Volume 3: 2010-2011 **ISSN: 2041-6776**

INNERVATE
Leading Undergraduate Work in English Studies

The University of Nottingham
School of English Studies

‘The emergent literatures of modernity [...] are formed around a single question: how to express life which has never yet found expression in written literature?.’[1]

How have Irish Writers explored the relationship between modernity, colonialism, and national identity?

Rory Byrne

The aim of this discussion is to examine some of the work of W.B. Yeats and James Joyce with regard to their approaches to modernity, colonialism and national identity – the most prominent concerns of modern Irish literature and other culture. Declan Kiberd states that Yeats ‘based his doctrine on the conviction that there is no great literature without nationality and no nationality without literature’, which asserts the connection between the poet’s work and his nationality.[2] As a poet writing in late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century Ireland, it is unsurprising that Yeats’s poetry often concerns national identity, modernity and colonialism. Unlike Yeats, Joyce is harder to positively classify as an ‘Irish’ writer. His work shares themes with other examples of modern Irish literature and is set exclusively in Ireland, yet, as Kiberd suggests, he is more characteristic of a ‘world author’ in that he cannot be comfortably placed into the Irish, British or European schools.[3] The focus of Kiberd’s *Inventing Ireland* is the relationship between Irish literature and the formation of a national idea and identity, although – as he points out – it is worth noting that not all modern Irish literature is concerned with these themes. Neil Corcoran describes the critical tradition regarding the two authors: Yeats ‘steps forward into modernity out of the mists of the Celtic twilight and the Irish Literary Revival’, whereas Joyce ‘is read as urban realist, European modernist, stylistic revolutionary.’[4] He goes on to suggest that seeing their work as totally dissimilar is detrimental to modern Irish criticism.[5] The most pertinent correspondence between the works of the two contemporaries to this discussion is that both writers highlight the importance of the self and the individual. Yeats, amongst others, ‘immodestly equates self and nation’ and similarly to Joyce he places the job of exploring identity in the modern Irish colonial state onto individual characters in his work.[6] Yeats’s ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’ and ‘Easter 1916’ will be examined as they represent two stages in the progression of his techniques and thoughts, and compared to ‘Ivy Day in the Committee Room’ and ‘A Little Cloud’, from Joyce’s *Dubliners*. These texts contain references to the themes with which this discussion is concerned and, I will argue, exhibit parallels in terms of style, content and opinion.

In the first lines of Yeats’s early poem ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’ the speaker states that he wishes to be counted among the great poets who ‘sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong.'[7] Timothy Webb warns of the danger of automatically equating opinions portrayed in Yeats's poems to those of the man himself, although on this occasion it seems appropriate to associate him with the speaker.[8] The identity of the poet-speaker is discussed here because of the importance placed by Yeats on the identity of the poet and how this influences his work. Yeats distances the poet's identity from that of 'the bundle of accidence and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.'[9] However, as we will see in the example of his later work, the identities of both the poet and the speaker are not static but capable of change. In this poem Yeats argues that his poetry speaks for Ireland despite its romantic themes, such as the woman who owns the 'red-rose-bordered hem', and indeed addresses Ireland directly in the second person. The poet talks to Ireland as a whole to explicitly foreground the concept of national identity and, more specifically, the idea of an Irish nation in the lines 'While still I may, I write for you /The love I lived, the dream I knew.' The words 'the love I lived, the dream I knew' could refer to the 'you' (i.e. Ireland) in which case the use of the past tense raises questions as to whether the speaker's experience in Ireland has ended for a reason which is not mentioned. Alternatively, these words could indicate that the poet intends to write about what he has known and loved in the course of his work for Ireland; by bringing his personal thoughts into the content of his writing for the nation the poet equates the significance of the individual and the formation of a national identity. Another figure is referred to in the poem, which may be the individual reader: 'Because, to him who ponders well, / My rhymes more than their rhyming tell.' Here, the poet encourages the reader to analyse the poem's words closely and to read a wider significance into his work. By placing importance on the subjective interpretation made by each reader, the poet highlights the individual in the wider context of the poem's subject matter. Yeats expresses the admiration he had for one aspect of romantic poets – such as those of the Young Ireland movement, whom he called 'eighteenth-century' – that 'they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people', which is the intention of the speaker in this poem.[10] Unlike 'Easter 1916', Yeats argues that he should speak for Ireland by placing his art and himself as the central voice addressing the country's wrongs, but in doing so he emphasises the importance of the self in a poetic context and the individual in the national context, which is accomplished differently in the later poem.

