poets' Rebellion. One of the primary leaders of the resistance was Pearse, who, along with fourteen other leaders, was executed by a British firing squad after their failed insurrection. Pearse became historically relevant due to his proclamatory

leadership and eventual martyrdom; therefore, historians and biographers discuss Pearse as a politician, teacher, and revolutionary, but still, scholars rarely consider him a literary figure.

Four hundred eighty-five people died in the Easter Rising with over fifty percent of whom were Irish civilians. The rebels made up only sixteen percent of those who died. Tragically, the majority of the deaths were civilians who got caught in the crossfire, which led to the backlash from Dubliners against the leaders of the rebellion for causing more harm than good. That was until they became martyrs: “the[ir] failure had become a triumph and romantic Ireland lived on” (McCafferty 12). Awaiting his execution, Pearse reflected on his call to be Ireland’s savior and “claimed, ‘when I was a child of ten I went down on my bare knees by my bedside one night and promised God that I would devote my life to an effort to free my country, I have kept that promise’” (O’Donnell 18). Even though most of his followers initially condemned Pearse and the other poets for wreaking havoc throughout Dublin and for causing hundreds of Irish men and women to die their martyrdom became a symbol of Irish nationalism and inspired a surge in political parties determined to continue the mission of the poets. Through their deaths, the poets James Connolly, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas MacDonagh, and Patrick Pearse among others are some of the most well-known and respected Irish politicians and revolutionaries of the early twentieth century, and even though he is mostly discussed as a politician and rebel, Pearse wanted his legacy to be more than that of a revolutionary. He wanted Ireland’s future generations to see him as one of the great heroes he read about as a child—a hero like Cúchulainn or Christ who knew that their sacrifices would be for the greater good of their followers and their country.

Evolution of the Epic Hero:

“[T]he classical epic [is] based on actions  
and brought about through exaggerated tales of oral tradition,

[while the] modern-day epic [is] based on discourse and brought about through mundane yet realistic events” (Meyer 138).

The legend of Cúchulainn is one that every Irish schoolchild would be familiar with, including Pearse. As a child, Pearse studied the Irish folk hero and developed an interest in his intense bravery and willingness to fight for his kingdom no matter the cost. Pearse cited Cúchulainn’s heroism throughout his political writings and poetry, and the hero’s armed protection of Ulster would heavily influence Pearse’s belief that as Ireland’s messiah, both he and the fictional Pearse would have to stage an insurrection in order to free Ireland from England’s shackles.

Cúchulainn was born to an inn keeper who gave her son to the king of Ulster’s sister, Deichtine. Shortly after, the boy died, and Deichtine mourned the loss of her foster son: “She came home from lamenting him and grew thirsty and asked for a drink, and the drink was brought in a cup. She set her lips to drink from it and a tiny creature slipped into her mouth with the liquid. As she took the cup from her lips she swallowed the creature and it vanished” (Kinsella 21). She went to sleep and had a dream that “a man came toward her and spoke to her, saying she would bear a child by him—that it was he who had brought her to the Brug to sleep with her there, that the boy she had reared was his, that he was again planted in her womb and was to be called Sétanta [an incarnation of his father: the god Lugh]” (Kinsella 21-3). This boy would be known as the legendary Irish warrior, Cúchulainn—Ireland’s mythological epic hero who was born to protect Ulster.

Cúchulainn’s birth was extraordinary, supernatural, and noble, setting the stage for him to be Ireland’s epic hero—not to mention that *The Tain* (which is the story of Cúchulainn) is often referred to as the Irish *Illiad*. Throughout the rest of the story, Cúchulainn exhibited superhuman strength and natural fighting abilities, and when “[t]he Ulster chariot-warriors were practising on

spearheads stretched the length of the house from one door to the other, two hundred and five feet...Cúchulainn outdid them all by his brilliance and nimbleness in the feats” (Kinsella 25-6). His warrior abilities mirror those of Hercules—superhuman strength, the ability to defeat hundreds of people on his own, agility, and mastery of a weapon: his javelin.

His biggest challenger was Medb, the warrior queen of Connacht. While Cúchulainn abandoned his post at the border to be with a woman, she successfully invaded Ulster to steal their fertile bull. It was now Cúchulainn’s responsibility to prevent Medb and her army from taking over Ulster, so he began fighting and killing hundreds of her men. Eventually, he was ambushed by her army, but he “guarded himself so that his skin was untouched, and even his armour. Then he turned on them and killed all fourteen of them” (Kinsella 137-8). While recovering from this battle, Cúchulainn was given healing herbs to help him rebuild his strength. While he rested, he was visited by the god Lugh who revealed that he was Cúchulainn’s father. This healing process resulted in his “first warp-spasm, [which] made him into a monstrous thing, hideous and shapeless, unheard of,” and he became unrecognizable as his former self (Kinsella 150). He had become a monster filled with blind rage, ready to destroy anyone or anything that would stand in his way or try to defeat him, and his chariot was also equipped in such a way that it would be nearly impossible for those opposing him to reach him before he stepped out into battle. Thus, Cúchulainn became the most feared and unstoppable force in Ulster because he was consumed by “battle frenzy” (Kinsella 144-53). Cúchulainn continued to fight and kill those who stood against him, and Medb knew he needed to be stopped because he had become a reckless, supernatural, truculent monster who was doing more harm to Ulster than good. He became spiritually weak, making him vulnerable to Medb’s army who shot three magical spears at him—the warrior king was dead.

