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Reluctant Sons: The Irish Matrilineal Tradition of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien

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RELUCTANT SONS: THE IRISH MATRILINEAL TRADITION OF OSCAR
WILDE, JAMES JOYCE, AND FLANN O'BRIEN

By

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ABSTRACT
RELUCTANT SONS: THE IRISH MATRILINEAL TRADITION OF OSCAR
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Jessie Wirkus Haynes, B.A., M.A.

Marquette University, 2022

    My project counters the long tradition of using British categories to define the
literary production of Irish authors. Instead, it moves us in a new direction by
offering a counternarrative that places authors into an Irish matrilineal literary
tradition. To illustrate this matrilineage, I turn to the life and works of Oscar Wilde,
James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien, complicating their traditional classifications as
aesthete/decadent, modernist, and post-modernist and reexamining them in light of
Irish nationhood. Beginning with chapter 1, I situate Wilde as progenitor of this
tradition, specifically focusing on his appropriation of a mythic maternal creative
space in which he forges identity grounded in beauty. In chapter 2, Joyce emerges as
the ambivalent inheritor of this tradition. Inspired by the antagonistic relationship he
shares with Wilde, Joyce explores the amalgamation of the mythic mother with
national identity, ultimately demythologizing it while simultaneously using the
Gothic genre as a creative space for a new type of feminine, transformative literary
production. Finally, chapter 3 places Flann O'Brien as reluctant "son" to Joyce,
deconstructing O'Brien's use of dialogism and mythic time in order to reconstruct a
national Irish identity. Paying attention to the mythic maternal metaphors of each
author as a confrontation with creation and creativity within my project underscores
a much larger concern—their formal innovations reveal their struggle to recreate
themselves and their nation. Ultimately, form offers them a way to affect change
through language as it examines shifts in thought about gender, identity, and even
nationalism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God

(John 1:1)

Athena sprang from Zeus' head fully formed.[1]

Many of our foundational origin stories inextricably connect language, thought, and existence as components of personal autonomy. Whether examining Biblical creation stories that link the word with flesh or classical mythology that illustrates birth's unique ability to personify the abstract, western civilization has privileged the creative power of artistic words. In the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde takes this connection to its absurd limit when he humorously exchanges the baby Jack Worthing with a three-volume novel through a series of comic tragedies in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)*.* These examples show men and male deities appropriating the maternal role, resulting in a type of reproduction that depends on the linguistic power of thought. My project considers the reasons for and results of this appropriation, paying particular attention to the slippage between personal identity and text and investigating how thought, intention, and language become expressions of personified art and beauty. By highlighting the formal innovations under which these expressions take on a life of their own while paying particular attention to the outcomes of this endeavor, I identify a new literary tradition that relies on a creative space of maternal appropriation. Ultimately, I question how the linguistic

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[1] This comes from one of the versions of Athena's birth in Greek mythology. Often, her birth is described as occurring after Zeus swallows Metis and has recurring headaches. In some versions, Hephaestus cuts Athena from Zeus' head.

manifestation of an artistic, personal identity leads to a form of national identity production.

By contextualizing a new literary tradition, my project pushes back against British literary categorizations applied to colonized Irish writers. The inability of conventional literary labels to adequately describe authors becomes especially obvious when considering my archive of authors who subvert the maternal space to find productive linguistic forms of artistic re/creation—specifically Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and Flann O'Brien. A quick glance at a broad range of English literary anthologies underscores traditional perspectives of these authors as we see Wilde described as a member of both the aesthetic and decadent literary movements; Joyce described as a modernist; and Flann O'Brien omitted from the British canon altogether. However, this literary tendency to focus on labels, and particularly on British labels, often subsumes or even erases important attributes of each author as it encourages a limited interpretation of their lives and works. Choosing to view Wilde, Joyce, and O'Brien as Irish literary powerhouses rather than as British labels allows us to view them not only as artists but also as Irish artists while strengthening the relationship between them.[2]

It is perhaps not surprising that Oscar Wilde has been identified for so long as an aesthete or decadent author because one of his main goals has always been the creation of beauty. Known for his aesthetic beliefs, which he clearly elucidates in his well-known essays "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying" (1891), Wilde interweaves his passion for beauty into every text he creates. We can trace Wilde's essays and lectures

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[2] This is especially relevant to O'Brien, whose very absence from British anthologies, reasserts his Irishness and reinforces the need for different categories to more effectively help interpret his work.

back to the writings of John Ruskin, which argue for a dissociation of art criticism from the idea of usefulness.[3] In addition, Walter Pater's collection of essays entitled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) becomes a "golden book" for both aestheticism and Wilde. The preface and conclusion exemplify the aesthetic separation of morals from art, and their embellished prose inspires many aesthetic writers "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy . . ." (Pater np). Pater uses his aesthetic influence to mentor many writers with what literary critic Kate Hext refers to as Socratic friendships, and he began a mentorship to Wilde when Wilde sent a copy of his first published article along with praise for *Renaissance.*[4] Wilde, however, moves beyond the work of both Ruskin and Pater, seeing the need for his life to personify aestheticism— something, as Wilde once noted, for which Pater lacked the commitment. This decision to enact aestheticism underscores the way that aestheticism or decadence fails to adequately describe Wilde's work, moving Wilde from the realm of British literary categorization to something new and productively creative, something that subverts the maternal function and relies on beauty, instead, as its starting point. Critic Elisa Bizzoto goes so far as to claim that he "display[s] a neat refusal of nineteenth-century literary schools" (32) and dismisses "categories of classical and romantic . . . as mere catchwords of schools in his lecture the English renaissance of art." She explains that Wilde understands these classifications more as temperaments or artists' groups rather than historically (32-33).[5] This lack of stability allows room for growth and gives Wilde the ability to confront

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[3] See George P. Landow and Adam Wong's work on Ruskin, Aesthetics, and Wilde on the *Victorian Web.*
[4] Ultimately, however, the two parted ways when Pater criticized *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a review (although many scholars believe that Pater merely wished to distance himself from what he viewed as Wilde's increasingly dangerous lifestyle).
[5] In this, Wilde takes his cue from Symons and Pater, who voice this same concern.

creativity and creation, to use his pen as an innovative weapon in his arsenal and fashion a new, subversive identity. In doing so, he further illustrates the inability of English literary categories to accurately describe Irish authors and the inability of British genres to accurately describe a social system that has become hollow.[6]

If interpreting Wilde through British literary categorizations limits our reading of his life and ideas, what new productive explorations could we make of his scandalous, life, work, and theories? To fully understand Wilde, we must pay particular attention to his desire to enact his beliefs, his focus on the very recreation of self into an artistic form that could be admired. This desire manifested at an early age as Wilde grew up in Dublin. The son of a strong, nationalist Mother and a famous otolaryngologist/ophthalmologist father, Wilde spent his youth surrounded by Irish culture and folklore. However, when he traveled to England to study at Oxford at 20, he experienced criticism, striking "his English peers as utterly other" because of a "'suspicion of a brogue in his pronunciation, and an unfamiliar turn in his phrasing'" (Wright 75). As a result, Wilde took steps to refashion himself, styling his appearance carefully and even hiring a voice coach. Viewing identity as a self-made construct, Wilde understood its fluidity. He set beauty as his goal, and, because of this, ultimately "goes beyond rather than behind the English" (Ellmann 38).[7] Beauty becomes his raison d'être, his own way of classifying himself and the world around him, as he begins to equate it with his own life and, ultimately, life itself. This shift signals a significant separation from Wilde and British aesthetes and decadents, and stems, in large part, from his own conception of identity—specifically, his

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[6] See also Rachel Teukolsky's "Walter Pater's *Renaissance* (1873) and the British Aesthetic Movement" and Thomas Wright's *Built of Books.*
[7] See also Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* in which he reclaims Wilde for the Irish.

national identity. Therefore, considering the Irish in terms of beauty and identity becomes a productive way to interpret his ideas.

Joyce's relationship with Ireland and his success have, in the past 5 decades, made it harder to easily apply British literary categorizations to his texts. However, writing on the heels of Wilde's scandal and demise offered Joyce a warning of what could befall the Irish artist that moves too far from British sensibility or a colonial, romanticized idea of Irish identity. Ultimately, the lure of a true Irish artist proves too tempting for Joyce to ignore, and he reluctantly embraces Wilde's project of Irish identity construction. Admitting the importance of constructing an artistic persona with *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)*,* Joyce moves Wilde's project forward in new ways as he fights the systemic oppression he observes rather than working within its confines. Growing up in Ireland during a time of deep nationalism, Joyce understood the importance of an Irish artist for a colonized nation; however, he refused to allow this artist to represent British or even romanticized Irish stereotypes and struggles, seeing the stereotypes as symbols of this oppression. Instead, he writes something that represents his own conception of Irish artistry and nationhood.[8] His work with *Dubliners* underscores his fear of the paralysis that results from political, cultural, familial, and religious systems. Yet, he fights back, refusing to kneel, and using language and formal innovation to write his way out of this oppression that trapped him in the static language of the colonizer and limited his ability to define himself authentically.

Missing from most British canonical anthologies, O'Brien represents the least globally known author of my project. Critical work situates him as either a modernist or

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[8] For more information on Joyce's insistence of his Irishness, see Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce.*

post-modernist and frequently comments on his relationship with Joyce, but much work remains to truly excavate what O'Brien accomplishes for Irish artistry and the Irish nation. Born in Strabane as Brian O'Nolan, O'Brien matures into his artistry as the Irish nation attempts to find its footing after British colonial rule. Understanding the intricacies of language, as evidenced by his frequent use of changing pseudonyms, he employs Irish, English, and altered versions of each, to show the rich layering of cultures that must be considered in the process of national identity formation. O'Brien writes several novels, some in Irish; however, most of his work consists of articles for newspapers, written in both Irish and in English. Like his predecessors, he decides that the most productive formation of identity occurs when textually inscribed. As a result, he writes a self-reflective novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939)*, which focuses on the author's ability to shape reality. Through this text, O'Brien furthers the tradition begun by Wilde, bringing it full circle by grounding it in Irish myth and the Irish language: rather than writing using English forms or using classical Greek mythology, O'Brien brings his story and mythology back home to Ireland.

My project depends on the relationship between Wilde, Joyce, and O'Brien, positioning them as an antagonistic yet dependent trio of authors intent on the re/creation of self. They share the painful inheritance of post-1890s Irish writers at a moment when British colonialism had "colonized their minds," and, in the case of Wilde and Joyce, made them strangers to what might have been a native language. Not only is each author Irish, but each also feels deeply affected by British colonialism and, therefore, searches for distinct ways to come to terms with what it means to be Irish during and after British colonial rule. I begin with Wilde, whose equation of the achievement of artistic beauty

with personal identity sets off a project of individual identity creation that relies on

subverting British form from inside England itself. Joyce then engages in a fraught

relationship between himself and Wilde, viewing Wilde both as a progenitor, an example

of the true Irish artist, and as a warning about the risk inherent in expressing true Irish

identity. Working in a self-imposed exile, rather than from within England itself, Joyce,

like his character and alter-ego Stephen Dedalus, "sets out to forge in the smithy of [his]

soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race." By highlighting national identity creation as

the artist's true aim, Joyce picks up Wilde's mantle, turning an individual project into an

artistic lineage despite the anxiety inherent in following in Wilde's footsteps.[9] O'Brien

rounds out my group of authors as both a reluctant inheritor to Joyce and an Irish artist

writing in Ireland. O'Brien's focus on Irish myth and the heteroglossia of the Irish

language grounds his work and plays a central role in his own creation of Irish identity.

He takes up Joyce's work even as he bemoans his frequent association with him.[10] While

Wilde does not set out to found a literary tradition, Joyce's ambivalent decision to take up

the unique creative work of the Irish artist sets up an Irish literary tradition that others,

including O'Brien, continue.

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[9] See Harold Bloom *The Anxiety of Influence.*

[10] Perhaps the best example of Joyce's admiration and ambivalence comes from an article he writes entitled "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé.*" Rather than reviewing this play, Joyce pontificates on Wilde's use of his full Irish name and his "crime" and trial, illustrating a distaste for Wilde's "youthful haughtiness" (201) but spending most of his time in a rather sympathetic discussion of Wilde's scandal. In fact, he claims that Wilde was a "scapegoat," who was convicted merely for the uproar he created in England rather than for bi/homosexuality itself (204).

For O'Brien's relationship with Joyce, see his letter from May 1st, 1939, in which he talks positively about Joyce's reaction to *At Swim-Two-Birds.* However, O'Brien later fumes, "If I hear that word 'Joyce' again I will surely froth at the gob!" (Letter from Brian O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe, November 25th, 1961).

