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# Imperial Anxiety and Irish Myth: A Case-Study of T.C. Boyle's Water Music

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IMPERIAL ANXIETY AND IRISH MYTH: A CASE-STUDY OF T.C. BOYLE'S *WATER*

*MUSIC*

by

CONNOR MABRY

(Under the Direction of Howard Keeley)

ABSTRACT

There is a long history of returning to a collective past or history during periods of cultural anxiety in human history. In what I term late-imperial anxiety comes a slew of writers returning to mythology and folklore in response to changing cultural and political environments around them. T.C. Boyle is living in a vastly changing America during the 1960s and 70s when he writes and publishes his first novel, *Water Music*. Boyle participates in the tradition of hearkening to the past to face the future by drawing from popular Irish mythology for his novel. In it he adapts popular heroes like Cú Chulainn into a familiar, yet innovative, new form in response to America's fast-growing disillusionment domestically and abroad.

INDEX WORDS: T.C. Boyle, Irish mythology, Literature, *Water Music*, *Tain Bó Cuailgne*, American imperialism, Imperial anxiety, Morrigan, Cú Chulainn, Great mother

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

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MASTER OF ARTS

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## I • Introduction

Born near New York City in December 1948, Thomas Coraghessan Boyle published his first novel, *Water Music*, a semi-fictional adventure tale, in 1981, seven years after graduating from the Iowa Writers Workshop with an MFA in creative writing. Since *Water Music* — which is a central focus of this thesis — Boyle’s literary output has been prolific, including but not limited to 26 novels, eight collections of short stories, and multiple essays for such publications as the *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker*. Winner of 1987 Pen/Faulkner Award, the 2014 Rea Award, and other fiction prizes, Boyle is currently a distinguished professor emeritus of English at the University of Southern California. He continues writing from his home in Montecito, near Santa Barbara, California. Despite the large quantity and the acknowledged quality of his writing, Boyle has received relatively little scholarly attention thus far.

Boyle’s novels cover a wide array of topics. An incomplete list would include: immigration from Mexico to the United States; the overpopulation of planet earth; and increases in urbanization and deforestation. Consistent across his opus is engagement with how human cultures exploit and alter the world. Boyle typically pushes straight to the core of a problem.

Perhaps the comparative lack of scholarly responses to his work is a factor of its “easiness.” By his own admission, Boyle does not want readers to have to work hard to understand his output; he eschews hiding “true meaning” beneath cryptic complications<sup>1</sup>. In *Water Music*, as in many other Boyle novels, the action clips along, hastening from one episode to the next until the basic narratives collide as the work concludes.

In a 2003 interview with Peter Wild, creator of Bookmunch and author, Boyle reflected that he strives to maintain a reader-friendly style. Characterizing much literary criticism as, in

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<sup>1</sup> See Interview with Peter Wild



effect, an ivory tower, he lamented “the domination of the literary arts by theory over the past 25 years”; he continued, “[I]t’s as if you have to be a critic to mediate between the author and the reader, and that’s utter crap” (Wild 1). Boyle fears that too many Americans associate literature with school assignments, not the pursuit of happiness. He wants readers to enjoy all elements of his writing: plot, language, style, and characterization. While Boyle’s work does not require the kind of literary-critical engagement useful in the case of, say, James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939), scholarly scrutiny of it does yield worthwhile insights.

The thesis opens with a brief summary of the essential characters, structure, and plot of *Water Music*. It then turns to the Irish Revival to suggest that creative engagement with mythology by several of that movement’s key authors was, to some degree, a response to late-imperial anxiety, specifically, exasperation with the increasing Anglicization of Irish culture and a desire for sovereign nationhood. Next, the thesis posits that, conscious of how Irish revivalists manipulated myth, Boyle’s presentation of larger-than-life characters and an ambitious quest narrative in *Water Music* may be a reaction to anxieties over the state of the American “empire” (a disgraced president, defeat in Vietnam, and more) around the turn into the 1980s. Finally, the thesis elaborates on that idea by offering a close reading of the nameless old woman and then, Ned Rise in relation to crucial characters from popular Irish Revival versions of the series of tales centered on Cú Chulainn, the best-known Irish mythological figure in the Anglophone world.

*Water Music* focuses on the narratives of Mungo Park and Ned Rise as they slowly wind together before finally meeting in the Niger Basin. Park is a fictional representation of the very real Scottish explorer who was the first European to lay eyes on the Niger River and survive the trip back to England. As Park attempts to chart the Niger and write a book of his exploits, most

of it exaggerated fiction, he eventually succeeds and becomes master of his own destiny. As a second son he forges his own path in adventure rather than the soul crushing boredom he experiences as a countryside doctor in Scotland. After his *Odyssey*-like return to his wife and home he grows restless. Famous for his exploits he begins to plot a return to the Niger and find the source of the river before the French. Ned Rise, on the other hand, is an orphaned street urchin turned entrepreneur whose struggles mirror those of Park, but take place in the streets of London. After several failed attempts at climbing the socioeconomic ladder – he “dies” twice – he is eventually shipped off to Africa as part of the plan to make criminals man forts at the fringe of empire to cut costs. Throughout his whole life Ned is relentlessly haunted by a nameless old woman whose sinister presence Ned is never able to escape. When explorer and criminal meet in Africa they are subjected to disease, desertion, and the hatred of the Sahelian Moors. The mission ends in a complete disaster due to Park’s inflated hubris. The failed expedition ends at the terrible waterfall, *boussa*, where everyone except Ned is killed. Ned then continues to live on in the interior of Africa as the lone white-man.

My essential argument is that Boyle feels compelled, in this, his first novel, to use myth in response to what might be termed late-imperial anxiety in American society and the American body politic. Due to his education, the model most available to him for using myth was work by W.B. Yeats and his circle during the Irish literary revival. *Water Music* manifests many mythic characteristics across several mythological traditions not just Irish, including Homer, Virgil, Spencer and Milton.

Characters with such larger-than-life mythic qualities are the massive 400 lb. Queen Fatima, the pariah birth of Georgia Gleg, the mysterious nameless hag who appears in Africa, Scotland, and London, Dassoud the human-jackal whose cruelty and bloodlust are unmatched.

Coupled with these mythic archetypes are very direct allusions to mythology like Mungo and Ailie Park as Odysseus and Penelope, *boussa* as African Charybdis, the mythic circumstances of Mungo's adventures through Africa – the financiers of his trip continually refer to historians' and explorers' of antiquity versions of what resides in Africa, two-headed cannibals, chimeras etc. The two examples that pertain to this project is the Irish mythological figures Cú Chulainn and the Morrigan which appear within the characters Ned Rise and the nameless old woman, respectively.

Note that I claimed that Boyle turned to myth in response to the America of his time. During his high school and college years, America, the closest the free world then had to an empire, underwent a series of anxiety-provoking episodes. The major events shaping the American conscious in the 1970s center around its involvement in world affairs, specifically the Vietnam War and the Cold War. At home too America was undergoing serious cultural upheaval with the civil rights movement and the impeachment of President Nixon. America's lasting popular reputation domestically remained intact through two World Wars and the Great Depression, however the increasing dissemination of information through the media was a hard blow to the United States nationalism.

Television played a crucial role in this turn in collective consciousness by allowing news to be spread exponentially faster and to a wider audience than ever before. Images of the horrors of war and race relations could reach everyone and it became impossible to completely filter and censor news. Growing up and studying during this time period would clearly have an effect on a young writer such as Boyle. By his own admission in his younger, formative years Boyle engaged in counter-cultural behavior such as punk and anti-establishment ideals.

Another example of this type of reaction to America's fading imperialistic influence abroad is the movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The movie is an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to the Vietnam War. The movie follows American soldiers as they travel up river searching for Colonel Kurtz, who has gone mad. The movie is a far cry from the typical war movie portraying American soldiers as saviors fighting the dreaded enemy for the glory of America. Francis Coppola's film is released within two years of the publication of *Water Music* indicating that during this period in United States history artists are returning to, and reinventing, past literary traditions to highlight problems in their contemporary moment.

An obvious question arises as to why Boyle engages with contemporary American crises by inscribing mythic characters and situations neither in the United States nor in a theater in which the United States was notably active, such as Vietnam, but instead divides the action in *Water Music* between rural Scotland, inner-city London, and the African interior, specifically, the Niger basin. The simple answer is that by displacing key issues to foreign locales, Boyle gives his readers a new, perhaps more enlightening perspective. However, the matter is more complex. Boyle's specific locational choices afford him potent ways to highlight contemporary American anxieties.

*Water Music* centers on the European race for Africa, specifically control over the Niger River. The two main combatants are England and France, two of the premier colonial superpowers. Boyle parallels the race for the Niger with the United States and Russia vying for control of other countries and nations. English colonial dominance can be easily compared to the way America contended with the U.S.S.R competing over countries like Vietnam and Korea. The pretense to "save" the Vietnamese from communist influence is comparable to the English pretense to "civilize" the African natives. *Water Music* makes it painfully obvious that England's

real reason for charting the Niger River are purely economic, much like the United States fear of losing influence, and resources, to Russia.

Boyle's displacement of action to Africa in the nineteenth-century creates an avenue to present the issues of race that were continuing to be problematic in 1960s and 1970s United States. There was endemic racist attitudes and biases, but Boyle points to more nuanced aspects of white-black race dynamics. *Water Music* highlights the condescending paternal feelings that white people were developing to replace racial animosity, believing that Africa, and African-Americans, needed to be saved by Western powers. Within *Water Music* the main black character is Johnson, a former slave who grows in his master's favor leading to an education and comfortable position in England. After murdering a white man in a duel he is exiled back to Africa and then hired to be Mungo's guide to the Niger. Mungo continually treats him as inferior, referring to him as boy, despite Johnson being much older, and assuming the role of master despite his complete dependence on Johnson's help to survive. Eventually a mutual respect grows between the two, but on Mungo's second trip his enhanced ego alienates Johnson as Mungo refuses his council and hurls racist insults at him when they argue. Even though they are on equal footing in Africa, their relationship is still strained by race, comparatively in the United States even though the government recognized equal rights by law there was still a long way to go for true equality in everyday society.

Another problematic aspect of American society were high poverty levels across the United States. Robert F. Kennedy made poverty the mainstay of his campaign for office in 1965, and President Lyndon Johnson recognized the problem and declared a "war on poverty" in his State of the Union address in 1964. At this time poverty rates were cited around twenty percent and legislation was formed to provide a concerted effort to combat it. So drastic was the "war on

poverty” that it is during an address in Memphis in support of the sanitation worker’s strike that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Boyle addresses the socioeconomic disparity through the class gap in London during the turn of the nineteenth-century. Representative of the have-nots is Ned Rise who perpetually struggles against the haves such as the Banks and Durfeys. The major barrier to Ned is the bourgeoisie and their abuse of power. Throughout the novel there is a prominent divide between the conditions of the working class and that of lords and ladies.