While the story of Cúchulainn might not be as well-known in American education as it is in Irish education, most American students, Christian or not, have some understanding of the story of Jesus Christ, even if it is limited to biblical allusions in literature. The story of Christ's heroism and sacrifice proves that an epic hero does not have to be mythological nor does he have to be a fighter. Christ's birth, even though not following the epic tradition of a noble birth, was a divine one. He was born as the son of God to become a god on Earth: divine made human. In addition, God chose a human woman to become the mother of his son—to raise him in her faith as a human child and not as a divine one.

On what is now the Christian celebration of the Annunciation, God sent the angel Gabriel to approach the Virgin Mary, telling her that God had chosen her to bear his only begotten son; thus, like Cúchulainn, Jesus Christ was conceived unconventionally through the intervention of a god—God himself. Christ was born half human, half divine, so his early childhood was not wholly defined by any supernatural abilities or superhuman strength. He did not stand out from other kids, other than the fact that people thought he was deranged. He was drawn to education within the church, and it was not until he went missing and his parents found him in temple that Jesus recognized that he was the son of God: “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” (*The New American Bible*, Luke 2:49).

Jesus Christ maintained humility as he learned more about his divinity. He never flaunted his abilities unless someone needed his help. In fact, it was not until the Wedding of Cana, when he was an adult, that he performed his first miracle—turning water into wine. The miracles he performed proved he was the Son of God and also showed that judgmental God is also a compassionate one. Christ's exhibited bravery as he willing died for the redemption of humanity, but this does not negate the fact that Christ did have doubts about fulfilling his prophecy. Since

Christ was partly human, he faced temptation to go against God, his father, which would lead to an unfulfilled prophecy—Christ would not succumb to his human faults and turn away from his Father and his faith. However, even though he was tempted by Satan for forty days, he did not turn his back on his vocation or his people. Christ’s flaws and doubts became something Pearse connected with. He, too, doubted that he was Ireland’s chosen messiah “for fear [that he] should fail” (“Renunciation” 324). In addition, Christ was accused of treason (among other accusations) and executed by the Roman colonial authorities at the request of Jewish authorities. Pearse, too, was executed by the colonial authorities in Ireland, but his treason was more apparent than Christ’s because he staged an insurrection against the crown. Despite having doubts about their fated deaths, both Christ and Pearse’s reservations did not prevent them from fulfilling their prophecies of emancipating their nations.

Unlike most epic heroes, Christ promoted peace and compassion over war, so when it came time for him to sacrifice himself, he urged his followers to continue his peaceful mission. He knew his blood would be the only blood shed for the redemption of his followers. Christ’s sacrifice is unlike Pearse’s who knew many of his followers would die gruesome deaths during the battle between Irish rebels and English soldiers. This is the point where Pearse began embodying the heroic spirit of both Christ and Cúchulainn—blood self-sacrifice meets bloody battle.

More than eighteen hundred years after Christ’s sacrifice, Ireland found Herself in need of a redeemer, a messiah. Ireland’s modern epic hero, Patrick Henry Pearse, did not have a noble birth or a divine one. His mother, Margaret Pearse, was not she told by an Irish pagan god or an angel that she would give birth to a great warrior or the Messiah. Rather, Patrick Pearse was born on November 10, 1879, to a relatively average, working-class family on a relatively average day:

“At his birth, there was no great excitement in Dublin. The city went about its business, unaware that its savior had arrived...[But his] mother smiled for she had brought forth a redeemer, a man whose name would be forever green in Ireland...Her son would also be a holy man and he would lead the holy men of Dublin, of Ireland, to freedom” (McCafferty 14-5). Even though he had an ordinary birth, Pearse was different from other kids. As previously noted, Pearse did not interact much with his classmates; he kept to himself and immersed himself in his own fantasy worlds. He read and studied the Irish language, and “[h]e steeped his mind in the heroic literature of the Fionn and Cúchulainn cycles. He acquired a wide and first-hand knowledge of Irish folklore, prose and poetry” (Ryan 30). Growing up Catholic, he was well-versed in the story of Christ and his blood sacrifice for the redemption and rebirth of Christians; thus, both mythology and Christianity shaped his understanding of the world around him.

As he approached adulthood, Pearse saw the negative effects of British colonialism in Ireland: the rapid decrease of Ireland’s cultural identity. Seeing his heroes Cúchulainn and Christ die tragically for their nation and followers, “Pearse had come to believe that without the shedding of blood, there [was] no national redemption” (McCafferty 19). In turn, he did what was natural to him: he dedicated his life to educational reform in order to reignite nationalism throughout Ireland. However, he soon realized that the efforts of the Gaelic League, which he had become heavily involved in, were inadequate. Ireland needed more than reverting back to Her Gaelic roots to become free again: “Pearse’s Ireland was a constant blazing war of Nationalism in politics and letters [where] Cúchulainn again strolled the high hills and green valleys. It was an Ireland that was rapidly losing its artificial English overtones. It might seem a small world for a poet but not all men are allowed to survey the wide world. Most must content themselves on limited paths and familiar streets” (McCafferty 13). In founding the St. Enda’s

school, Patrick Pearse began building a youth army to fight alongside the IRB and the Irish Volunteers during the impending rebellion. Neither Pearse nor his fellow revolutionaries had any formal military training, so they relied heavily on political propaganda (much of which Pearse wrote) to appeal to those who had some combat training.

