

FLORENTINA ANGHEL

Twentieth Century Irish Fiction

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myths, historical determinism. The latter category of themes is illustrative of the relation between art and reality and of the role and impact art can have upon people. Thus, these works display an intrinsic synchronicity with the historical and cultural background.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The origin of the Irish people goes back to the Celts who established in Ireland a century before Christ. Although they were not the first inhabitants, the fact that they resisted any influence and that they absorbed the other migrants and their culture for nearly one thousand years made them coherently build a solid cultural core – the heritage that the Irish boast with nowadays.

Other migrants such as the Vikings (the 8th century) and the Scots, contributed to the economic and cultural evolution of the country while also spoiling the harmony of the community. The Scots brought their respect for education, order and beautiful buildings in Ulster. The Vikings spread around Ireland and contributed to the rise of towns and commercial centres. In the 9th century, when the Vikings decided to settle down, they founded more settlements, among which

Dublin (840), which they later developed by carefully planning it in the 10th century.

The course of Irish history was changed by the Norman conquest (the twelfth century), also known as the "Anglo-Norman" conquest, as few of the incomers who got to Ireland were of Norman ancestry, most of them were more related to the Kingdom of England through family links.

The first English settlers arrived in Ireland in the twelfth century and settled their first colony near Dublin. They eventually colonized only part of the country and being less numerous and not dominated by the kingdom, the colonists developed different strategies of survival from adopting Gaelic customs and names to mingling with the Gaelic population and to maintaining their control over areas of importance, such as Dublin. A new wave of settlers of Puritan religion reinforced England's control over Ireland in the 16th century. The new colonists chose to enforce religious discrimination and they repudiated both Irish of Catholic religion and English of Catholic religion that belonged to the first wave of English colonists.

An important event was the battle that took place on 15 August, 1598, in which the Irish were victorious. It may be described as "the Irish victory which the clever

English had later turned into defeat" (Trevor, 1984: 20). According to Hayes McCoy, the above mentioned battle, one of the most important in Ulster, was begun by some of the Ulster lords in 1593 and joined by Hugh O'Neil, earl of Tyrone: "Until 1597, the English merely marched into the Irish territories and left garrisons in castles or roughly constructed forts. O'Neil's great victory at the Yellow Ford, north of Armagh, in 1598 made them more cautious" (Hayes-McCoy 149). O'Neil submitted in 1603, the Battle of Kinsale, which meant "the end of the old Irish world" (Hayes-McCoy 151).

The rebellion in 1641 brought the Ulster Irish and the Old English together in what they called "the Confederate Catholics". The Catholic English joined the movement for their protection against the new settlers and their greed. The war resulted in the defeat of the Confederate Catholics, while in England the Civil war led to Cromwell's victory. These two events followed by the confiscations of the 1690s had as a result the degradation of the Old English who became "Irish" to both Irish and English.

An improvement of the situation of the Catholic Irish is related to Daniel O'Connell and his fight for Catholic emancipation in the 1820s. He succeeded a mass movement by involving the Church and by

inaugurating the “Catholic” rent of 1 penny. According to the law, Catholics could not sit in parliament, but they were not forbidden to candidate. Daniel O’Connell announced his candidature for the well-known Clare elections (1828) and was elected. The British government introduced a Catholic emancipation bill as a result of the elections and it became a law in 1829. Unhappily, the next campaign – known as the campaign for the repeal of the union between Ireland and Britain (Moody 210) – Daniel O’Connell initiated failed with the calling off of the meeting planned for 8 October 1843.