All of the dramatic problems that America is undergoing, blown up by the access that television provided, justifies the deployment of epic myth as a literary response. For Boyle, the mythology closest at hand was Irish, specifically, that mythology promulgated during the Irish literary Revival, which he studied at Iowa’s Writer’s Workshop under his mentor Frederick P.W. McDowell.

## Chapter II • Boyle and the Irish Literary Revival

This chapter discusses elements of the Irish Literary Revival (henceforth “the Revival”) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The purpose is to suggest that Boyle’s *Water Music* may be a latter-day example of the kind of manipulation of mythology that the Revival pioneered. By changing his middle name from John to Coraghessan (a fact rehearsed in the *Encyclopedia of World Biography*), Boyle gestured towards his Irish ancestry, but he gained direct exposure to the Revival by obtaining a variety English-literature degrees, including a doctorate.

Boyle contributed to Michael and Tina Love’s 2016 *The Passion of Yeats* (funded by the California Branch of the American Irish Historical Society), a documentary that examines one of the figures most associated with the Revival: the poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939). In the film’s first section, “Celtic Twilight Period,” Boyle traces his interest in the Revival to his studies under McDowell. “[W]hat struck me most” in Yeats’s work, Boyle asserts, “was ... the magical early poems,” such as the myth-based “Song of Wandering Aengus” (1899). So compelling to Boyle was the Yeatsian version of the Revival that he elected to live in Ireland “for a bit” soon after completing graduate school. In *The Passion of Yeats*, Boyle makes specific reference to the “attachment ... to the landscape” inherent in “the Irish myth” (*Passion*).

In the evolution of the Revival, Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory — his occasional collaborator and foremost benefactor — followed and were influence by Standish James O’Grady. This chapter examines how all three deployed Irish mythology to create a body of work that continues to resonate for many in the Anglophone academy and the larger Anglophone world, not least T.C. Boyle. Anglo-Irish Protestants by upbringing, O’Grady, Gregory, and Yeats had to school themselves into conversance with the complex range of Irish-language mythology.

For their part, neither of the males gained fluency in Irish (Gaeilge); thus, their command of any of Ireland's four mythological cycles — the Mythological, Ulster, Fenian, and Historical Cycles — was always partial.

In fact, O'Grady, Gregory, and Yeats tended to be improvisational and strategic when crafting their version of Irishness through the retelling of the Cú Chulainn tales from the Ulster Cycle and other narratives. When appropriating myths, each engaged in a significant amount of editing — one might even say play — to fit their artistic and political needs. I wish to argue that a similarly imaginative and inventive approach is manifest in Boyle's limited but striking exploitation of myth, including (it would seem) Irish myth, in *Water Music*.

Surface-level readings of *Water Music* are plentiful, but a richer appreciation of the text emerges when one contemplates parallels within it to certain central figures and tropes in Ulster Cycle myths, also known as Red Branch myths, particularly those that O'Grady and, after him, Gregory and Yeats favored in their English-language publications. Fundamental to the Revival, those works were studied by T.C. Boyle, especially under Frederick P.W. McDowell. Between 1878 and 1881, O'Grady published a three-volume *History of Ireland* at whose heart were the exploits of the adolescent warrior Cú Chulainn (spelled Cuculain by O'Grady): his training in arms; his defense of Ulster, Ireland's Northern Province, during the *Táin Bó Cualinge* (Cattle Raid of Cooley); and his heroic death. The same birth-to-death trajectory constitutes the essence of a 1902 collection by Gregory, her first published work, the full title of which is *Cuchulain of Muirthemne, The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster Arranged and Put into English by Lady Gregory with a Preface by W.B. Yeats*. Presented in her distinctive Hiberno-English idiom, known as Kiltaranese, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* sold out four editions within a decade.



In his turn, Yeats authored five Cú Chulainn plays over a 40-year period, completing the last — *The Death of Cuchulainn* (1939) — while expiring on his deathbed. Often, the figure of Cú Chulainn served Yeats as a kind of alter ego. Yet the turn to Cú Chulainn and the greater Ulster Cycle by no means ended with Yeats. In the late 1960s, the Dublin-born poet Thomas Kinsella made an investment in the teenage warrior, producing a translation of the *Táin Bó Cualinge* story. Published in 1969 as *The Táin* (Dolmen Press), it featured illustrations by Louis le Brocquy. Kinsella's version did not attempt a comprehensive retelling of Cú Chulainn's service to Ulster during an invasion led by Queen Medb (or Maeve) of Connaught, the western province, although in 1967 precisely that ambition was reflected in the publication of a translation by scholar and Kerry native of the Book of Leinster redaction (i.e. version) of the *Táin Bó Cualinge*.

Deploying a blend of Old and Middle Irish, plus some Latin, the Book of Leinster was written around 1160, and O'Rahilly addressed it systematically with support from the School of Celtic Studies of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies. In essence, she bucked the trend of creatively exploiting key Cú Chulainn stories — a trend seen not just in O'Grady, Gregory, and Yeats, but also in such texts as Aubrey Thomas de Vere's *The Foray of Queen Maeve and Other Legends of Ireland's Heroic Age* (1882); L. Winifred Faraday's *The Cattle Raid of Cualgne* (1904); Mary A. Hutton's *The Táin: An Irish Epic Told in English Verse* (1907); and more.

O'Rahilly's achievement remains the seminal scholarly translation of the Book of Leinster recension of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. By contrast, Kinsella attempted to produce an exploration of Cú Chulainn accessible to the general population. He has acknowledged that his intention was never to present a “scholarly work” but instead “a living version of the story, leaving as few obstacles as possible between the original and the reader” (vii). While likening his

efforts to those by Lady Gregory and Yeats, Kinsella also expressed awareness of the politics of his day: the beginnings of the Troubles in the counties of Ulster known as Northern Ireland. The Troubles would prove a 30-year period of sectarian violence (1968-1998), and just under a decade after their conclusion, the Ulster poet Ciaran Carson saw to publication his text, *The Táin: Translated from the Old Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge* (2007). The Kinsella translation appeared around the time that Boyle was transitioning from undergraduate to graduate education, so one wonders whether the Boyle had exposure to it as a new text.

Boyle picks up where Kinsella leaves off, imitating and innovating Irish myth into a consumable product for a wide audience. Unlike many twentieth century Irish-American authors – McCarthy, Fitzgerald, O'Connor – Boyle did not simply hearken to Joyce's influence on Irish literature; Boyle, due to his time at Iowa, looks back further to Yeats and the grander scheme of the Celtic Revival.

The Revival began to germinate during the late 1700s in the form of such works as Charlotte Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789). However, it gained new urgency after the Great Hunger or Great Famine of the 1840s, an event that accelerated the loss of Gaeilge, the Irish language, which had already suffered due to the institution of the English-language National School system in 1831. Given the state of Gaeilge, the post-Famine focus on Irish mythology could not have become a popular phenomenon without translators, and in the case of Lady Gregory the work of translation embraced both Irish-language manuscripts and the oral tradition. Gregory went beyond the Ulster Cycle; her 1904 book, *Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha De Danaan and of the Fianna of Ireland*, includes both tales of the people of the goddess Dana (genitive: Dannan) as inscribed in the Book of Invasions, part of the

Mythological Cycle, and tales of the Fianna or military followers of the warrior-hero Finn mac Cumhall (Fionn MacCool) as reflected in the Fenian Cycle (also known as the Ossianic Cycle).

Cú Chulainn, though, would prove the most potent figure, a status intensified by the Easter 1916 Rising, whose chief ideologue, Patrick Pearse, appropriated him as an icon of Irish vigor and valor when resisting the colonist. In 1912, Pearse wrote both a Gaelic and an English version of a poem “Mise Éire” (“I Am Ireland), which includes the lines, “I am Ireland / ... / Great my glory: / I who bore brave Cúchulainn.” Cú Chulainn’s single-handed defense of Ulster struck a chord with Pearse and his fellow republicans, and their deployment of him as a national icon, as opposed to just a regional hero, underscores how myth can be fluid, depending on cultural and political needs. Those who first wrote down Irish mythology, from around the eighth century, were primarily scribes in Christian monasteries, and one wonders whether they perceived in pagan tales some sort of moral message compatible with their monotheistic faith.

In *Gods and Fighting Men*, Lady Gregory pushes against reading a particular Fenian Cycle myth — Oisín’s return to Ireland from Tír na nÓg, the Land of the Young — in Christian terms. Back home after hundreds of years living in a supernatural realm of constant youthfulness, Oisín finds Ireland changed, no longer graced by his father, Finn, and that man’s core retinue, the Fianna. Instead, there is a new culture built around Christianity, recently introduced by St. Patrick. The saint discovers Oisín, who, having regained the years staved off by the magic of Tír na nÓg, is now an ancient man. In a nurturing manner, Patrick attempts to “bring him to [Christian] baptism” (Gregory 412); however, he remains true to the druidic religion of the pagan Irish, alone and depressed though he may be. Having reflected, “I am the last of the Fianna, great Oisín,” he continues, “the voice of ... [Christian] bells” places “long clouds ... over me to-night!” (Gregory 426).

In the Dedication with which Lady Gregory opens *Gods and Fighting Men*, she quotes Finn as saying, “We would not give up our own country — Ireland — if we were to get the whole world as an estate, and the Country of the Young along with it” (1). Nationalistic pride seems present here, but by the end of the greater text Oisín’s isolation in Patrick’s Ireland is hard to ignore. In effect, his condition may implicitly question the ability of the Revival project to recover and distribute native Irish tales and culture — or at least to radically de-Anglicize and, thus, change the greater Irish society. In an address, “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland,” delivered before the National Literary Society in Dublin on November 25, 1892, the Anglo-Irish revivalist Douglas Hyde reflected, “[T]he Irish race is at present in a most anomalous position, imitating England and yet apparently hating it. How can it produce anything good in literature, art, or institutions as long as it is actuated by motives so contradictory? ... I believe it is our Gaelic past which, though the Irish race does not recognize it just at present, is really at the bottom of the Irish heart” (2).

If Gregory harbored anxiety about the ultimate dominance of Patrick over Oisín, some of her unease perhaps derived from knowledge that she habitually doctored the tales she wrote and published, thus not really presenting a true version of what Hyde termed “our Gaelic past.” In the case of *Cúchulainn of Muirthemne*, she reduced the level of violence generally associated with the title character and certain other protagonists, and sometimes she omitted violent scenes altogether. By doing so, she essentially created a Cú Chulainn of her own choosing. Although she fashioned an Oisín who resists that which he deems inauthentic, she inscribed a less-than-authentic Cú Chulainn, at least as regards violent action. This inconsistency on the part of a formative Revival author is a practice that T.C. Boyle may have recognized when engaged in academic study of the phenomenon he has called “the Irish myth.” The looseness of approach

manifest in Gregory, O'Grady, Yeats, and other Irish revivalists may have informed his incorporation of fantastical — arguably, quasi-mythic — characters into *Water Music*, not least the street urchin Ned Rise's alcoholic mother and the 400-pound African queen, Fatima.

