The evolution of the Gaelic mythos through twentieth-century drama

Kristina Ann McGraw

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE GAELIC MYTHOS THROUGH
TWENTIETH-CENTURY DRAMA

by

Kristina Ann McGraw
Bachelor of Arts
Westmont College
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Theatre
Department of Theatre
College of Fine Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Kristina Ann McGraw

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is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Theatre

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative

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ABSTRACT

The Evolution of the Gaelic Mythos Through Twentieth-Century Drama

by

Kristina McGraw

KC Davis, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Theatre
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

In this thesis I will explore the Gaelic mythos as it evolved in Irish drama throughout the twentieth century. I will begin by surveying postcolonial theories of imperialism’s effect on culture, drawing comparisons to Ireland’s reaction to colonialism. I will then discuss the Celtic Revival movement, as propagated by W. B. Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge at the turn of the twentieth century. I will discuss this movement’s use of Gaelic folklore and mythology through its drama.

Next, I will consider this mythology’s reception by later dramatists, represented by Sean O’Casey and Brian Friel. I will examine these playwrights’ reaction to the ideologies of the Celtic Revival as revealed in their plays.

After surveying the history of the Gaelic mythos, I will then investigate the drastic economic and social changes of the last few decades in Ireland. I will question whether the new “Celtic Tiger” Ireland still needs the mythos of the past.

Finally, I will explicate contemporary works by Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh to determine these playwrights’ attitudes toward the Gaelic mythos. I expect to find that
these contemporary dramatists reject this system of beliefs as inadequate and dangerous for a people whose circumstances are very altered from those of their predecessors.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of intellectuals and theatre artists in Ireland founded a series of literary and theatrical groups which provided a national drama for and by the Irish people. Headed by W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, this movement, now commonly referred to as the Celtic Revival, set out to rediscover Ireland’s mythology and bring to the Irish people the heroes they so desperately needed after centuries of British imperial oppression.

The phenomenon of using culture to resist against a colonizer is not unique to Ireland. Post-colonialist scholars, led by Edward Said, have examined the role of culture in imperialism, beginning with Said’s groundbreaking book, Orientalism, and its sequel, Culture and Imperialism. In the latter, Said discusses how imperialist nations use culture to oppress colonized peoples, and how colonized nations, such as Ireland, respond with their own cultural revolutions. Said suggests that imperialist nations defend their oppressive actions by depicting the peoples they are conquering as savage, barbaric, ignorant and unable to govern themselves. Sinead Garrigan Mattar also discusses this phenomenon in Primitivism, Science, and the Irish Revival. Mattar describes how “images of primitiveness among subject peoples were consistently employed [by imperial nations] as political tools to illustrate the necessity of civilization” (10).
Britain was relentless in applying this method to Ireland. As Mattar informs us, “for centuries English accounts of the natives had focused on the supposed savageries of their manners and customs” (11). Gregory Castle adds, in Modernism and the Celtic Revival, that the “distinction” between a civilized nation and a barbaric one was “largely grounded in certain inherent features (skin color and physiological difference) or sociological factors (drunkenness, laziness, criminality) the presence of which determined conclusively that a particular race was primitive” (45). The Irish presented a unique challenge to the British, as their “inherent” features were the same as those of the British. Hence the British focused on the “sociological factors,” depicting the Irish as uneducated, unproductive and prone to drunkenness and violence.

Said proposes that colonized peoples have been seen to counteract the cultural oppression utilized by their colonizers before they rebel politically. To achieve this cultural rebellion, a native people will celebrate their national history by creating new stories and legends that will “assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (Said xii). The Irish, culturally oppressed, deprived of their history, native language and even the names of their towns and landmarks (the Irish names were changed to English “equivalents”), needed to “reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land” – an attempt made by all colonized nations whose cultures had been destroyed. A nationalist movement was needed to “search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and . . . heroines, myths, and religions” (Said 226).

The process of combating the imagery of the Irish barbarian predated the Celtic Revival, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with Ernest Renan and Matthew
Arnold. These two writers created several treatises that softened the savage image of the Celts, redefining them, Mattar tells us, as 'a passionate, isolated, melancholy, creative, and ‘essentially feminine’ race" (9). This transformation seems at first glance to benefit the Celts’ image and standing with their colonizer, but the redefinition actually reinforced England’s claim over Ireland by envisioning a feminine and childlike Celtic race that needed a patriarchal figure to govern them. As Castle suggests, Renan “create[d] the kind of gendered colonial space that imperialism required in order to regulate and control a subaltern people,” while Arnold further developed this theme into “an imperial allegory of paternal appropriation” (47). Hence England merely shifted from the role of jailer to that of parent, with the same essential power over the Irish people. A different argument was needed in order to shake off the yoke of colonialism.

Many critics assert that the movement now termed the Celtic Revival began with Standish O’Grady’s History of Ireland (1878-80), a collection of Gaelic legends that depicted Ireland’s ancient heroes. In 1892, Yeats and Lady Gregory formed the National Literary Society, which produced the Irish Literary Theatre (1899), later reorganized as the Irish National Theatre Society. This Revivalist movement responded to Ireland’s cultural oppression by creating a new Irish history based on Gaelic folklore and culture. The Revivalists, Mattar tells us, wished to “promote a picture of the early Irish that would answer the negative images that were being projected from England” (14). To do this, they turned to histories such as O’Grady’s, and reinterpreted Ireland’s pagan era as a Gaelic “golden age” (Mattar 16).

Yeats, Lady Gregory and others began to compile folk legends and songs using pseudo-anthropological methods. As Linda Seidel posits in “Celtic Revivals and
Women's Work," they then reappropriated the "pagan heroes and heroines, warriors and goddesses" to create modern myths (27). As Said puts it, the Revivalists created a new "communal memory." They "reinhabit[ed] the landscape using restored ways of life, heroes, heroines, and exploits" drawn from folklore in order to create "pride as well as defiance" in the native people (Said 215). Thus the Revivalists attempted a cultural rebellion that would be achieved by restoring self-confidence to the Irish people.

Seidel suggests that the reappropriated images of a heroic Gaelic past also "confirm[ed] Ireland's otherness, its provinciality, marginality," and transformed this "otherness" into an assertion of strength and spiritual superiority (39). Castle tells us that Yeats in particular, through his collections of Celtic myths and legends, shifted the focus of "otherness" from "racial essence" to Ireland's primitive spirituality that "links the ancient to the modern in a continuous, timeless unity" (51). Thus the negatively connoted "sociological factors" that defined the Irish were replaced by this pagan connection to the supernatural which became the Celt's new distinguishing characteristic. By creating this shift, Castle contends, "Yeats challenge[d] the cultural superiority of the English and offer[ed] a kind of prophylactic for the madness of colonial domination" (50).

In this manner, the Celtic Revivalists attempted to redefine the Irish self-image. According to Said, this type of "self-definition" is practiced by all cultures, whether consciously or not. A nation's self-image "has a rhetoric, a set of occasions and authorities . . . and a familiarity all its own" (37).

This self-image, or mythos, is the primary focus of this study. The term mythos refers to the stories, legends, spirituality and shared history that define a group of people
and distinguish them from others. Ireland’s Gaelic mythos consists of all the legends that the Revivalists rediscovered and reappropriated in its efforts to combat England’s cultural oppression. Yeats, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, the primary dramatists of the Celtic Revival, created a mystical Ireland, inhabited by a romanticized peasant class and propelled by heroic nationalists. Hardship and adversity were redefined as opportunities for strength and courage. Oppression became a chance to prove one’s passion for Ireland with self-sacrifice. Above all, the Gaelic mythos celebrated Ireland’s “otherness” and encouraged the Irish to band together against their common enemies.

There is a drawback to this mythos, however. As Said postulates, a mythos that is founded in reaction to colonialism will always contain at its core the negative image that it is challenging. The “liabilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit,” Said tells us, “are clear; they have much to do . . . with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt to be necessary” (16).

Said also shows concern for a continuing xenophobia in formerly colonized nations, such as Ireland. “In time,” he suggests, “culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them,’ almost always with some degree of xenophobia” (xiii). Of course this antagonism is implicit in the Irish sense of “otherness” that the Gaelic mythos engendered. In the process of bonding together against imperialism, the Irish may have created such a separate entity that now they cannot relate to the rest of the world. Said expresses the hope that a formerly colonized nation can “preserve what is unique” about itself while “preserv[ing] some sense of the human community” (32).
In the following pages, I will present the Gaelic mythos in a more concrete fashion by exploring and explicating some of Ireland's most vital plays that deal with this ideology. First I will outline the creation of this mythos via perusal of the dramatic works of Yeats, Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge. Then I will examine how two of Ireland’s most important twentieth-century writers, Sean O’Casey and Brian Friel, received and propagated this mythos. Finally, I will consider the Gaelic mythos in contemporary drama by deeply probing the works of two of Ireland’s currently celebrated playwrights, Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh.
CHAPTER 2

CREATING A MYTHOS

The dramatic element of the Celtic Revival was led by William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory and John Millington Synge, though many playwrights contributed to the nationalist fervor created at the Irish National Theatre Society’s Abbey Theatre. These dramatists, as Edward Said suggests, “articulat[ed] the expression of Irish identity as it attaches to the land, to its Celtic origins, to a growing body of nationalist experiences and leaders . . . and to a specifically national literature” (236). Their plays created a new mythology, “an imaginary Ireland,” according to Gregory Castle” (137), that “drew on folklore, myth, and legend” (135). The Revivalists brought the past into the present, lifted the peasants above the aristocratic classes and exalted the courage necessary to stand against the adversity and oppression with which the Irish struggled.

