



***READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR STUDENTS OF
LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: MODERNISM AND MODERNITY***

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4.1. W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902)

Reading Skills

I

1. Look at the “Persons in the Play”, as listed before the play proper, why are capital letters used in referring to “The Poor Old Woman”, subsequently the “Old Woman” in the play which follows?
2. Who might the “Old Woman” be related to in Irish mythology?
3. The scene is set in “a cottage close to Killala, in 1798”. What is the historical significance of the setting?
4. As the play begins, Peter remarks on a sound he hears and suggests it might be “a hurling”. What is “hurling”?
5. What sort of parents do Peter and Bridget Gillane show themselves to be?
6. When the Old Woman gains access to the Gillane household, she tells Bridget, in answer to the latter’s question as to why the Old Woman has lived a wandering life: “Too many strangers in the house.” What “house” is she referring to and who are the “strangers”?
7. The Old Woman claims that her “four beautiful green fields” were taken from her. What are the “fields” she is referring to?
8. Before the woman entered the Gillane household, she passes by the window and looks at Michael as she passes. Once in the cottage, she will invite Michael in particular to go nearer to her as she speaks. Why is the Old Woman so interested in Michael?
9. Towards the end of the play, the Old Woman declares: “It is a hard service they take that help me.” What is she referring to?
10. Michael’s fiancée, Delia, declares that Michael will not be going to join the French who, we are told, have just disembarked at Killala. However, Michael abandons her. Why? What justification can be found for his behaviour?

II

1. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was first staged as *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* in Dublin in 1902, i.e. not long after Queen Victoria’s death. How would you relate the Old Woman’s being transformed into “a young girl” at the end of the play to the passing of the queen and in the context of Anglo-Irish relations? (See: Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
2. Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the Old Woman, has been referred to as a “devouring mother, ... a vampire who demands a blood offering.” (See: Patrick J. Keane, *Terrible Beauty: Yeats, Joyce, Ireland and the Myth of the Devouring Female*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988. Chapter 1. Cited in Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class and Irishness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (1996). p.75). What justification for this claim do you find in the play?
3. One of the ways in which the play is constructed as distinctly Irish is through the language. Show how this is achieved.

4. Define Hiberno-English. Supply examples of it in the text.
5. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was translated into Catalan and Galician in the 1920s and a Basque rendering was produced in the 30s. What interest would the play have had for Catalans, Galicians and Basques at that time?

Writing Skills

1. The Irish actor and drama critic Frank Fay appealed to Yeats to produce drama which would “send men away filled with the desire for deeds”. In what ways might Yeats, together with Lady Gregory, been seen to be answering to Fay’s appeal in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*?
2. In what ways might Yeats and Lady Gregory’s play be related to salient events in Irish history as the twentieth century advanced?
3. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* possesses an aura of mystery. How is this achieved in the play and what is its function in relation to the play as a whole?
4. Comment on the representation of other women in the play (Bridget; Delia). To what extent are they comparable or how do they contrast with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*?
5. *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is repeatedly presented as singing. Consider the occasions in question and comment on the nature of the songs.