Although my argument focuses on these three authors, it is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and many additional Irish authors could join their ranks; however, these three authors make visible the significance of maternity as a means to redefining themselves within a tradition they self-consciously create. Each inheritor of Wilde powerfully cements their place within the Irish literary tradition I consider—a tradition that offers a more complete understanding of each author than that allowed by British literary categorizations because of its focus on what it means to be Irish and what it means to be an Irish nation impacted by British colonialism.

<div align="center">History's Irish Nightmares</div>

Ireland was Britain's first colony, and the literary effects of this occupation were far-reaching for both the British and the Irish. Beginning with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century, the British increasingly developed a presence, both physical and political, within the area. By the time Oscar Wilde was born in 1854, Ireland was actively chafing under Britain's control—as seen by an escalating interest in Irish nationalism. Each of my authors writes during a distinct political and cultural era of colonialization in Ireland—with Wilde writing during the peak of British colonialism in Ireland, Joyce writing during the massively violent Irish War of Independence and the subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty (in 1921), and O'Brien writing in the aftermath of the treaty as the Irish tried to become an independent nation. Therefore, each experiences a different relationship to oppression and the conflicts within Ireland, and each must literarily respond to unique conditions.

My authors must also respond to the literary expression of Irish nationalism under colonialism, which took shape under the guise of the Irish Literary Revival. The Irish

Revival describes the rise of a literary talent at the end of the nineteenth century and the

beginning of the twentieth century that focused on a nationalistic, romanticized

restoration of Irish identity. Spearheaded by W.B. Yeats, the Revival essentialized Irish

traditions and the Irish peasantry in the search for an idealistic version of an Ireland past

(or lost). Appropriating language, myth, folklore, and fairy tale, the Revivalists shaped

society's perception of a national identity, seeking to separate themselves culturally from

Great Britain. Many Irish authors reacted against the reductionism of the Revival, using

their literary abilities to "demythologize" a symbolic national version of Irish identity.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Irish colonization combined with the Irish Literary

Revival affects each of my authors as they work to reclaim or create an Irish identity that

refuses the limitations imposed by both Britain and Ireland's literary response to it.[11]

This project centers on historicization coupled with close readings to offer a new

way of interpreting the life and works of each author as a network. I argue that the

tradition of these authors is actually best described as a matrilineage: each author creates

metaphoric systems in their works that cast them as mothers or new versions of

themselves. Playing with form and formal innovation, these authors illustrate the

important role British colonialism plays in their understanding and development of their

own identities as they push back against colonialism's influence and effects. Shifting the

ways we interpret the life and works of these authors from confining British literary

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[11] Reactions to Revivalist idealization often occurred because the romanticized mythic removed sexuality, poverty, and violence from portrayals of Ireland. See Katherine Mullin's *James Joyce Sexuality and Social Purity* (2003). When authors reincorporated these harsh realities, the Irish often responded with protests or violence (e.g., the riots over Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* in 1907).

categorizations to a new Irish framework allows us to understand the larger work of each as a strategy to reclaim an identity of their own construction.

The term matrilineage plays a large role within my project because it describes the unique relationship between authors who have chosen to appropriate the maternal as they use language to create and to construct versions of literature and life as reciprocal spaces of birth and rebirth. Wilde feels compelled to re/create himself as a work of art; Joyce uses his texts to recreate Dublin, even as he lives in exile; and O'Brien specifically describes an author's work as aestho-autogamy in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, leaving out the female aspect of procreation completely. In addition, my authors frequently subvert what I term mythic maternal metaphor in their efforts to self-create. The mythic maternal refers to the mythologization of the mother in Irish life and literature. The specter of the mother looms large in Irish literature during my author's lifetimes, and each confronts this mythic ideal. In her book *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce,* Diane Stubbings discusses the dichotomous nature of the mother in Irish culture— she plays both a powerless familial role, tied to hearth and home, and a powerful mythical role (e.g., the symbol of the Virgin Mary or Cathleen ni Houlihan). Stubbings ultimately asserts that "[b]y representing [the mother], and, importantly resisting her, it became possible to move beyond the constrictions of the cultural tradition and assert a subjectivity free of rigid discursive practices that were themselves an expression of British hegemony" (8). These ideas take shape in romanticized Irish folk stories about the mother figure as national symbol, such as Cathleen ni Houlihan—a play in which an old woman convinces Irish men to go to war and then transforms into a young queen-like

figure.[12] My authors are invested in demythologizing these amalgamations of motherhood with the mythic and subverting ideas about the mythic mother for their own creative use, one free of colonialized or romanticized stereotypes.

Finally, I refer to this Irish literary tradition as a matrilineage because of the rather warped or deconstructed familial relationship between the authors. In this relationship, Wilde plays the role of unwitting mother, whose confrontation with the mythic maternal allows him to re/create himself. When Joyce follows in Wilde's footsteps, he complicates the relationship, viewing Wilde as an anxious and fearsome literary father-turned-mother. Finally, O'Brien arrives as the reluctant son who takes the tools that Joyce offers yet bemoans his connection to Joyce. Taken together, this maternal creation, this confrontation with the mythic maternal, and this complicated literary genealogy form what I term a matrilineage.

In my first chapter, I discuss Oscar Wilde's conception of identity as a fluid fiction capable of being "rewritten by the artist in life" (Wright 5). As Wilde searches for beauty, he uses art, in all forms, to transmute everyday existence into an artistic masterpiece. For Wilde, beauty in art and his own personal identity were synonymous, and he lives this belief as he spends his life in pursuit of an artistic identity re/creation. Taking aesthetic ideas as his starting point, he fashions them into something altogether new and exciting, something original. Creating spaces of textual re/creation, he becomes a social innovator who explores issues of personal, sexual, and national identity within

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[12] This mythologization is particularly dangerous for the Irish because it often inspires violence (e.g., sending men off to war). In fact, in the 1930s, Yeats bemoans the fact that he might have caused men to be shot with his portrayal of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Also, see Yeats poem "September 1913."

his own life. In this chapter, I situate Wilde's search for beauty within the context of his re/creation of self, exploring issues of both nationality and sexuality through a brief historicization of Wilde coupled with close readings of "The Critic as Artist," *The Importance of Being Earnest,* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)*.* Through these readings, I posit that Wilde textually manifests his desire to reconstruct identity through a simultaneous mythologization and de-mythologization of female characters and a subversion of maternal mythological metaphor as he strives to artistically appropriate the paradoxical nature of identity itself. These textual subversions and appropriations allow him to create characters who serve as prototypes for his unique method of literary identity creation (e.g., Jack Worthing and Dorian Gray). Ultimately, I illustrate how Wilde's search for an aesthetic personal identity through text serves as a blueprint for other Irish authors to come, sparking an on-going literary reconstruction of Irish national identity, a matrilineal Irish Literary tradition.

Joyce's work with national identity creation, bolstered by the reoccurring presence of Wilde within his texts, highlights not only Joyce's intense literary engagement with Wilde but also his antagonistic position as reluctant inheritor to Wilde's literary tradition in order to fight against systemic oppression—political, religious, and familial. My second chapter, discusses how, Joyce, like Wilde, demythologizes mythic maternal figures, making space for artists to rewrite themselves as they break free from the ghosts of the oppressive social structures that define them. Believing that his mother's death was caused by a failure of Irish ideas about motherhood, Joyce confronts the idea of the romanticized Irish mythic mother through his own mother's ghost. This is especially significant because it allows him to push back against Revivalist ideology.

Specifically, in this chapter, I investigate the ways in which Joyce appropriates different forms of the Gothic genre—the Female Gothic and the Male Gothic—as a method of transformative literary creation. Paying close attention to the dichotomous relationship between Stephen and Buck in *Ulysses,* I argue that Stephen appropriates and reshapes the feminine maternal while Buck Mulligan mockingly dismisses it. Ultimately, I illustrate how Stephen uses elements of the Female Gothic while Buck employs elements of the Male Gothic to produce literature; however, while Stephen's creativity manifests in the complete (and almost unrecognizable) transformation of a classic Irish love song into a Gothic poem, Buck's Gothic story manifests as an imitation or parody. By contrasting the transformative nature of Stephen's poem with the imitative nature of Buck's story, Joyce argues for an Irish identity that looks past Revivalist stereotypes and works outside of imperial confines.

Even after the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Ireland faced civil war as the country separated, with Northern Ireland remaining under British rule and Irish Free State citizens debating which linguistic, cultural, economic, and political frameworks should remain. In other words, the Irish fought over what it meant to be Irish. My third chapter takes this unsettled time-period into account as Flann O'Brien enters the scene and begins writing in the 1930s and 40s. O'Brien must face the Irish struggle to rebuild and reform an Irish national identity without colonial rule; therefore, his writing benefits from this Irish literary tradition of creating national and personal identity through the art of language. However, while Wilde uses English manners and mythical paradox and Joyce appropriates the female Gothic to attempt transformative identity re/construction, O'Brien favors temporality. Specifically, he uses the heteroglossia of language in Ireland

to disrupt linear stereotypes, focusing instead on a mythic or monumental form of time and ultimately pushing back against Revivalism to illustrate the multiplicity of Irish identity. By employing an Irish dialogism in his personal life and work and using a mythic/non-linear time in his bildungsroman *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien crafts his own version of national and personal identity construction and takes his place within the matrilineal tradition begun by Oscar Wilde.

Although many other Irish authors could be added to this matrilineal literary tradition, my conclusion gestures toward female Irish authors.[13] The project of identity creation becomes even more important as it intersects Irish nationality with gender. Each of the tools my authors employ to complicate portrayals of Irish identity—paradox, the Gothic genre, myth revision, borrowed characters, and non-linear time—prefigures tools later used by female Irish authors as they strive to carve out their own space in Irish literature. Specifically, in my conclusion, I focus on Irish poet, author, and professor Eavan Boland, who writes about the conflation of the national and the feminine, on several inheritors of Joyce and O'Brien's work, and on the borrowing of characters/myth revision in the works of Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* 1993) and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (*Midwife to the Fairies* 2003). I argue that female Irish authors and the authors of my project use linguistic creation and formal innovation for a similar purpose, to destroy the illusion of a reducible identity, to modernize and enliven characterizations, and to cause readers to question simplified portrayals of nationality or femininity—to fight an amalgamation with simplified symbolic imagery and to create their own identities linguistically. With the addition of female artistry to my matrilineage,

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[13] Namely, Samuel Beckett. See, for example, *Endgame.*

my project comes full circle, offering solutions to authors who have been "othered" by colonialism or gender (or both), and reaffirming the creative power of language.

Chapter 1

Art for Life's Sake: Self-Writing as Identity Creation in the Life and Works of Oscar Wilde

The true critic will, indeed, always be sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty, but he will seek for beauty in every age and in each school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. He will realise himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways, and will ever be curious of new sensations and fresh points of view. (Wilde, "Critic")

Literary critic Thomas Wright claims that Oscar Wilde "built himself out of books," choosing "volumes as 'prompt books' for the various roles he assumed during the different phases of his life" (6). Rather than perceiving identity as fixed, Wilde maintains it is a fluid fiction capable of being "rewritten by the artist in life" (5). And Wilde was nothing if not an artist. Treating himself as the canvas, he uses all the tools at his disposal to create an aestheticized version of himself: his library included a voice training primer, and he was "known to have carefully styled for himself a smooth and seductive voice that struck listeners as at once natural and artificial" (135); he deliberately chose his clothing, viewing it as a "pose, devised to signal his impeccable credentials and his strong sense of individualism" (Fitzsimons 102); and he surrounded himself with beauty, decorating his own house beautiful with Greek engravings, venetian glass, and beautiful colors ("Wilde's Personal Appearance" n.p.). Art, in all forms, created the building blocks for Wilde's transmutation of everyday existence into an artistic masterpiece. In other words, for Wilde, beauty in art and his own personal identity were synonymous.