Following are specific examples of plays that contributed to the creation of the Gaelic mythos. Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan, Synge’s Riders to the Sea and Lady Gregory’s Rising of the Moon represent some of the most famous and important works by these writers. These plays also exhibit the ideology that these Revivalists brought to the Irish people in an effort to, as Said suggests, create a new narrative for the people that would resist imperialism and bring about a new order (232).
Cathleen ni Houlihan

Although scholars have recently given Lady Augusta Gregory collaborative credit for her work on Cathleen ni Houlihan, this quintessential mythic play is considered W. B. Yeats’ initial dramatic foray into the Gaelic mythos. In this play, first produced in 1902, Yeats uses a Petrarchan discourse to elevate the Irish peasantry. He centers the story on a poor, rural family, and thus places them center stage, where they occupy the same space that gods and kings inhabited over the previous centuries of western theatre. Yeats also exalts the humble cottage, proclaiming it to be the center of peasant life – the witness to all of the heartaches and celebrations that make up this world. This cottage kitchen set later became infamous in Lady Gregory’s “kitchen comedies” and soon became cliché for any plays centered on the Irish peasantry. In “The Ideology of the Abbey Theatre,” Adrian Frazier writes: “That cottage on stage represents the temple of Irish domesticity, the sacred origin, the mystery of mysteries – within it the Irish are themselves” (44). Yeats, and those who followed him, attempted to penetrate this heart of Irish life, evoking what seemed to them to be a more authentic life.

The exposition of the play reveals a typical rural family that is eagerly awaiting the wedding of their eldest son. This wedding will bring a substantial dowry and greatly alleviate the family’s poverty. Yet the arrival of a stranger soon interrupts the family’s eager preparations. The old woman who comes to the family’s door is rumored to be the “strange woman that goes through the country whatever time there’s war or trouble coming” (Yeats 84). She has a strange sense of “otherness” about her that tests the family’s sense of hospitality. Traditions such as the custom of hospitality are crucial to peasant life, in Ireland and in all rural traditions. Yet the family, particularly Michael, is
loathe to open the door to this woman on the night before Michael’s wedding (87). She later tells the Gillane family that “there’s many a one that doesn’t make me welcome” (87). There seems to be something ominous about the woman that encourages people to turn away from her.

The Old Woman tells the bewildered family that she is fatigued from great traveling, referring metaphorically to Ireland’s long, arduous history. “Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet,” the Old Woman says, “but there is no quiet in my heart” (88). Here the woman evokes the crucial mythic element of national zeal. Although the Irish may be wounded and tired, their hearts are always fervent, just as the Old Woman’s.

When the Old Woman is asked to describe her hardships she replies: “My land was taken from me . . . My four beautiful green fields” (88). This famous reference suggests Ireland’s long colonial history and all that was taken from the Irish – not only land, but livelihood and spirit. The Old Woman, though, is not content to weep for her loss. She will solicit her friends for aid in regaining her lands, just as the swelling nationalism of the time was prompting the Irish people to reclaim their nation. The assistance she requires, however, goes beyond what many are willing to give. Peter offers her a shilling, as alms to the poor, and the Old Woman rejects it. “If any one would give me help,” she asserts, “he must give me himself, he must give me all” (90). The nationalist fervor implicit in the Gaelic mythos does not accept half-hearted gestures. Ireland requires body and blood from those that claim to love her. Thus Ireland must woo the people into a sort of human sacrifice, reminiscent of that which pagan spiritual practices would have required.
While she waits for her friends to aid her, the Old Woman tells the family, she survives on hope – “The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house” (90). The Irish people require this same hope for their survival. It is hope that sustains them in their oppression. It is hope that is manifested in the Gaelic mythos in which Cathleen ni Houlihan participates.

Near the end of the play, the Old Woman is finally identified as the “Poor Old Woman” or “Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan” (91). In “The Theatre of William Butler Yeats,” Joep Leerssen tells us that the woman known by these and other names is “a longstanding poetical figure representing Ireland” (53). The play’s theme is by now quite overt, and the Old Woman sings an explicitly nationalist song as she continues to enchant Michael.

Do not make a great keening
When the graves have been dug to-morrow.
Do not call the white-scarfed riders
To the burying that shall be to-morrow.

Do not spread food to call strangers
To the wakes that shall be to-morrow;
Do not give money for prayers
For the dead that shall die to-morrow. . . .

(91)

The song than affirms twice that those who die “will have no need of prayers.” A moment later, Cathleen ni Houlihan continues the song:

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever.

(92)

The Old Woman thus reinforces the nationalist idea that one who dies for his country will live forever in the people’s memory, and therefore should not be mourned. Frazier
suggests that “Cathleen ni Houlihan became a foundational myth of grass roots Irish republicanism: its enactments took on the character of a rite of blood sacrifice” (41). To honor Cathleen ni Houlihan with one’s blood thus becomes the ultimate honor.

Michael, symbolic of generations of Irish nationalists, is overcome by the Old Woman’s enchantment. Bridget tells her husband, “He has the look of a man that has got the touch” (92). Thus the Old Woman also represents the supernatural element of Yeats’ mythos. She is able to woo Michael with her tales and her songs until she is his only thought. He does not even recognize his fiancé when she enters, but instead impulsively follows Cathleen ni Houlihan to fight the British.

The famous last lines of the play reveal Yeats’ gift to the people of Ireland of a new self-image – a new mythos.

   Peter: Did you see an old woman going down the path?
   Patrick: I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.

(93)

The symbol of Ireland, according to Yeats, has evolved. The tired and worn old woman has been replaced by a strong, beautiful and regal girl. The Irish, Yeats implies, can reform Ireland if only they will come to her aid. Irish blood will create the Ireland of which the Celtic Revivalists dream.

Riders to the Sea

John Millington Synge perpetuates the mythos of the Celtic Revival in Riders to the Sea, produced in 1904. Synge had found what he believed to be authentic Ireland in the Aran Islands, and he sought to share this authenticity with the rest of Ireland through his drama. On this chain of small, barren islands, surrounded by a tempestuous ocean, life
was stripped to its very essence – survival. According to Gregory Castle, Synge “regarded the Aran Islanders as a wild and primitive, inherently noble people cut off from modern Europe” (101). They continued to live the nativistic lifestyle, Synge believed, that Yeats and other Revivalists were attempting to recreate from history and myth. This primitivism was at the essence of the Gaelic mythos.

Although all Irish peasants struggled to earn their livelihoods, islanders faced imminent death on an almost daily basis. In Riders to the Sea, the men must ride their livestock through the tumultuous sea to reach the ships that will carry the beasts to the mainland for pasturing or for sale. This perilous occupation is the only one available to most Aran men and the only means for them to support their families. Synge depicts the nobility of these courageous men in the character of Bartley, who undauntingly turns to the sea for his livelihood, even after the deaths of his father, his grandfather and all of his brothers. Synge’s play, however, is not really about these brave men: it is about the women who wait for them . . . and who bury them.

At the beginning of the play, Bartley’s sisters express concern for their mother, Maurya. They fear that her health may fail after facing so much adversity. Indeed, Maurya appears to be a frail, broken woman, mourning for her lost sons and agonizing over her last living one; unwilling to accept his intended self-sacrifice. Her agitation and frustration reveal that she is utterly helpless. As a woman, she is unable to take her son’s place, though it seems that she would if she could. Maurya’s helplessness invites pity, but she seems impotent and nagging compared to the courage of her only surviving son.

Yet Maurya is actually stronger than any of the men. Her strength is revealed when Bartley’s body is brought to her on a board, covered with a piece of wet sail. After
Bartley’s death, she is finally able to let go of her fears, having nothing left to lose. With this sense of release, Maurya is able to tell the women gathered to mourn with her that “no man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied” (Synge 99). This final acceptance of so great a loss reveals the courage and strength of character that Maurya has had all along. The men have faced certain death, but have had control over their own actions. Maurya, on the other hand, had no control over the deaths of her loved ones, and yet she remains strong and stoic. In fact, what appeared earlier to be useless bleating, when she begged Bartley to stay at home, was actually Maurya’s only available method of saving her last living son. Now that she has no one left to save, she is quiet, facing her pain with dignity. This feminine strength is intrinsic in the Celtic Revival’s portrayal of Ireland. The Revivalists modify Renan’s and Arnold’s image of feminine Ireland, giving her the strength to withstand adversity. In Cathleen ni Houlihan, Ireland needed to withstand external oppressors that had stolen her land. In Riders, Maurya’s hardships embody the internal challenges that face the Irish – poverty and the constant struggle for survival.