Amateur or dilettante engagement characterizes most of the “rediscovery” of Irish myth and legend during the Revival. Certainly, Standish O'Grady fit that mode, beginning with *The Heroic Period* (1878), the first volume of his three-volume *History of Ireland*. Though a historian, O'Grady was not well-versed in Gaelic mythology or folklore. To that point, Gregory Castle and Patrick Bixby repeat a story concerning a meeting between O'Grady and Patrick Pearse, who had become fluent in Gaeilge. When O'Grady pronounced Cú Chulainn's name as *Cutch-ul-ane*, Pearse explained the need to say it as *Coo-hu-lin*. “[O]verwhelmed by the discovery,” O'Grady “after a long pause informed Pearse that he would have written an entirely different book if he had known the correct sound of the name” (O'Grady xii).

In his turn, the Yeats produced his early anthologies *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892) without deep expertise in Gaelic folklore. He relied on rural Irish natives of his acquaintance, such as the cottage-dwelling Sligo woman Bidy Hart. As he became more established as a literary presence, he exploited his status to provide billowy publicity for works by his patron, Augusta Gregory. In his Preface to Gregory's 1902 *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Yeats declared, “I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world — and it tells them perfectly for the first time” (Yeats vii).

For such hyperbole, Yeats drew criticism from many, including James Joyce, who also wrote scathing reviews of several of Gregory's works. According to Clare Hutton, Joyce

“want[ed] to expose the nature of revivalist publicity and the faintly ludicrous culture of mutual admiration shared between people like Yeats, Gregory,” and others in their circle (198). Despite Joyce’s critique of Yeats as a fawning propagandist, Yeats’s accomplishments on behalf of the Revival should not be underestimated. His continual efforts to push Irish mythology into the mainstream helped garner international recognition for Revival versions of such mythological narratives as the *Táin Bó Cualinge*. As Declan Kiberd observes in his book *Inventing Ireland* (1997), “[T]he Irish writer has always been confronted with a choice” as to “whether to write for the native audience” or instead adopt a broader ambition: “to produce texts for consumption in Britain and North America” (459). What T.C. Boyle’s study of the Revival canon at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the 1970s demonstrates is that, with great success, Yeats helped invent a form of Irishness appealing to consumers of literature well beyond Ireland.

To catapult it into the world, Revival literature needed an international superstar, and especially during the first quarter of the twentieth century, Yeats (winner of the 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature) proved just such a figure, despite his amateurish understanding of the Irish-language source material. He exploited his widespread renown to broadcast Ireland and its culture across the Anglophone sphere, making a type of Irishness widely accessible. Kiberd asserts that by means of “a few chosen symbols and simple ideas” — “a highly-edited version of their history” — the Irish could be and were “explain[ed]” globally (462). Having limited acquaintance with the Irish language and no scholarly training in literature, Yeats, like O’Grady before him, elected to be creative in approaching Irish mythology. In a work of autobiography, *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), Yeats opined on O’Grady’s essential achievement, as well as Gregory’s:

[O'Grady]...made the old Irish heroes, Finn, and Oisín, and Chuculain, alive again, taking them, for I think he knew no Gaelic, from the dry pages of [Eugene] O'Curry and his school, and *condensing and arranging*. ... Lady Gregory has told the same tales, but keeping closer to the Gaelic text, and with *greater powers of arrangement and a more original style* (Yeats, *Collected Works* [Vol. III] 183; emphases added)

Yeats's comparison of O'Grady's *History of Ireland* with Gregory's efforts provides evidence that creative editing was commonplace. Such manipulation may be mapped onto David Lloyd's discussion of how late-imperial anxiety informs the evolution of sovereign nationhood in historically colonized countries.

In *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (1993), Lloyd asserts that by the nineteenth century Ireland, long a colony, needed to reconstruct its national culture through "deliberate artifice;" according to Lloyd, from the emergence of the Young Ireland movement in the 1840's – and continuing into and beyond the Revival associated with the likes of O'Grady, Gregory, and Yeats – Ireland produced a literature that advanced both "the unification of culture" and "the production of a dialogic subversion of the colonizing power" (402-3). Lloyd especially discusses the composition of ballads, a practice most associated with the Young Irelander Thomas Davis' poems for *The Nation* newspaper, which – written between 1842 and 1845 – evoke myth in such lines as one that declares a native Irishman's "spirit" to be "light as any fairy" (from "Tipperary"). Like Yeats after him, Davis was a middle-class Anglo-Irish Protestant.

In "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892), Yeats' speaker declares, "Nor may I less be counted one / With Davis;" and he goes on to characterize the Ireland to which Davis was

pointing as “a Druid land” animated by “a Druid tune.” Lloyd’s points about the nature of Young Ireland ballads can be easily applied to Revival versions of mythology, too, whether in poetry or prose. He notes that Davis and circle incorporated into their ballads both native-Irish and Anglo-Irish dialects, but wrote almost entirely in English, despite pervasive anxiety about the Anglicization of Irish culture. Lloyd draws an evolutionary line from Davis’ ballads to those of the Revival author Douglas Hyde, such as *Ballads of St. Columkille* (1895), a collection primarily of translations from Gaeilge to English. Overall, Lloyd sees the nineteenth- and early – twentieth-century production of nationalist literature – or a “national poetry... speak[ing] with one voice” – as imbued “at every level” with “political choices,” the goal being to articulate “a specific difference which would constitute an Ireland independent of England”(408-9).

Hyde comments on his collection of ballads, as he found them, the generations that “perpetuated” ballads through whatever medium available (recitation, oral tradition) were subject to forget “as was natural, the real words of the song, and then they invented others,” leading to an inherently different text. Hyde continues on this trend, “but more frequently they borrowed verses from any other piece that came into their head, provided it could be sung to the same tune” (Hyde Gaelic Folk Songs 113-14). The assemblers of these songs wished to create an essential Irish identity, yet the very nature of the composition undermines the effort. The composers that Lloyd and Hyde discuss set the stage for supporters of the Gaelic Revival such as Lady Gregory and Yeats. Revivalists wished to preserve what they considered the base of a Gaelic identity, yet the act of collecting, translating, and publishing stories such as the myth of Cú Chulainn irreparably alter the so-called base.

Already undergoing a shift away from his original form through the publications of Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and O’Grady’s *History of Ireland*; the Easter Rising of



1916 launched another wave of (mis)appropriating Cú Chulainn in the name of “Irishness.” The figure of Cú Chulainn became iconic with the rebellion and a symbol for a free, sovereign Ireland. Sheppard’s statue at the Dublin PO has been claimed as emblematic of the Easter Rising. A google search will yield the information that Sheppard constructed the famous statue with the intent to commemorate the Easter Rising, yet the bronze statue was finished five years prior to the Rising, in 1911. While that is not the best way to seek knowledge, it does indicate a pervasive ignorance of truth surrounding the Revival. Not until 1935 was it officially named, by Éamon de Valera, as the official icon for the rebellion. Later in the twentieth-century, Irish loyalists would again appropriate the statue and Cú Chulainn during The Troubles, pointing out that he had defended Ulster from the entirety of the rest of Ireland.

The Revivalists saw themselves recreating the old literary and cultural ways, but the finished product was something totally different; the literary tradition they helped establish at the turn of the century was a new “Irishness” disseminated to Ireland and the rest of the world because the revival of that literature and cultural history was forever changed by prominent figures like Yeats, O’Grady, and Gregory to the masses. Whether or not Yeats or Gregory were experts, it is their versions received by the majority. Therefore a precedent is set, maybe subconsciously, that finagling and altering the supposed base of traditional Gaelic literature is not only tolerable but necessary. To quote Stuart Hall:

No cultural identity is produced out of thin air. It is produced out of those historical experiences, those cultural traditions, those lost and marginal languages, those marginalized experiences, those peoples and histories which remain unwritten. Those are the specific roots identity. On the other hand, identity itself is not the rediscovery of them, but what they as

cultural resources allow a people to produce. Identity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed. (291)

What figures such as Gregory, Yeats, O'Grady, and Hyde did for the resuscitation of Irish culture cannot be underestimated, but a century later we have forgotten, or perhaps are ignorant of the inherent messiness of their project. In their attempt to recreate and revive, in their view, an existing form of "Irishness" from the past they actually succeed in "creating the Irish" through the invention and editing of their various projects as they went; although their invention may not have lived up to their varied expectations.

The pervading sense of the Celtic Revival belies the true nature of how it comes to be, especially due to the designs of Yeats to cover up that aspect of his aspirations for Ireland (his famous claim of Gregory's book being the greatest of his time). This era is often viewed as concrete, almost premeditated due to such actions taken by Yeats. Yet there were a plethora of critics of Yeats and Gregory and their vision of the movement from all sides, Joyce being one of the most biting.

Joyce was not the only critical voice during this movement. There were multiple different parties and organizations that sought to put forth their idea of "Irishness." The rising tensions from the winding down of the British colonial empire served to exacerbate the political agendas of defining what "Irishness" was to become. It was not enough to be Irish, they had to be decidedly not English as well. This created a great deal of anxiety within the cultural consciousness of Ireland; characters and entire stories in Gaelic literature are changed or altered to better fit the writer's vision of what "Irishness" should be. Political turmoil throughout the beginning of the twentieth-century in Ireland only further fueled the "change as you go" mentality that Gregory and others had begun decades earlier.

### III • Mythic Dimension of *Water Music* & Ned Rise as Cú Chulainn

This chapter picks up identifying the ways in which Boyle perpetuates and invents his own methods of drawing from Irish mythological tradition. First, the chapter takes a look at the prominent differences between Ned and Cú Chulainn while also examining the underlying parallels between the two that bind them together. This will hopefully show how contemporary authors, like Boyle, are still following in the creative editing process of Irish myth, just like their predecessors a century ago in the wake of emerging Irish nationalism and fading British colonialism. The chapter continues by showing how Boyle follows Joyce's trend of stripping away the trappings of romantic heroism and redemption leaving Ireland and its heroes exposed for their true selves in a rapidly globalizing world. Rather than simply transplanting Cú Chulainn, or a figure totally living up to his reputation, Boyle diminishes the epitomizing heroism in the form of Ned Rise, thief and whoremonger, trying to scrape by in the slums of London.

Ned does not carry on or inherit the martial prowess of Cú Chulainn. Where he most resembles the ancient hero is his iconic survivability. Boyle plays up the special, unique circumstances surrounding Ned's birth and his environment to mythic proportion. These function as indicators signifying the "heroism" that surrounds Ned's life while simultaneously demonstrating how he consistently does not meet the hero standard that is apparently meant for him. Cú Chulainn has many miraculous events that he continually lives up to, good or bad. When told by Cathbad, the druid, if he took up arms on this day he would be doomed to live a short, but famous, life. Both happen, and Cú Chulainn expects nothing less. *Remscelas* like the Boyhood Deeds and his tutelage under the best warriors all lend to his credibility as a great warrior-hero. Boyle seems to make a point to place emphasis on Ned's unique growth to adulthood and beyond

for a similar effect, but for far less prestigious acts of heroism. Rather than shining as a warrior defending an entire people single-handedly, Ned uses his skills to perform feats of skullduggery and crime. Cú Chulainn becomes adapted to the world of the destitute in Boyle's hands, no longer the shining, formidable warrior defending Ulster. He takes on the form of Ned whose picaresque adventures are far less altruistic or honorable, but no less impressive as he navigates the ugly realities of the poor working class. Ned's struggles against the bourgeoisie, who more or less ignore poverty until threatened by it, underline the plight of the poor in America during the 1960s and 70s. Boyle makes the poverty of Ned and his compatriots so striking that it simply cannot be ignored, signaling a parallel to the real world neglect and forced forgetfulness by the upper class towards the poor.