Not only does Wilde link the search for beauty with the search for his individual

identity, but he also lives this belief as he spends his life in pursuit of an artistic identity

re/creation. This dedication to art has prompted many critics to label him as a member of

the aesthetic or decadent literary movements. [14] Pigeonholing him, however, is

problematic because he "will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of

thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things" ("Critic"). To do so would discount

his paradoxical nature, his Irish heritage, and his fluid view of identity.[15] Rather, Wilde

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[14] Two well-known authors play major roles in Wilde's aesthetic development: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. We can trace Wilde's essays and lectures back to the writings of John Ruskin, and Wilde vigorously agrees with Ruskin about the need for a dissociation of art criticism from the idea of usefulness. See George P. Landow and Adam Wong's work on Ruskin, Aesthetics, and Wilde on the *Victorian Web.* Wong specifically details the ways Wilde's four tenants of aestheticism in "The Decay of Lying" are in agreement with Ruskin's ideas and principles. In addition, Walter Pater's collection of essays entitled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* became a "golden book" for both aestheticism and Wilde. The preface and conclusion exemplify the aesthetic separation of morals from art, and their embellished prose inspired many aesthetic writers "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy . . ." (Pater np). Pater used this influence to mentor many writers with what literary critic Kate Hext refers to as Socratic friendships, and he began a mentorship to Wilde when Wilde sent a copy of his first published article along with praise for *Renaissance.* Ultimately, however, the two parted ways when Pater criticized *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a review (although many scholars believe that Pater merely wished to distance himself from what he viewed as Wilde's increasingly dangerous lifestyle). However, their exists more to this separation, Wilde transformed Pater's work, taking it even further by personifying it: as Wilde once noted, Pater lacked the commitment to enact his aesthetic theory. On the other hand, Wilde lived the aesthetic theory. See also Rachel Teukolsky's "Walter Pater's *Renaissance* (1873) and the British Aesthetic Movement" and Thomas Wright's *Built of Books.*

[15] Critic Elisa Bizzoto goes so far as to claim that Wilde takes his cue from Symons and Pater, who she claims "display a neat refusal of nineteenth-century literary schools" (32) to dismiss "categories of classical and romantic . . . as mere catchwords of schools in his lecture the English renaissance of art" She explains that Wilde understood these classifications more as temperaments or artists' groups rather than historically (32-33). This lack of stability allowed the room for growth and gave Wilde the ability to confront creativity and creation; to use his pen and all the weapons in his arsenal—from aestheticism, to decadence, to classicism—to fashion a new, subversive, and even paradoxical identity. To further illustrate the inability of English literary categories to accurately describe Irish authors. In addition, several critics have written about aestheticism and/or Wilde's Hellenism as a method of subversion that flirts with the modernist agenda. For example, literary critic Evangelista often talks about Wilde "modernist" program or "modern" dialectic, hinting at Wilde's place as a type of proto modernist. The book *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations* takes up where Evangelista leaves off, firmly linking aestheticism and decadence to modernism, especially in terms of political subversion. In fact, the collection makes a point of focusing on how Irish aestheticism and decadence can and should be linked to modernism due to British Colonialism (using Egerton, Moore, Joyce, Wilde and more as examples). This makes sense considering that the use of Hellenism to subvert

pushes the boundaries to literary categories; he becomes a "true critic . . . sincere in his devotion to the principle of beauty" who "realise[s] himself in many forms, and by a thousand different ways" ("Critic"). Taking aesthetic ideas as his starting point, he fashions them into something altogether new and exciting, something original.

Unlike other famous Irish authors, Wilde does not set out to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race." Instead, his aim remains constant in its deceiving simplicity: to create an identity grounded in beauty. Each quip, each use of wit or paradox, allows him to wield language, to shape his words, ideas, and ultimately his very self into the beauty that he longs to see in the world. By taking full advantage of language's formal innovations to shape, model, and create, Wilde uses literature to transform into his own aesthetic ideals. Creating spaces of textual re/creation, he becomes a social innovator who explores issues of personal, sexual, and national identity within his own life. In this chapter, I situate Wilde's search for beauty within the context of his re/creation of self, exploring issues of both nationality and sexuality through a brief historicization of Wilde coupled with close readings of "The Critic as Artist," *The Importance of Being Earnest,* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* Through these readings, I posit that Wilde textually manifests his desire to reconstruct identity through a simultaneous mythologization and de-mythologization of female characters and a subversion of maternal mythological metaphor as he strives to artistically appropriate the paradoxical nature of identity itself. These textual subversions and appropriations allow him to create characters who serve as prototypes for his unique method of literary identity

has long been attributed to modernist writers and creates questions about the stability of literary categories themselves as well as our ability to characterize Wilde's particular literary movement.

creation (e.g., Jack Worthing and Dorian Gray). Ultimately, I illustrate how Wilde's search for an aesthetic personal identity through text serves as a blueprint for other Irish authors to come, sparking an on-going literary reconstruction of Irish national identity, a matrilineal Irish Literary tradition.

<p align="center">The Story of Oscar Wilde</p>

The tragic tale of Oscar Wilde is a rather well-known story—born in Dublin to Anglo-Irish parents, Wilde grew up with a classical education in Ireland before attending Oxford at the age of 20. Without a doubt, Wilde's parents played an essential role in his future—his father was not only a renowned otolaryngologist and ophthalmologist but was also an Irish author and folklorist, and his mother was a fierce nationalist who led salons and wrote under the name Speranza.[16] Wilde follows their literary example, becoming a poet, a famous lecturer in the Americas, a novelist, and a popular playwright. His achievements, unfortunately, were overshadowed by the scandal that followed him after his accusal, trial, and imprisonment for "gross indecency." Forsaken by most of his friends, Wilde dies in a French hotel room not long after his release.

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[16] Both were what we now refer to as members of the Irish Literary Revival, committed to romanticizing an ancient Irish past in order to create a current Irish identity. The Revival describes the rise of a literary talent at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that focused on a nationalistic, romanticized restoration (or recreation) of Irish identity. Spearheaded by W.B. Yeats, this revival focused on a reconstruction which essentialized Irish traditions and the Irish peasantry. Appropriating myth, folklore, and fairy tale, the Revivalists shaped society's perception of a national identity, seeking to separate themselves culturally from Great Britain. Literary critics have explored the national and literary effects of this Revival—notably Gregory Castle in *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland,* and Terrence Brown in *The Literature of Ireland Culture and* Criticism— connecting the rise of Revivalism to the rise of the modernist movement (occasionally as a direct cause but more often because of authors' reactions against Revivalism). Many Irish authors reacted against the reductionism of the Revival, using their literary abilities to "demythologize" a symbolic national version of Irish identity. As Edward Hirsch notes, "[f]rom James Joyce and Flann O'Brien onward," most important Irish writers have "felt compelled to demythologize the peasant figure that was first imagined by the Revivalists." (1116).

While Wilde's history in brief fails to encompass the magnitude of the literary figure that he ultimately becomes, it does hint at the reasons for his careful restructuring of self. First and foremost, growing up during the British colonization of Ireland forces him to accept a duality of self as he struggles between his Irish heritage and his life as an aesthete and artist in England. A victim of British cultural norms and Irish stereotypes, Wilde experiences the bias that resulted from England's colonization of Ireland. [17] For example, when, as a 20-year-old, he travels to England to study at Oxford, "he struck his English peers as utterly other" because of a "'suspicion of a brogue in his pronunciation, and an unfamiliar turn in his phrasing'" (Wright 75). Wilde's accent coupled with his extraordinarily Irish name—Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wilde—mark him as different, and the "gaucheries" he commits as he attempts to fit in encourage him to "go beyond rather than behind the English" (Ellmann 38). [18] Therefore, he hires a voice coach, and he writes

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[17] A victim of British cultural norms and Irish stereotypes, Wilde experienced the bias that resulted from England's colonization of Ireland. As Declan Kiberd explains, "Through many centuries, Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters" (1). In addition, "Ireland was soon patented as not-England, a place whose peoples were, in many important ways, the very antithesis of their new rulers from overseas" (9). In fact,

> By [Matthew] Arnold's day, the image of Ireland as not-England had been well and truly formed. Victorian imperialists attributed to the Irish all those emotions and impulses which a harsh mercantile code had led them to suppress in themselves. Thus if John Bull was industrious and reliable, Paddy was held to be indolent and contrary; if the former was mature and rational, the latter must be unstable and emotional; if the English were adult and manly, the Irish must be childish and feminine. In this fashion, the Irish were to read their fate in that of two other out-groups, women and children, and at the root of many an Englishman's suspicion of the Irish was an unease with the woman or child who lurked within himself. (30)

Perpetuated in large part by Arnold's lecture series "On the Study of Celtic Literature," this placement of Irish identity as other, as sentimental, and as inferior affected others' perceptions of Wilde and propelled him to succeed and to recreate himself In his effort to reconstruct a national identity, He erased all trace of his Irish accent while at Oxford, aesthetically transforming his voice into one that his English friends described as melodious and rich, and, by 23, he shortened the name that he loved to Oscar Wilde: he became "more English than the English themselves" (Kiberd 36).

[18] Ripped straight from Irish history and legend, Wilde's full name—Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wilde—played a huge role in his artistic conception of himself. "Fingal" and "Oscar" derive from James

texts that out British the British in their deployment of English mores and manners.[19] In other words, his nationality encourages his eventual use of the art of language, both oral and written, to recreate himself, revealing a subtle critique of English manners and culture that underlies his appropriation of its language and customs.

Wilde becomes so successful in his recreation of self as an educated English aesthete, that many have mistakenly identified him as an English author. In *Inventing Ireland,* Declan Kiberd fights against this false notion of Wilde as English, working to reclaim him for the Irish. Kiberd views Wilde's posing—his feigned Englishness—as his ironic commentary against the illusion of the English/Irish binary: a commentary that asserts one cannot be either English or Irish; rather, one has the qualities of both present at all times. According to Kiberd, Wilde fights against the "Victorian urge to antithesis" (38), affirming the perpetual presence of the Irish by inverting stereotypes in his seemingly English novels, plays, and essays. In other words, Wilde embraces the duality of his national identity, combining Irish citizenship with English language and mannerisms: even the final iteration of his name, Oscar Wilde, embodies this duality (rather than destroying it) by joining the Irish "Oscar" (legendary grandson of Fingal) with the English surname "Wilde."[20]

Macpherson's translation of the *Ossian* cycle of epic poems based on Celtic mythology. O'Flahertie is a royal Galwegian name and the name of a "famously fierce Irish clan." At one point, Wilde added Wills to his list of surnames to commemorate a family connection (Ellmann, 17; Wright 11-12).

[19] See Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland.*

[20] It was commonly believed that the Wilde family descended from a Wilde who emigrated from Wolsingham England; therefore, Wilde was considered an English surname. However, Oscar Wilde's son, in his book *Son of Oscar Wilde,* clarifies that this was a common misconception and Wilde was actually Dutch. The misconception continues, and many people still consider "Wilde" an English name.

Wilde's dueling national heritages give us a preview for his later love of paradox—combining two seemingly disparate things to come up with a greater truth. This duality becomes even more evident when considering his fluid sexuality. Literary critic Rolf Breuer notes that Wilde begins using paradoxes in his texts around the time that he starts exploring his own sexual desires, circa 1886:

> Paradoxes in Oscar Wilde are an obvious phenomenon in the works written between 1887 and 1895, not however in the earlier works (the rather unoriginal poems, the tragedies, the literary fairy tales), nor in the few works written after the trials. But since it is the works between 1887 and 1895 on which Wilde's fame chiefly rests, paradoxes are a central topic in any discussion of Wilde. (224)

Critics have therefore linked Wilde's use of paradox to "his sexual reorientation" because "it implied a double-life, and, as a growing consequence, a growing personal understanding of ambivalence, contradiction, irony and paradox" (227). In other words, paradoxes, for Wilde, serve as a textual manifestation of identity as something composed of seemingly opposing things that somehow gain unity when ironically placed together— whether they be marriage to a woman combined with homosexuality or the creation of a British and Irish nationality.

Paradoxes within Wilde's life itself thus reveal his fundamental truth: he believes that something can only be true if its opposite it true and that this creates true art. In other words, his search for national identity is dependent upon his paradoxical and aesthetic nature:

> 'A truth in art', Oscar Wilde once remarked, 'is one whose contradiction is also true', and of nothing is this truer than of Wilde's own brilliant, blighted career. Wilde came from the city which his literary compatriot James Joyce spelt as Doublin, and most things about him were doubled, hybrid, ambivalent. His name, for a start, which yokes the Gaelic Oscar to the English Wilde; his sexuality, as a respectable married man who consorted with rent boys in cheap hotels, and his

politics, as a convinced socialist who would frequent only the very best restaurants. He was socialite and sodomite, victor and victim, upper-class and underdog, a darling of English high society whose enchanting fables for children are almost all secret revolutionary tracts. (Eagleton 7)

Declan Kiberd perhaps says it best when he quips: "The Wildean moment is that at which all polar oppositions are transcended" (41); this, for Wilde, is epiphany—the moment when identity can be textually created—and is evidenced by both his personal identity and, as we will see in the rest of this chapter, by his literary creations.