Another aspect of the Gaelic mythos that Synge evokes is a return to pagan beliefs. Catholicism had been Ireland’s dominant religion for centuries, but here in the Aran Islands a more primal, and to Synge authentic, spiritual awareness thrived. For instance, Maurya may speak of needing holy water for all of the men she has buried, but she also refers to Samhain, the pagan day of the dead. Likewise, while Maurya’s daughters ask the local Catholic priest for guidance, and trust his interpretation of God’s will, Maurya ignores his council, asserting that “it’s little the like of him knows of the sea . . .” (95).
She respects the primal sea and knows that it cannot be controlled by anyone, especially those who would underestimate it.

By the time Bartley’s body has been brought to Maurya, the priest is nowhere to be seen. His religion is impotent in the face of such extraordinary grief. Maurya performs the rites of ritual burial herself, accepting the role of priestess as she sprinkles holy water over Bartley’s body and Michael’s clothing. The ritual must also include the pagan act of keening to be complete. This act of wailing for the departed was condemned by the Catholic church, which considered such intense mourning to be disrespectful to the souls that were proceeding to Heaven. The islanders, however, express no concern about the biases and formalities of official religion. They know only their grief, and they will invoke their primal spiritual awareness in the face of such primal despair.

Synge thus evokes the Gaelic mythos by ennobling the hardships that the Irish people face and emphasizing the great strength of which they are capable. In this view of Ireland, we see an independent nation worthy of admiration as well as empathy. These themes will continue in the Irish drama influenced by Synge’s remarkable work.

**Rising of the Moon**

*Rising of the Moon*, produced in 1907, is one of Lady Augusta Gregory’s best known works and is more explicitly political than either of the previous plays examined in this study. As a rule, the dramatists of the Abbey Theatre shied away from strictly political drama. Castle suggests that, although they were creating a “national style,” these playwrights “avoided the partisan, polemical, and propagandistic tendencies of various
nationalist factions” (135). Yet it was difficult to entirely circumvent political issues because nationalism was such a crucial part of Irish life at this time.

In Rising of the Moon, Lady Gregory juxtaposes a police officer and an escaped fugitive, symbolically pitting English loyalism versus Irish nationalism. When the Sergeant unwittingly meets the fugitive, who is attempting to escape by boat, the ensuing conversation humanizes these opposing parties and encourages the audience to empathize with both men. Lady Gregory thus implies that the Irish people are united by something stronger than that which would separate them. Her version of the Gaelic mythos represented here thus encourages Irish unity.

The fugitive and the Sergeant meet on the common ground of Irish nationalist songs. In the introduction to Imagining an Irish Past: The Celtic Revival: 1840-1940, co-authors T. J. Edelstein, Richard A. Born and Sue Taylor relate that “seekers of Irish national culture such as Lady Gregory . . . documented songs and melodies of the common people. Both stories and songs,” they suggest, “were viewed as outside the influence of Anglo-Irish traditions of the eighteenth century and earlier” (xiv). Thus, nationalist songs provided for Lady Gregory a communal aspect of the Gaelic mythos to which Irish people of all political persuasions could relate.

The fugitive, who calls himself a balladeer, uses these songs in an attempt to preoccupy the Sergeant and thus make his escape. This theme of escape is important to the Gaelic mythos. The fugitive is escaping from the prison of colonialism and all that it entails – enforced religion, cultural oppression, usurped language. He is running toward the ideology of the mythos. When the fugitive (simply called Man in the script), cannot get around the Sergeant, he knows that he must convince the police officer to escape with
him – not a physical escape to the awaiting boat, but a symbolic escape from his loyalist ideology to the nationalism that the ballads represent. Thus the Man uses his songs to remind the Sergeant of that which the two men hold in common – the romance of Cathleen ni Houlihan and her nationalist fervor.

One of the Man’s ballads recalls the beauty of Ireland and depicts a lovely woman singing of her woes while standing “beneath a fertile vale” (26). As the woman, called Granuaile, describes her afflictions, it becomes clear that she, like Cathleen ni Houlihan, is a representative of Ireland. Just as Yeats and Synge did, Lady Gregory feminizes Ireland. This version of Ireland, reminiscent of Cathleen ni Houlihan, seduces men to her cause. The Sergeant knows the song about Granuaile and corrects the Man when he makes a mistake. The loyalist has been caught, it seems, in the enchantment of Ireland’s call for nationalism and forgets that he no longer endorses these nationalist ballads. The Sergeant eventually realizes that he and the fugitive are virtually interchangeable. If fate had simply pulled him in a different direction, he speculates, “it might be myself now would be after breaking gaol and hiding in the dark, and it might be him that’s hiding in the dark and that got out of gaol would be sitting up where I am on this barrel . . .” (27). The two men are indeed the same, for they share a common history and a common mythos that ultimately binds them together.

When the Sergeant’s fellow policemen return to the dock, and the fugitive is threatened with discovery, the Man implores the Sergeant’s aid with the simple statement, “I am a friend of Granuaile” (27). The two men’s shared love for Ireland unites them, though they are on opposite sides of the political spectrum, as well as on opposite sides of the law. By allowing the Man to escape, the Sergeant acknowledges
their common bond and contributes the hope for a united Ireland to the ever-growing Gaelic mythos.

Before the Man escapes into the night, he thanks the Sergeant and tells him: “Maybe I’ll be able to do as much for you when the small rise up and the big fall down . . . when we all change places at the Rising of the Moon” (28). This reiteration of the words that the Sergeant had spoken at the beginning of the play evokes the Revivalists’ idea of cultural revolution. The past becomes present; the peasants are uplifted; and the oppressed become exalted. Though Ireland is worn and tired, she will be renewed by the blood of her people. Those in need of salvation will one day be redeemed at last.
CHAPTER 3

IRELAND'S RECEPTION OF THE GAELIC MYTHOS

Innumerable playwrights have written in the shadow of the Celtic Revival, attempting either to live up to its iconic participants or to break the constrictive mold that they created. Sean O'Casey and Brian Friel are two such writers who have become icons in their own right. Sean O'Casey wrote in the Revivalists' lifetime, but most of his work was produced after the Revival was considered defunct. Thus he became the first respondent to the recently created Gaelic mythos. Brian Friel began his career in the 1950s, with his first commercial success occurring in the 1960s. His career continued through the remainder of the twentieth century and he became, and in fact still remains, a barometer for the changing Irish culture and ideology.

O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), one play from his "Dublin trilogy," suggests that the Irish are unable to live up to the idealism of the mythos and, further, that they are being destroyed by it. Friel responds differently to the mythos at separate moments in his career. In *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964), his first great success, Friel explores the contradiction between the mythos' enchantment on the Irish people and the economic need during the mid-twentieth century for the people to emigrate from Ireland. Twenty years later, Friel investigates the Gaelic response to imperial oppression in *Translations*. In both instances, Friel avoids labeling the mythos as "good" or "bad."
Instead, he employs it as common ground that he shares with his audience – a base upon
which he builds his own themes.

The Plough and the Stars

Although Sean O’Casey worked with Yeats and Lady Gregory at the Abbey Theatre, his
plays do not perpetuate the Gaelic mythos that the Celtic Revivalists introduced. Rather,
he suggests this image is one that the Irish people can not achieve. O’Casey was reacting
to the recent violence in Ireland, in particular the Easter Rising of 1916, which The
Plough and the Stars recalls, and the revolution that brought independence to the future
Republic of Ireland. Ireland was by this point an officially free country, but the ravages
of war had left deep scars and little had changed for the majority of the Irish in their daily
lives. Ronan McDonald suggests in “Sean O’Casey’s Dublin Trilogy: Disillusionment to
Delusion,” that O’Casey actually

debunks the mythology of Mother Ireland, who sends her sons out to die for the
recovery of her four green fields, replacing it with images of real suffering mothers,
of families torn apart by men drunk on ineffable dreams of political utopia and
doggedly sober on a doctrine of arid, inflexible political principles.

Thus Cathleen ni Houlihan’s idyllic Ireland cannot be achieved; and the people are dying
in their imperfect efforts to obtain it.

In The Plough and the Stars (1926), Jack Clitheroe is more interested in personal
power and prestige than he is in the romance of Cathleen ni Houlihan and her four green
fields. At the opening of the play, Clitheroe rejects the Irish Citizens Army because he
believes the Army has refused to promote him to Commandant. Yet when he learns that
he was in fact promoted, Clitheroe is only too eager to return to the Army’s ranks. It is
obvious that his national fervor extends only so far as the social position that the Army can provide him. He offers Ireland only a half-hearted gesture, such as the alms given to Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats’s play.