Pearse's writings began as political pieces but quickly evolved into an epic narrative, where he likened the character version of himself to Cúchulainn and Christ, even though he was neither supernatural nor divine. However, he refused to be remembered as ordinary, and thus, his mission to be the savior or messiah for Ireland began. He could not change his origin story, but he could write his future as the heroic one he envisioned and thus save Ireland.

Analysis of Pearse's Works:

“I care not if my life have only the span of a night and a day  
if my deeds be spoken of by the men of Ireland.”  
—Cúchulainn (qtd. in McCafferty 173)

In 1912, Pearse published “The Murder Machine,” which on the surface reads as an argument for how education in Ireland should go back to Gaelic roots and move away from the British canon. However, what Pearse accomplished in this pamphlet is much more than an argument for educational reform; it was a call to nationalism because “nearly all the schools in Ireland [taught] children to deny their nation” (“The Murder Machine” 16). Pearse defined the “murder machine” as “the English system of education [because it] was cold and mechanical[,] and [it] ground out products fit only for the English Civil Service. It gave instruction without education” (McCafferty 139). This system made it impossible for Irish schoolchildren to become free-thinkers who could threaten and challenge the British government. For this reason, Pearse wrote this pamphlet as his justification for founding the St. Enda's school, where he developed a



curriculum encouraged students to fight for Irish individualism and for the preservation of Irish culture. Throughout, Pearse began asserting himself as the savior of his people by making references to Christ and Cúchulainn and their influences on Irish culture in order to show the importance of Irish literature and mythology in addition to religion in Ireland. He also used them to reinforce the significance of his own imminent sacrifice for Ireland. He reimagined a less mythological hero for Ireland by showing the evolution of the hero from Cúchulainn's supernatural heroism to Christ's hybridity and finally to himself—the wholly human redeemer for Ireland, who, according to Peter McCafferty, was willing to put his “pen aside for the sword” (139):

He believed “himself predestined to lead a revolution in arms one day...” Messiah like, he tried to exalt his people, to teach them good and noble things and to condition them to the idea of freedom. A man of noble nature, an intellectual who identified himself with the oppressed and poor, he was willing to be Ireland's savior even if it meant grasping the sword of violence. If death was to be the price of victory, Pearse was eager to pay it.

(McCafferty 139).

Pearse identified with Christ's noble sacrifice for his people, but when facing the British army, he knew a peaceful sacrifice would be inconsequential. In order to emancipate his nation, he would not only have to surrender himself, but would have to embody the mythological Cúchulainn's leadership and warrior spirit. In creating himself in the images of Christ's nobility and Cúchulainn's valor, Pearse reinforced his invention of a different type of literary epic hero—one not categorized by supernatural abilities but rather humanness.

Even though the surface level interpretation of “The Murder Machine” is Pearse's argument for educational reform, the pamphlet is nonetheless about freedom—freedom from

British indoctrination. Liberation is what Pearse wanted more than anything—a desire to free his beloved Ireland and the Irish people and make Ireland Her own nation once again. Just as Jesus died to redeem and free mankind, Pearse knew someone would have to give Ireland life again—a life that was taken over by Britain: “[W]e need the divine breath that moves through free peoples, the breath that no man of Ireland has felt in his nostrils for so many centuries, the breath that once blew through the streets of Athens and that kindled, as wine kindles the hearts of those who taught and learned in Clonmacnois” (“The Murder Machine” 49-50). As an educator, Pearse decided the most efficient way to build an army and awaken Ireland’s youth was to create a school removed from British doctrine, and thus, Sgoil Eanna (more commonly known as St. Enda’s school) was born. In doing so, he built a school centered on old Irish literary and cultural traditions: “There had never been any human institution more adequate to its purpose than that which, in pagan times, produced Cúchulainn and the Boy-Corps of Eamhain Macha and, in Christian times, produced Enda...The old Irish system, pagan and Christian, possessed in pre-eminent degree the thing most needful in education: an adequate inspiration” (“The Murder Machine” 24-5). Pearse realized the youth of Ireland needed motivation in order to restore Ireland to Her Gaelic roots, and he was going to be the one to inspire them because heroes “must be willing always to make the ultimate sacrifice—this is the inspiration alike of the story of Cúchulainn...the inspiration that made [him] a hero” (“The Murder Machine” 25).