Wilde's Aesthetic Theory: Individuality, Beauty, and Identity

Ernest: But what are the two supreme and highest arts?
Gilbert: Life and Literature, life and the perfect expression of life. (Wilde, "Critic)

Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world. ("Critic")

"The Critic as Artist" implicitly offers Wilde's justification for both his use of aesthetic theory and his own departure from it by underscoring his individuality and placing him as a critic.[21] First appearing under the title "The True Function and Value of

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[21] Wilde's essay entitled "The Decay of Lying" also presents a succinct summary of Wilde's artistic and literary beliefs. In this essay, Wilde uses a witty Socratic dialogue to illustrate his theory through both form and content. The premise of the essay is a discussion between two men—Vivian, who represents Wilde by voicing the ideas of aestheticism and Cyril who represents Victorian responses and objections. In this way, Wilde provides an artistic overview and justification of his "new aesthetic theory," which Vivian sums up with 4 tenants:

> 1. "Art never expresses anything but itself": an idea which reinforces Wilde's support of art for art's sake in his lectures;
> 2. "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals": this complex idea succinctly sums up his critique of mimesis and realism in "The English Renaissance of Art."
> 3. "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. . .. It follows, as a corollary from this, that external Nature also imitates Art": not only does this idea describe his equation of Art with Forms, but it illustrates his desire to be creator rather than simply imitator.
> 4. ". . . Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art": while he doesn't

Criticism" in the July and September 1890 issues of *The Nineteenth Century*, the (much-revised) essay ultimately found a home in Wilde's collection *Intentions.* Using a Socratic dialogue between his alter-ego Gilbert and the antagonistic voice for popular aesthetic ideas, Ernest, it considers life in relationship to art, emphasizing the importance of the individual and citing critical analysis as the birthplace of originality. Through these characters, Wilde explains that criticism or the critical faculty is at the heart of art itself:

> It treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the many of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in the soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meaning, and makes it marvelous for us . . ..

In other words, art becomes life as it gains the soul of each critic, "For when the work is finished it has, as it were, an independent life of its own, and may deliver a message far other than that which was put into its lips to say." It is, therefore, an infinitely re-creatable experience; it is a paradox—individual yet collective. Through his alter-ego, Wilde provides us with his personal manifesto: he stands as the critic, providing a "message far other" than a mere parroting of aesthetic ideals. In effect, he gives himself

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expressly say this in his lectures, he alludes to it through his description of beauty and art as an artificial reality that ironically becomes more real than life and paradoxically remains separate from the sphere of morality.

Although these tenants are offered by Vivian, a fictional character, we can justifiably read them as Wilde's own ideas because, as shown above, they either echo or add to ideas from his lectures. The characters—Vivian and Cyril—are even named after Wilde's own children, and, as Ryan Wong points out, "Wilde's use of his children's names suggests, though, that he in a sense 'gave birth' to the characters and the ideas that they toss about."

permission to completely refashion these literary ideas into something individual and

new:

> For it is not enough that a work of art should conform to the aesthetic demands of its age: there must be also about it, if it is to affect us with any permanent delight, the impress of a distinct individuality, an individuality remote from that of ordinary men, and coming near to us only by virtue of a certain newness and wonder in the work, and through channels whose very strangeness makes us more ready to give them welcome. ("Renaissance")

This is absolutely crucial for Wilde who believes that individuality and newness which

transform the original are necessary for true art.

Wilde then presents his own theory of art as he considers the juxtaposition of the

individual versus the collective:

> Gilbert: Believe me, Ernest, there is no fine art without self-consciousness, and self-consciousness and the critical spirit are one.
>
> Ernest: I see what you mean, and there is much in it. But surely you would admit that the great poems of the early world, the primitive, anonymous collective poems, were the result of the imagination of races, rather than of the imagination of individuals?
>
> Gilbert: Not when they became poetry. Not when they received a beautiful form. For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual.

Wilde achieves several important things through this conversation: first, he links art and

self, using the classical idea of forms to position both as abstract ideals that are achieved

through the literary efforts of the individual. Next, he justifies individualism, defining

classical (and all good) art as beginning with the imagination of the individual rather than

the nation. Finally, he reacts to a very Irish urgency to literarily reconstruct a national

identity during British colonialism.[22] Rather than bow to the need for a collective

recreation of nation, however, Wilde explains that a good artist/critic must write

"themselves" and that these individual identities, written and re-written, become, over

time, what we view as the collective imagination of a race:

> The culture that this transmission of racial experiences makes possible can be made perfect by the critical spirit alone, and indeed may be said to be one with it. For who is the true critic but he who bears within himself the dreams, and ideas, and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure? And who the true man of culture, if not he who by fine scholarship and fastidious rejection has made instinct self-conscious and intelligent, and can separate the work that has distinction from the work that has it not, and so by contact and comparison makes himself master of the secrets of style and school, and understands their meanings, and listens to their voices, and develops that spirit of disinterested curiosity which is the real root, as it is the real flower, of the intellectual life, and thus attains to intellectual clarity, and, having learned 'the best that is known and thought in the world,' lives—it is not fanciful to say so—with those who are the Immortals.

This is the secret of originality and immortality for Wilde, his reason to justify art

criticism. By continually creating and re-creating with the critical faculty, each individual

inscribes into art their own souls—a true juxtaposition of the individual versus the

collective combining to create more than the sum of their own parts (or, in this case, more

than the sum of the original art), and, thus, passing on the ideas of a nation or

generations. In effect, what Wilde outlines here is a unique method of national identity

creation that relies on the appropriation of creation and comes from the literary efforts of

the individual identity standing in for and ultimately becoming a national imagination.

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[22] As Edward Hirsch notes, "[f]rom James Joyce and Flann O'Brien onward," most important Irish writers have "felt compelled to demythologize the peasant figure that was first imagined by the Revivalists." (1116).

This paradox of collective race definition by individual identity creation, becomes the

foundation of a new Irish literary tradition that takes Wilde as its starting point.

Wilde further separates himself from aestheticism with a subtle shift to the way

he views beauty. Rather than simply echoing "art for art's sake," he champions a more

complex argument, "art for life's sake," firmly linking art and beauty with life itself. In

essence, Wilde treats art as one of Plato's Forms, equating it with beauty and explaining

that it exists in the Realm of Ideals. He pushes this even further as he claims that art more

accurately represents reality than our non-literary lives or even nature (both of which are

mere shadows of art) in both his lecture "The English Renaissance of Art" and his essay

"The Decay of Lying."[23] Claiming that "Life imitates art more than art imitates life"

("Decay"), Wilde strives for a world of beauty, a more complete world he believes must

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[23] In 1882, Wilde went on a year-long tour almost exclusively consisting of two essential lectures: "The English Renaissance of Art" (which morphed over time into "The Decorative Arts") and "The House Beautiful." He also gave one impromptu speech on St. Patrick's day in St. Paul, Minnesota, a lecture entitled "Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century" in San Francisco, California, and a talk entitled "The Relation of Art to the Other Studies" to a women's college in Hamilton, Ontario. See John Cooper's website *Oscar Wilde in America* for the most complete information on Wilde's American tour. Because Wilde presented this information over 140 times in lecture form (rather than fiction or poetry), we can safely assume that these lectures represent his own ideas on beauty and art. Specifically, Wilde begins his lecture "The English Renaissance of Art" by underscoring one of the most important characteristics of his personal aesthetic theory—that of rebirth or recreation. This emphasis on rebirth further supports Wilde's placement of himself as a "critic" to literary aestheticism.

[24] Wilde's other essays and texts further support his artistic theories as laid out above, working synergistically with his constructed persona, manipulating juxtaposition, paradox, and mythical metaphor to explore identity and to consider how it can be textually created. For example, in "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," Wilde reinforces his idea that art is a form that represents a "truer" reality through its artificiality than life does through its reality when he describes Thomas Griffiths Wainwright as follows: "This young dandy sought to be somebody, rather than to do something. He recognized that Life itself is in art and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it" (np). In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde illustrates the aesthetic admiration of Greek culture, and he, once again emphasizes that art creates a superficial version of reality that is superior. In addition, the preface to Dorian Gray is famous for separating art from morality with the quote: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." It also promotes the idea that art should not be judged by its usefulness: "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless." Finally, the essay "The Soul of Socialism Under Man" expresses the importance of individualism to art.

be fashioned through the two highest forms of art "life and literature" ("Critic").[24]

And the Word Became Flesh

Not only does Wilde elevate life and literature but he also treats them interchangeably as he experiments with something I describe as "self-writing." For example, "The Critic as Artist" takes on personal textual creation, beginning with a discussion of memoirs. While Ernest despises them, Gilbert celebrates them: "But I must confess that I like all memoirs. I like them for their form, just as much as for their matter. In literature mere egotism is delightful." I bring this point up not only because it continues Wilde's emphasis on the importance of the individual in literature but also because it begins a subtle textual shift which allows Gilbert to begin personifying books. In fact, immediately after this confession, Gilbert begins to confuse famous authors (such as Cicero, Balzac, and Byron) with their writings before adding that "Cheap editions of great books may be delightful, but cheap editions of great men are absolutely detestable." Thus, the essay begins with a slippage between self and text, and this, coupled with a celebration of self or the individual, sets a precedent for Wilde's recurring trope of characters fashioning themselves into books—one that occurs again when baby Jack is switched for a three-volume novel in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and when Dorian Gray works to become the "poisonous yellow book" in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This type of textual recreation or self-writing represents Wilde's ideals about art, his personal method of identity creation, while underscoring that it must be achieved through the medium of text.

Combining Wilde's personal history of juxtaposition and paradox, his equation of life with the individual search for beauty, and his intentional slippage from text to identity, provides a blueprint for Wilde's version of self-creation—one that extends from his own life into his most famous works. Therefore, in this next section, I will specifically look at *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* analyzing the ways Wilde introduces classic elements into his famous paradoxes, creating mythic exaggerations of English wit and manners, thereby both subtlety appropriating them and critiquing them. In this way, I will illustrate how Wilde paradoxically combines classic mythology with English stereotypes to demonstrate the ways that national and gender identity are more than the sum of their parts—that rather than limiting, they provide the space for identity recreation and fluidity. In other words, each of these works experiments with Wilde's personal methods of self-writing, both warning of and extoling the power inherent in textual creation and paving a path for future Irish authors to attempt their own literary identity creations.

More Monster than Myth: Paradoxical Mythological Metaphor in *Importance* and *Picture*

From his carefully chosen clothes to his witty and paradoxical words, we have seen that Oscar Wilde deliberately makes choices that allow him to artistically recreate his identity. For Wilde, literature represents an opportunity to transcend both language and time, to complicate traditional ideas of national and personal identity through a juxtaposed duality. This becomes especially clear during his most prolific years of writing—1890 through 1896. In fact, the works Wilde produces during this timeframe can be seen as intertextual texts that synergistically bolster each other while providing prototypes for his version of self-writing. Specifically, he textually manifests the ideas he

develops in "The Critic as Artist" in his (1890) novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his (1895) play *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Considered Wilde's best works by many critics, both texts underscore the fluidity of identity through Jack Worthing's recreation of himself into Ernest and Dorian Gray's transformation of himself into a living version of the poisonous yellow book. Wilde couples these transforming protagonists with the complicated female characterizations of Lady Bracknell, Miss Prism, and Sibyl Vane, who he simultaneously mythologizes and de-mythologizes. This subversion of mythological metaphor allows Wilde to artistically (and thus immortally) portray the paradoxical nature of identity, to create identity that is more than the sum of its parts. This unique use of metaphor allows the males in these texts to subvert and appropriate the role of the mother by becoming creators—recreating themselves as pieces of literature, as immortal novels that can be aesthetically appreciated. In essence these texts behave as the classical Echo, personifying Wilde's own struggle for an identity based on aestheticism.[25]

Wilde's reconstruction of his own identity into something complicated and yet paradoxically unified underscored his belief that identity could (and perhaps should) be artistically constructed—a theory which he employed when creating characters for many of his texts. Nowhere is this more evident than in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest.* [26] While critics have described this play as a masterpiece of English wit and

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[25] As ever, however, Wilde complicates matters by showing the potential problems that ensue when one creates identity through artifice through both Dorian and Jack. This mirrors the difficulties he has in real life, which, unfortunately ends in public humiliation, jail, and death.

[26] *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first performed at St. James Theatre in London on February 14th 1895. It opened to great acclaim although most critics believed it was a trivial play and enjoyed it simply for its humor. For example, in *Saturday Review,* George Bernard Shaw described it as "rib-tickling" but lacking depth. A few, however, discerned greater meaning in Wilde's dialogue, including H.G. Wells who

manners and have frequently discussed the potentially homosexual undertones of Jack

Worthing's double life, they have largely ignored Wilde's unique use of mythological

metaphor—specifically, the way Wilde mythologizes and then immediately

demythologizes the adult women in the play.[27]

Wilde characterizes the first of these women, Lady Bracknell, as larger than life.

