Irish Lore and Its Effects on Irish Writing and the Irish Audience

Before coming into English 320, I had not considered how Ireland could possibly differ from England. I was aware that many years ago Ireland had its own customs and language, but assumed that it had all been mostly superseded once the English had conquered the island, culturally. Of course I assumed that there remained a few vestiges and strongholds of the old ways in libraries and in the most rural areas, but I had not known how hard that these old ways were at dying and how many of the cultural remnants of an older Ireland remained. I believe that this, the language and beliefs, were kept alive and strong by the folklore, the oral (hi)stories of the land. This folklore of course also inspired the truly Irish writers, and would help to shape their fame throughout Ireland and the world. Three of these writers I have alluded to are William B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and James Joyce. The folklore of their land (I include stories and religious beliefs under the umbrella term of folklore) played major roles in many pieces of work for each author, affecting their reception. Although these three authors would eventually gain international renown, I argue that they wrote primarily for an Irish audience, and by incorporating the Irish folklore into their poems and tales, they were better able to convey their messages. In the paragraphs that follow, I will offer up for review at least one piece of writing for each author, that will illustrate the affect of the Irish lore on the writings of these Irish writers.

The first of these I present is Yeats. Being an author fascinated by all things occult, it seems only natural that Yeats would employ the folktales of his country in his writing. In fact, it is commonly known that Yeats was fascinated with spiritualism, mysticism, and
astrology. A poem that is fraught with examples of Irish lore that supports my claims is

“The Hosting of the Sidhe” (Pethica 23). Below is the poem in its entirety.

The host is riding from Knocknarea
And over the grave of Clooth-na-Bare;
Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
And Niamh calling Away, come away:
Empty your heart of its mortal dream.
The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving our eyes are agleam,
Our arms are waving our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.
The host is rushing 'twixt night and day,
And where is there hope or deed as fair?
Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
And Niamh calling Away, come away.

In this poem alone, there are four direct references to figures from Irish mythology.

Knocknarea is a mountain overlooking Sligo bay, and it is said that at the top of the mountain is a cairn, the final resting place of Maeve, Queen of the Sidhe (Pethica 23).

Further, it is said that the Sidhe (mythical and spiritual beings, often equated to elves or fairies) made their dwellings within hills such as Knocknarea, and at night would exit to ride about the world of mortals. Next, we have Clooth-na-Bare, which is a transmogrification of the word Cailleach Bhéirre (MacKillop), referring to a fairy woman who grew tired of her immortality and drowned herself in Lough la (Pethica 23). Caoilte refers to Caoilte MacRonain, the legendary warrior from the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology, and founder of the Fianna who are said to swell on Ben Bulben (Pethica 23). Finally, we have Niamh, a fairy women who was known for spiriting away young men to the world of the Sidhe (Pethica 23). These four items alone, work together to convey an idea of death, and life after death. We have two images of graves, hinting at death. But we
also see the hero Caoilte, with hair flaming in glory, and hear Niamh’s sweet voice urging us to come away with her, as if to say death is not so bad as we fear. There is also the fifth line that reads “Empty your heart of its mortal dream,” which I believe implies that life as we know it is but a passing dream that we will all awake from when we die and enter into a new life, perhaps the same life that Sidhe live. This poem might have been the result of Yeats struggling with his own mortality, or a way to aid others in coming to terms with mortality. Clearly, whomever the audience was, it must needs be Irish to receive the full benefit of the poem without difficulty an research. The average reader from the U.S., or even neighboring United Kingdom would not be familiar with the names and places mentioned in the poem, and certainly would not be able to equate any meaning to their appearing together in sequence as they do. By using distinctly Irish symbols, Yeats identifies for whom this piece should be applicable to, which when pondered, simply makes sense.