It was in this school that Pearse brought to life his educational theories as outlined in “The Murder Machine”: “‘What the modern world wants more than anything else, what Ireland wants beyond all other modern countries, is a new birth of the heroic spirit,’ and in creating his St. Enda’s school for boys he told the students, ‘We must re-create and perpetuate in Ireland the knightly tradition of Cúchulainn, ‘better is short life with honour than long life with dishonour’”

(38-9). Like the followers of Christ were reborn through his death, Pearse's nation would be redeemed through his blood sacrifice. What's more, while on the surface the St. Enda's school appears to facilitate the awakening of Ireland's youth, according to historian Michael Böss, the school itself initiated Pearse's awakening:

He saw his own inner 'darkness'—a result of a history of frustration and repression—as foreign to his true self, which he perceived as authentically 'light'... Without showing any awareness of it, Pearse began to see the Ireland of his own day in the same way as he experienced himself: as original (national) selfhood corrupted by the presence of a foreign ('English') substance in its 'blood'. Ireland needed to be restored to an authentic nationhood and rid itself of a 'foreign' element that had emasculated Irish men, he claimed. Pearse's nationalism got its peculiar emotional and religious colouring because he unconsciously associated his own unresolved personal traumas with what he regarded as the problems of the Irish nation. (Böss 274)

In founding the school, Pearse began his journey toward his inevitable martyrdom. At this point in his life, he could not separate himself from Ireland. His darkness and Ireland's darkness were the same. One could not live while the other died. Both Pearse and Ireland must become pure in order for ultimate redemption (Böss 274). Through Pearse's physical death, the Ireland plagued by Britain would die and be reborn in its purest form. As he outlined in "The Murder Machine," Ireland needed a new type of hero to save Her—a nontraditional epic heroism—because Ireland needed more than a Cúchulainn-type warrior and more than the Christlike sacrifice of one man. She needed someone who could incite a revolution while being willing to sacrifice himself for his followers and his country—someone whose legacy would inspire nationalists to continue his fight long after his death. In order for him to become this hero, he must martyr himself for

Ireland, and starting with “The Murder Machine,” Pearse embarked on this journey, creating a fictionalized, literary version of himself who was willing to be the sacrificial lamb for Ireland—“to restore manhood to a race that has been deprived of it. [The hero] must lead Ireland back to her sagas” (41).

A year after the publication of “The Murder Machine,” Pearse published another political piece, “The Coming Revolution,” where he proposed the need for the second coming of a messiah. Instead of explicitly calling himself the messiah like he did in “The Murder Machine,” in “The Coming Revolution,” he alluded to the blood sacrifice Christ made to redeem his followers. One explanation for this is that Pearse likely doubted that he would be successful in saving Ireland. He had not quite separated Pearse the writer from Pearse the character, which was difficult to do through a nonfictional lens, but his tone changed drastically from “The Murder Machine” to “The Coming Revolution.” In “The Murder Machine,” Pearse argued for educational reform, which he took responsibility for when he founded St. Enda’s school. He desired to be Ireland’s messiah, and he took responsibility for reigniting nationalism in Ireland’s youth and for reinstating an Irish centered education. In “The Coming Revolution,” he expressed his confidence that there would be a messiah coming to save Ireland, but instead of placing emphasis on his role as messiah, he wanted to call others to join the fight and that the savior could not emancipate Ireland without the help of other Irish nationalists: “I do not know if the Messiah has yet come, and I am not sure that there will be any visible and personal Messiah in this redemption: the people itself will perhaps be its own Messiah, the people labouring, scourged, crowned with thorns, agonising and dying, to rise again immortal and impassible” (91).

Pearse intended for this political piece to urge the Irish people to come together and fight against British tyranny. Rather than praising himself as a martyr for Ireland, Pearse used this pamphlet to inspire nationalism among his peers. He insisted that his Irish brothers and sisters not fear bloodshed and that no matter their background, they have one objective: the Irish Revolution (“The Coming Revolution” 94):

Ireland armed will attain ultimately just as much freedom as she wants...We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood. There are many things more horrible than bloodshed; and slavery is one of them. (“The Coming Revolution” 98-9)

Just as Christ had to sacrifice his life to save his people—to save the chosen people—the messiah for Ireland must do the same. The one main difference between Christ’s crucifixion and the inevitable death of Ireland’s messiah is that more lives will be lost than the messiah himself, and this is the first time Pearse pushed for the Irish to be brave enough to put their lives at risk in order to emancipate Ireland for future generations. Even though he did not explicitly refer to himself as the messiah at this point, he began prophesizing that a messiah would have to sacrifice himself for Ireland, while anticipating that he might have to be that person.

Beginning in 1913, Patrick Pearse began writing poetry in addition to political propaganda both meant to incite nationalism throughout Ireland, though here he took a drastically different tone in his poetry. As a poet, he was no longer Pearse the prophet or Pearse the politician; rather, he was Pearse the artist. Through this shift, Pearse placed himself on the

page as a character rather than his autobiographical self. He consistently used religious and pastoral imagery to immortalize his place in literature as Ireland's modern epic hero.