Mother of Gwendolyn, Lady Bracknell must grant Jack her blessing before he and

Gwendolyn can marry. However, Lady Bracknell's personification of English values and

manners makes her seem rather ridiculous. In a humorous interview with Jack, she asks a

series of important questions but gives rather absurd commentary:

> Lady Bracknell: [Pencil and note-book in hand.] I feel bound to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men . . .. However, I am quite ready to enter your name, should your answers be what a really affectionate mother requires. Do you smoke?
>
> Jack.: Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
>
> Lady Bracknell: I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. What is your age?
>
> Jack: Twenty-nine.
>
> Lady Bracknell: A very good age to be married at. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?
>
> Jack: [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

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mused that most people would miss the point of the play entirely (from an unsigned review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*). Immensely popular, the show, nevertheless, suffered due to Wilde's legal battles/troubles with the Marquess of Queensberry. Due to the scandal, the theatre first tried to preserve the play by removing Wilde's name from the playbill but ultimately shut down its production at St. James Theatre.

[27] While metaphors typically create a productive association between two different things (e.g. She is a rose), Wilde pushes them further, adding the opposite to create a deeper, more robust meaning (e.g. She is a rose, but she is no flower). So, for example, calling a woman a rose might indicate that she is beautiful; however, calling a woman a rose but not a flower might indicate that she is beautiful but not delicate.

> Lady Bracknell: I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone. The whole theory of modern education is radically unsound. Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square. What is your income? (Wilde, *Importance,* 493)

While each of these questions, indeed, might be of interest to "a really affectionate mother," Lady Bracknell's priorities and reasoning undermine their importance. Ultimately, she refuses the match when she discovers Jack was found in a handbag at a railway station and then adopted by a wealthy gentleman. She recommends that he "acquire some relations as soon as possible" so that he might produce "one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over" because she would never dream of allowing her daughter "to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel . . ." (495). While this entire exchange trivializes the Victorian emphasis on family lineage (and, thus, identity itself), it also firmly establishes Lady Bracknell's role as a symbol of English values and customs.

Jack senses Lady Bracknell's power, stating "Never met such a Gorgon . . . I don't really know what a Gorgon is like, but I am quite sure that Lady Bracknell is one. In any case, she is a monster, without being a myth, which is rather unfair . . ." (496). Here, Wilde sets up a complicated mythological metaphor. Jack begins by saying that Lady Bracknell is a Gorgon—a classical monster—but he takes his metaphor further, creating a paradox when he adds "without being a myth." Because the term "Gorgon" explicitly refers to the three sisters from Greek mythology (Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa), Lady Bracknell must be a myth. However, Jack's revelation that she is not a myth complicates the metaphor, making it paradoxical. While metaphors typically create

a productive association between two different things (e.g., she is a rose), Wilde pushes them further, adding the opposite to create a deeper, more robust meaning (e.g., she is a rose, but she is no flower). So, for example, calling a woman a rose might indicate that she is beautiful; however, calling a woman a rose but not a flower might indicate that she is beautiful but not delicate. Through his treatment of Lady Bracknell, Wilde manages to create a more realistic person and, as per his aesthetic theory, this person is real because she is based on artifice not reality. In other words, the artistic space of the play offers Wilde the opportunity to transform (recreate) the reality of the Victorian culture with a powerful and complicated "real" woman.

Furthermore, the figure of the Gorgon adds another layer to Wilde's use of paradoxical mythic metaphor. The three Gorgon sisters were mythological creatures with snakes for hair, famous for turning those who looked upon them to stone. Wilde imbues this mythological metaphor with a significant amount of meaning by making Jack describe stasis as monstrous; therefore, Jack's fear of this "monster" symbolizes his fear of becoming entombed in stone, becoming static, and lacking the means for a fluid identity. Thus, I argue that Wilde pairs classicism with expected English norms in this paradoxical manner to underscore the limits of English identity, to imply that a fluid identity must be made up of more than a set of static stereotypical national values, and that this paradoxical mythological metaphor not only strengthens Wilde's implicit critique of Victorian mores, but it also allows him to create an identity that is literary and steeped in metaphor, ultimately representing his desire for identities that are both artistic and paradoxical.

Wilde also creates a paradoxical mythological metaphor about Miss Prism through an interesting dialogue exchange between Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble. Specifically, Chasuble says, "But I must not disturb Egeria and her pupil any longer," to which Miss Prism responds, "Egeria? My name is Lætitia, Doctor" (502). In this instance Chasuble constructs the metaphor by equating Miss Prism to Egeria, a nymph from Roman mythology rife with associations to chastity, pregnancy, and education.[28] Immediately following Chasuble's proclamation, Miss Prism demythologizes herself, adding complexity to her identity. These two lines, working in concert, offer a more complete image of this complex character. For example, Miss Prism, like Egeria, has a connection to education as Gwendolyn's governess. She also has a chaste association with pregnancy and birth through her role as Jack's nanny and her subsequent loss of him in the train station. However, unlike Egeria, who was known for the wisdom with which she instructed Numa, the second king of Rome (Nethercot, 112), Miss Prism fails to teach Gwendolyn anything of value and is rather, as Lady Bracknell describes her, "a female of repellent aspect, remotely connected with education" (Wilde, *Importance,* 533). In addition, rather than standing as a symbol of hope to pregnant women like Egeria, Miss Prism fails them by accidently switching a baby with a novel and leaving him in a train station. Rather than acting as a guide and source of hope for pregnant women, she fails at the most basic of maternal tasks for a new mother. Wilde thus uses the aesthetic space of his play to experiment with paradox and myth as means of textual identity creation, to craft the paradoxically complex nature of Miss Prism as Egeria/not Egeria.

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[28] All information about Egeria comes from Nethercot.

Years before Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest,* he had begun to play with mythological metaphor through the character of Sibyl Vane in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[29] An actress at a small and seedy theatre, Sibyl captures Dorian's attention through her portrayal of Juliet. Captivated, Dorian returns every night, falling more and more in love with each performance. Wilde constructs Sibyl's paradoxical mythological metaphor implicitly through her name and profession rather than explicitly through dialogue as in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* On the one hand Wilde mythologizes Sibyl by equating her to the sibyl of ancient Greek mythology, an empty vessel through whom the Greek gods would speak. He further connects her to classical Greek mythology through Dorian's description of her:

> . . . imagine a girl, hardly seventeen years of age, with a little, flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark-brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose. She was the loveliest thing I had ever seen in my life. You said to me once that pathos left you unmoved, but that beauty, mere beauty, could fill your eyes with tears. I tell you, Harry, I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me.

On the other hand, he demythologizes her by having her fulfill her role of oracle as an actress, speaking with the voices of classical literary deities rather than Greek ones. As Dorian explains to Lord Wotton,

> "To-night she is Imogen . . . and to-morrow night she will be Juliet."
> "When is she Sibyl Vane?"
> "Never." (Wilde, *The Picture* 48)

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[29] Originally published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (1890), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* received quite a bit of notoriety. Many critics worried about the homosexual innuendos and moral value of the novella, and, as a result, Wilde made quite a few revisions before ultimately publishing the story as a novel in 1891 as a novel. This version included the famous preface that claims, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all." The novel was used in Wilde's trail and helped to convict him of "gross indecency."

In essence, Dorian responds to Sibyl's fluid identity creation and recreation: for him, she represents the opposite of stasis.

The squalid nature of the "absurd little theatre" located "in a labyrinth of grimy streets and black grassless squares" theatre further de-mythologizes Sibyl:

> Well, I found myself seated in a horrid little private box, with a vulgar drop-scene staring me in the face. I looked out from behind the curtain and surveyed the house. It was a tawdry affair, all Cupids and cornucopias, like a third-rate wedding-cake. The gallery and pit were fairly full, but the two rows of dingy stalls were quite empty. . .. (48)

Wilde thus aesthetically creates Sibyl by illustrating her infinite ability to recreate herself, while simultaneously defining her through a mythic paradox—pulling her name and description directly from classicism and juxtaposing this with the de-stabilizing depiction of the theatre. Sibyl's failure occurs only when she gives up her fluid identity for Dorian, becoming static by losing her artistic identity and desiring a realistic one with Dorian. Wilde, by making Sibyl an actor, both figuratively and literally uses the space of the play as a space to explore identity recreation.

Mythic Mothers

In addition to Greek and Roman attributes, Wilde implicitly endows each of these female characters with another mythic trope—that of the mother. As with the other mythological metaphors, Wilde treats this trope paradoxically. This is perhaps not surprising because, as Diane Stubbings discusses in her book *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce*, the specter of the mother looms large in Irish literature during this time period, playing a dichotomous role—both a powerless familial role, tied to hearth and home, and a powerful mythical role (e.g. the symbol of the Virgin

Mary or Cathleen ni Houlihan). Wilde simply taps into this cultural paradox; however, he uses it in a unique way.

First, with Miss Prism and Sibyl Vane, Wilde creates something that is and is not at the same time—mothers who are not mothers. As a governess, Miss Prism operates as a kind of substitute mother: she cares for Jack (until she misplaces him), and she helps raise and educate Gwendolyn. In addition, when Chasuble calls her Egeria, he associates her with birth and fertility. Jack even believes that Miss Prism is his mother when he hears the story of the baby that is switched with a three-volume book:

> Jack. [In a pathetic voice.] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.
>
> Miss Prism. [Amazed.] You?
>
> Jack. [Embracing her.] Yes . . . mother!
>
> Miss Prism. [Recoiling in indignant astonishment.] Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried! (Wilde, *Importance,* 536)

Even though Miss Prism is not an actual mother (as she so indignantly asserts), and she fails as a governess, she does ultimately become a type of mother to him. Specifically, she rebirths him, bringing him into a brand-new life, changing him from son of Ernest Montcrief to the orphan adopted by Thomas Cardew. Like Miss Prism, Sibyl Vane represents another "not mother." As Dorian explains to Lord Henry, "there is something of a child about her" (Wilde, *Picture,* 48), and she is inexperienced, unmarried, and unknowledgeable. However, Sibyl also instigates a re-birth in Dorian when her suicide compels him to begin a new life that is modeled on the poisonous yellow book. Thus, both women become paradoxical mythic mothers through their childless status and their role in their protagonists' rebirth.

Wilde's use of the paradoxical mother is perhaps most obvious when considering

Lady Bracknell, who as Gwendolyn's mother, is quite literally the only mother in both

texts. Even though she is technically a mother, Wilde frequently implies that she fails as a

mother to Gwendolyn. For example, when she interviews Jack, she claims that she is

merely searching for answers that any "really affectionate mother" would require;

however, she gives absurd responses and fails to consider Gwendolyn at all. In addition,

she has no interest in Gwendolyn's well-being, refusing the match with Jack despite its

appropriateness until he blackmails her by not allowing Algernon to marry his ward

Cecily unless she agrees. When she finds out it is monetarily beneficial to her, she

relents. Wilde also blurs Victorian gender norms through Lady Bracknell: she takes an

active role and leaves her husband in the house and uninformed.[30] In essence, Wilde

paradoxically subverts Victorian ideas about motherhood and self-sacrifice, turning Lady

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[30] Wilde often blurred gender roles:

> Elaine Showalter describes the last twenty years of the nineteenth century as a time of "crisis in masculinity and an age of sexual anarchy," and elsewhere says that "New Women and male aesthetes redefined the meanings of masculinity and femininity." In the late eighteen-eighties, as editor of The Woman's World, Oscar Wilde provided a link between gathering anxieties around notions of sexual decadence and the increasingly epicene image of the New Woman. The character of Oscar Wilde, theatrical, articulate and carefully dressed, unsettled an array of masculine meanings. (Green 104)

In addition, to his bi/homosexuality, many also consider him a proto-feminist. He advocated for dress reform, and when he became editor of a woman's magazine, he changed it from a fashion magazine into a more serious magazine, with stories by good female authors (e.g. Olive Schreiner) and more serious information.

> Wilde's valuation of women was, for his time, a positive one, particularly when measured in terms of his support for "the 'feminine' in all its guises," male or female, as John Stokes suggests.10 This attitude is exemplified in his approach to women's publishing in the late 1880s. One of Wilde's first decisions as editor of the Ladies ' World was to modify the name to the Woman s World. The former title was "too feminine, and not sufficiently womanly,"11 he said. The magazine needed to become more serious and responsible, to reflect "a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel." (Mendelssohn 156-157)

Bracknell into a mother/not-mother through her decidedly selfish (and often masculine) actions. In addition, Lady Bracknell, like Miss Prism and Sibyl, precipitates a new life for Jack when she reveals that he is, in actuality, her nephew. In fact, all three women represent mothers/not-mothers in some way, and, as such, play powerful, gate-keeping roles for the protagonists. This blurring of gender roles, offers Wilde a space to blur his own gender (both literarily and literally) and to become a literary mother himself—to create through art.