A further step was set by the fight of the Land League whose president was Charles Stewart Parnell supported by the Fenian organisation. As a result of the movement that wanted peasant ownership, the Land Act of 1881 diminished the interest of the landlords in the land. In 1885 the British government established a system to make the peasants purchase their land with the help of the state. This success determined Parnell and his supporters to begin the fight for home rule. Parnell died in 1891 without succeeding in his attempt and leaving behind political division. In the 1890s more resonance had poetry than politics, and non-political movements, such as Tír-na-nÓg and the Irish literary revival, emerged. William Butler Yeats, the leader of the Irish

literary revival, restored to people’s consciousness the early Irish legends and history of Ireland with the help of Lady Gregory, George Russell, J.M. Synge, Douglas Hyde and other representatives of the literary movement.

Two more rebellions – the Easter Rising in 1916 and the Anglo-Irish War 1919-1921 – and bloodshed were needed for the treaty signed in December 1921 between the British and the Irish. The Easter rebellion was the concerted action of two groups, Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), led by Patrick Pearse and James Connolly. (Hurtley 92) Fifteen of the arrested participants were executed on 3 and 12 May and more people than participants were arrested to discourage further movements. The Anglo-Irish War, euphemistically called “the troubles”, was “characterised by guerrilla warfare, ambushes, raids on police barracks, and planned assassinations on the one side; and reprisals, the shooting-up and burning-up of towns, executions and terrorizing on the other.” (Moody 258)

The status Ireland reached by signing the treaty with Britain in 1921 was that of “The Irish Free State”, which was not what all the Irish wanted. Michael Collins said that the treaty offered the Irish people “the freedom to achieve freedom” (in Moody 272). Ireland had to face economic depression and the troubles created by private

armies like the Irish Republican Army. In 1937 a new constitution, meant to replace the one given in 1921, was introduced and it was only in 1949 that the government passed an act according in which the state is "The Republic of Ireland". This period is characterized by economic difficulties and oscillations, cultural censorship that banned novels written by great contemporaries, the revival of Irish and the development of university education.

After 1966 The Republic of Ireland experienced a period of increasing prosperity in economy due to three programs of economic expansion and in education through measures that favoured free education.

Northern Ireland had a different evolution as the Protestants were against the home rule which they associated with the Catholics' interest: "Home rule is Rome rule". (Moody 262) Political and economic interests are echoed by religious belongingness: the Ulster Unionists (Protestants) chose the union with Britain, while the Nationalists (Catholics) tried to fight for the national unity of Ireland. The Second World War showed how the two parts of the country evolved: Northern Ireland joined Britain and had to share high taxation and restrictions while the Free State of Ireland preserved its neutrality. In 1949 the Unionist

representatives to the British government proposed not to adhere to the Ireland Act unless the parliament of Northern Ireland consents. As a result, people had to endure another period of demonstrations and violence and the "nationalists continued to complain of discrimination in the distribution of housing and jobs". (Moody 271) However, post-war prosperity and development proved the benefits of the union with Britain.

Irish tales and myths

Ireland is the place where Celtic gods and myths are still echoed in fairy tales and literature, which traces the Irish tradition to the period when the Celts arrived in Europe, prevailingly known as 1000 B.C. According to Jeffrey Gantz. (1981, 5), the Celts expanded quickly in Europe settling first in Rome, moving towards France, Germany and later on into the northern islands. Traces of Celtism can be found all over Europe but the Celts are considered the ancestors of the Irish, the British, the Welsh and the Scots. The Irish succeeded more than the others in preserving the Celtic cultural heritage due to the fact that the Vikings invaded the island only in the 8th

century. Its isolated geographic position favoured the establishment and development of the Celtic culture, which turned the Irish people into a “repository of information about the Celtic people” (Gantz 5). Another reason for which Celtism has survived in Ireland consists of the Irish people’s effort to demonstrate that their cultural identity is different from their conquerors’, and by interlacing the physical fight for the independence of the country with the revival of their Celtic tradition, they contributed to the preservation of this early culture that would have otherwise been entirely extinguished.