Born to a "second generation gin-soak" mother, Ned is birthed on a bed of straw in a penny-flophouse, called "The Holy Land," which can best be described as a stable where poor people are allowed to sleep for a penny. Not only does it draw obvious connections to Christ, (such allusions will continue throughout the novel) it sets up Ned's birth as something special, out of the ordinary. Also like Christ, there is an audience for his birth except it consists of an old hag and unconscious drunk people. Highlighting the squalid conditions and nefariousness of the denizens Ned is snatched by the nameless old woman. As she attempts to run off she is stopped by Edward Pin, the stonemason; in the aftermath of the commotion Ned's cries can be heard from the floor, where he fell on the gin bottle the old woman was carrying, cutting him across the chest as he falls on the broken glass.

"Baptized in blood. And gin" (Boyle 36) succinctly describes the trajectory of Ned's life from his first moments. Even the title of the chapter relates just how impressive it is that Ned even achieves adulthood. The title: "Not Twist, Not Copperfield, Not Fagin Himself" implies

that only Ned himself could have endured the trials he goes through as a youth in the slums of London. The title hearkens to a common tradition of *Oliver Twist's* picaresque, live by your wits characters, to relate how they are at once ordinary, yet extraordinary. The way Boyle uses this comparison to literary figures well-known for their ability to survive, and indicating Ned's superiority among them, brings to mind Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds in the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. When Cú Chulainn makes his opposition to Mebd's army known, he performs several feats of heroism before any of the men of Ireland have seen him. So, to interpret the impressive signs he has left behind they call upon Fergus Mac Roich. He tells them that it is Cú Chulainn who slew her men and accomplished such seemingly impossible tasks. When Medb and Aillil are questioning Fergus they make a point to ask which of the famous Ulster warriors did these feats: Conchobar, Celtchar mac Uthidir, Eagan mac Durthacht etc.. Fergus answers no each time and says that the only one who could have done this was Cú Chulainn. It can be no coincidence that this systematic side-by-side comparison of Cú Chulainn to warriors famous in Irish myth is intended to display his martial superiority amongst all the Men of Ireland. Similarly, Boyle's explicit comparison of Ned to three other famous figures to the reader highlights Ned's superiority amongst roguish characters.

After informing the audience of the particular excellence of Ned through comparison Boyle further parallels the Irish myth in the way he mirrors the *remscela* form in the telling of Ned's past. After Cú Chulainn's initial war-feats the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* breaks off to the Boyhood Deeds as a way to fill in the audience how he became the way he is. Boyle follows this form although it does not happen as exposition from another character. After Ned's initial portrayal and leading up to his current enterprise (organizing a sex show) Boyle breaks off the narrative to fill in how Ned came to his current position, before resuming it once again where it left off. Both

Cú Chulainn's Boyhood Deeds and Ned's "Not Twist, Not Copperfield, Not Fagin Himself" chapter inform the audience of the level of brilliance the heroes operate on in their respective fields.

After Mebd is informed of the killing of her men and her dismissal of Cú Chulainn as a non-threat Fergus and other warriors recounts several of Cú Chulainn's impressive deeds: how he got his name, his first trip of Emain Macha and how he subdued all the young boys there, how he destroyed the sons of Nechta Scéne, and his first warp spasm. Ned's trials as a child mirror those of Cú Chulainn in the sense that both are seemingly impossible and both place emphasis on the young age at which these seemingly impossible feats are achieved. Included in Ned's version of boyhood deeds are his tutelages under particular men which mirror Cú Chulainn's fostering among renowned warriors. Each of Cú Chulainn's foster mothers and fathers teach him a specific skill, or feat, which he uses to overcome his foes during the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. Likewise, Ned's "fostering" under Edward Pin and Prentiss Barrenboyne build his character and teach him specific skills that directly aid him in surviving various situations.<sup>2</sup>

The first trial Ned endures is his abusive step-father Edward Pin. His former savior is now Ned's worst nightmare. Pin routinely physically abuses him and mutilates him, cutting off the fingers of his right hand down to the first joint. After Pin's death Ned is forced to live off the streets completely alone while honing his ability to survive; all while under the age of ten. It is nothing less of astounding that a boy of ten is capable of surviving the horrid conditions of the poor districts of London, with no money, no shelter, and no protection. Ned's life during this

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<sup>2</sup> Cú Chulainn's mastery of the Gáe Bulga, learned from his foster mother Scáthach, is the reason he is able to defeat Ferdiad. Likewise, Ned's mastery of the clarinet under Barrenboyne is what allows him to befriend the African pygmies after the fatal crash of Mungo Park's expedition boat at the conclusion of the novel.

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time consists of “begging, filching, eating garbage, occasionally finding shelter with a loon or pederast or axe murderer. It was a tough life. No hand to comfort, no voice to praise” (Boyle 34). Though Ned’s time under Pin is horrible, it still builds his character and teaches him specifically how to live by his wits in extreme conditions. The one good thing to come of Ned’s life as a street-urchin, his fostering by Barrenboyne, comes to an abrupt end when his benefactor is killed in a gentleman’s duel. Ned is then forced to once more live on the streets and survive alone.

As *Water Music* resumes from Ned’s backstory the reader is now much more acquainted with what type of hero they are dealing with. Ned’s capacity for cunning, survivability, and incredible street smarts are unmatched and explained by his past experience as a child. There is no longer any question to the validity of Ned’s abilities just as Cú Chulainn’s martial prowess is unquestionable when Fergus and the others frame his stories the way they do.

As the reader is transported back to Ned nervously standing outside the Reamer Room they are introduced to another common trope in Irish mythology, *geas*. After the resounding success and popularity of the show, and an exponential increase in personal wealth, law enforcement raids the tavern and Ned is forced to flee, losing everything and nearly freezing to death in the Thames. This trend will continue for Ned each time he tries to bounce back. Each of Ned’s enterprises, the sex-show, the caviar business, and grave-robbing, all end in a catastrophic near-death experience. Although the breaking of his *geas* does not result in his actual death, as it does Cú Chulainn, it does place Ned at the threshold of death each time. So close in fact, that each of his near-death experiences should have been actual death barring miraculous intervention.

A hero’s *geas* is a type of vow or prohibiting aspect that the hero must never breach. Breaking one’s *geas* is usually followed by death. Often times in Irish mythology it seems

simple, like sleeping on a certain side of a stone bed or never revealing your true name. In the story of the death of Cú Chulainn he has a *geas* that he must not eat dog meat. An old crone offers him dog meat and hospitality (in Ireland a general taboo existed about declining hospitality when it was offered) forcing him to consume the forbidden meat. As a result of his *geas* he loses a great amount of his spirit and this allows him to be defeated by Lugaid. Ned's *geas* does not specifically prohibit one action or thing such as Cú Chulainn not being allowed to eat dog meat, it is a bit more intangible. Ned's *geas* appears to thwart him every time Ned attempts to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

No matter how well prepared, no matter how cunning and intelligent his plans, no matter how far he ascends economically, he will inevitably be cast back down to start the painful climb over again. Every time one of Ned's plans succeeds, the caviar business, the corpse-stealing business, his planned elopement with Fanny, the universe finds a way to foil his every move completely and utterly. The way in which it happens seems to imply that the universe itself is against him in a similar manner to heroes of Irish antiquity; just like witches and prophecies are to Cú Chulainn, bad luck and vindictive upper class aristocrats are inexorable to Ned.

Ned's *geas* is not specific in the traditional sense, but gaining wealth and social status always spells his doom, usually in the form of the already established hegemonic power. When Ned first achieves success with his live sex-show the police raid it. After his resounding success with selling caviar he is framed for murder. After turning a hand to mouth existence by grave-robbing into a comfortable life he is relentlessly hunted down by a wealthy aristocrat whose father he had disinterred. Pure coincidences set off chain reactions that result in Ned's downfall; in the first two falls he narrowly escapes death, rescued by two fisherman and somehow



surviving the hangman's noose, and on the third he is shipped off to Fort Goree, a hub of pestilence and despair that is an existence worse than death.

The aspect of the universe or higher powers that enforce *geasa* within *Water Music* are the hegemonic powers that reside at the top of society. The aristocrats are willing to pay for the sex shows and go into seedy parts of town for business or pleasure that they would condemn in the daylight, however, once one of the lower, working class make an attempt to climb the social hierarchy they all unite to block upward mobility. Ned is framed for the murder of Lord Twit, of which he is innocent, and all the privileged aristocrats unite to exert their power over the lower class. They feel threatened by Ned and despite the blatant truth the aristocratic community wishes to make an example of him which belies their fear: the fear that their exclusivity of power is in jeopardy. Ned reminds them that they are not so different from the working classes they actively revile and blame for the extremely bad conditions of the city. Though Ned's innocence is apparent, with obvious bribery and blackmail part of the proceedings, they react to his "crimes" vehemently and condemn him to death.

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh speaks to this phenomenon invoking a structuralist reading of mythology, including Cú Chulainn and Irish myth. Irish myth, or any myth for that matter, is "basic opposition... between man and god, and this opposition is mediated in the person of the hero" (73). O Cathasaigh expounds, saying that the opposition between man and god is used as a "discrimination of paired categories" (73). According to Cathasaigh's studies the battle between the higher powers and mortals can be represented through the enforcement of *geasa*. Lacking explicit intervention from the gods or higher powers, *geas* can serve in their absence. Heroes cannot escape the power of *geas* anymore than they can hope to strive against the gods. Gods appear quite regularly in the Gaelic myth that could have inspired Boyle, but in *Water Music*

there are no gods for heroes to struggle against. Rather than the struggle between man and god, Boyle uses the struggle between two juxtaposed socioeconomic classes, with the bourgeoisie acting as, or at least enforcer of, the *geasa*. The representatives of the wealthy upper class, the Banks and Durfeys, become the substitute for gods. Their power is absolute over the proletariat and they wield with impunity over the proletariat beneath them.

Boyle places the unfairness in the disparity of power between the two economic classes center stage during Ned's incarceration in Newgate Prison. Upon Ned's initial arrival to Newgate his cellmate informs him that Jock, the deceased inhabitant of the same cell, was left to die never even receiving a trial. His crime? He "Nipped tuppence from the waistcoat of one of yer lords out on King's High Street" (Boyle 151). Such a small crime would not normally be punished so severely, even the crazed loon in Ned's cell knows that. The injustice that lower/working class people like Ned and Jock face derives from the fear of the upper class losing their power. Ned's been fighting it his whole life. It is inescapable like the power of gods and *geas* on heroes in Gaelic myth.