Subverting the Role of the Mother to Become Text

These paradoxical women play a key role in relationship to the men of the texts, precipitating both Jack and Dorian's attempts to reconstruct themselves literarily and driving them away from static, superficial identities. In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* Jack's rebirth in the train station gives him the freedom to construct a dual life: he creates an alter-ego named Ernest, who he pretends to be when he is in the city. Jack claims Ernest is his troubled brother and leaves his country home and his ward Cecily quite often to take care of Ernest, but, in reality, he is Ernest, and he uses this as a cover story to break away from the tedium of his responsibilities. As Ernest, Jack meets Gwendolyn, and they fall in love. The difficulty arises when Gwendolyn swears she could only love someone named Ernest: "... and my ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you" (490). As a solution, Jack decides to be re-christened, and to choose the Christian name Ernest. In other words, Jack chooses to live as his own new creation, and he wants to rebirth himself through a christening to affect this change. In essence,

Jack appropriates the role of mother/not-mother from Miss Prism, subverting motherhood

to give himself the agency to create as he sees fit. Wilde complicates things even more

when Lady Bracknell signals yet another rebirth for Jack as her nephew, who is actually

named Ernest. Jack, however, implies that he will appropriate and subvert motherhood by

recreating himself once more through this dialogue with Gwendolyn:

> Gwendolyn: Ernest! My own Ernest! I felt from the first that you could have no other name!
> Jack: Gwendolyn, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?
> Gwendolyn: I can. For I feel that you are sure to change.
> Jack: My own one! (499)

By recreating himself repeatedly, Jack escapes the gorgon's stare, and regains the agency

that he loses when the mother figures restart his life: he rewrites himself however he sees

fit.

The image of the baby in the hand-bag that is switched with a three-volume novel

further connects Jack to a literary identity. Miss Prism describes the debacle as follows:

> The plain facts of the case are these. On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is for ever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious hand-bag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag. (534)

Jack is physically switched with a three-volume novel, and as literary critic Joel Fineman

explains, this creates a unique bond between the two:

> As a result, because Jack-Ernest is in this way so uniquely and definitively committed to literature, with literature thus registered as his alter-ego, he is one of those few selves or subjects whose very existence, as it is given to us, is specifically literary, an ego-ideal of literature, as it were, whose form is so intimately immanent in his content as to collapse the distinction between a name

> and that which it bespeaks, and whose temporal destiny is so harmoniously organic a whole as to make it a matter of natural fact that his end be in his beginning-for Ernest is indeed, as Lady Bracknell puts it, paraphrasing traditional definitions of allegory, one whose origins are in a terminus. (79-80)

Therefore, Miss Prism begins Jack's destabilization of identity by mistaking a three-volume novel for a baby. Furthermore, by discarding Jack, Miss Prism privileges the novel over Jack's own identity. In this situation Jack has no agency, so it is not surprising that as an adult he would seize authorial power and rebirth his own literary self—he would essentially subvert and appropriate the role of mother to become his own creator.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* Dorian attempts a similar recreation, and his prophetic relationship with the aptly named Sibyl foreshadows this intention to blur the lines between life and literature. In effect, Dorian falls in love with Sibyl's ability to aesthetically recreate herself as Juliet, Imogen, or Rosalind; however, when Sibyl drops character and becomes static, when she falls in love with him and loses her ability to act, Dorian falls out of love with her; she becomes ugly to him:

> ". . . before I [Sibyl] knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. . .. You taught me what reality is. To-night, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played."
>
>   He flung himself down on the sofa, and turned away his face. "You have killed my love," he muttered. (74-75)

Sibyl models aesthetic recreation for Dorian: she serves as an example and a type of mother who grants him a new start to life, but when she journeys in the opposite direction from him, moving from actress to person, he loses interest. Forsaken by Dorian, Sibyl commits suicide. On hearing of her death, Dorian exclaims, "[h]ow extraordinarily dramatic life is!" revealing that had he "read all this in a book" he would have "wept over

it" (85). He goes on to explain, "[s]omehow, now that it has happened actually, and to

me, it seems far too wonderful for tears" (85). By using the word "wonderful," Dorian

indicates that Sibyl, through this dramatic gesture has "passed again into the sphere of

art" (93-94), cementing his own need to aesthetically recreate himself. As he discusses

Sibyl's death with Henry and with Basil, he realizes that he would prefer an aesthetic life

to the realities of day to day:

> It often happens that the real tragedies of life occur in such an inartistic manner
> that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd
> want of meaning, their entire lack of style. They affect us just as vulgarity affects
> us. . .. Sometimes, however, a tragedy that possesses artistic elements of beauty
> crosses our lives. If these elements of beauty are real, the whole thing simply
> appeals to our sense of dramatic effect. Suddenly we find that we are no longer
> the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch
> ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthralls us. (87)

Wishing to be a spectator as well as the author of his own life, Dorian searches a way to

gain agency, to rebirth himself.

After Sibyl's death, Lord Henry sends two items to Dorian—a newspaper record

of the inquest and a yellow book. Sibyl's death prepares and propels Dorian so that when

he reads this book, he is ready to begin his transformation to fiction. The book plays a

key role in this transformation because it represents the novel *À Rebours*.[31] Perhaps the

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[31] The Oxford Companion to English literature (in agreement with many other sources) quotes the
following: **"*À Rebours* has been regarded as a manual of the extravagant aestheticism of the *fin‑de‑siècle*.
It was much admired by Oscar Wilde, who introduces it into *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the 'yellow
book' given to Dorian by Lord Henry Wotton" ("Huysmans"). In addition, in transcripts of Carson's
examination of Wilde during the libel trial, Wilde maintains that he used *À Rebours* as a model for the
yellow book (Holland 99-100). Interestingly, Gary Scharnhorst writes about a letter in which Wilde
"reveals" the origin of his novel:

> Allow me to clear up the mystery. The genesis of 'Dorian Gray' is as follows - In December, 1887, I
> gave a sitting to a Canadian artist who was staying with some friends of hers and mine in South
> Kensington. When the sitting was over, and I had looked at the portrait, I said in jest, 'What a
> tragic thing it is. This portrait will never grow older and I shall. If it was only the other way!' The

most famous treatise of the decadent movement, J.K. Huysman's 1884 novel *À Rebours*

roadmaps decadent modes of life and thought by focusing on the ultimate aesthete, Des

Esseintes, who seeks, through artifice, to sustain unsustainable moments of sensory and

aesthetic experience. The relationship of the novel *À Rebours* to *The Picture of Dorian*

Gray provides another indication of Dorian's preference for life as a literary rather than a

realistic pursuit. The yellow book has a curious effect on Dorian; while reading it, "the

sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly

dreamed of were suddenly made real to him" (106). In effect, through the act of reading,

he turns fiction into reality, rejecting the events of the non-literary world.

    À Rebours has been correctly referred to as a "novel without a plot" because it

focuses on one character, Duc Jean des Esseintes, and his artificial pleasures. The book

spends its first chapter discussing briefly the history of his illustrious ancestry, his

education and early childhood, the dissipations of his young adulthood, and his eventual

wearying of societal life, which culminates with his decision to sell the family estate and

create his own Thébaïde raffinée.[32] Chapter 2 describes Des Esseintes decoration of this

retreat in minute detail: he pays careful attention to how paint and material colors would

show best in candlelight, binds his walls with leather, uses special glass to create his

windows, and adds a mantelpiece display of three poems by Baudelaire—essentially

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moment I had said this it occurred to me what a capital plot the idea would make for a story. The
result is 'Dorian Gray.' As for M. Huysmans' study of aestheticism, it is a clever chronicle and a
clever caricature, but the suggestion that I was influenced by it when I wrote the ninth chapter of
my story is quite absurd. (qtd. In Scharnhorst 13)

Scharnhorst, however, underscores Wilde's paradoxical nature and interesting views on the artistic value
of lies when he emphasizes Wilde is disingenuous in this letter.

[32] Sophisticated, solitary retreat.

changing his home into a work of art. These decorations bear special consideration

because, in essence, Des Esseintes binds himself as a book with his house acting as the

outward cover: "In the end he decided to have his walls bound like books, in heavy

smooth Morocco leather, using skins from the Cape glazed by huge plaques of steel

under a powerful press" (Huysmans 14). Leonard Koos, in his article "Executing the

Real in Fin de Siècle France," notes this attempt to create literal literary surroundings:

> "Once comfortably installed in his house in what is arguably the middle of a
> semiological nowhere . . . The decorating strategy here . . . verges on the ironic . . ..
> The windows of this room resembling the inside of a book. . ." (38).

By creating an aesthetic, intellectual retreat, Des Esseintes endeavors to leave society and

change himself from a normal aristocrat to a literary character.

Des Esseintes' preference for imagination over reality, inherent in this

transformation of flesh into words, fosters literary creativity. For example, he constructs

his dining room to give the illusion of being shipboard; when he feels hot, he dresses in

winter furs and chatters his teeth in order to affect coldness; when struck by an urge to

visit London (after reading Dickens, of course) Des Esseintes begins his journey but

returns after he reaches Paris because a purchase of a London travel book and a visit to a

pub where Londoners dine affects for him the same result as the actual trip itself. These

examples establish Des Esseintes decadent prioritizing of artifice over nature, explaining

his desire to recreate himself as art or literature and supplementing the rest of the novel,

which mostly consists of his opinions of literature and art.

By linking *À Rebours* to *Dorian Gray,* Wilde provides an example or roadmap for

Dorian, who views Des Esseintes as "a kind of prefiguring type of himself" (Wilde, *The*

Picture 108). In fact, Dorian believes that the book details "the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (108), allowing Dorian a glimpse of his infinite life as a novel. Following this model, Dorian sees an opportunity take agency and rebirth himself, becoming the author his own life; however, this is especially paradoxical because Dorian himself is static—the unchanging picture of perfect youth—while his picture acts as the instrument of change and recreation.

In both of these texts, Wilde uses characters to explore his own theory of identity (i.e., the artistic fashioning of identity through text): Ernest becomes Jack when he is replaced by a three-volume novel, and he recreates himself through the "Army Lists" that name him Ernest, while Dorian first yearns to be a physical piece of art as a painting and then decides to change himself into Des Esseintes. Wilde takes this exploration further, however, as he becomes his own critic. By providing prototypes of self-written identities, Wilde subtly pushes his aesthetic ideas forward while paradoxically warning against potential pitfalls. We see this best in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which provides several models: Basil behaves as a true critic, putting too much of himself into the picture of Dorian Gray, but he is ultimately destroyed by the results (foreshadowing Wilde's demise); Sibyl's infinite reformulation of self each night protects her from the coarseness of realism, but proves unsustainable; and Dorian, while striving to enact Wilde's mantra of life imitating art, ultimately fails because rather than behaving as a true critic and inscribing himself upon the original portrait, he produces an uninspired copy of it. Wilde's life experiences make him fully aware of the difficult nature of his identity project, and his insertion of paradox and juxtaposition into the enactment of this theory

serve to enhance rather than harm his project as they create fuller representations of Wilde's words made flesh.

Conclusion: Immortality and a Matrilineage

Wilde's personality, lectures, essays, and texts, when taken together, create what we could term "The Picture(s) of Oscar Wilde." Like his protagonists, Wilde wishes to become art himself. This attempt to become literature is actually the ultimate artifice, subverting nature by providing the potential to infinitely savor life through thousands of critic-inspired iterations rather than suffering a complete and abrupt ending with death. In Wilde's essay "The Critic as Artist with Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing," one of the characters describes the beauty of being able to pick up a book, open it to a specific event or description, and immediately feel its emotion. This ability provides a type of permanence because it is infinitely re-creatable. Furthermore, Vivian, in "The Decay of Lying," says, "One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempre. It is a grief from which I have never been able completely to rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh" (4). This literary power provides one explanation for why Wilde, Jack, and Dorian wish to literarily recreate themselves—they wish to create immortality, which may be defined as the infinite ability to provide emotional response. For Wilde, stasis is not an option: he longs for fluidity and infinite reincarnations. However, while art may provide infinite possibilities through the eyes of the critics, it can also represent stasis and stagnation by capturing only a moment in time. It is fitting that Wilde's chosen method of identity creation creates a paradox of its own: textual recreation, while offering a type of fluidity with critical response, does pose the risk of stagnation by capturing only a moment in

time. This is the danger Wilde warns us of in Dorian's tale, but it is also the hope for immortality.