---

[1] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp.117-18.
[2] Ibid., p.162.
[3] Ibid., p.327.
[4] Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.viii.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Kiberd, p.119.

Yeats discusses the significance of individual people again in 'Easter 1916', both in terms of the Easter Rising instigators' role and the effect their actions have on the individual in Ireland who is represented by the speaker in the poem. Jonathan Allison proposes that 'Easter 1916' 'celebrates the romantic energy of revolution, but does so ambiguously', a suggestion with which I disagree.[11] The speaker's response to the events is relayed in ambiguous terms, therefore the poem cannot be said to celebrate nor condemn the Rising with any certainty; it conveys an ambivalence, which is most emphatically communicated by the repetition of 'A terrible beauty is born', which as Marjorie Howes states is 'unresolvably contradictory.'[12] The speaker's oxymoronic statement is paralleled by the speaker's conflicting view towards change: the first two stanzas imply that the pre-Rising Ireland was a 'casual comedy', likened to a play in which the four people mentioned were content, but then were ‘All changed, changed utterly’. Here, change is seen as damaging to the revolutionaries in that it distances them from their previous happiness. In the last two stanzas the opposite is implied: their static and obstinate viewpoint is symbolised by ‘the [stone] in the midst of it all’, which contrasts the moving natural world around it, and is counterproductive to their aims. Kiberd suggests that ‘The poem speaks, correspondingly, with two voices, and sometimes enacts in single phrases (“terrible beauty”) their contestation.’[13] With this assessment in mind, it may be that the poem does not depict the uncertainty of one speaker who cannot decide whether the Rising was a success or a failure, but rather a dialogic exchange between two contrasting points of view. Yeats may have been expected to applaud the Rising given his earlier more Nationalist views – evident in the poem ‘Reprisals’ (published in 1948 but written in 1920) and play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1902), to name just two examples – but in this poem instead only offers conflicting opinions.[14] This undecided attitude of the individual poet-speaker in his self-analysis may have been an attempt to encourage a reciprocal introspective questioning from the reader and thus promote a questioning of their own views on the Rising, regardless of other people’s. Unlike in his earlier poem, he is not arguing that he should speak for Ireland but that Ireland should form its own opinions; the individual should recognise their importance both in the interpretation of any text – whether it be a poem or an uprising – and also in the wider context of the Irish nation.

---

[7] W.B. Yeats, 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', *Selected Poems*, ed. Timothy Webb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp.38-9.

[8] Ibid., p.xix.

[9] W.B. Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work', *Selected Criticism and Prose* (London: Pan, 1980), p.255.

[10] Yeats, 'A General Introduction for my Work', 1980, p.256.

[11] Jonathan Allison, 'Yeats and politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Marjorie Howes, John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.185-205 (p.192).

[12] Yeats, 'Easter 1916', 2000, pp.119; Marjorie Howes, 'Yeats and the postcolonial', in *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. by Marjorie Howes, John Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.206-25 (p.216).

‘Easter 1916’ is a later example of Yeats’s work than ‘To Ireland in the Coming Times’, and we see a change in the poet’s style and political views between the two. I would argue that in its progression the work grows closer to that of Joyce: the image of the rebels ‘Coming with vivid faces/ From counter or desk among/ grey Eighteenth-century houses’ would not seem out of place in one of the *Dubliners* stories, unlike the romantic and mythical imagery used in the earlier poem.[15] Furthermore, a suggestion Kiberd makes is extremely interesting here:

> ...the rather clichéd tones of the closing lines, which seem sometimes like fillers (“Now and time to be”) or like jaded formulae (“wherever green is worn”) [indicate] Yeats’s bitter awareness that this utterance, too, will become part of the inevitable simplification of a complex event [...] he foresees that these strands will all be forgotten, as the rebels are converted into classroom clichés and his own poem quoted only for a refrain which will be ripped out of its wider context.[16]

If this is indeed the case, Yeats’s self-awareness of his work as a symbol that relates to national identity draws parallels with the metafictional nature of Joyce’s work, for example, the explicit references to literature and its construction in the works discussed below.