Another parallel that Boyle simultaneously draws and subverts between Ned and Cú Chulainn is the manner of their death. Ned's death at the gallows strongly parallels Cú Chulainn's death at the hands of Lugaid and the forces of Mebd. Both are isolated and surrounded by enemies who take pleasure in watching them die. The frame of their deaths are where similarities are strongest, but it is in the details that Boyle strays into his own invention to continually diminish the romanticized nostalgia for such displays of martyrdom. Whereas Cú Chulainn is still an awesome figure, maintaining his famed ferocity and heroism till the moment of death, Ned is given no such treatment. The disturbing realities of death are at the forefront of Ned's execution: there is nothing romantic about it.

Boyle appears to set up a heroic death for Ned early on in the novel, which only serves to deepen the disillusioning ugliness of his actual death. Earlier when Ned goes to a clothes shop to buy a disguise he is confronted by the nameless old hag. Once he makes his purchase, the old woman prophecies Ned's death singing "The Ballad of Jack Hall" at Ned and earlier in the novel warns him to "beware the hangman's cravat" (5,85). "The Ballad of Jack Hall" is an old folksong about the martyrdom of a highwayman turned folk hero where the peasants all gathered to mourn and celebrate his life. Jack Hall became famous because he robbed and vexed the social elite, while maintaining a prominent relationship with the poor in a Robin Hood-esque manner. In an aside, Boyle takes the time to explain why Ned's execution is noticeably different to that of other man of the people criminals like Jack Hall who received what is called the "Tyburn March:"

When a highwayman was executed - particularly a striking and notorious one - they were in ecstasy. Invariably he would be decked out in silks, his hair fluffed and curled, the gold buckles of his pumps flashing defiance. He would bow to the women, shake hands with the boys who ran beside the cart, even sign autographs. He went to the gallows a hero, a martyr. (Boyle 192)

This type of execution parade was short-lived, as in 1784 the so-called "Tyburn March" was scrapped and prisoners were to be hanged right outside the gates of the prison.

The celebration of life before death inherent in the "Tyburn March" carries a similar tone to Cú Chulainn's death at the hands of Mebd and Lugaid. As Lugaid retreats from his fight with Cú Chulainn and Laeg, Cú Chulainn decides to tie himself to an old pillar-stone, Carrig-an-Compan, so that he may die on his feet continuing his defiance of Mebd's forces, intending to fight them from this position. Unlike Ned's execution at the gallows, Cú Chulainn retains his

heroism, his glory, and even inspires fear amongst his enemies as he dies. In the throes of death Mebd's forces dared not to approach him. Weak as he was, just the sight of him was enough to drive them away and wait until they were sure he had passed:

But the host of Mebd, when they beheld him, retired again, for they said that he was immortal and that Lu Lamfada would once more come down out of fairyland to his aid, and that they would wreak a terrible vengeance. So afar they retreated, when they beheld him standing with the drawn sword in his hand, and the rays of the setting sun bright on his panic-striking helmet. So stood Cuculain, even in his death-pangs, a terror to his enemies, and the bulwark of his nation.

(O'Grady 185-6)

Cú Chulainn dies in full display of his enemies crowding around him to celebrate his death. Haunted and watched by his enemies Cú Chulainn experienced no fear for "a deep spring of stern valour was opened in his soul" and when he dies he is "mild, handsome, invincible" (O'Grady 188). Boyle shifts away from a valorous demise, instead showing the hero completely exposed and vulnerable to his enemies.

Boyle explains that the social elite realized the pageantry of the "Tyburn March" only offered a pedestal for the criminal to be celebrated, engendering unity amongst the masses and establishing a sense of martyrdom, especially when the criminal's actions are targeted at aristocrats. Ned would have been celebrated similarly by the masses for constantly taking advantage of those with measurable wealth for his own gain. However, he was not given a grand public execution where he is paraded through the town and everyone gathers to see the vigilante throwing flowers at his feet, celebrating his life of opposing the wealthy such as Jack Hall received. Instead, Ned's execution has "No parade, no fanfare, no glory, no dignity" and where

O'Grady focuses on the "valour" of Cú Chulainn's death, Boyle instead highlights the realities inherent in death. The hero is further diminished and reduced to "[j]ust meat, twisting slowly round the rope in the cold glare of the sun" (Boyle 193) devoid of any romanticized heroism, such as Cú Chulainn's drawn sword, or stalwart defiance towards his enemies, like Cú Chulainn's "panic-striking helm."

Ned's initial attempts to don a heroically stern outward appearance mimic the actual calmness of Cú Chulainn. Ned thinks to himself "Got to die well" and he "feels as calm as the average butcher or bootblack waking from his bed to the smells of holiday goose and figgy pudding" as he is led out of his cell and to the gallows (Boyle 194). The illusion is quickly dispelled as he is bound and led to the gallows. Unable to match the heroism of Cú Chulainn Ned quickly gives into thoughts of despair and fear. He doesn't even notice the faces watching him, excited for their imagined justice of executing an innocent man. There is no ceremony, no appearance of the gods telling him he died and lived well as in Cú Chulainn's death in O'Grady's text. A far more negative tone is found in Boyle's depiction of the hero's death. Whereas Cú Chulainn remains a feared and powerful figure (when his sword falls from his hand it cuts off an enemies head) Ned is powerless. At the whim of the interests of the upper class Ned dies uncelebrated and unremembered. His body is then claimed by the nameless old woman who promptly sells his body for five pounds,<sup>3</sup> furthering the depredations of his death by cheaply commodifying his remains displaying Ned devoid of allies while his remains are worth only a small amount of change.

Boyle makes Ned's early life and death mythically situated by mirroring that of the famous figure Cú Chulainn. The similarities are as striking as the differences. Boyle cuts away

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<sup>3</sup> Further strengthening their Cú Chulainn Morrigan connection, the old woman is described as sitting atop his coffin, much the same way the Morrigan sits atop Cú Chulainn's shoulder as he dies.

any pomp or celebration that is prominent in Irish mythology and gives a dirty realism look into the issue inherent in disparity between the haves and the have nots. The heavy-handed approach Boyle takes with class disparity in Ned's narrative makes it clear he is commenting on the epic gaps and issues within America's socioeconomic class structure that were only beginning to be addressed by those with power and influence in a concerted manner during the War on Poverty in the 1960s.

#### IV • Boyle's Morrigan

This chapter begins by framing the context in which Boyle recreates the Irish mythological goddess of war, the Morrigan, through the lens of Erich Nuemann's studies of Gaelic earth goddesses in his book *The Great Mother*, Joyce's interpretation and response to Yeats's romanticized utilization of the Fliath trope, and finally how Christianity has had lasting influence on the bifurcation of pagan goddesses and women figures even to this day. It then discusses the way in which Boyle may have been influenced during Boyle's studies of Yeats, at once acknowledging and going against the original ambivalence of the Morrigan in a Joycean fashion. The Fliath trope is crucial in Boyle's recreation as he follows the shift in the Fliath myth from redemption of Ireland, seen in Yeats' redemptive female, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, to complete lack thereof stemming from Joyce's deliberate critique of such figures in his Irish milk woman in *Ulysses*. Boyle's nameless hag has seemingly been reduced to role of mischievous witch, like Yeat's powerful Cathleen Ni Houlihan has been reduced to a milk woman in *Ulysses*, yet still manages to hold onto an underlying influence of power that she carries throughout. Boyle presents a complex character in the nameless hag, playing with the common modern era sinister avian witch depictions as well as the classic ambivalence true to the traditional Morrigan.

The Morrigan figure in *Water Music* demonstrates an extremely antagonistic personality that fits the contemporary imaginings of the Morrigan as a purely evil or violent character. Underneath her surface level actions throughout the novel, there is an underlying sense of the Morrigan's other, life-giving half. Boyle seems to be taking a more Joycean course than that of Yeats and Gregory. Rather than follow the very popular redemption archetype from the Revival, Boyle's old woman never receives that moment of transformation into a beautiful young woman. This is reminiscent of Joyce's treatment of the old milk woman in the "Telemachus" chapter of

*Ulysses*. Instead of mustering enough faith and treating the old woman with respect culminating into a kiss which will transform her into a beautiful young woman, Joyce's men, mostly Buck Mulligan, mocks and belittles her. Thus the old woman is not redeemed, and as a representation of Ireland, neither is Ireland in Joyce's eye. I believe that Boyle draws from Joyce's rejection of the redemption of Ireland trope, further building upon it amidst his own late-imperial moment.

Boyle's portrayal of the Morrigan and Cú Chulainn closely parallels that of Joyce's milk woman, with key differences that point to a further diminishment of the archetype. The old woman in Boyle's text will similarly never be granted redemption, growing more decrepit and grotesque as the novel progresses. Boyle's take on the impossible redemption of the woman highlights the disillusionment of America with its previously high nationalism. Even after two world-wars the American public was still mostly behind its belief in itself and its governance. However, the role played by America's government in worldwide affairs quickly drew the ire of the people, setting off mass protests and growing resentment of what it meant to be American. He sets his novel in the midst of Britain's colonial heyday and their colonizing mission in Africa. There is a persistent questioning of eighteenth-century Britain's quest to explore and colonize Africa that can easily be applied to twentieth-century America's attempts to prevent the spread of communism to protect its own economic interests.

Of the two classical Irish figures that dominate Boyle's adaptations of Irish myth the Morrigan is an interesting choice. In the *Táin Bó Cuailgne* the Morrigan plays a relatively small role compared to other feminine characters such as Mebd. The utilization of the Morrigan figure speaks to Boyle's anticipation in a growing trend, I believe, in contemporary culture. With the growth and accessibility of Gaelic literature to a world-wide audience the Morrigan has become increasingly popular. She rarely appears in modern entertainment as her classic ambivalent self;



rather, the focus stays almost solely on her aspects of war – violence, bloodshed, etc. – rather than incorporating the other side of her character which is representative of rejuvenation and life. Most often associated with the crow, a form she favors in Irish myth, she has inspired countless figures not only in contemporary literature but in other forms of popular media: television, comics, animation, and video games demonstrating the penetration of Revivalist’s Irish myth to modern pop culture over the last century. Boyle’s imagining of the Morrigan, while complex, appears to play into the sinister figure she has come to represent in contemporary culture.