Through textual self-writing and formal innovations such as paradox and mythic metaphor, Wilde carves out a unique method of identity creation during a time of personal, cultural, and national turmoil. Most of Wilde's texts (including "Critic," *Importance,* and *Picture*) were written as the Irish Parliamentary Party came into power in the elections of 1890 and 1895. This movement, commonly referred to as the Home Rule Movement, sought land reform and legislative independence for Ireland. As an Irish person living a life in England, Wilde feels the weight of his country's increasing nationalism as well as the potential bias of his colleagues in England. In addition, his fluid sexuality makes him even more of an outsider as he struggles for his identity as a writer. Despite, or perhaps because of, all these considerations, Wilde forges his own path, choosing to build his identity text by text. Outlining a radical artistic agenda, he argues that true originality occurs when produced in reaction to something—in art, he gives the critic higher praise for originality than the original artist. By doing this, he implicitly asserts that his own Irish identity is more fully realized as he creates it in reaction to English life and literature. Rather than playing the victim of colonialization or sexual otherness, Wilde sets up his position as one of power. Using paradox and maternal mythical metaphor as his weapons of choice, Wilde provides a roadmap for future Irish authors to consider Irish identity because, as he eloquently describes in "Critic," his personal choices naturally lead to a collective imagination. Furthermore, Wilde's focus on motherhood within the paradoxes and metaphors of his most famous texts coupled with his appropriation of self-recreation (i.e., rebirth), create what I term a matrilineal

Irish tradition as other Irish authors follow in his footsteps, appropriating the maternal for their own personal and national identity creation.

Chapter 2

Ghosts, Vampires, and Monstrous Forerunners: Wilde's Reluctant Progenitor

"We have grown out of Wilde and Paradoxes" (Joyce, Ulysses 1; 554)

Grown out, grown past, grown beyond, grown from: no matter how you read it, Buck Mulligan's pronouncement in the first episode of *Ulysses* situates Oscar Wilde as an originating creative force behind Irish literary identity.[33] Though Joyce flippantly disavows Wilde, Wilde has a complex influence on his formation as a person and as an artist. From Joyce's obvious nod to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with *A Portrait of the Artist of the Young Man,* to frequent references to Wilde's history and ideas in *Ulysses,* we trace Wilde's influence throughout Joyce's career. Joyce reaffirms this connection in his article, "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé"* when he sets up Wilde as the apotheosis of an Irish artist and then warns of the danger inherent in that position.[34] As Ellmann describes, "He took the occasion of his article to see in Wilde something of what he was coming to regard as his own personality" (274).[35] Wilde's scandal and downfall thus

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[33] This statement is even more interesting when considering Buck makes it to Haines as the symbol of the English interloper.

[34] Perhaps the best example of Joyce's admiration and ambivalence comes from an article he writes entitled "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé."* Rather than reviewing this play, Joyce pontificates on Wilde's use of his full Irish name and his "crime" and trial, illustrating a distaste for Wilde's "youthful haughtiness" (201) but spending most of his time in a rather sympathetic discussion of Wilde's scandal. In fact, he claims that Wilde was a "scapegoat," who was convicted merely for the uproar he created in England rather than for bi/homosexuality itself (204).

[35] Joyce hints at this in "Scylla and Charybdis" with Stephen's musing that, "Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves."

warned Joyce of the potential for being ostracized, banned, or otherwise dismissed as he attempts to create his own Irish literary identity. This fear helps explain why, while both authors learned to create in a place bound by English rule, Joyce ultimately chose to create as an exile in notable contrast to Wilde, who operated within the confines of Britain itself.[36]

Throughout his career, Joyce textually underscores his ambivalent connection to Wilde's ideas, simultaneously pushing against and embracing them. Most of Joyce's works include Wilde's haunting ghost presence. For example, the green carnation surfaces in *Dubliners* and *Portrait*, hinting at the potential scandal of writing about forbidden or banned topics, and we know from Joyce's letters that Wilde was not far from mind as he wrote both texts.[37] Joyce also frequently references Wilde in *Ulysses* and uses him as a kind of prototype for HCE in *Finnegans Wake.* In each of these cases, Joyce hints at Wilde's scandal, seeing in it a potential fall from grace for his own life as an Irish artist while drawing inspiration from Wilde's efforts to inscribe identity into art.

As part of Wilde's matrilineal literary tradition, it is not surprising that Joyce hints at Wilde as one interpretation of the ghost presence throughout *Ulysses.* For Joyce, Wilde is a haunting presence because he represents both the Irish artist and the Irish artist's

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[36] Joyce expresses this need to write in exile elegantly in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Stephen exclaims, "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and

[37] The green carnation has been seen as a symbol of Oscar Wilde himself. He frequently wore them, and they became a representation of aestheticism and homosexuality.

downfall. Margot Gayle Backus' "Odd Jobs: James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and the Scandal

Fragment" goes into great detail about the effect of newspaper scandals and trials on

Joyce, claiming that Wilde's trial deeply affected him. Joyce confirms this in his essay,

"Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé,*" as he sets Wilde up as the symbol of the Irish artist

and as an Irish scapegoat. Joyce's antagonistic relationship with Wilde derives, in large

part, from Joyce's desire to be an Irish artist coupled with his refusal to become a

scapegoat to the systems that entrap both his mother and Wilde. Therefore, Wilde's death

serves as a haunting reminder of what could be even as his life provides a method for

writing an entirely new identity, a way to escape the institutional oppression. Joyce

wishes to succeed where he feels Wilde has failed, to see himself as his own person free

of British confines and Irish stereotypes.[38]

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[38] Another fraught connection between Joyce and Wilde is their use of Greek classicism because both connect to the myths in slightly different ways: Wilde finds the physical Greek figure and aesthetic ideal crucial to his self-created identity; while Joyce uses classics in a more complex way, focusing on language and myth to get back to what he views as a more realistic Irishness. This can be seen best in the way he uses the scaffolding of *Ulysses,* appropriating episodes within the *Odyssey* to create a realistic Irish version; or by the fact that Stephen, who cannot even speak Greek, has the surname of Dedalus—the mythic Greek creator of the labyrinth. As Joseph Valente explains, "Mediated by his compatriot Wilde, Oxford Hellenism afforded Joyce a script to be performed or mimicked in his youth and a narrative code to be implemented and manipulated in his fictive representation of that youth" (11). Thus, Joyce follows Wilde's lead; however, he transforms parts of classicism to serve his own purposes, often using mimicry and mockery.

    The differences between Wilde's wholehearted acceptance of Greek classicism and Joyce's tendency to mimic it may stem from the authors' differing educations. Wilde was educated in Anglo-Saxon schools, which placed an emphasis on classicism and the Greek language (in fact, Wilde won many awards and first in classics). Joyce, on the other hand, attended mostly Jesuit schools and learned Latin not Greek. In his article "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé,*" Joyce reveals his antipathy to English education when he claims "that Wilde, far from being some perverted monster who sprang in some inexplicable way from the civilization of modern England, is the logical and inescapable product of the Anglo-Saxon college and university system, with its secrecy and restrictions" (204). Furthermore, Joyce underscores the often haughty nature of Anglo-Saxon classicism in *Ulysses* with his character Buck Mulligan (educated at Oxford), who exclaims to Stephen: "*Epi oinopa ponton* (4;78). Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks! I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* (5; 80)". Buck's proclamation serves not only to underscore Stephen's (and Joyce's) inability to speak Greek, but also to add to the mocking description Joyce builds up of Buck in the first episode "Telemechus." As R.J. Schork aptly points out, "Gogarty/Mulligan establishes himself in the novel as the ultimate authority on the

Joyce follows Wilde's tradition of using art (language, literature . . .) to create a personal and national identity while under British rule from a type of self-exile. As discussed in chapter 1, Wilde wishes to become a piece of art, to write his own identity. Joyce shares a similar project: striving to make word into flesh, "he longed to write himself into the body of the text—to transform world into word, life into Logos, in a magnificent aesthetic couvade that would re-create the cosmos in his own mental image" (Henke, *James* 1). Like Wilde, Joyce sees himself as the art that he creates, believing art springs from the artist's personality. Ultimately, he articulates this idea in a radical reaffirmation of his predecessor's paradox: "My art is not a mirror held up to nature," Joyce tells Oscar Schwarz in Trieste. "Nature mirrors my art" (220).

Wilde's history of viewing identity as an artistic construct inspires Joyce, who takes this idea even further by giving art reproductive power. Specifically, he "refer[s] to the making of literature as the phenomenon of artistic conception, artistic gestation and artistic reproduction . . ." (Ellmann, *James Joyce* 296). continues *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* depicts the "virgin womb of the imagination" where "word is made flesh." Not only does *Portrait* reference Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* as an example of interchanging art with identity, but it also adds the procreative element by allowing the main character, Stephen, to gestate his own aesthetic and mythic identity. As Joyce

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classics and that it is precisely on this field that Joyce has him bite the dust. In *Ulysses*, Mulligan is the grammaticus gloriosus, as such he shares his comic model's fate and is destined to be hoisted with his own linguistic petard" (81). As a product of mainly Irish schooling and sentiment, Joyce must find a way to rewrite classicism, not in the Anglo-Saxon way, not in a romanticized Revivalist version, but in a unique and realistic Irish way. Thus, Joyce uses *Ulysses* to re-appropriate classical language and ideas into a more accurate form for Ireland—one that eschews colonial rule and Anglo-Saxon ideas of classicism. See Leah Flack's *Modernism and Homer.*

matures as an artist and author, we see him take the core of Wilde's legacy of remaking

himself into art and ultimately reshape it, giving it a reproductive function as he makes it

his own in the "brain-womb" of *Ulysses'* imaginative space.[39] In this way, Joyce "births"

the matrilineage tradition, starting with Wilde's idea of identity as art and shaping it into

a way to not only create, but also recreate.[40] In so doing, an Irish matrilineal literary

tradition is born.

For different reasons, Wilde and Joyce construct artistic frameworks that disrupt

maternal relationships and complicate ideas about sex and marriage. While Wilde

endeavors to work within the system of British rule, subverting the English by playing

with their forms and formal innovations, Joyce's project depends on creating an Irish

artist free from the colonial structures embedded in both language and the mind itself: in

other words, Wilde subverts cultural systems by working from within while Joyce fights

against them by working from without (in exile). For Joyce, the maternal plays a major

role in his dissatisfaction with Irish culture and politics. He sums this up in a letter to

Nora Barnacle in which he describes his mother as a victim to both:

> My mother was slowly killed, I think, by my father's ill-treatment, by years of
> trouble, and by my cynical frankness of conduct. When I looked on her face as
> she lay in her coffin face grey and wasted with cancer-I understood that I was

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[39] See Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce,* especially the chapter "The Growth of Imagination."
In addition, many critics have mapped out this interesting relationship between *Picture* and *Portrait*. For example, Gregory Castle considers *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Picture of Dorian Gray* as bildungsromans in that the development of aesthetic theory in each is the development of bildung (133). In addition, Castle points out that Wilde uses Gothic and aesthetic strategies in *Picture* as a method to disrupt English bildung (134) much as Joyce uses Gothic strategies to disrupt British identity creation in *Ulysses.* John Paul Riquelme takes this consideration of *Portrait* and *Picture* further. Specifically, he maintains that Joyce travels from a more aesthetic focus in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to a more internal and realistic expression of what it means to be Irish—one that focuses on combining internal dialogue with language and myth.
[40] This matrilineage also comes about, in part, from Joyce's disdain for the father and embrace of the mother. See *Portrait.*

> looking on the face of a victim and I cursed the system which has made her a
> victim. (Joyce, "Letter to Nora Barnacle, Aug. 29th, 1904)

These phrases precisely sum up Joyce's reasons for fighting against familial, religious, and political structures because he sees in the symbol of this dead mother the failure of each of these institutions to provide for his mother. When he refuses to kneel at her bedside as she dies, he begins a lifelong project of working against what society endorses and constructing, instead, his own institutions through literary form.

Joyce's decision to rebuild the Irish nation in the body of his texts becomes possible because of Wilde's trailblazing example of equating art with identity. Through Wilde, Joyce understands the power inherent in the life and works of an Irish artist as well as the danger that each Irish artist undertakes as the representative for the nation. Joyce believes the project worthwhile, however, and continues it through his protagonist and alter-ego Stephen Dedalus, who attempts to "forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race." In this chapter, I will discuss how, Joyce, like Wilde, demythologizes mythic maternal figures, making space for artists to rewrite themselves as they break free from the ghosts of the oppressive social structures that define them. Joyce, emerging from the same cultural and political system as Wilde, responds to Wilde's artistic pursuits, alluding to Wilde within his texts; however, Joyce ultimately moves beyond Wilde as he establishes this matrilineal literary tradition.[41]

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[41] In other words, Wilde is a helpful progenitor and a necessary antagonist. Also, see "Odd Jobs: James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and the Scandal Fragment by Margot Gayle Backus for more about Joyce's textual reactions to Wilde's trial.