Still, Cathleen ni Houlihan’s lure seems to cause the discord in Clitheroe’s relationship with his wife, Nora. Clitheroe leaves Nora in Act One, rather vehemently, to go to the Army’s meeting, and he subsequently rejects her in order to continue fighting with the Army. However, as McDonald points out, Clitheroe and Nora were at odds before Captain Brennan informed him of his promotion to Commandant (147). Mrs. Gogan notes early in the play that the newlyweds seem to have cooled to each other, observing that “afther a month or two, th’ wondher of a woman wears off” (O’Casey 138). Also, the couple’s vacillating emotions are obvious as soon as they are alone together – now hot, now cold; kissing one moment and arguing the next. Thus McDonald speculates that “Cathleen ni Houlihan has not lured Clitheroe away from Nora – he was already disencharnted” (147).

Ireland does bewitch the men, however, at the end of Act Two, when Clitheroe, Captain Brennan and Lieutenant Langon exalt the upcoming revolution, in between snippets of The Speaker’s oration. In a spiritual frenzy, enhanced by whiskey, Langon avows that “Ireland is greater than a mother,” and Clitheroe likewise declares that “Ireland is greater than a wife” (178). All three men are prepared to trade everything they have for the honor of Ireland. Once again, feminine Ireland seduces men to her cause. O’Casey, though, explores the consequences of this enchantment. After the vows of love for Ireland have been made, the reality of war sets in. The image of a feminine
Ireland with seductive charms gives way to one of raw violence and cruel death. In the end, everyone involved will question whether Ireland is truly worth the price that is paid.

Bessie Burgess takes the role of devil’s advocate in the play, consistently ridiculing the nationalist fervor that surrounds her. She begins in Act One as merely an antagonistic character, representing the loyalist party and vexing her nationalist neighbors at every possible turn. Before long, though, she becomes the voice of reason. In Act Three she gloats to the other residents of the tenements, “Sorra mend th’ lasses that have been kissin’ an’ cuddlin’ their boys into th’ sheddin’ of blood! . . . Fillin’ their minds with fairy tales that had no beginnin’, but, please God, ‘I’ll have a bloody quick endin’!” (184).

Bessie intimates that the “fairy tale” of Cathleen ni Houlihan was created for the very purpose of beguiling men to their deaths. The legends of the Gaelic mythos, she implies, have no “beginnin’” in actual history; but there will be a very definite historical ending when Irish blood is spilled. She also points out that the men do not sacrifice themselves willingly, but at the prompting of “th’ lasses” who have filled their minds with the false romance of war. Nora also sees the men’s unwilling bravado when she searches the barricades for Jack. She sees the “fear glowin’ in all their eyes” and recognizes that they fight not because they are brave, but because they are afraid of being called cowards.

These beguiled men are not the only ones who suffer the consequences of these “fairy tales.” O’Casey also focuses on the families and the innocents who are victimized by war. McDonald suggests that in *The Plough and the Stars* elevating love for Ireland above love for a woman is presented as unnatural and inhuman, equivalent to elevating an abstract, bloodless idealism above the flesh-and-blood familial concerns of hearth and home” (146). This unnaturalness is underlined by Nora’s madness, which occurs when
Jack abandons her for the battle and she loses her unborn child. When news of Jack’s
death finally comes, Nora does not even hear it – her mind has retreated into a world of
shadows, because it can no longer handle the violent world into which she had been
thrust. Hence Nora is the antithesis of Maurya in Synge’s Riders to the Sea. Maurya
loses every man in her family and meets this adversity with courageous stoicism; while
Nora is driven mad by the mere prospect of her husband’s death. Once again, O’Casey
presents the reality behind the mythos. The real Irish people cannot live up to the mythic
images that they have been given.

Mollser’s death also emphasizes the unnaturalness of a “bloodless idealism.” She
dies in the midst of the fighting, but from consumption, not from battle wounds. Her
death, then, seems unrelated to the chaos surrounding her. Yet the Covey points out at
the end of the play that consumption is by far a more prevalent and dangerous concern
than the consequences of a temporary outburst of nationalist ardor. The soldiers,
however, are so caught up in revolution’s enchantment that they dismiss the tragedy of
this young girl’s death, even expressing disappointment that she wasn’t “plugged” (208).
The men sacrifice their lives and their families for the image of feminized Ireland, but
they have no concern for an actual girl whose life hangs in the balance. Thus, the play
reveals how the ideologies of a Gaelic mythos have distracted the Irish people, and the
Irish men in particular, from life’s realities. While they fight for a dream, their reality is
unraveling.

Bessie’s death is by far the most ironic in the play. She has been completely
uninvolved with this revolution and is unrelated to anyone fighting in it, yet she becomes
part of the “collateral damage” of the battle. The true irony, of course, is that she is killed
while she is attempting to save Nora from harm. Bessie has worked untiringly to care for Nora, and in the end she dies for her pains; while Nora, in her insanity, cannot even hold Bessie’s hand to comfort her as she dies.

O’Casey adds irony to irony as he brings the play to a close. After the parade of death and madness – Mollser and Nora’s baby have been taken away in a coffin, Bessie has been killed by a sniper and Nora has been led away in madness – the two English Tommies anticlimactically sit sipping tea in Bessie’s room. They hear singing from the street below and join in the song:

Keep the ‘owme fires burning,
While your ‘earts are yearning;
Though your lads are far away
They dream of ‘owme;
There’s a silver loining
Through the dark cloud shoining,
Turn the dark cloud inside out,
Till the boys come ‘owme!

This song expresses the same sentiments that have persuaded the Irishmen to rebel. The dream of returning home victorious has spurred the Irish rebels to their ultimate defeat. As the Tommies invoke their own sense of nationalism, they poignantly remind the audience what the Irish have lost. The Irish rebels will not be returning home, nor do they even have homes to which they can return.

Philadelphia, Here I Come!

In Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964), Brian Friel explores the vital Irish issue of emigration. Though this is not a subject with which the Celtic Revivalists dealt specifically, Friel does build on the Revival’s mythos. For instance, Friel sets his play in
a traditional cottage kitchen in rural Ireland, immediately recalling *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *Riders to the Sea* and Lady Gregory's "kitchen comedies." He seems to use this clichéd set to instantly alert the audience that his subject is the quintessential Irish peasant; and, in fact, Gar, the main character of *Philadelphia*, is of the same Roman Catholic peasant stock that the Revivalists romanticized. The play seems to neither glorify nor demonize such a tradition, but merely uses it for his own purposes.

The play's theme of emigration is immediately recognized when the audience learns of Gar's intention to move to Philadelphia the very next day. We soon infer, however, that Gar is uncertain in his present course. Throughout the play, Private Gar must continually distract Public Gar from dwelling on thoughts of that which he is leaving behind. Gar romanticizes his homeland, his town, and his friends and family, responding to each reason for leaving with an equivalent one for staying in Ballybeg. Gar tries to believe Boyle when he speaks of America's "impermanence" and "anonymity," asserting that this apathy toward tradition and history is "the way things should be" and "offers great attractions" (52). Yet the more Gar tries to convince himself that he wants to leave Ireland, the more we are convinced that he is deceiving himself. When he is finally confronted with his former love, Kate, Public Gar defiantly protests:

> All this bloody yap about father and son and all this sentimental rubbish about 'homeland' and 'birthplace' – yap! Bloody yap! Impermanence – anonymity – that's what I'm looking for; a vast restless place that doesn't give a damn about the past. (79)

Yet this outburst, that echoes Boyle's earlier words, is hollow and rings false. Public has been reserved and nonplussed throughout the play, allowing Private to express his stronger emotions. This uncharacteristic protest is too vehement to be believed. Public wants desperately to leave behind the emotional pain of his childhood, which he connects
with his homeland, but he cannot quite convince himself that abandoning his personal history and familial connections is “the way things should be.” The play ends with Private’s pointed question, “God, Boy, why do you have to leave? Why? Why? Why?” to which Public responds, “I don’t know. I – I – I don’t know” (99).

Gar’s struggle with his personal history can be related to Ireland’s struggle with its turbulent past. Although Ireland’s collective memory contains many painful moments, the nation cannot simply sever them and begin anew. Memories can never be left behind, by individual émigrés or by whole nations. The greater implication of Friel’s work is that Ireland needs its past history, its mythos, in order to be whole. Leaving its culture behind is not a viable option. Yet does Yeats’ Gaelic mythos merely cover the truth of Ireland’s difficult past in order to console the nation? Just as Gar created the memory of fishing with his father in order to comfort his desperate soul, so has Ireland created a mythology of heroes to erase the humiliation of colonialism.

Translations

In Translations, produced in 1980, Friel changes his theme from emigration to language. How important is language? Is a Gaelic landscape still Gaelic once it is Anglicized? In Translations, Friel takes a much more explicit look at the Gaelic mythos than he did in Philadelphia, exploring the Anglicization of Gaelic place names as a central event in Britain’s oppression of Ireland. He thus explores Ireland’s cultural destruction and asks what Ireland must do to survive its exploitation.