Similarly to the Morrigan, the old woman is associated with carrion fowl, her screeching laugh producing the same sound as buzzards. Also like the Irish war goddesses she excels at causing conflict and honing in on the best way to create strife. The ability of the nameless old woman to make it through the deprivation of her life speaks to the power that she possesses. Like the Morrigan feeding off battle, the old woman is quite capable of thriving on the deprivation of herself and others, even displaying power to inflict as well as endure. She spends the most time haunting Ned, drawn to him as the Morrigan is central to Cú Chulainn’s adventures, but she also appears to other characters to increase, instigate, or otherwise support strife. Furthering her connection to the goddess are collection of abilities inherent within the power of gods: she is able to appear anywhere, speak any language, and hide her true nature from those she interacts with. She is able to appear in Africa, the Scottish Highlands, and the English countryside without explanation. She compliments this with her inexplicable ability to speak Arabic and Erse, and blending into her surroundings as she requires, and no other characters are ever able to recognize her, even if they interact with her multiple times.

There are a series of episodes within *Water Music* that indicate the nameless hag’s affinity for conflict mirror those of the war goddess. The most obvious is her antagonistic

relationship with Ned, the Cú Chulainn figure. The Morrigan is a central figure in the Cú Chulainn myths, serving a role similar to that of Athena and Odysseus in Greek myth. However, unlike Athena, the Morrigan acts with hostility to Cú Chulainn and assists him, often within the same story. Boyle focuses the relationship between his postmodern recreations of the pair on the antagonistic aspects of their dealings with each other. The nameless hag's dealings with Ned only have the facade of aid, her true intention is to have a harmful impact on him, echoing the Morrigan's direct attacks on Cú Chulainn during the *Táin Bó Cualinge*. Another overt mirroring of the Irish goddesses of war is when the nameless hag foretells the death of Ned at the gallows, the same way the Morrigan foretells of Cú Chulainn's death in a future battle, and how she will be there to oversee it. The nameless hag also appears to several other characters, continuing to sow corruption and conflict wherever she goes.

Her acts of instigating strife and bloodshed mirrors precisely how the Morrigan functions in the Irish myth. Only once does she appear and openly attack in the *Táin Bó Cualinge*. Her preferred method is to plot in the background, waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of men. When the two armies, Ulster and the Men of Ireland, are about to fight she creeps into their camp singing a dirge that frightens men so bad they die instantly. She instigates the cattle-raid further by going to the Donn Cuailnge and warning him of the approach of Mebd's army so that he will flee and Mebd will have to pursue him further into enemy territory, forcing a conflict with Cú Chulainn.

When the nameless hag appears to Dassoud, Emir of Ludamar, she aids him in deposing of his predecessor, Ali, by beheading him and taking his position by force. Before Dassoud meets her he has had no luck finding Ali, but the old woman is quick to betray him despite no promise of reward for herself. Dassoud threatens her (he does not know the power she possesses)

and she gladly gives up the information. Dassoud cuts a very intimidating figure; both physically and reputationally Dassoud is well-known across the Sahel as someone who lives for bloodshed. He is described as a human-jackal who has accomplished incredible-some would say impossible-feats of strength, survivability, and martial prowess. Everyone would know who he is and a threat of violence from him would make most men cower in fear. The hag doesn't even bat an eye. She laughs at the prospect of bloodshed and willingly gives up the information without thought for material reward. She simply desires conflict for the sake of conflict, feeding off death and war like her

Her interaction with Dassoud is very short, but the implications go far beyond simply assisting in murder. Dassoud's reputation is that of a warmonger and merciless tyrant. Once he is the Emir he embarks on years of campaigning, conquering neighboring tribes and clans. The power means nothing to him, he cares not for the squabbling of petty tribal chiefs or land disputes; he cares only for war for wars sake. The nameless hag's assistance in ascending to this position is the catalyst for years of bloody war in Ludamar and the surrounding Sahel regions.

She continues her penchant for conflict in the Scottish Highlands when she appears to Ailie, Mungo's wife, while she is vacationing the countryside. The nameless hag is immediately able to identify Ailie's insecurity over Mungo's departure and their broken family. She persistently directs aggressive comments to Ailie about how she may appear poor and hideous but as long as she has her family with her she is the happiest woman in the world. Ailie finds it ridiculous at first, but the longer she is exposed to the old woman and her words she can't help but be overcome with despair and anguish. The old hag once again shows her ability to produce fear and despair in others, thriving in the situation, playing into her role as instigator joyfully. The hag's words will continue to haunt Ailie long after she has left and will ultimately force her

to subject herself to a life of despair and solitude, waiting for her husband to return, eternally humiliated at the woman's words.

Due to the perception of the Morrigan as a purely violent, antagonistic character, such as Boyle's nameless hag, her nurturing, life-giving aspects have been overlooked in contemporary inspirations. Irish myth boasts an array of complex female characters that have been reduced, like the Morrigan, to their current single dimension for a variety of reasons. This is limiting in our understanding of mythic figures, such as the Morrigan, because it drastically alters the complexity of their characters. Following Neumann's studies of Gaelic goddesses reveal far more ambivalences in line with the "Great Mother" than either the "Good Mother" or "Terrible Mother." According to Neumann in his study *The Great Mother*, a mother figure that embodies both positive and negative aspects is deemed the "Great Mother." Mothers who embody only positive or negative traits are termed "Good Mother" and "Terrible Mother" respectively. Neumann's study shows that "Great Mothers" are quite prolific in Gaelic myth because of their connection with the earth. The earth embodies life while also representing death as the "ultimate repository of the dead" (Tymoczko 24). The inextricable link between life and death was important to early Irish myth, but has diminished through the spread of Christian influence.

The Morrigan is characterized as the "Great Mother" due to her strong associations with both death and war as well as her similarly strong ties to the earth and fertility. The Morrigan's ties to death are numerous and easy to identify. She sows strife and fear on the field of battle and openly attacks Cú Chulainn. Her ties to the "Good Mother" and nourishment are more subtle, but nevertheless present. In one instance, after her attack on Cú Chulainn she comes to him in the form of an old decrepit woman leading a cow. She comes to him and gives him milk from each teat of the cow, after which his wounds are healed. Her purpose is to heal him and gain his

blessings, thereby healing her own injuries sustained in their fight. Her reasons for healing Cú Chulainn are selfish to be sure, yet the way in which it happens is rife with the imagery of the nourishing fertility that comes with the “Good Mother.” The actions of the Morrigan and Cú Chulainn are indicative of the cyclical rebirth/rejuvenation trope that follows the hags and old women of Gaelic literature.

The epitome of this structure is the myth of Niall. Niall and his four half-brothers are given weapons and go into the woods to hunt. While they are there they stop at a well-guarded by a hideous old woman. In order to obtain the water from the well they must first give her a kiss and embrace. All the brothers refuse except for Niall, and when he disengages from the embrace he finds that the old hag has turned into a young, beautiful woman. The hag reveals herself as Fliath and gives him a drink from her well promising that he will become king and that his future generations will rule Ireland after him. Walter Brenneman explains this myth, and others like it, function as a reflection of “the agrarian cycle of the waning of the season of fecundity and its rebirth in springtime. The woman at the well is not only sovereignty but also the land of Ireland” (347). Fliath becomes emblematic of Ireland and she blesses those who have faith in her with the rule of the land, through the blessing received from her well.

Brenneman draws the conclusion that the old hag’s influence comes strongest from the water in the well. In the same way that the cow’s milk heals Cú Chulainn and restores his health, the water from the well grants Niall the power of sovereignty over the land, implying that it will be subsequently rejuvenated under his power. Maria Tymoczko, in her essay “Unity and Duality: A Theoretical Perspective on the Ambivalence of Celtic Goddesses,” echoes Brenneman’s assertions that in Gaelic myth there is a strong implication that life and death are inseparable. The figure of the old hag represents death, and only by embracing it can rebirth occur.

This can also be applied to the Morrigan as well. An origin story of the Morrigan demonstrates her simultaneous affinity for violence and redemption/life using the same tropes. In *Lebhar na Huidre* there is a tale that describes the rape of a woman who guards a magic spring. After she is raped the spring overflows, drowning everyone in the kingdom of Ecca, in Ulster. The only one to escape is the king's daughter, Libane, who lives at the bottom of Lough Neagh in the form of a salmon. After three hundred years she is reborn, and emerges as the Morrigan. Born from the violence of an act of rape the Morrigan's origin a rejuvenation and redemption event. The waters from the flood allow the land to regrow, renewing it even after such a violent act as rape and war. Once again we see a woman connected with the earth, through the well, and her transformative powers in the form of water. However, the liquid provided by these powerful women figures does not always have to be water or milk: often it can be alcohol, or emulate alcoholic affects.

Brenneman expounds on the meanings of Fliath. Not only a sovereignty goddess, her associations are heavily linked with strong drink and intoxication. Fliath offers Niall water from her well after he embraces her, but it is described more akin to alcohol than to water. Fliath tells Niall "smooth shall be thy draught from the royal horn 'twill be mead, 'twill be honey, 'twill be strong ale." Of Gaelic goddesses who thrive on death and nourish the land the Morrigan is chief among them. She, like Fliath in the Niall myth, is at once life and death, the "Great Mother." Boyle plays with this trope in his nameless hag by never allowing the transformation or rejuvenation to occur. He subverts the expectation which only lends an increasingly sinister aura around the nameless hag.

The nameless old woman of *Water Music* is a horrifying reimagining of the Morrigan. She dwells in squalid, disgusting conditions and is physically hideous. Yet, the old hag

associates herself with motherhood calling herself “Mother Geneva” and offering Ned her special “lixir,” insinuating it will be a fortifying experience. It is implied however is that the old woman is distributing gin. Boyle’s depiction of gin expands on its role as an alcoholic spirit by focusing explicitly on the negative aspects of overconsumption of such a cheap drink by the poorer masses, “it was cheap as piss, potent as a kick in the head. They went mad for it: after all, why swill beer all night when you can get yourself crazed in half an hour - for a penny?” (Boyle 34). The urban legend around the stuff was that it was “distilled from bone and marrow from the Devil himself” and it rapidly becomes an unstoppable juggernaut of influence. The ruling class readily identifies its negative impact on London society but any attempts to curb its presence in England is met with immediate and rabid protest from its main users, the poor and working classes. Boyle combines the terrible effect gin has on the people with a strange aspect of positivity and life. It may ruin people’s lives but it simultaneously functions as “a palliative for hard times, it was sleep and poetry, it was life itself. Aqua Vitae” (Boyle 35).

Boyle’s treatment is an echo of the traditional Fliath trope of offering special, alcoholic, liquid to young heroes, but there is no hope of redemption in the nameless hag. By including the pleasure the masses gain from a substance that Boyle clearly outlines is horrible, the traditional fortifying liquid becomes enervating rather than rejuvenating, lending a far more sinister tone to her character. She no longer distributes the redemption of the land, she is purposefully contributing to its corruption. Instead of becoming a young, beautiful woman she becomes increasingly more decrepit and hideous as the novel progresses. Boyle’s Morrigan figure departs from the romanticized ideals of Yeats and Gregory. She is more reminiscent of Joyce’s handling of the Fliath sovereignty trope. In the “Telemachus” chapter of *Ulysses* an old decrepit milk woman sells milk to young men, but does not receive the treatment that Fliath gets from Niall.