It has been suggested that ‘[post-famine] Irish artists wrote with one eye cocked on the English audience. They were, for the most part, painfully imitative of English literary modes.’[17] Joyce was presumably trying to represent an example of a writer with such a colonial mentality when creating the character of Little Chandler in ‘A Little Cloud’. The narrator, who has full access to Chandler’s thoughts, tells us ‘The English critics, perhaps, would recognise him as one of the Celtic school’, which shows us the colonial mentality of the character.[18] This is paired with Chandler's apparent inability to write any poetry and his image as an infantile figure: the narrator describes his 'childish white teeth' (p.76) and 'infant hope' (p.79) which is augmented by Ignatius Gallaher, who repeatedly addresses Chandler as 'my boy' (p.82, *et passim*). By constructing the character in this way Joyce encourages a connection to be made between these faults and therefore draws a comparison between the colonial mentality of some Irish writers and children who imitate their parents. The narrator of the short story plays an important part in the critique of the character and, similarly to Yeats's poems discussed above, is an active participant in the creation of the text. There are instances where it is unclear as to whether words are coming from the narrator or whether Joyce – using the same technique which would become crucial to his later works – is representing the thoughts of Chandler through free indirect discourse.[19] For instance, the sentence 'Melancholy was the dominant note of his temperament, he thought, but it was a melancholy tempered by recurrences of faith and resignation and simple joy' (p.80) is followed by 'If he could give expression to it [...].' This raises the question as to whether Chandler's inability to describe his feelings has led the narrator to illustrate them in his stead, or whether he, in fact, is unaware of his ability to create such poetic sentiments. In either case, if we assume that the narrator is an active participant in the creation of the story who adds a subjective rendering to the narrative, comparisons can be drawn with the speaker of 'Easter 1916', whose personal attitude of the Easter Rising colours our view of the event. Similarly, after the personified description of the 'poor stunted houses' as 'a band of tramps, huddled together along the river-banks' the narrator tells us Chandler wonders 'whether he could write a poem to express his idea' (p.79). If these instances of poetic expression do in fact come from Chandler, then he is evidently not paralysed by a lack of poetic competence but by the restrictive nets of Dublin, from which, we are told, 'you had to go away. you could do nothing in Dublin' (p.79). The association of Ignatius Gallaher with the London Press and English journalism, paired with symbolic hints such as his 'vivid orange tie' (p.81), lead us to see him as a representation of the liberated exile in England against Chandler, whose situation leads us to see him as the constricted prisoner in Ireland. There is an inherent danger in assuming the presence of a national allegory in the texts of the colonial writer in that it is reductive to their work, although the symbolism Joyce weaves into the story suggests such a reading is defensible. Gallaher is vulgar, well travelled and has 'got on' (p.76) and as such might echo the global militaristic aspirations of the British Empire, whereas Chandler's punctilious and inhibited personality means he dare not even read his wife some poetry or travel further than the Isle of Wight – a possible hint towards Ireland's lack of ambition and its subjugation by Britain.[20] If we are to read this story as an allegory, we might see Chandler's increase in confidence at Corless's – such as his assertion 'we'll just have one more now' (p.87), his aggression toward his child and the internal anger directed towards the 'patronizing' Gallaher (p.88) – as representative of Ireland's inability to assert itself in the various rebellions prior to 1916.[21]

---

[13] Kiberd, p.213.
[14] Yeats, 2000, p.262.
[15] Yeats, ‘Easter 1916’, 2000, p.119.
[16] Kiberd, pp.216-7.
[17] Ibid., p.115.

Seamus Deane describes the individual in *Dubliners* as 'Highly individuated, they are nevertheless exemplary types of a general condition in which individuality is dissolved.'[22] As much as this is the case in 'A Little Cloud', with Joyce's portrayal of the typical paralysed

---

[18] James Joyce, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), p.80. Subsequent references to this text will be accompanied by page numbers in brackets in the body of the essay.

[19] *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), *Ulysses* (1922), and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) all use free indirect discourse as a central technique to the narrative.

[20] Don Gifford notes that the Isle of White was 'a quiet tourist trap for the unadventurous' Don Gifford, *Joyce annotated: notes for Dubliners and A portrait of the artist as a young man* (Berkely, University of California Press, 1982) p.70.

[21] Such prior uprisings are discussed in Kiberd, pp.191-3.

[22] Seamus Deane, 'Dead ends: Joyce's finest moments', in *Semicolonial Joyce*, ed. by Derek Attridge, Marjorie Howes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.32.