Friel chose to move this play out of the cottage kitchen, thus creating a more accurate atmosphere for the story. The hedge-school represents the attempt by the characters to
learn and to better themselves. This yearning for improvement echoes the financial benefit that the Gillane family had achieved in Yeats’ *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. That family would have substantially improved their lives if Michael had gone through with the wedding. In that instance, though, feminized Ireland convinced Michael that her cause was more important than the individual family. In Friel’s play, the community has been able to improve its quality of life without obstacle. There is still a connection to the land, though, as is portrayed in the outdoor scenes and in the agrarian nature of the community. Also, Manus displays a sense of self-sacrifice, that is stereotypical to the Gaelic mythos, by serving his father thanklessly and teaching without a salary. He even gives up his one opportunity for a secure job in order to avoid competing against his father. In fact, the initial glimpse we see of the hedge-school students reveals that they are all good-hearted people who try to improve their lives and who smile in the midst of their hardships. Thus Friel’s Ballybeg seems to concur with the Revivalists’ notion of an ideal Ireland.

Yet this sentimental Irish image quickly disappears when Owen and the British army officers enter the scene. Although the hedge-school students do not yet recognize the army’s purpose there, it is obvious to a modern-day audience that the officers want not to help the villagers but to dominate them. However, even after Manus recognizes the objective of this “military operation,” the British presence initially seems harmless (Friel 408). In fact, as Maire and Yolland become more attracted to one another, Friel seems to ask whether such expected antagonism is necessary. Must these two cultures always oppose each other, or can they merge in an act of love and faith? Unfortunately, this question is answered in the negative with Yolland’s death and Lancey’s subsequent
threats to the villagers. As Jimmy explains at the end of the play, “you don’t cross those borders casually – both sides get very angry” (Friel 446).

Friel expands on this issue of British and Irish relations by exploring the role of language and culture in this antagonistic relationship. Near the end of the play, Owen voices the question of language’s importance when he relates an anecdote to Yolland regarding the name of a nearby crossroads. The area is named for a well that was not located directly at the crossroads and no longer exists. Yet the story behind this name, possibly lost to everyone but Owen, is one of many such legends that contribute to the rich emotional landscape of this area. The play thus asks through Owen: “do we keep piety with a man long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’ beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?” (420). This question goes to the heart of the Gaelic mythos.

The Celtic Revivalists worked to revive fading stories such as the one Owen relates here. These stories, though “‘eroded’ beyond recognition,” defined a people, and the revivalists believed that, armed with these legends, the Irish could oppose their cultural oppressors. Hugh evokes the mythos of the Revivalists when he tells Yolland that the Irish language is “full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception.” It is the response, he declares, of the Irish to “mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to . . . inevitabilities” (418-19). This is the language of Ireland’s past – the past that the Gaelic mythos reveres and attempts to recreate. This language and the stories that it has created have allowed the Irish to withstand their difficult circumstances.

Yet is it beneficial for a people to, as Hugh suggests, “be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact?” (419). As Owen questions,
should a community continue to pay tribute to diluted stories, the origins of which are long forgotten? Of course while this question is posited, the Gaelic place names that reflect these stories are being destroyed by the English. The Irish are so caught up in the past that they do not recognize the impact of the present. Hugh’s parting advice to Owen is, “take care, Owen. To remember everything is a form of madness” (445). Perhaps Friel is implying that as life changes, people must change with it. Ireland cannot carry all of its past histories on its shoulders to the end of time. The Irish must release some of their baggage in order to continue their forward pace. Or perhaps he is suggesting that by dwelling in the past, the Irish miss what is important in the present.
CHAPTER 4

THE "CELTIC TIGER"

Contemporary Ireland is radically different from the world in which Yeats and Lady
Gregory created the Abbey Theatre a century ago. The last several decades have set
Ireland on the path of economic prosperity, and Ireland has found itself joining the ranks
of modernity. As John Ardagh outlines in his introduction to Ireland and the Irish:
Portrait of a Changing Society, the Irish economy began to slowly modernize after the
election of Sean Lemass to Prime Minister in 1959. Lemass, Ardagh relates, was a
"modern-minded" politician who "introduced a policy of economic growth and foreign
investment" (2). In 1973, Ireland joined the European Community, a step which required
the Irish people to step outside of their isolated world and embrace "a new range of
outside links and commitments" (Lemass 2).

The Irish economy continued to improve over the following decades and new
leadership became increasingly modern and liberal, culminating in the 1990 election of
Mary Robinson as Irish President – “the first woman to hold that post, the first youngish,
modern-minded liberal” (Ardagh 16). Colin Coulter, in his introduction to The End of
Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger describes how in 1994, an
investment banker in London, comparing Ireland’s economic performance to the south­
east Asian economies, labeled the Republic of Ireland the “Celtic Tiger” (3). This new
image completely contradicts Ireland’s former image of a poverty-stricken, oppressed
nation riddled with violence. As Coulter says, “The advent of the Celtic Tiger is held to have marked an era in which the Irish Republic emerged from its former underdevelopment in order to take its rightful place as an equal among the nations of the world” (15).

This brave new world brings with it an entirely new set of challenges for the formerly colonized nation. With its foray into modernism, Ireland has experienced great economic and social gains, coupled with modernism’s drawbacks. Unemployment, crime and drug use has escalated in parts of Dublin, as Ardagh relates, particularly “among ex-peasant emigrants alienated by the transition from their strict but safe rural world” (4-5). Ireland’s entire self-image has been altered by its improving economy. Ardagh asserts that it has sprouted “a new kind of brash, materialistic, go-getting society, untypical of Ireland” (14), and Coulter suggests that this materialism “articulates a spiritual emptiness that invariably attends the process of modernisation” (25).

Thus, the Irish have been thrust into the modern world, for better or for worse. Some of Ireland’s contemporary dramatists, reflecting and commenting on the world around them, recognize that this new Ireland has little to do with the Gaelic mythos created for an entirely different people in entirely different circumstances. The reaction to colonialism that provided hope to a despondent people now serves only to remind the people of a difficult past, encouraging them to wallow in self-pitying memories. The Irish people were controlled by Britain for centuries – first literally as a colonized nation, and then, as Ardagh relates, economically and socially as they struggled to stand alone amidst a new-found independence. Ireland was still economically dependent on and culturally indebted to the British for decades after gaining their literal independence (10).
As Ardagh poignantly suggests, “the Irish live the present in terms of the past . . .
elephant-wise they never forget” (8). Nor can they forget while their mythos is
constantly reminding them of their colonial and oppressive history.

In the next chapter, I will examine the dangers of adhering to this obsolete ideology,
as suggested by Marina Carr in Portia Coughlan. Portia clings to the past and to the
“otherworld” that is represented by her dead brother. Carr symbolically compares the
lifeless Gaelic mythos to a ghost that no longer belongs to the world but exercises an
uncanny hold on it, suggesting that the old stories and stereotypes of the Gaelic mythos
do not correspond with modern reality.
CHAPTER 5

PORTIA COUGHLIN: A DEFEATED WOMAN

Contemporary Irish playwright Marina Carr explores the lives of modern Irish women living in the shadow of the Gaelic mythos. She questions whether continued faith in this ancient mythos is beneficial to contemporary Irish men and women. In Portia Coughlin (produced in 1996), Carr asserts that the continued lure of the Celtic Revival in modern-day life is perilous to the Irish.

It is apparent at the beginning of the play that Portia Coughlan is a desperate woman. She drinks alone in the middle of the morning, she argues with her husband and she seems to be neglecting her children. Portia’s uncle, Senchil, observes to his wife that Portia is “lonely in herself,” and his observation appears accurate (Carr 200). She drives her husband away only to meet her lover by the river; but she speaks antagonistically to him and eventually forces him away as well. She later propositions the local barman, but she ridicules him while she does so. In this fashion, she consistently pulls people in only to push them away. She seems to not care who she hurts – even if she hurts herself.

As the play continues, it becomes apparent that Portia has lost all that had meaning for her – her twin brother, Gabriel. Without him, her life has been empty and desolate for fifteen years, and she has lived a sort of half-life, trying to exist in the reality of the world that holds her husband and children, while being increasingly pulled into another world of ghosts and shadows. Throughout the play, Portia hears Gabriel’s ghostly voice singing
to her and she strains to hear him more clearly, repeatedly following him back to the river in a desperate attempt to hold on to him, perhaps even to bring him back into her world. Yet she cannot bring him back. To the contrary, she is pulled farther into his world. At the beginning of the play, she is merely indifferent toward her husband and her children. Through the course of the story, though she continues to drift even farther away from the "real" world until she finally joins with Gabriel completely in her death.