Besides archaeological evidence of the Celtic culture in Ireland, the Irish stories have brought their contribution to the outlining of the Irish-Celtic society. According to the conclusions analysts and historians drew, the Irish society of that time supposed the existence of three social classes: a warrior class, the druids, the farmers and free men. (Gantz 8) It seems that the druids have taken care of the cultural heritage by memorizing and further transmitting the stories, which empowered the druids. At the same time, the stories are far from being accepted as reliable documents, although valuable, due to their continuous alteration during their oral survival. Attempting to establish a typology of the kings of the Irish stories, Gantz notices that, unlike the

Celtic warrior kings, “the kings of the Irish stories are not battle leaders: either they betray vestiges of divinity (Cú Ruí, for example) or they have a young champion as heir and rival.” (Gantz 9). An example of the second type is in the story of Óengus: Mider, the king, has his foster-son Óengus/Áengus as a rival. The latter symbolizes youth and love and temporarily takes over Brú na Bóinne by using a trick. By threatening Mider at Samuin (1 November), a day of peace, he requests the land for a day and a night, but then he pretends that he meant *day and night*, as Irish had no indefinite article. Mider is judged as a betrayer who cares more for his life than his land and the land remains in Óengus’s possession, according to “The Wooing of Étaín” (*Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Radice 41-42).

Conchubur/Conchobar, another Irish king, loses Derdriu/Deirdre, the woman that he loves, to a young warrior Noísiu/Naoise, whom he eventually kills. The king’s experience is also challenged by Cú Chulainn/Cuchulainn, an Irish hero who seems to be invincible and whose supremacy in battle is recognized by Conchobar. There are many stories and variants to them that describe Cuchulainn’s ambiguous, partly divine, origin and prowess. According to Gantz’s research, Cuchulainn has two fathers: Lug, the Celtic

Mercury, considered the most important god, appears to be the father in the original version; Súaltain is only known as his father. In Nathaniel Harris's book on Ireland's cultural heritage, Cuchulainn, initially named Sétantae/Setanta ("one who has knowledge of roads and ways"), is given this name because he offered to guard Culann after he had killed his hound, Cuchulainn meaning "the Hound of Culann". (Harris 75) The hero actually tries to achieve a prophesy that was made: "Hearing a prophesy that a boy who took up arms on a certain day would become famous, but would not live long, Cuchulainn asked Conchobar for weapons. After breaking fifteen sets of arms, he took up specially made arms that had been intended for the king himself, and then went out and slew a band of Conchobar's most dangerous enemies." (Harris 75)

The Irish-Celtic stories provide information about different celebrations related to the seasons and about religious celebrations. The Irish year has four seasons, each season having a celebration day. Samuin or Samhain that marks the end of summer and the beginning of winter and of the new year is the first day of November and corresponds to modern Halloween. It is "a day of changes, of births and deaths" (Gantz 12) or "a day of peace and friendship" as it is described in "The

Wooing of Étaín" (Radice 41). It is also a day when kings are killed and buildings destroyed, suggesting the end of the cycle of life and rebirth. Summer begins on the first day of May with the Celtic festival known as Beltene or Beltane and governed by god Bel. Less important seem to be the days celebrating the beginning of spring and autumn. Imbolg/Imbolc that takes place on 1 February and marks the beginning of spring is also associated with Brigid, a Celtic goddess, and with the birth of lambs. Lughnasad or Lughnasa is a harvest festival that used to take place on the first of August and was dedicated to the god Lug.

The Irish tales also promote characters specific to their culture such as the leprechaun, a funny little man that is good at shoemaking and has gold; the puca/pooka, a mischievous fairy; the changeling, a being with a human body and the soul of a fairy.

The leprechaun, generally dressed in red and/or green, plays tricks when he is caught: a man who found a leprechaun in his house under the table succeeded in catching him and asked the leprechaun to give him gold. The leprechaun left promising the man that he would get him the gold and never came back, but the man's wife admired the shoe that the leprechaun was working on when he was caught. (Blackwell and Hackney 139)