Irish writer, the same is true of the canvassers in ‘Ivy Day at the Committee Room’ (pp.132-152). ‘Ivy Day’ is a chief example of where this assessment can be applied because it presents an exemplary assortment of political ‘types’, ranging from the idealistic and uncompromising Parnellite Joe Hynes to the paranoid and materialistic John Henchy.[23] The canvassers seem to have little impetus for the Nationalist Party’s campaign, the aim of which is to remove Ireland from the colonial oppression of the United Kingdom. Their reasons for working for the candidate Richard Tierney vary from the promise of money or porter, and in Crofton’s case a choice between ‘the lesser of two evils’ (p.146). Their indifference toward modern post-Parnell Irish politics is signified most poignantly by the description of Mat O’Connor, whose zeal for canvassing is destroyed by slightly inclement weather, and who instead spends ‘a great part of the day sitting by the fire in the Committee Room’ (p.133) lighting cigarettes with Tierney’s pamphlets.[24] Similarly to ‘A Little Cloud’, ‘Ivy Day’ has been chosen for examination because of Joyce’s reference to a form of Irish literary expression, of which he disapproves. Hyne’s recital of ‘The Death of Parnell’ is emblematic of the impotent sentimentalism displayed by those characters of the story who cling to the memory of Parnell, and Deane suggests ‘manages, more than anything previously, “to befoul and smear th’ exalted name”.’[25] The poem describes ‘modern hypocrites’ (p.150) which, ironically, refers to those in the room who simultaneously advocate Parnell’s vigorous and assertive personality – ‘“Down, ye dogs! Lie down, ye curs!” That’s the way he treated them.’ (p.149) – whilst adopting a contrary, passive approach to politics. The final line, ‘One grief— the memory of Parnell’ (p.152), ostensibly refers to the sadness felt regarding the loss of their leader, but also implied is that the ghost of Parnell is an inescapable presence in modern Republican politics, as it is in ‘Ivy Day’, and that it is this refusal to forget the past which causes ‘grief’ (p.150) in the form of the paralysis of modern Nationalist politics. Richard Ellmann quotes a solicitor who was in contact with Joyce during the production of *Dubliners* as saying ‘Why don’t you use them [Joyce’s talents] for the betterment of your country and your people?.’[26] The same man who saw Joyce’s work as unbeneficial to Ireland might have approved of elegiac works like ‘The Death of Parnell’, which aim to ‘sweeten Ireland’s wrong’, while Joyce sees nostalgia and inaction as detrimental to the Nationalist, and therefore anti-colonial, cause in the context of modern Irish politics.[27]

Kiberd states that Yeats ‘started out in the conviction that texts by [...] himself would provide the foundation for “the idea of the nation”: much later, he sadly concluded that he must settle for expressing “the individual”.’[28] This statement can be said to be incorrectly recognising a failure if one equates the individual with the nation, which Anthony Smith describes as ‘the nationalist solution, which sinks or ‘realizes’ individual identity within the new collective cultural identity of the nation.’[29] Ultimately the concept of a nation is comprised of individuals and as such national identity must be formed by the amalgamated identities of its citizens, whom are given universal significance in Yeats’s poetry. The same is true of Joyce’s work in *Dubliners*: by illustrating various types of person the writer universalises his characters in an Irish context and encourages the connection to be made between the text and real-world manifestations of Irish national identity and its place in the modern form of the colonial state. The narrative personae used by both writers are important in mediating between the reader and the world the text describes; their conspicuous influence in shaping the narrative draws attention to their presence, thus highlighting the importance of the self in interpreting their individual experience, just as the reader must interpret a text. Though both writers are often seen as holding opposing answers to the question of how to express modern Ireland in literature, their use of the active narrator, the individual yet universal character and the awareness of the individual reader's perception of their work are indicators that the two men should not be seen as utterly different.

---

[23] Ibid.

[24] It is interesting to note that Tierney’s card is described as ‘pasteboard’, which the OED states can be used to mean ‘a thing of a flimsy or unsubstantial nature’, when applied in a figurative context.

[25] Deane, p.32.

[26] Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1959), p.343.

[27] Yeats, ‘To Ireland in the coming times’, 2000, p.38.

[28] Kiberd, p.127.

[29] Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p.97.

Bibliography

Attridge, Derek, Marjorie Howes eds., *Semicolonial Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Corcoran, Neil, *After Yeats and Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Ellmann, Richard, *James Joyce* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1959)

Gifford, Don, *Joyce annotated: notes for Dubliners and A portrait of the artist as a young man* (Berkely, University of California Press, 1982)

Howes, Marjorie and John Kelly eds., *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Joyce, James, *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999)

Kiberd, Declan *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996)

Smith, Anthony D., *National Identity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991)

Yeats, W.B., *Selected Poems* ed. Timothy Webb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000)

------ *Selected Criticism and Prose* (London: Pan, 1980)