The attempt to leave the harsh reality of her world is a persistent issue for Portia. When Maggie and Senchil give Portia a large horse statue for her birthday, Portia remarks that she "may jump up on him and ride off on him one of these days" (198). This statement seems unimportant initially, but it becomes the first of many such references to methods of escape. During her argument with Raphael at the end of Act One, Portia tells him that sometimes, when she’s falling asleep, she’s “slidin’ into a dream that’ll take me away from this livin’ hell and you touch me and lurch me back to Belmont Valley . . .” (221-2). She practically spits the words at him; despising him for keeping her in a world that she cannot abide.

Portia’s attempt to escape is not directly related to Gabriel’s death, though. She has been attempting to escape since childhood. In Act Two, after Portia’s body is found, Damus tells Fintan of a school trip that he took with Portia and Gabriel. The twins, he relates, went missing and were eventually found in a row boat “five mile out to sea.” When their teacher asked them what they were doing, they replied, “‘We were just goin’ away,’ says one of them . . . ‘Anywhere,’ says the other of them, ‘just anywhere that’s not here’” (225). Both siblings, then, felt an intrinsic need to leave the confines of their life. Nor is the theme of escape limited to the Coughlan twins. On the day of Portia’s
funeral, when Blaize is rattling on about Count McCormack, she tells Stacia that he was “born only up the road, but he got away” (226). This simple phrase reveals Blaize’s envy toward one who was able to leave, and implies that she also feels confined in her circumstances. This theme of escape contrasts with Lady Gregory’s version of escape in Rising of the Moon. Lady Gregory’s fugitive was escaping from colonialism toward the ideologies of the Gaelic mythos. Carr’s characters, however, are trying to escape the very mythos that Lady Gregory propagated. Portia in particular needs to leave this dream world and reinhabit reality.

In the face of such strong desire to escape, though, Portia feels that she could never actually leave. When Damns asks Portia in Act Three why she doesn’t leave Raphael like she used to say she would, Portia cannot remember her former avowals and asks herself, “Where did I think I was goin’?” (237). She could not possibly leave, she feels, because she has no where else to go: and even if there was such a place, Portia knows that she could never leave her homeland. When Stacia suggests that Portia should take a holiday, she replies that she could never leave Belmont Valley. If she did, she insists, she would always be thinking of the river:

Be wonderin’ was it flowin’ rough or smooth, was the bank mucky nor dry, was the salmon beginnin’ their rowin’ for the sea, was the frogs spawnin’ the waterlilies, had the heron returned, be wonderin’ all of these and a thousand other wonderin’s that river washes over me.

(207-8)

The tension resulting from Portia’s need to leave and her inability to do so threatens to suffocate her. At the beginning of the play, Portia tells Stacia that sometimes she “can’t breathe any more” (207). When Maggie later speculates that Gabriel went into the river because he “couldn’t take the asphyxiation of that house” (245), it becomes clear...
that they both suffered from the same loss of breath. Neither of the twins can survive in
their environment. Although Gabriel ran out of air first, Portia’s supply is running thin.

Though it is apparent from Portia’s comments that she cannot leave, that which binds
her to the valley is not immediately understood. Portia’s connection to the land becomes
clear when she and Fintan discuss the story behind the Belmont River’s name. Fintan
recalls that it was about “a mad hoor of a witch as was doin’ all sorts of evil round here
but they fuckin’ put her in her place, by Jaysus they did.” Portia is outraged by his
description and quickly insists that the woman was not evil, but was misunderstood; and
so she was attacked and left to die by the villagers. The river god Bel saved her and “the
river was born.” Portia speculates that perhaps Bel took everything else good from the
valley along with the woman, for the place is now “the dungeon of the fallen world.”
Fintan asserts that the story is a “load of bollix,” to which Portia replies, “I’m not askin’
you” (219), with the air of someone defending something of deep meaning to her.

Whether or not Portia believes that the story is true, she obviously relates to it,
particularly to the misunderstood woman who escapes from a dangerous reality. Perhaps
it is this affinity to the origins of the Belmont River that bonds her so tightly to it.

Portia’s relationship to the river is more than a mere connection, however – it is a
dependence. She feels that she can never leave the river, even in death. When Damus
asks her why she keeps coming back to the river, Portia responds: “I come here because
I’ve always come here and I reckon I’ll be comin’ here long after I’m gone” (203). She
comes to the river because it is associated, both in the play and in Portia’s mind, with
Gabriel. When her father encourages her to forget Gabriel, she replies:

Forget Gabriel! He’s everywhere, Daddy. Everywhere. There’s not a corner of any
of your forty fields that don’t remind me of Gabriel. His name is in the mouts of the
starlin's that swoops over Belmont hill, the cows bellow for him from the barn on frosty winter nights. The very river tells me that once he was here and now he's gone.

(213)

Gabriel's spirit exists in the land that surrounds Portia; in fact, Gabriel and the land are inseparable to her. Thus, she cannot escape because leaving her homeland, and particularly the river, would mean leaving Gabriel.

Now Gabriel's connection to the Gaelic mythos becomes clear. He represents the land — hence romanticized Ireland. Portia's statement that she finds him in every corner of her father's "forty fields" recalls Cathleen ni Houlihan's four green fields. Carr seems to be intentionally recalling the Celtic Revival and the mythos that Yeats and Lady Gregory created. Portia's connection to Gabriel corresponds to the Irish people's connection to the Gaelic mythos. The people are surrounded by references to the mythos in their legends and songs, just as Portia is surrounded by Gabriel in the land around her. Also, Gabriel's ghost represents the past; thus blending the land and the history of Ireland to lure Portia into the mythos. She is pulled increasingly into the past — her own and, by extension, Ireland's — and simultaneously toward the "otherworld" of mystical Ireland; complete with ghosts and river gods and fairy-like song. Likewise, the Irish are pulled by the mythos toward this mystical world. Carr implies that the Irish cannot simultaneously exist in their modern Ireland and in the Ireland of the past. They must choose which world to inhabit.

The incongruity of time in the play creates an even greater sense of the intertwining of past and present, reality and mythos. Act Two, in which Portia's body is discovered in the river, interrupts the otherwise chronological sequence, with Act Three occurring the day after Act One. Although the initial exposition occurs in the first act, the motivations
for Portia’s suicide are left unclear until the final act – a scene that chronologically precedes her death in Act Two. This jumbled sequence of events thus adds to the chaos stemming from Portia’s unhealthy relationships, both with Gabriel and with reality.

The disturbing nature of Portia’s relationship with Gabriel is revealed in the final act. In a heated argument with Portia, Marianne describes in disgust how Gabriel “used start ya chokin’ by just lookin’ at ya! How he used draw blood from ya when ya tried to defy him!” Portia undauntingly replies: “Mother, he was doin’ them things to himself for he thought I was him!” (249). Portia’s comment reveals that the twins’ connection was as disturbing as it was inextricable. The closer they became, the more compelled they were to hurt each other.

The degree of their closeness becomes very unsettling to the audience when Portia reveals to Raphael that she and Gabriel had an incestuous relationship. Portia tells Raphael that she and Gabriel “made love all the time down be the Belmont River among the swale, from the age of five” (253). The degree of the twins’ intense connection, and its aberrant nature, is thus even greater than was previously conceived. Portia continues to describe to Raphael exactly how intertwined she is with Gabriel:

I close me eyes and I feel a rush of water around me and above we hear the thumpin’ of me mother’s heart, and we’re a-twined, his foot on my head, mine on his foetal arm, and we don’t know which of us is the other and we don’t want to, and the water swells around our ears, and all the world is Portia and Gabriel packed for ever in a tight hot womb, where there’s no breathin’, no thinkin’, no seein’, only darkness and heart drums and touch . . .

(254)

This image represents the world to which Portia has been trying to return. The river symbolizes the liquid environment of the womb that keeps the twins inseparable and indistinguishable.
Portia cannot distinguish herself from her dead brother, and therefore her life feels insubstantial to her. She tells her mother that “when God was handin’ out souls he must’ve got mine and Gabriel’s mixed up, either that or he gave us just the one between us and it went into the Belmont River with him” (211). Although she still physically lives, Portia has felt more dead than alive since Gabriel’s death, and her grasp on reality continues to fade as Gabriel brings her nearer to death with almost every breath. He had promised her the night he died, Portia tells her mother, “‘I’m goin’ now but I’ll come back and I’ll keep comin’ back until I have you’” (250). Gabriel will have Portia with him again, even if he must kill her to achieve his goal.

This unnatural relationship with Gabriel, and thus with the Gaelic mythos, leaves Portia torn between the present and the past, the modern world and that of shadows. Portia believes that this lack of substance also makes her an unnatural mother – if she cannot live fully in the present, she cannot mold future generations. Portia “never wanted sons nor daughters” and, though Raphael may have hoped to “woo [her] into motherhood” she “can’t love” her three sons and begs Raphael to care for them (221). Instead of loving and doting on her children as a “natural mother” would, Portia looks at her children and sees “knives and accidents and terrible mutilations . . . And I have to run from them and lock myself away for fear I cause these terrible things to happen” (233). Portia thus represents the dangers inherent in one who clutches at the past to the detriment of the present and the future.