His *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Plays, Stories, and Poems* contains twenty-one of his poems, and this list does not include four of the five poems he wrote while in prison. In "Renunciation" from *Collected Works*, Pearse addressed the speaker's fear of failure while he reflected on the destiny of heroes—that a hero must risk his own life for the greater good. The hero's initial destiny can change over time, and the hero must turn his back on what he once thought was his mission and adapt. In this poem, Pearse illustrated the journey of the hero through an internal monologue by Pearse the character as he addressed his fear of failing Ireland:

Naked I saw thee,  
O beauty of beauty,  
And I blinded my eyes  
For fear I should fail. ("Renunciation" 324)

In the opening stanza, Pearse recounted the beauty of patriotism throughout Ireland that had been plagued by British colonialism. The fictional Pearse chose to focus on that beauty, ignoring the tragedy of colonization on Irish soil, because he feared he would not be able to free his beloved country. This reminds Christians of Christ's self-doubt when he was in the desert for forty days, and in that time, he questioned his role as the savior while being tempted by the devil. They know the beauty of their faith, but often, they have to fight to maintain their faith because of the evils in the world, but eyes must be opened and ready to see the evils in order to combat them, despite the fear of failure. In three of the four lines, Pearse used "I" instead of "we," which places responsibility on Pearse, so like Christ, he is taking responsibility for bringing about salvation in Ireland. While he knew he would not be fighting alone, he recognized that he must

be the one to lead them to salvation. Pearse used his own experience of doubt and fear to show that even the noblest of heroes fear failure, but unlike the coward, who merely stands by, the hero perseveres.

A few stanzas later, Pearse transforms himself by showing that his initial vision for his nation was not necessarily the best vision for Ireland's future—that the Gaelic league was not going to save Ireland because its goals were too peaceful and thus an ineffective weapon against Britain:

I turned my back  
On the vision I had shaped,  
And to this road before me  
I turned my face.

I have turned my face  
To this road before me,  
To the deed that I see  
And the death I shall die. (“Renunciation” 324-5)

Again, Pearse placed emphasis on the “I” in these two stanzas, reinforcing the importance of his role in redeeming Ireland. Here, Pearse admitted that his death would be the only way to emancipate Ireland. He acknowledged that his blood sacrifice, much like Christ's, would fulfill Ireland's prophecy and return Her to an independent nation. In addition, Pearse brings the mythological spirit of Cúchulainn back into his writing for the first time since “The Murder Machine” by referencing the bloody battles of Cúchulainn while still embodying Christ's spirit and heroism:

I tasted thy mouth,  
O sweetness of sweetness,  
And I hardened my heart  
For fear of my slaying.

I blinded my eyes,  
And I closed my ears,  
I hardened my heart  
And I smothered my desire. (“Renunciation” 324)

While much of the poem depicts internal reflection, spiritual doubt, self-doubt, and accepting of his messiah role, the militant focus that resonates throughout the poem (“slaying,” “smothered”) is reminiscent of the warrior Cúchulainn and his blind-battling. Christ’s sacrifice was not a bloody battle; it was marked by the death of one person. Even though Christ realized that his followers might be persecuted or executed after his death, he was not driving his followers to death. Pearse realized that while he believed himself to be the sacrificial lamb, Britain would not crucify one man and leave the many unscathed while giving them back their freedom. As historian Michael Böss points out, Easter Rising would inevitably be a bloody battle, much like ones Cúchulainn led, and he shows how Pearse wrote “Renunciation” to further prove he was destined to be Ireland’s hero:

His poem ‘Renunciation’, long regarded as an expression of the highest and noblest form of national idealism, must now be read as a document of the personal conflicts he suffered after having decided to renounce ‘beauty’, ‘sweetness’, and ‘desire’. He chose to harden his heart and to develop a finer self, which he invariably associated with the



national cause and the ‘destiny of heroes’ who had chosen to ‘turn their backs to the pleasant paths and their faces to the hard paths, to blind their eyes to the fair things of life, to stifle all sweet music in their heart, the low voices of women and the laughter of little children, and to follow only the far, faint call that leads them into the battle or the harder death at the foot of the gibbet’. (Böss 286)

Much like Cúchulainn’s blind-battling, Pearse and his army would march into battle not knowing what to expect from the enemy, not knowing if their fight would end with their success.

Regardless, “[t]he prophetic quality of this poem was often commented on after Pearse’s death” because it “reflect[ed] his desire to completely and unreservedly commit himself to a worthy cause,” which would be similar to the less mythological, more human heroic sacrifice like Christ’s (Crowley 104).

While in “Renunciation” Pearse had a more positive outlook on death and his sacrifice, his tone shifted to a more intense contemplation of death in “Long to Me Thy Coming.” Rather than embracing the beauty of self-sacrifice for his people, Pearse began reflecting on his own psychological pain, making his martyrdom seem more like a suicide mission, as can be seen in the first stanza of the two-stanza poem:

Long to me thy coming,  
Old henchman of God,  
O friend of all friends,  
To free me from my pain. (“Long to Me Thy Coming” 319)

Those who have studied Pearse’s psychology note his peculiar demeanor, beginning in childhood and extending into his adulthood, which often led his peers to perceive him as arrogant. Since he socially isolated himself during his youth and preferred to live in his own fantasy world rather

than the real world, Pearse, the adult, had trouble immersing himself in society without writing a fantasy version of himself, which caused him inescapable, psychological pain (Augustejn 42-7). Thus, in “Long to Me Thy Coming,” Pearse reflected on his own personal pain instead of the pain of Ireland or the Irish people. Here, he was not comparing himself to Christ or his sacrifice. He was longing for his own death to free himself, and it is through the evolution of his writing, specifically his poetry, that it became clear Pearse “was undergoing an emotional crisis” where his “deep sadness [for] the condition of Ireland, and a desperate fear that all his work is being wasted. Although often trite, [his poetry is] packed with images of [his own] torment and grief” (Edwards 98). However, even though he does not reference Christ, this poem is reminiscent of Christ’s agony in the garden where he acknowledged that his desires and God’s will were in conflict, and he must succumb to God’s will to bring salvation to Christianity. Like Christ, Pearse acknowledged his own sorrow and pain upon realizing he would have to die in order to save Ireland, and he would have to put his grief aside to become Ireland’s epic hero through his tragic death.