The old milk woman in *Ulysses* is mocked and rejected by Buck Mulligan and Stephen Daedalus. They pay no respect to her, nor pay her in full. She is Irish, yet does not speak Gaelic. The three men, especially Mulligan, eagerly drink the milk she delivers yet she remains ugly and withered. Daedalus observes about her “A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal” at once giving her the godlike aspect of immortality but undermining it with her unpleasant form. His observations continue “serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean... To serve or to upbraid, whether he could not tell: but scorned to beg her favour” (Joyce 15). She is given the same treatment as the traditional archetype of countryside witches in Irish folklore, Daedalus observes the woman’s “old shrunken paps” and equates her to “a witch on her toadstool” (Joyce 14).

Despite Daedalus’ negative descriptions her milk provides an invigorating effect for Mulligan. He says if “only [we] could live on good food like that...we wouldn’t have the country full of rotten teeth and rotten guts” (Joyce 15). The milk-woman’s old shriveled breasts and Daedalus’ observations likening her to a “wandering crone” perpetually provide strong evidence of Joyce mirroring the Fliath/sovereignty trope. The woman is meant to represent Ireland and upon providing her special drink should revert to a younger, more attractive form. Joyce clearly echoes the sentiments of the Fliath myth through the language of Daedalus’ thoughts, but he holds back on the redemption of the woman and Ireland.

Unlike Fliath, Joyce’s woman never achieves youthful rejuvenation, despite the consumption of the milk by Mulligan, who eagerly drinks it at her bidding and his notion that it would cure Ireland’s rotten guts and teeth. Instead, Mulligan continues to mock her not even paying full price for what they have asked for. Further criticizing this type of romanticized redemption evoked by Yeats the milk woman is of Irish ethnicity but she does not speak Gaelic,



nor even recognize it when it is spoken at her by Haines, the Englishman. Joyce paints a negative portrait of the current state of Ireland and its romantic supporters. The idea that “Irishness” can be saved so simply by romanticizing pre-colonial Ireland is ridiculous. As long as revivalists continue to harbor that hope of Ireland she will remain their “cuckquean,” forever romantically idealized, but in reality eternally serving her conqueror, Britain, a shadow of her former self.

There is strong evidence in Boyle’s creation of the nameless old woman in *Water Music* that he was acutely aware of Joyce’s take on the Fliath myth. Boyle seems to take Joyce’s tactics with this myth even further, for his wandering crone is actively distributing debilitating gin, rather than rejuvenating milk, and doing it for free. There is no redemption for Boyle’s woman because she is the one distributing the corruption. She does not want to save or be saved, she corrupts those she comes in contact with.

If the Morrigan and her contemporary inspirations have such deep roots in what Neumann calls the “Great Mother,” both positive and negative aspects, why is she now depicted almost universally one-sided? Why has the ambivalence that is characteristic of Gaelic goddesses been replaced by either Yeats overtly positive Cathleen Ni Houlihan or Joyce’s poor milk woman? The answer, as Tymoczko elaborates, lies in the shift to Christianity during the Common Era. While the Gaels had a plethora of gods with ambivalent characteristics, Christian theology prefers to separate them into different figures. What was once a complicated goddess is now split into two goddesses or figures. One division of the goddess would embody her “Good Mother” attributes while the other division would then become the “Terrible Mother.”

Tymoczko uses the example of St. Anne to illustrate that Christian scribes writing down pagan literature made drastic changes to the originals. Tymoczko asserts that the Christian scholars would divide figures such as the Morrigan and other Gaelic earth goddesses because

they did not like the ambivalence that the Gaels were so drawn to. She prescribes this phenomenon to the Christian's dislike of characters that embody both good and bad in a single form (28-30). Early Christian scribes removal of ambivalence in pagan gods stems from anxiety of tolerating the prior culture. For Christianity to take root within pagan populations aspects of that culture must be destroyed or changed. A goddess possessing power over life and death is too multivalent for Christian doctrine. During the twilight of pagan-Gaelic dispensation the new Christian order went to great lengths to reorganize pagan culture into a Christianized binary structure.

Resulting from Christian bifurcation pagan goddesses such as the Morrigan become split and embody only the negative sides of their characters. This is due to "the tendency to divide merged opposites" (Tymoczko 26) by Christian scribes during their rise to dominance over cultural discourse. Tymoczko points out that it is rare that these earth goddesses were presented in the same text with both positive and negative qualities. It is from a variety of sources from Gaelic literary tradition that we can draw them together to better understand a more realized figure. The lack of a formal writing system within Gaelic culture made it all the easier for Christianity to dictate its transcription (Tymoczko 26). These impressions made by Christians has been upheld because of the power their religion has held over Europe over the last two millennia. Tymoczko theorizes that had the initial scribes writing down Gaelic myth for the first time not been Christians, figures such as Fliath and the Morrigan would have kept their original ambivalence. Even still, as Tymoczko points out, there are examples of these Christian bifurcated figures holding onto some small semblance of their former ambivalence, allowing us to attempt piecing them back together.

Tymoczko's example of St. Anne derives from James Doan's essay, "Five Breton *Cantiques* from *Pardons*," wherein he argues that the holy Christian figure still contains traces of her pagan earth goddess concept. St. Anne fulfills the role of "mother" as well as that of a protector of the people from evil and death. She is also referred to as the "Queen of Brittany" and "grandmother of the Bretons" indicating a strong motherly presence. Doan argues she is also associated with death. She is seen as a protector from death as well as capable of granting a "happy death" (Doan 31). She is clearly supposed to be the "Good Mother," due to her role as motherly protector of the people, however, her associations with death indicate at least small traces of ambivalence in her character that survive Christian bifurcation. Not only does she provide life and protect from death she also possesses the ability to grant death. Although it is a happy death, St. Anne, like her Gaelic goddess predecessors has dominion over the realm of death, being able to deliver and ward it off (Doan 35).

Doan's studies of St. Anne reveal a "Good Mother" that, as Tymoczko points out, manages to hold on to vestiges of ambivalence but is ultimately still positively "Good Mother," not a "Great Mother." What then of the negative aspects of the "Terrible Mother" that should be attached to her character if she is to remain true to Neumann's prescription of Gaelic goddesses as "Great Mothers?" It is Tymoczko's thought that what would have been St. Anne's terrible aspects, had she remained pagan, have been transferred to Dahut by Christian scribes.

Dahut is the daughter of Gradlon in the Is legend of Breton culture. In this myth, Gradlon builds the city of Is, or Ys, in what is now modern day Brittany. The city is protected from inundation and a place of magical prosperity, wealth, and abundance. Eventually however, it is inundated and afterwards swallowed by the sea because of Dahut's evil actions. Dahut's figure,

despite being linked with the abundance of Is very clearly supports aspects of Neumann's "Terrible Mother." Dahut is a:

[M]agician whose supernatural powers and skills bring about destruction to her people. Her sexuality is out of control, and she kills the ones she loves.... Despite her sexual activity, she does not give birth, and in some versions of the legend she is associated with holes or gulfs full of rotting corpses. (Tymoczko 27)

Dahut's sinister qualities set her up as a shadow figure to that of St. Anne. The two are "complementary female types" according to Tymoczko, "associated with a series of opposites, inversions, and mirror images" (28). Tymoczko attributes the Christian consistency in bifurcation of normally ambivalent characters in Gaelic legend to the lack of room in Christian dogma for prominent female figures and the historical origins of the religion.

She claims that though there are women such as Eve who occupy a prominent role in Christian canon, most of the time they are relegated down and ultimately discarded for masculine replacements. She argues that there is no way to "salvage or assimilate the acceptance and celebration of negative female figurations" (Tymoczko 29). In the grand scheme of Christianity themes such as good and bad, light and dark, are assigned polar ends of the cosmic spectrum. They then become good *versus* bad, light *versus* dark. There is an inherent battle between what is perceived as good/positive and that which is evil/negative. There exists little to no room for ambivalent figures in Christian doctrine like the Morrigan, who can incite violence and yet nurture in the very same story.

St. Anne and Dahut occupy opposite ends of the Christian spectrum, yet possess vestiges of ambivalence featured in pagan-Gaelic belief. Though the Morrigan has become uniformly

antagonistic in contemporary popular entertainment she can still hold onto some semblance of pre-Christian ambivalences as Tymoczko has explicated with St. Anne and Dahut. The same way that St. Anne and Dahut still possess fragments of their former, ambivalent selves, the Morrigan too retains fragments of ambivalence that survived Christian transcription that we can identify in Boyle's postmodern reimagining of her form.

Some classic Irish mythological stories that point to the Morrigan's fertility and positive aspects of the "Good Mother" and could have influenced Boyle are fragmentary or asides, not receiving much popular attention. Sharon Macleod refers to the *Dindshenchas* tradition citing the place name associated with the Morrigan's fertility, called Brug na Boinde. This place-name translates to "Paps of the Morrigan" and in the *Second Battle of Mag Tuired* the Morrigan marries the Dagda and he lives at Brug na Boinde for a while in the narrative. The name alone stands to contribute to her part-time motherly role. Paps of the Morrigan fairly obviously points to motherhood, explicitly referring to her breasts, or nipples, signifying that it is the Morrigan nurturing and maintaining the area.

Her marriage to the Dagda points again to the Morrigan's feminine role, rather than only focusing on her war and death aspects that are the main feature in texts like the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*. In another myth, *Lebor Gabala* the Morrigan is said to be the mother of the "three gods of poetry." Macleod concedes that there is confusion about the identity of the "divine trio" insinuating doubt whether the Morrigan is truly their mother (351). For the purposes of simply finding areas in which traces of the Morrigan's ambivalent self can be found the ambiguity of whether she truly is the mother can be overlooked to an extent. Just being a strong contender in the conversation of their mother lends evidence to her positive motherly roles, rather than just a war goddesses feeding off death (351-2).

It is highly likely that Boyle was aware of the Morrigan's original status as an ambivalent "Great Mother" as well as the bifurcation of Gaelic goddesses due to his inclusion of Fanny Brunch, farm-girl turned housemaid who becomes Ned's lover. Fanny presents the complete opposite of the "Terrible Mother" aspects of the nameless old hag, embodying the epitome of fertility and nurturing "Good Mother." The process Tymoczko used to identify the relation through opposition of St. Anne and Dahut is applicable to Fanny and the nameless old woman. Because of their central relationship with Ned, the hero of the novel, they become connected as obvious foils to one another. The hag constantly tries to seduce him with gin, while Fanny becomes his lover and his hope, providing Ned with motivation to rise above their destitution. Using Tymoczko's methods the two can be analyzed as pieces to one central whole, Fanny completing the "Good Mother" and the nameless hag figuring as the "Terrible Mother." Combining the two aspects lends credibility of Boyle's knowledge of the Morrigan's ambivalence, while simultaneously perpetuating the Christianized bifurcation of her figure into two characters individually taking on the Morrigan's capacity for nurture and death.