Portia has tried to fight this detrimental bond to Gabriel and to the mythos. She tells Raphael that she married him in an attempt to join the “real” world: “. . . and I says to meself, if Raphael Coughlan notices me I will have a chance to enter the world and stay
in it, which has always been the battle for me” (255). This attempt, however, was fruitless. Portia has only drifted farther from her friends and family, farther from modern reality, and closer to that fading romantic world of legend and song that still tries to lure Ireland into its shadow. Gabriel continues to call for her, and his song becomes louder and louder. Portia tells Marianne near the end of the play, “I can hear him comin’ towards me, can here him callin’ me . . . I’m just tryin’ to tell ya how it was, he’s closin’ in on me, I hear his footfall crossin’ the worlds” (251).

Portia Coughlan is destroyed by Gabriel’s pull and by the lure of the mythos. The world of shadows cannot sustain her in the modern age. The Irish people likewise cannot live in the world of myth and legend. Portia’s fate represents Ireland’s destiny if the people continue to cling to stories and ignore reality. The real world of contemporary Ireland has more to offer than a world of dreams.
CHAPTER 6

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, produced in 1996, Martin McDonagh reflects on the quintessential Irish film of the twentieth century – Robert J. Flaherty’s award-winning film, *Man of Aran* – from the perspective of the very islanders it portrays. This work echoes J.M. Synge’s depiction of the nobility of the Aran Island inhabitants in *Riders to the Sea*. The grainy black and white images of the film romanticize the resilient Irish peasants who have only rock and a tempestuous sea from which to earn their livelihoods. Flaherty’s islanders are always smiling, even as they perform the most arduous tasks. He thus propagates the Gaelic mythos of the noble Irish that embrace their hardships willingly. McDonagh, however, turns this mythic image on its head.

In *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the people assume that Ireland is inhabited only by those who have no where else to go. The characters show continual surprise that anyone with options would choose to come to Ireland. Johnnypateenmike first raises this issue when he tells his neighbors about the upcoming filming of *Man of Aran* on the neighboring island of Inishmore. He asserts that “Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come to Ireland to do their filming” (14). This statement – “Ireland mustn’t be such a bad place” – is repeated no less than five times throughout the play, expressing surprise at the arrival in Ireland of, among others, “French fellas,” “coloured
fellas," "German fellas" and sharks (21, 37, 52, 78). Each reiteration of this statement emphasizes the inferior position that the Irish are used to occupying. This is particularly obvious when Babbybobby refers condescendingly to the fierceness of "coloured fellas" – "Oh they'd give you a terrible scare" – and yet still displays surprise that they would "want to come to Ireland" (36-7). These Irish islanders thus feel unworthy to host even those peoples that they consider racially inferior to themselves.

Ireland’s inferiority reveals itself in other ways as well, such as Helen’s game of “England versus Ireland” with Bartley in Scene Six. She plays England by breaking eggs on Bartley’s (Ireland’s) head. When Bartley complains of the ill treatment, Helen replies, “I was giving you a lesson about Irish history” (71). It is also notable that Bartley does not fight back, just as Ireland was unable to combat England’s oppression. This is another aspect of the lesson about Irish history. Another reference to England comes in Scene Three, after Bobby has thrown a rock at Johnny’s head. Johnny indignantly bellows: “I wouldn’t get that kind of treatment in England!” (40). The people of Inishmaan thus believe that England is not only superior in strength, but in civility; just as imperialist England asserted when colonizing Ireland.

In addition to this greater theme of Irish self-image, McDonagh ridicules several particular aspects of the Gaelic mythos. First, McDonagh mocks Irish Catholic spirituality, by portraying the priests’ perversity and the islanders’ general irreverence. Helen, for instance, pegs eggs at the village priest for “touching me arse in choir practice” (20). In a warped interpretation, Helen believes she must be pretty to have clergymen “groping” her. Yet Bartley astutely points out that “it isn’t being pretty they
go for. It’s more being on your own and small” (22). Bartley’s response to Helen implies that he has also been molested by the local clergymen:

Helen: Have you ever had your arse groped be priests?
Bartley (quietly): Not me arse, no.

(22)

At the end of the play, Helen again refers to the impropriety of Irish priests in her discussion with Billy on the topic of violence. After insisting that violence is necessary in order to not be taken advantage of, Helen recalls that she first “ruptured a curate at six” (105). It is obvious, then, that priestly misconduct is a regular and recurring part of life for these villagers.

Irreverence on the part of the villagers is first noticed in their unchristian speech to one another. This unkindness specifically opposes Christian ideals when Helen suggests hiding Kate’s stone to encourage her nervous breakdown. Bartley responds, “Sure that wouldn’t be a very Christian thing to do,” to which Helen replies, “It wouldn’t be a very Christian thing to do, no, but it’d be awful funny” (67-8). Christian charity is not very important in this world of antagonistic relationships. Johnny tells of another shocking bit of sacrilege at the beginning of the play when he mentions a man who threw a Bible into the sea (10). This story is received with proper incredulity by Kate and Eileen. Yet later on in the play, when Babbybobby discovers what is obviously this same Bible floating in the shallows, he responds to the odd find by nonchalantly throwing it right back out to sea (43). Thus McDonagh humorously reveals how superfluous a true Christian faith is to the people of this village, as well as how unrealistic the overemphasized spirituality of the Gaelic mythos is.
McDonagh also highlights the stereotype of Irish stupidity with Billy’s interest in books and learning. Eileen accuses him early on of thinking too much: “There’s too much oul thinking done in this house with you around” (29). Later Bobby expresses incredulity that Billy would want to read a book as opposed to throwing it at a cow (34). Also, after Billy returns from England, Eileen accuses him of “big-wording” her and calls him “Mr. Yankee-high-and-mighty” (91). All in all it appears that Billy is the only person on the island who is the slightest bit interested in learning. McDonagh uses this stereotype to criticize the Gaelic mythos. By glorifying the image of the simple peasant, the mythos has propagated the image of the uneducated Irish that continues to persist to the modern day.

Bartley’s obsession with telescopes provides an interesting image that emphasizes Ireland’s inferiority complex. Although Helen ridicules him for his fixation, Bartley is nonplussed, explaining that with a telescope “you can see a worm a mile away” (24). McDonagh surely has little interests in worms, unlike Bartley: but the image of the telescope symbolizes the need to see far away, i.e. far away from Ireland. Thus the telescope represents the dream to escape from Ireland.

Billy realizes this dream when he goes to America with the producers of Man of Aran. After returning, Billy tells Babbybobby that he “had to get away from this place . . . by any means” (92). Billy has experienced only hardship and cruelty in his homeland and he, unlike the characters in Man of Aran, is not smiling. He resents his “life of nothing but shuffling to the doctor’s and shuffling back from the doctor’s and pawing over the same oul books and finding any other way to piss another day away” (92). It pains him that his friends call him “Cripple Billy” and constantly ridicule him for
his handicaps. His sensitivity makes Billy the strongest link to humanity in Inishmaan – the moral touchstone of the play.

McDonagh’s most prevalent and obvious theme – that of violence – seems to mock a traditional sense of morality. The Cripple of Inishmaan is riddled with violence at every turn, from the cruel jokes that the islanders play on one another to pegging eggs and rocks at each other to killing farm animals. The normal civility and politeness of society is completely absent here. Nor do the villagers expect anything different. Bobby calls Billy “too kind-hearted” for refusing to harm cows (33). Helen similarly accuses Bartley of being “too kind-hearted,” expressing shame that he’s related to her (69). Later, when Billy tells Bartley that he “shouldn’t laugh at other people’s misfortunes,” Bartley responds, confusedly, “Why?” (89). Unkindness seems to be a natural part of life in Inishmaan.

Of course, the violence does not stop with mere words. The people of Inishmaan seem to enjoy hurting one another, physically as well as verbally. Although the antagonistic dialogue may elicit only nervous laughter from an audience, Babbybobby’s attack against Johnny in Scene Three is downright shocking. Bobby has no qualms about holding down an old man and throwing rocks at his head simply to prevent him from gossiping. Even Billy is nonplussed by this extraordinary violence, but rather encourages Bobby’s actions. McDonagh does not dwell on this cruelty, though. Johnny gives in to Bobby after only one stone being thrown and responds dismissively to his would-be torturers. As soon as Johnny leaves, the tension is forgotten in an almost tender exchange between Billy and Bobby. The lack of reaction to or comment on this scene by McDonagh makes it even more disturbing.