Prior to the rebellion and his incarceration, Pearse was a character on the page—a hero whose sole purpose was to fulfill his hero prophecy. However, after his incarceration, his fictional self became and his actual self became one because they were now both fulfilling the prophecy both on and off the page. During this time, “he destroy[ed] his own actual self by projecting a new, ideal self onto the images of the dead son/Christ/people lying in the arms of his mother/Mary/Mother Ireland” (Böss 284). Between “The Murder Machine” and “Renunciation,” Pearse’s fictionalized version of himself had accepted his imminent sacrifice for the nation. The rebellion, which would likely end with his own blood sacrifice, would free Ireland from Britain’s shackles, and the nation would once again be able to thrive on Her own again. However, the

living Pearse failed and began to realize that his death by firing squad—his crucifixion—would not be enough to free his beloved Ireland. Thus, he began justifying his sacrifice through a series of prison writings. As his death grew closer and closer, his need to fulfill his sacrificial prophecy strengthened. Thus, he foreshadowed his mother’s grief to give both his literal and fictional death meaning, as can be seen in “A Mother Speaks”:

Dear Mary, that didst see thy first-born Son  
Go forth to die amid the scorn of men  
For whom He died,  
Receive my first-born son into thy arms,  
Who also hath gone out to die for men,  
And keep him by thee till I come to him.  
Dear Mary, I have shared thy sorrow,  
And soon shall share thy joy. (qtd. in Edwards 315)

In this moment, Pearse’s speaker no longer echoed through his art. By making his mother the persona of his poem, he immortalized himself through the voice of another speaker: “In speaking through his mother’s voice, Pearse [gave] meaning to his short life by comparing his own death to the sacrifice of Christ. He sacrifice[d] himself within the poem itself, so to speak: he mute[d] his own voice, thereby annihilating himself; he disappear[ed] into his own mother” (Böss 284). This is one of the first times we truly see Pearse the writer disconnect from Pearse the character by allowing his mother to assume the role of speaker, reinforcing the significance of his fictional death and the inseparable bond between writer and character. Here, “[h]e ma[de] a clear connection between Mrs. Pearse’s plight at that of the Virgin Mary. It reflects Pearse’s own identification with the self-sacrifice of Christ, which is increasingly evident in his writings in the

years leading up to the Rising” (Crowley 148). On the eve of his death, Pearse needed to reimagine his fictional world without him in it, and he had to shore up his heroic legacy. Pearse chose for his mother to be the voice who would live beyond his execution in order to underscore the parallels between him and Christ. Pearse’s mother’s grief in the wake of her son’s sacrifice would mirror that of Mary’s as depicted in the Bible and the numerous artistic representations of the Pieta. Just as Mary ensured Christ’s sacrifice would be remembered and revered after the crucifixion, Margaret Pearse would make sure that Pearse’s heroic and nationalist spirit would extend well beyond his mortal life.

Awaiting his death by firing squad, Pearse wrote his final poem: “The Wayfarer.” In this poem, Pearse reflected on the tragic beauty in the world and how happiness is fleeting. In “Country of Light: The Personal Nation of Patrick Pearse,” Michael Böss describes Pearse’s psychological state and his reflective moments leading up to his execution:

If we want to understand the psychology, politics, and writings of Patrick Pearse, we should not only see the calm that came over him in the days and hours before his execution as a result of his conviction that the rebels’ blood sacrifice had helped clear the way for Irish freedom. We should also see it as a sacrificial act of a tortured man trying to ‘purify’ himself and his nation from the ‘darkness,’ i.e. from all inadmissible personal and foreign otherness. (288)

As previously mentioned, Pearse grew up psychologically disconnected from reality. As an adult, in order to make sense of the world around him, he had to create a fantasy world that paralleled reality. It was not until his execution that his fantasy world and reality would converge. In “The Wayfarer,” Pearse used more imagery than he ever has in his poetry: “leaping squirrel,” “red lady-bird,” “slanting sun,” “green hill where shadows drifted by,” “children with

bare feet upon the sands” (qtd. in Crowley 151). In doing so, Pearse appealed to those unlike him—those who could connect the images of the world around them and perceive them in real time. Life made Pearse more sorrowful than death ever could:

The beauty of the world hath made me sad,

This beauty that will pass; [...]

These will pass,

Will pass and change, will die and be no more,

Things bright and green, things young and happy;

And I have gone upon my way

Sorrowful. (qtd. in Crowley 151)

In this moment, Pearse realized that even though he sacrificed himself for Ireland, he would not be able to save his people from all sorrows. He lived sorrowfully, and he will die full of sorrow.