Fanny's associations with the "Good Mother" are overt, much like the example of St. Anne. Fanny is described as "fresh from the creamery. Her breath was hot with the smell of milk...Her skin was cream, her breasts cheeses, there was butter in her smile... She grinned like wheatfields in the sun, stole round the house on celestial feet" (Boyle 124). The allusions to agriculture not only indicate strong connections with life and birth, they are also well in line with the typical affinity with the earth of a Gaelic goddess, or Christian saint. Her "celestial feet" further lend her an elevated status above a typical working class person in *Water Music*. Most characters in Boyle's novel are reflective of the awful conditions of turn of the nineteenth-century London: they are broken, ugly, scarred, and diseased. Her milky skin and breath separate

her from the masses of other ordinary people that surround her, just as the old hag's extraordinary hideousness serve to demonstrate her unique depravity. If compared to the Fliath trope, Fanny practically exudes and breathes rejuvenation. In opposition to the nameless hag's distribution of corrupting gin, Fanny embodies nurture so strongly that she breathes life into her surroundings.

The agricultural imagery does not stop at her physical appearance either, her breasts are cheeses and her skin cream, but it also is interwoven with her personality as well. The smile like "wheatfields in the sun" and the "butter in her smile" give the sense that her personality is nurturing and gentle as well. Complimenting her similarities with what define typical Gaelic earth goddesses Fanny possesses an overpowering fertility. Once again, she naturally exudes motherhood, her breath "whispered of cribs and nipples and the darkness of the womb" and men are instantly enraptured by her upon seeing her (124). Once she comes of childbearing age men attempt to possess her in one way or another due to an irresistible urge to impregnate her beyond the level of what can be considered normal human lust. This, much like St. Anne's power over death marking her potential ambivalence, is also where Fanny's "Good Mother" bleeds into death and aspects of the "Terrible Mother." Her motherly aura is so strong that men become practically possessed, inflicting harm upon themselves and others to obtain her: when she was fifteen "two country louts hacked one another to death...with hoes," shortly after "the local squire abducted her and bound her to his bed" and, within the first few days of her new job as maid for the Banks residence, the butler tries to lick her arm and Adonais Brooks sees her on a visit and "threw himself from the third-story window for love" which results in him "breakin[ing] nine ribs, both legs and los[ing] an ear" (Boyle 124). Despite this, Fanny remains a

pinnacle of nurturing and motherhood, especially to Ned. This brings her into underlying conflict with the nameless hag due to her oppositional aspects of the “Terrible Mother.”

In the old hag’s first appearance in the novel she is described as a “balding crone, her face a *momento mori*” and her laugh carries the same piercing unpleasant sound of nails on a chalkboard while phlegm runs slowly out of her mouth (Boyle 6). Rather than the inviting loveliness that is Fanny’s personality and physicality, the old hag is aggressive and lewd. Her interactions with Ned in the opening pages carry throughout the entire novel, shedding more light on just how diametrically opposed to Fanny she is. Instead of pleasant images of the countryside we are introduced to her in the cellar of an old tavern complete with passed out drunks, “the concurrent odors of urine and vomit,” a pig, and an overturned chamber pot. The old hag is aggressive towards Ned, trying to serve him gin from her terracotta jugs whilst making extremely lewd comments and lifting her skirts revealing “spindle legs and yellowed bush like the denouement of a Gothic tale” (6).

Much like Joyce’s milk-hag is counter-imaged by Molly Bloom and her full breasts the old hag is juxtaposed by Fanny in regards to her fertility. Fanny practically emanates motherhood while the old hag appears to be incapable of having children and is so repulsive her chances of having children are remote. Not only is she aggressive, but her Gothic genitalia inspire disturbing and frightening images within Ned. Her ancient genitalia and repeated attempts at kidnapping give the sense that she is barren. Her physical inability to have children distances her from Fanny even further, but it is her display of attempted motherhood that cements her in the role of “Terrible Mother.”

After stealing Fanny’s only son, the old woman retreats into the countryside, living in an old run-down cottage that looks like it hasn’t been lived in for a hundred years. Ned’s and the old



woman's narrative intercept once again where he experiences her abuses of the child she stole. The child, nameless, is beaten and abused, living in squalor with the terrifying woman. The old woman puts him on display "playing to her audience like a demented actress in her most ominous role" for her guests where his greasy hair and filthy face with open sores speak to her wanting ability as a caring mother (Boyle 284). The old woman seems to take delight in horrifying her guests at the mistreatment of the child, playing into her commitment to the "Terrible Mother" which comes in stark contrast to the nurturing care of Fanny.

I believe that their connection is stronger than Tymoczko's relation of St. Anne to Dahut however, because Fanny and the nameless hag are presented with a connection through their oppositional relationships with Ned. Through Ned, they are meant to be seen together, rather than conjecturally pulled from different stories and mythologies. To strengthen their connection it is important to note Fanny's fate in the novel. Though she begins as a paragon of nurturement and motherhood, by the end of her life she has fallen from grace. Reduced to opium addiction and destitution she wanders the dark alleys of London with her son in hopeless despair, until the nameless hag kidnaps him, and she proceeds to commit suicide. Her fallen state before her suicide is uncannily similar to the brief glimpses of the nameless hag's mysterious past, perhaps indicating a corrupting process that explains the current sinister state of the hag.

During Ned's birth the nameless hag informs Ned's mother that she was indeed fertile in the past, for "babies dropped from these old loins like pippins from a tree" (Boyle 35) and her obsession with obtaining a child of her own can be interpreted as residual motherly behavior despite her complete lack of anything "Good Mother" at this point in her life. The old woman's character provides hints at an ambivalent history where she may have possessed both positive and negative qualities of the "Great Mother." Here Boyle is clearly playing with the concept of

the degradation of the Morrigan overtime in popular culture into her current overtly “Terrible Mother” form.

The small glimpses at the past of the old woman can also be construed to parallel the process through which the Morrigan and other pagan goddess figures were transformed into one-sided entities. Where before she had birthed many children, now she has turned into a kidnapping, child abuser who appears only to cause strife. There is no explicit evidence that she birthed many children nor that she was nurturing to them but there are undertones of a corruption process that has molded her into what she is presently. The corruption of her perhaps once decent character comes in a series of questions that lend a sense of horror at the life she has been subjected to. The narrator asks us who could fathom how much time she has spent in a “Turkish seraglio or a Berber hut? Who could guess what twisted paths and dark alleys she’d been down, or what she was thinking when that ring of hammered gold was struck through her lip?” (Boyle 35). This passage questioning the life choices the old woman could mean that she made those choices because she was already inherently evil, never actually embodying any characteristics of the “Good Mother.” Yet, due to her connection in opposition to Fanny I wonder at her past as indicative of some force or presence outside of her own power that forced her to become such a horrifying figure.

Fanny’s downward spiral begins once Ned has been incarcerated. She ends up making very questionable decisions that align with her desire to nurture and protect Ned, but implicate her character. After Ned’s imprisonment she begins to trade her body for money in order to keep Ned comfortable and alive in prison, and after his death she has nowhere left to go except with the despicable and sexual deviant Adonais Brooks. Due to her choice to shack up with him for his ability to keep Ned alive and comfortable in prison with his pocketbook she has been fired

from her comfy job with the Banks and because of the standards for women at the time will be rejected by her family, so she cannot return home. Afraid of her leaving him, Brooks takes advantage of her grief and isolation at her true love's death and dopes her up on laudanum and absconds with her to Germany.

In Germany, she is subjected to something similar to the old hag's past of Berber huts and Turkish seraglios. Sexually abused and addicted to opiates she eventually gives birth to a son, product of her and Ned's last conjugal visit (she desperately hopes). She escapes back to London a disgraced woman and drifts through the alleyways trying desperately to take care of her son and nursing a consuming addiction to opiates. Eventually we find her destitute in a dark alley where she encounters the old hag whose past Fanny is appearing to slowly imitate. The old woman serves as enabler, granting her more laudanum and when Fanny awakes her son and the woman are gone. Driven by despair she commits suicide, drowning herself in the Thames. Fanny's fall into the dark twisted life of London mirrors what little we are given about how the old woman may have spent her life before she became the twisted, degraded visage she in the novel. The old hag is made of sterner stuff than poor Fanny however, and is able to thrive and make her way through the despicable conditions.

The nameless hag demonstrates strong evidence that in Boyle's utilizes the figure of the Morrigan in his return to myth. Rather than follow in the footsteps of Yeats and Gregory, Boyle's treatment of the Irish goddesses of war is far more Joycean. The nameless old hag is presented, not as sovereignty, but as a corrupted vision of the land of Ireland. Instead of blessing the land and young men with her rejuvenating milk or water she distributes gin, and even opium, in order to perpetuate the slow decay of those she comes in contact with. Though Boyle's hag shares many similar traits with other Irish earth goddesses, it becomes clear through her affinity

for strife and conflict that she most resembles the Morrigan. The clearest explanation for the Joycean recreation of the sovereignty archetype is Boyle's contemporary cultural and political environment. Responding to America's foreign affairs abroad, such as the Vietnam War, and the domestic situation which was largely ignored until it reached critical levels, such as poverty rates, in the 1960s and 70s. Boyle's nameless hag hearkens back to the trope of redemptive rejuvenation seen in myths, such as Fliath, but there is no hope of redemption for Boyle's woman. She is not only unredeemed she actively goes against the traditional sovereignty trope by actively participating in the perpetual corruption of the land and people.

## V • Conclusions

Boyle's grittier shift away from romantic heroism in his re-crafting of figures from Gaelic literary traditions reflect the disillusionment of the American conscious with its status as supreme world power. In this moment of America's anxiety over contending with communism and a divided populace Boyle reaches for myth to compensate. His first published novel since his graduation from Iowa Boyle take this opportunity to show what he knows, in this case tapping into the traditional figures of Cú Chulainn and the Morrigan from Irish mythology. Though he fell in love with Yeats, he shifts away from the poet's romanticized nostalgia of Irish mythology. He displaces the traditional figures and reimagines them without the trappings of romantic heroism or hopeful redemption.

Boyle's response to America's waning nationalistic pride is to participate in the trend set by the Revivalists of reintroducing myth to the world. Boyle is not alone in returning to myth to respond to collective cultural crises. Movies such as *Apocalypse Now* speak to a consistent effort by artists to reintroduce myth to a general audience by displacing it to contemporary environments. Ned and the old woman retain only fragments of their original heroic forms, cutting away the romantic trappings of the old ways by adapting them to Boyle's completely de-romanticized world.

Boyle's depiction of London reflects the deprivation of Empire, and its forced ignorance of domestic issues such as endemic poverty and civil rights. The hero must struggle to even survive in the dilapidated and decaying society of London's slums. By choosing to represent the colonial power of British Empire Boyle exposes the problematic trajectory of American nationalism. Paralleling America's contention with the U.S.S.R leading to events such as the Vietnam and Korean War is Britain's race to discover and chart the Niger River. Under the

pretensions of “civilizing” the locals by bringing British goods and culture is the real reason: economic domination of the region. America’s involvement in Vietnam was vocalized as the spread of communism but the true reasons behind military occupation are far more economic than they are altruistic.

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