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Yet the pervasive violence seems gradually less and less shocking as the play continues. Kate’s and Eileen’s violent reaction to Billy’s departure seems by this point to be somewhat reasonable. After learning that Bobby took Billy with him to Inishmore to see the filming of *Man of Aran*, Kate tells Eileen, “I’d like to hit Babbybobby in the teeth . . . With a brick” (57). This statement is humorous, rather than shocking. Later, when the aunts learn that Billy has left for America, Eileen indulges in the hopeful fantasy that his boat will sink before reaching America. Kate concurs, saying that she hopes he drowns “like his mammy and daddy drowned before him” (63). After venting their frustrations, the women recognize their extreme harshness, but continue to wallow in it nonetheless, in a futile effort to soothe their emotional pain. Again, this reaction seems understandable; wishing bodily harm on a loved one seems to be a reasonable response in this numbingly violent world.

McDonagh shocks the audience out of its stupor, though, when Billy returns to Inishmaan and reveals that he does not have TB. Babbybobby is irate that Billy lied to him and manipulated his emotions. Billy made a fool of Bobby, he feels, and so he will revenge himself on Billy. Bobby proceeds to beat Billy mercilessly, with no consideration to Billy’s already deformed body. Yet even the ghastliness of this beating fades in the next scene when Kate and Eileen return to normalcy, relating the village gossip in unconcerned tones. When Johnny enters and tells the Doctor nonchalantly that his mother is “lying at the foot of me stairs,” and explains sarcastically how she got there – “be falling down them! How d’ya usually get lying at the foot of a fella’s stairs?” (99) – his cruelty again seems normal and his sarcasm is humorous. Johnny has spoken so
much of trying to “kill [his] mammy with the drink” that the concept no longer seems abnormal.

The violence in The Cripple of Inishmaan has many motivations. Billy’s aunts indulge in violent thoughts as a reaction to emotional trauma. Johnny is fierce with his mother seemingly out of mere annoyance. Bartley uses violence to vent his frustrations. For instance, after Helen has been smashing eggs on his head and Kate neglects his Fripple-Frapples again, picking up her stone and wandering away, Bartley angrily smashes all of the eggs that Helen had left and huffily stalks out the door, slamming it behind him as he leaves. Helen, on the other hand, is violent for money. She admits in Scene Six that it was she who “murdered Jack Ellery’s goose and Pat Brennan’s cat for them” (66). She committed this act with no twinge of conscience, recalling the incident to Bartley as a professional killer might – calmly describing the best method for disposing of a cat. Such cruelty is normal in this world and elicits no shock or remorse.

Yet underlying these shallow motivations for the characters’ antagonism is the greater oppression that has forced the Irish to erupt in forceful rebellion. Violence was necessary, as Helen tells Billy at the end of the play, to avoid being “taken advantage of” (105). This is the downside of the Gaelic mythos. Irish nationalism encourages the people to follow Cathleen ni Houlihan into battle – to respond with physical force. Man of Aran portrays the Irish figuratively fighting the land and the sea – forcefully obtaining their sustenance. However, McDonagh’s characters have made this hostility a way of life. It is not only the English, the perverted priests or even Flaherty’s “master” of the “Man of Aran” – the sea – that these Irish battle continually. They are incessantly
fighting each other, therefore destroying any chance for that mythical Irish sense of community that should, according to the Gaelic mythos, come naturally.

McDonagh’s focus on Irish violence and inferiority contradicts the romanticism of the Gaelic mythos that would insist on the near-perfection of Irish communities – particularly the island communities such as those revered in Riders to the Sea and Man of Aran. It is the latter of these works that McDonagh specifically challenges in Scene Eight. The people of Inishmaan view this quintessence of the romantic “Irish spirit” and react with impatience, ridiculing the characters and throwing eggs at the screen. Helen is the first to expresses exasperation at the “fecking hour” the men take to catch the shark (79), but everyone present talks incessantly through the whole film, obviously paying it little attention. Helen then ridicules their sweaters (which are presumably meant to be classically Irish) and finally thanks Christ when “the fecker’s over,” calling the film “a pile of fecking shite” (84, 85).

This mockery of Ireland’s idolized image continues as Billy relates his experiences in America. He tells his friends of the movie role for which he auditioned, which presented a typically romantic view of Ireland. He scorns the references to “banshees” and “me barren island home,” calling them “arse-faced lines.” He also takes offense to the script’s description of the brave Irishman, “with a heart and a spirit on me not crushed be a hundred years of oppression,” calling this mythic image of the Irish “a rake of shite” (88). Now McDonagh reveals his private joke from Scene Seven. In that scene, Billy had wheezed his way through a monologue that, it is now evidenced, was an audition piece that he was rehearsing. At the time, though, neither Billy nor McDonagh gave any indication that the scene was part of a Hollywood script. The audience was momentarily

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bewildered by Billy's poetic language that evoked the legends and stereotypes of the Celtic Revival. McDonagh reveals this irony after portraying the villagers' response to Man of Aran, thus emphasizing how unrealistic these portrayals are.

The Cripple of Inishmaan reveals the unreliability of the stories of the Gaelic mythos. One of the primary stories of the play, that of Billy's illness, proves to be an ironic falsehood. Billy lied about having TB in order to get out of Inishmaan. When he actually contracts TB at the end of the play, the false story becomes true. Also, in the last scene of the play, Billy learns that the romantic image he had of his parents was a lie. The doctor tells him "they weren't the nicest people," and his mother, whom Billy had believed to be beautiful, was "awful ugly" (96). Johnny, however, perpetuates the idealistic story by telling Billy that his parents killed themselves in order to leave him the life insurance money that would pay his medical bills. Johnny thus gives Billy the "good news" that he so desperately longed for (103). The truth, however, as we learn from Kate and Eileen, is that Billy's parents tried to kill him, not themselves. Johnnypateen was the one who saved Billy and paid for his medical treatment. Johnny thus proves himself a liar when he tells Billy: "Do what you want and feck everybody else is Johnnypateenmichael's motto" (100). Thus no one is what they seem to be and no stories are trustworthy.

Martin McDonagh thereby asserts that the stories of romantic Ireland are unreliable and that people are more than a mere set of stereotypes. The happy ending anticipating Billy's romantic relationship with Helen is tempered by the blood that he coughs into his hand, reminding him that he will not live long enough to enjoy this relationship. Hence, this story of romance is also not what it seems. Helen has unwittingly prevented Billy
from taking his own life, in ironic imitation of the death he was saved from as an infant, but she cannot save him from the horrors of consumption. In fact nothing, not even the Gaelic mythos, can save these people from the horrors with which they continually exist. By mocking the mythos' stereotypes, McDonagh reveals that unquestioning belief in fairy tales tends to blind people from the reality beneath the story.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

When *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was first produced in 1902, Ireland was an English colony with a large peasant class and an almost third-world economy. The Irish had been oppressed by the English for centuries, enduring poverty and famine. They had staged numerous rebellions that had been put down each and every time. The Celtic Revivalists, particularly Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge, attempted to provide the downtrodden people with the heroes and legends that related the former glory of Ireland. These playwrights encouraged the peasant class, and themselves, by exalting the peasants' tenacity and strength, their simplicity and their rich spirituality. The dramatists of the Revival provided dreams and possibilities in the form of the Gaelic mythos.

However, as Edward Said asserts, “the cultural horizons of a nationalism may be fatally limited by the common history it presumes of colonizer and colonized” (223). The Gaelic mythos was a reaction against colonialism. Therefore, this ideology will always contain the kernel of inferiority against which it was striving, as Martin McDonagh powerfully portrays in the inferior and antagonistic attitudes of the islanders in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. The mythos also isolates the Irish in their own xenophobic world of “otherness,” convincing them that they “have only one single identity – that all the Irish are only Irish,” as Said explains. To surpass this “nativism,” Said suggests that the Irish would not need to abandon their nationality, but rather would need to view their
“local identity as not exhaustive.” One should not be “anxious to confine oneself to one’s own sphere, with its ceremonies of belonging, its built-in chauvinism, and its limiting sense of security” (Said 229).

Shakir Mustafa takes another view in “Demythologizing Ireland: Revisionism and the Irish Colonial Experience,” in which he warns against “dividing myths into good and bad.” In his analysis of the revisionist movement, he advises that such an attitude “betrays a dismissive gesture towards myths in general” (70). Mustafa describes the revisionist movement as one which dismantles myths and he obviously opposes the practice, speculating that “modernist demythologizing is after all a process of fetishizing certain artistic choices” (70). Yet Carr and McDonagh have not “fetishized” any artistic choices. Rather, they have highlighted an ineffective mythology that they believe to be detrimental to the Irish people. Stories in and of themselves are fine, they imply, but they are not reality – they are unreliable and they ignore the present. The old stories must remain stories and must no longer be confused with the fact of genuine Ireland.
WORKS CITED


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Kristina McGraw

Home Address:
6170 Boulder Hwy Apt 2102
Las Vegas NV 89122

Degree:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 1998
Westmont College, Santa Barbara CA

Thesis Title: The Evolution of the Gaelic Mythos Through Twentieth-Century Drama

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, KC Davis, MFA
Committee Member, Dr. Jerry Crawford, Ph D.
Committee Member, Linda McCollum, MA
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Christopher Hudgins, Ph D.