Lady Gregory was one of Yeats’s closest friends, so I think it only fitting that I present them in sequence here. The two writers collaborated on multiple pieces, but the one whose echoes resound most loudly is the play titled Cathleen ni Houlihan. The play makes use of both existing lore and current political feelings in Ireland. The name Cathleen ni Houlian calls to an Irish mind a deep-seeded symbol for the island. In the play, the character Cathleen appears to the general folk as an old woman wandering because her home on the four fields has been taken from her (the four fields representing the four provinces that are said to make up Ireland in its lore: Ulster, Connacht, Munster, and Leinster; taken form her by the English) (Harrington 7). She appears as such an old woman to represent the age of Ireland. However, to the young men in the play, she is a
beautiful woman who holds for them the promise of being immortalized. This promise comes with a price, and asks that these young men give their lives for the defense of Ireland. The Cathleen as a beautiful woman that tempts young men coincides with the beautiful glory that young men might seek to win in the defense of their country. I believe that this play had different messages for different audiences, just as Cathleen had varying messages for different groups of people. In this way, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* became a highly political play. For the younger generation, it was a call to arms in defense of Ireland. By depicting the long-time symbol of the country, Cathleen, the younger generation feels a need to protect this beautiful woman (or elderly woman, depending on the view points of audience members) and by consequence, protect the country for which she is a symbol by dint of many years tradition. Whereas a younger generation might feel the blood rush through their veins, an earlier generation might feel a sense of overwhelming pity and sadness for all the young men that go to fight, most of whom will not return. These young men are a sort of sacrifice, an idea that seems to crop up frequently in Irish writing based on the discussions I’ve experienced in class. Regardless of the message, this play remains a prominent one—clearly this is true because we are studying it in this class (and in other courses similar to this one) and it has been included in anthologies for a reason. I own that this is mostly due to the overlap of the political mind with the mythical mind. The combination of Irish lore with the political feelings of the time was the perfect thing needed to get the attention of Lady Gregory and Yeats’s audience. The idea of Cathleen ni Houlihan was something that all Irish folk could relate to, and by crossing that with a political message, the point was really driven home.
When it comes to driving home a point, James Joyce is a writer who does this quite excellently. In particular, I wish to refer to chapter three of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (hereafter referred to simply as *Portrait*). In this chapter, Joyce’s character Stephen Deadalus goes on a religious retreat. For the sake of this paper’s argument, I am including religion in the lore of Ireland. As it has been said, in some ways, Ireland is even more Catholic than Rome. The episode which I am speaking begins on page 361 and continues on until page 393 (Levin). During these thirty-odd pages, Joyce belabors the reader with constant religious speech delivered by both a priest, Stephen, and Stephen’s reflections. A few of these such gems include: “O what agony then for the miserable sinners! Friend is torn from friend, children are torn from parents, husbands from their wives” (367), “Every word of it was for him [Stephen]. Against his sin, foul and secret, the whole wrath of God was aimed” (368), and “The torment of fire is the greatest to which the tyrant has ever subjected his fellow creatures . . . But the sulphurous brimstone which burns in hell is a substance designed to burn for ever and for ever with unspeakable fury” (375). Based on these sentiments, having an impact on nearly thirteen percent of the novel, we can assume that an important message should be deduced from this. Prior to this point in the novel, Stephen is frequently visiting prostitutes, an act forbidden by the Catholic Church. After this retreat and confessing his sins, he is consumed by guilt. As a self-inflicted penitence, urged on by his belief in the Catholic Church, he denies himself basic luxuries and punishes his senses with acts such as preventing himself from looking at beautiful women, forcing himself to endure annoying sounds, purposefully exposing himself to foul smells, eating the blandest of foods, sleeping intentionally in uncomfortable positions, and even abstaining from scratching itches. All of this is done so that he might
save himself from Hell. The purpose of writing all that is to show the conviction with which the Irish people believe in the notion of Hell existing in their lore. But by chapter five, Stephen loses this formerly stalwart faith, and even refuses Easter communion (509–510). This departure from the lore of his country is never actually explained. However, I think there is a hint at this in the beginning of the chapter when Stephen’s mother says to him, “‘Ah it’s a scandalous shame for you, Stephen,’ said his mother, ‘and you’ll live to rue the day you set your foot in that place [Trinity College]. I know how it has changed you’” (437). The “change” that Stephen’s mother mentions could very well be his departure from the Church. If this is true, then we could say that Joyce’s purpose for including in this very strong part of Irish lore in *Portrait* is to show that as people grow and move on to higher education they begin to shake off and dismiss folklore and religion, for one reason or another. If we take this even a step further, based on the Stephen’s clear indifference and hinted at disdain toward the Church, we might say that Joyce was urging readers to graduate from placing faith in God and instead placing faith in intelligence. This aspect of Irish lore, as I have mentioned before, must be very strong if so large a portion of *Portrait* was devoted. What’s even more shocking is how soon after these events that *Portrait*’s protagonist dismisses all of it. From this, I think that whereas Yeats and Lady Gregory embrace Irish lore, Joyce rejects it.

Whether through acceptance or rejection of Irish myth and lore, Irish writers have been very much affected by it. All three managed to purpose Irish lore to serve their needs and convey their messages. Because I am an American reader living one hundred years after these writers completed the pieces mentioned, the effects are lost to me without some research. However, to an Irish audience, the writing would carry with it the same
mysticism that the Irish lore it is based on. The ability to recognize this quality is what helps to make these writers so brilliant.
Works Cited