The beauty of the world is fleeting, and the tragedies of the world will always overshadow beauty. In this final moment of reflection, Pearse realized that he would have never succeeded to fully free his beloved Ireland. While the physical version of Pearse was a failed Christ, the literary version of himself was not because, as seen in “A Mother Speaks,” Pearse the character’s death redeemed Ireland just like Christ freed his followers.

Reception and Legacy:

“I knew many of those now dead and had a genuine liking for them.  
They had no intellect. Connolly was the only with a real grip in his mind.  
They were rather featherbrained idealists.”

—George Russell (*Æ*) (qtd. in Edwards 335)

“Pearse is a dangerous man; he has the vertigo of self-sacrifice.”

—W.B. Yeats (qtd. in Edwards 335)

Writers during Pearse's time had mixed feelings about the rebels. While some joined in the fight, others felt that the poets were doomed to fail, especially under Pearse's leadership. Both George Russell (Æ) and W.B. Yeats were skeptical of Pearse and his contemporaries' agenda leading up to and during the 1916 rebellion. Russell felt that the poets were "featherbrained idealists" while Yeats felt that Pearse's desire to sacrifice himself was dangerous for those who blindly followed him (Edwards 335). They both feared for Ireland's fate at the hands of those not skilled in combat. All they had to guide them was the knowledge of epic heroes like Cúchulainn, and they lacked proper training. However, after Pearse's death, many poets and writers began eulogizing and praising the poets and their valiant effort. Russell reflected on the final moments of Pearse and the miracle of salvation that came from his death in "To the Memory of Some I Knew Who are Dead and Loved Ireland":

    Their dream had left me numb and cold,  
        But yet my spirit rose in pride.  
Refashioning in burnished gold  
    The images of those who died  
Or were shut in the penal cell.  
    Here's to you, Pearse, your dream not mine,  
But yet the thought for this you fell  
    Has turned life's waters into wine. (qtd. in Edwards 336)

Russell also validated Pearse's Christ-complex by stating that Pearse turned his "life's waters into wine" (qtd. in Edwards 336). The very last line of this stanza references Christ's first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. This is the first time Christ shows his divinity. By comparing Christ's miracle to Pearse's death, Russell further demonstrated that

Pearse possessed the characteristics of an epic hero because through his sacrifice, there was a resurgence of nationalism throughout Ireland that was similar to the rapid spread of Christianity after Christ's crucifixion. Like Russell, Yeats commemorated the leaders of Easter Rising in his poem "Easter 1916," where he reflects on their sacrifices:

To know they dreamed and are dead;

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died?

I write it out in a verse—

MacDonagh and MacBride

And Connolly and Pearse

Now and in time to be,

Wherever green is worn,

Are changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born. (446)

In this stanza, Yeats acknowledged that MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse's sacrifices became symbols for Ireland. Whenever an Irishman wears green, he will remember the tragic beauty that was born from the deaths of these men. Green will continue to symbolize Irish nationalism and pride, which would not exist for them had it not been for the poets' martyrdom.

One man who admired Pearse before, during, and after the revolution was Irish writer Desmond Ryan. In his 1917 book *The Man Called Pearse*, Ryan unveiled Pearse's desire to be a legend and began a conversation about him as a writer. While he did heavily delve into Pearse's background and politics, Ryan dedicated a chapter to "The Writings of Pearse" and the artistic nature of them since most of his other contemporaries only valued his texts as propaganda rather

than art. What Pearse did in his final days, in addition to throughout his career, was write what he imagined would be a perfect Ireland after his sacrifice. However, as can be seen in “The Wayfarer,” Pearse began to realize that the fantasy Ireland he envisioned would never fully exist in the real world—that he could only save Ireland from this one plight, but that there would be more struggles his people would face: “No one can do justice to Pearse’s final, fiery, coherent splendor except the glimpses he has left himself of it and there I leave this aspect of him. Pearse disdained to use a language unless he used it splendidly. That is why his English works rank so highly as literature” (Ryan 100-1). This is one of the only times in literary criticism of Pearse that he is seen as an artist and worthy of being regarded as a writer. Not only did Ryan commend Pearse as a writer during his own time, he acknowledged that Pearse would live on as a well-known, well-respected writer in the Irish literary canon:

As a writer, to-day is not the time to do justice to P.H. Pearse, any more than to discuss his final adventure. In both cases we are too near him in time and too much under the spell of his personality, his genius, his deeds. As a stylist, a poet, a preacher, we gather dimly that Pearse is great indeed...As the years pass, he must stand out more and more as an Irish writer. (103-5)

Ryan acknowledged that during his life, Pearse failed in a number of ways: saving the Irish language, preserving his school, fully liberating and restoring Ireland to Her Gaelic roots, but even though he failed, “he achieved, triumphantly, his greatest ambition of all,” which was to have his legacy and heroic actions live beyond the restrictions of his mortal life, specifically through his writings (Edwards 343-4).

Unlike Russell, Yeats, and Ryan, Irish writer and poet, James Stephens was not nearly as forgiving of Pearse. Even though he was a friend of Pearse’s, he was highly critical of Pearse’s



rhetoric, “find[ing] no magnetism in Pearse, but he was forced to recognize that it must be there for others because ‘it was to him and around him they clung’” (Martin 43). Stephens recognized how tragic Pearse’s death was and mourned for his friend, but he was unable to justify how Pearse amassed the following that he did: “If there was an idealist among the men concerned, it was he, and if there was any person in the world less fitted to head an insurrection it was he also...It was not, I think, that he ‘put his trust in God’, but that when something had to be done he did it, and entirely disregarded logic or economics or force” (qtd. in Edwards 343). Stephens also examined Pearse’s disconnect from reality, which led to the senseless, poorly planned rebellion that resulted in the death of many of his followers and his own. Since Pearse wrote himself into his literature as a hero, he was dying for fictional people—dying to save the lives of fictional Irishmen and women and a fictional Ireland: “he distorted into his own image the ordinary people of Ireland, who lacked his own remarkable qualities, but who had perceptions and complexities of their own that he could never understand” (Edwards 343). Until Easter Monday in 1916, Pearse developed a fictionalized hero version of himself who was destined to save Ireland; however, his reality began to intersect with his fantasy, and he could no longer separate the two. Stephens realized that Pearse could never achieve in his physical life what the fictionalized version of himself could accomplish, and it was at the end of his life that he realized the mortality of both his physical and symbolic selves (Edwards 343).

Despite fearing that Pearse’s legacy would die when he did, his influence proved to be significant enough to characterize in other artforms. Almost a decade after Pearse’s death, Seán O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars* premiered. While the play centers around a motley crew of working-class men and women living in a tenement house during the 1916 rebellion, there is a figure reminiscent of Pearse, even though his name is never stated during the play. As

his shadow passes outside the pub where the main characters drink, the unnamed figure's orations echo throughout Dublin:

**Voice of the Man** Our foes are strong, but strong as they are, they cannot undo the miracles of God, who ripens in the heart of young men the seeds sown by the young men of a former generation. They think they have pacified Ireland; think they have foreseen everything; think they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the fools!—they have left us our Fenian dead, and, while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland, unfree, shall never be at peace! (O'Casey 2.201)

O'Casey was aware that his audience would recognize the nameless man as Pearse, especially since the speech above mirrors Pearse's "Speech at the Grave of O'Donovan Rossa." The last sentence the man says repeats verbatim what Pearse said at the end of his speech in which he, Thomas MacDonagh, and the Irish Volunteers used this funeral as a platform to rehearse "the Rising[,] which would happen just a few months later; and Pearse's speech, with its reference to being re-baptised in the 'Fenian faith', constituted a clear challenge to those Catholic bishops who regarded physical force as sinful" (editor's marginal note in "Speech at the Grave" 409-10). Thus, O'Casey's reasoning behind having the man restate Pearse's words verbatim was to criticize Pearse's efforts and to "[demonstrate the futility of death—even noble death[, and *The Plough and the Stars*] dramatized the effect of Pearse's words on the emotional tenement dwellers of his Dublin," further showing how Pearse influenced impressionable and vulnerable lower class citizens to fight and die for what O'Casey portrays as meaningless (Edwards 339 & Deane 111). While Irish viewers of the play at the time knew who the man represented, contemporary American readers and viewers likely would not make the connection because of how little Pearse's literature is studied outside of Ireland.

In addition, O'Casey reinforces Pearse's belief that he was the Irish messiah—the second coming of Christ. Portraying Pearse as a nameless figure solidifies Pearse as an Everyman figure, and much like Christ, he found himself immersed in a situation he had little control over—he saw himself as fated to die and fulfill the messianic prophecy. Traditionally, the Everyman figure does not willingly take on a traditional hero role nor does he have a desire to make great change. He is typically an average man faced with extraordinary situations. This is another way Pearse redefined the epic hero—by combining these two literary characteristics: hero and Everyman. He reframed his humanness and ordinariness and rewrote himself as an epic hero. In addition, O'Casey, through Pearse, allows each Irish nationalist to take on the role and voice of Pearse during the revolution or, at the very least, allow Pearse's words to resonate within them and call them to action. Any Irish reader at that time could easily put themselves in this Pearse figure's shoes, thus extending the role of the epic hero to all those who continued to fight for Ireland after Pearse's death. Pearse's heroism continued after his death through his literature, propaganda, and his nationalist spirit.

#### Conclusion:

Patrick Pearse did more than just educate and inspire the men and women of Ireland; he created a mythological self, a redeemer of Ireland—one he could never physically become, but one who would live on in the minds of his people:

Not until recently have Irish writers again questioned the Pearse myth seriously. The idealists sought to put him beyond criticism. With a very few exceptions, everything written on him for 50 years after his death was designed to prove his sanctity, his vision,

and the validity of even his wildest prognostications. The pragmatists, despairing of making him their own, tried to ignore him. (Edwards 339)

Many scholars struggle to look at his works as something other than nationalist propaganda, but if you separate Pearse the writer and his political agenda from the how he characterizes himself in his literature and read his works as literature rather than propaganda, then you can look at his writings as an epic—a series of poetry, speeches, plays, etc. where his character underwent self-actualization, was called to nationalism, and became the messiah for Ireland. He questioned his calling; he doubted himself; but ultimately, he sacrificed himself to save Ireland and his people from further oppression.

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## Vita

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