Ghost Mothers: Joyce's Reaction to Mythic Maternal Metaphor

The figure of the maternal ghost haunts the entire text of *Ulysses.* In the most literal sense, this ghost represents Stephen's mother; however, Joyce hints at infinite possibilities and interpretations of this ghost. This project focuses on the ghost as a maternal presence that, much like Wilde's use of mythic paradox, demythologizes the Irish tendency to romanticize and equate the idea of the mother with the nation. In her book *Anglo-Irish Modernism and the Maternal: From Yeats to Joyce,* Diane Stubbings discusses the central and dichotomous nature of the mother in Irish culture— she plays both a powerless familial role, tied to hearth and home, and a powerful mythical role (e.g., the symbol of the Virgin Mary or Cathleen ni Houlihan). Stubbings ultimately asserts that "[b]y representing [the mother], and, importantly resisting her, it became possible to move beyond the constrictions of the cultural tradition and assert a subjectivity free of rigid discursive practices that were themselves an expression of British hegemony" (8). Joyce references both of these maternal tropes, complicating their connection to nationhood and appropriating them as he works to re/create Irish identity. In this section, I will investigate several of the ways he manipulates and appropriates the maternal ghost.

Joyce establishes maternal feminine creators from different mythic and real systems. For Joyce, the ghost serves as an ever-present representation of the artist as mother who weaves and unweaves the body through language, creating and recreating identity. He sets this dynamic up in "Nestor" when, as he teaches a class, he mentally links the ghost story, history, and weaving:

> Weave, weaver of the wind.
> -- Tell us a story, sir.
> -- Oh, do, sir, a ghoststory.
> -- Where do you begin in this? Stephen asked, opening another book.
> -- Weep no more, Comyn said.
> -- Go on then, Talbot.
> -- And the history, sir? (2; 57-63)

In this section of conversation and inner dialogue, Stephen smoothly moves from weaving to stories in a tacit admission of stories as fluid methods of creation. He then links the ghost story with history (a nightmare from which he is trying to escape). As a result, the reader is reminded of the ghostly maternal presence's importance to the weaving of stories, of history, and of identities. This connection is strengthened in "Scylla and Charybdis," when Stephen equates a female goddess with the artist, explaining that the weaving and unweaving of our bodies and the weaving of art and identity are the same: [42]"As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies, Stephen said, from day to day, their molecules shuttled to and fro, so does the artist weave and unweave his image" (9; 375-577). Through this exploration, Stephen grounds literature as a space for maternal literary creation, describing authors as Danu, the Celtic triple goddess to foreground the artist's ability to create.

This maternal ghost enters the book immediately when Buck Mulligan upsets Stephen by criticizing him for his refusal to kneel at his mother's deathbed:

> —The aunt thinks you killed your mother, he said. That's why she won't let me have anything to do with you.

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[42] This episode is of particular interest because it takes place in the National Library and focuses on literary lineage. In fact, Stephen's theory about Shakespeare, which, as Buck describes "proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father," focuses on complicating literary lineages.

—Someone killed her, Stephen said gloomily.

You could have knelt down, damn it, Kinch, when your dying mother asked you, Buck Mulligan said. I'm hyperborean as much as you. But to think of your mother begging you with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused. There is something sinister in you. (5; 86-94)

Buck's harsh critique of Stephen represents an even deeper issue because it mirrors Joyce's actual life. Richard Ellmann details how both Joyce's mother and aunt argued unsuccessfully, begging him to return to the church; Joyce, however, felt that such a concession would be morally wrong:

Her fear of death put her in mind of her son's impiety, and on the days following Easter she tried to persuade him to make his confession and take communion. Joyce, however, was inflexible; he feared, as he had Stephen Dedalus say later, the chemical action which would be set up in his soul by a false homage to a symbol behind which are massed twenty centuries of authority and veneration. His mother wept, and vomited green bile into a basin, but he did not yield. His aunt Josephine Murray argued with him. (129)

When her final hour arrived, Joyce adamantly maintained this refusal. His view of her death as caused by the systemic oppression of family, church, and government inspired him to create something new through Stephen in *Ulysses*. This refusal, however, was not without consequences, and, even as Joyce and his alter-ego Stephen fight to create new systems and structures, guilt overwhelms them as they both struggle to escape the ghost presence of the institutions they leave behind.

Believing that his mother's death was caused by a failure of Irish ideas about motherhood, Joyce confronts the idea of the romanticized Irish mythic mother through his own mother's ghost. This is especially significant because it allows him to push back against Revivalist ideology. The Irish Revival describes the rise of a literary talent at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that focused on a

nationalistic, romanticized restoration of Irish identity. Spearheaded by W.B. Yeats, this revival focused on a reconstruction which essentialized Irish traditions and the Irish peasantry. Appropriating language, myth, folklore, and fairy tale, the Revivalists shaped society's perception of a national identity, seeking to separate themselves culturally from Great Britain. Literary critics have explored the national and literary effects of this Revival, connecting the rise of Revivalism to the rise of James Joyce and the modernist movement as a reaction against its reductionism.[43] Joyce, therefore, uses the literary ghost of his mother, describing her as a corpse, a ghost who won't let go, rather than as a saint or romanticized symbol of Ireland past to demythologize a symbolic national (i.e., Revivalist) version of Irish identity. Joyce, understanding the mythic role mothers take on in a colonized and romanticized Ireland, takes the mythic and demythologizes it through harsh portrayals of Irish reality (e.g., familial oppression and cancer for his mother).[44]

Joyce further critiques the mythic mother in "Telemachus" by presenting a different maternal figure in the form of an old milkmaid. Rather than romanticizing her in a Revivalist fashion, he describes her as dried up, as unable to understand Gaelic, and as unintelligent:

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[43] See, for example, Gregory Castle in *Modernism and the Celtic Revival,* Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland,* Terrence Brown in *The Literature of Ireland Culture and Criticism,* and Tim McMahon's *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society, 1893-1910.*

[44] One of the most powerful symbols of the Revivalist movement is that of Cathleen ni Houlihan. Made famous by Yeats' play of the same name, the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan symbolizes Ireland and the mythic maternal. In the story, Houlihan is an old woman who convinces a young man to head to war rather than marry his love. When he agrees, Houlihan leaves as a young, beautiful woman. Joyce first argues against this romanticism of violence and the need for complete self-sacrifice by illustrating the devastating effects of this behavior on his mother (who he believed died from these systems of oppression).

He [Stephen] watched her pour into the measure and thence into the jug rich white milk, not hers. Old shrunken paps. She poured again a measureful and a tilly. Old and secret she had entered from a morning world, maybe a messenger. She praised the goodness of the milk, pouring it out. Crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field, a witch on her toadstool, her wrinkled fingers quick at the squirting dugs. They lowed about her whom they knew, dewsilky cattle. Silk of the kine and poor old woman, names given her in old times. A wandering crone, lowly form of an immortal serving her conqueror and her gay betrayer, their common cuckquean, a messenger from the secret morning. To serve or to upbraid, whether he could not tell: but scorned to beg her favour. (Joyce, *Ulysses,* 12; 397-407)

The milkmaid's lack of fertility and poverty contrast starkly with the queenliness of the Cathleen ni Houlihan stereotype. This milkmaid does not leave with the step of a Queen; rather, she demythologizes the mythic figure by underscoring the harsh realities mothers face in Ireland.[45]

Joyce continues to demythologize the milkmaid through her interaction with the character Haines, an Englishman visiting Ireland to research for a book about Irish customs/folklore. During the encounter, Haines, attempting to insert himself into Irish culture and custom, speaks Gaelic to the milkmaid. Ironically, she does not understand him; in fact, no one understands the Gaelic language except for the Englishman himself:

> Do you understand what he says? Stephen asked her.
> -- Is it French you are talking, sir? the old woman said to Haines.
>
> Haines spoke to her again a longer speech, confidently.
> -- Irish, Buck Mulligan said. Is there Gaelic on you?
> -- I thought it was Irish, she said, by the sound of it. Are you from west

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[45] Furthermore, the milkmaid, like Stephen's mother, underscores the stark contrast between Stephen and Buck because even as Stephen offers us a philosophical inner dialogue that demythologizes her, Buck focuses on the corporeal, discussing how milk strengthens teeth/bodies and gladly offering up the information that he is a medical student.

> sir?
> -- I am an Englishman, Haines answered.
> -- He's English, Buck Mulligan said, and he thinks we ought to
> speak Irish in Ireland. (12; 424-432)

Haines' use of a Gaelic language that few Irish citizens understand indicates the important role that the English have played in Irish language itself: Gaelic no longer represents a pure Irish historical and cultural artifact but rather a response to the colonial role of the English. In this scene, Joyce effectively critiques both the Irish Revivalists and the English colonizers through a language he will not claim, while demythologizing the idea of the mythic maternal with a realistic Irish mother who fails to live up to romanticized standards and expectations.

Joyce begins *Ulysses* by disrupting the idea of the mythic maternal, offering us images of his ghost mother and the milkmaid. The realistic descriptions of death and poverty highlight the inability of mythologization to create accurate representations of the Irish nation. Instead, these images offer us a reminder of the day-to-day suffering caused by colonial Ireland's familial, religious, and political systems. This haunting mother, this connection to and repulsion of the mother figure in *Ulysses*, underscores the importance of the mother for Joyce. Although he refuses to accept the romanticized maternal figure, he remains connected to the idea of the mother, and this explains his ultimate appropriation of maternal power as we move throughout *Ulysses.* In this next section, I will investigate the gothic way that Joyce ultimately finds a transformative maternal creative power in the de-romanticization of the mother figure in Ireland.

Joyce's Appropriation of the Gothic Genre

Throughout *Ulysses,* Stephen searches for an escape from this mythic representation of the maternal, longing for ways to free himself from guilt as he refuses to honor cultural and political systems he finds unproductive.[46] The Gothic genre offers a language, a set of tropes and metaphors, for Joyce to situate the ghost mother of *Ulysses* as a symbol of victimization and oppression, to reveal the danger inherent in mythologizing and romanticizing the maternal. Joyce's connection to the Gothic genre is not surprising given that ghosts such as Wilde, Robert Emmet, Charles Parnell, and Joyce's mother wander unchecked throughout *Ulysses.* The haunting allusions reach a crescendo when, in "Oxen of the Sun," Buck Mulligan parodies *The Castle of Otranto,*[47] recounting the story of a gruesome Haines, who evokes "horror" and "loathing" as he admits that he is a murderer (336; line 1014).[48] These ghosts, coupled with the repeated images of towers, birth, and death, reveal that the Gothic genre is a resource that Joyce uses to confront the mythic maternal so that he can ultimately be free of systems of oppression and rebuild for himself, and Ireland, a new identity free of these haunting presences.

Despite these rather blatant references to the Gothic, few critics have examined the implication of their presence or the varied ways that Joyce uses them within *Ulysses*. However, a close examination of Gothic tropes within the text reveals that Joyce

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[46] See, for example, the "Circe" episode and Stephen's lament in "Telemechus," "No mother! Let me be and let me live."

[47] If you look at the schema for "Oxen," the style is gestation.

[48] Joyce draws from both English Gothic authors (e.g., Monk, Lewis) and Irish Gothic writers (e.g., Maturin).

contrasts serious Gothic elements (like the gut-wrenching image of Stephen's mother) with parodic elements (like the false identity of Haines) to highlight the transformative reproductive ability of feminine creation. Specifically, in "Proteus," Stephen conjures images typically associated with what we now describe as the Female Gothic (e.g., a maternal ghost, the womb, and conception/birth), while in "Oxen of the Sun," Buck Mulligan invokes a masculine ghost, telling a Gothic tale replete with villains and murder (i.e., images typically associated with the Male Gothic genre). Therefore, looking at these two episodes in connection to each other underscores a dichotomous relationship between Stephen who appropriates the feminine maternal and Buck Mulligan who dismisses it. Ultimately, Stephen and Buck employ their respective Gothic tropes to help them produce literature; however, while Stephen's creativity manifests in the complete (and almost unrecognizable) transformation of a classic love song into a Gothic poem, Buck's Gothic story manifests as an imitation or parody. By contrasting the transformative nature of Stephen's poem with the imitative nature of Buck's story, Joyce privileges feminine modes of creation. Thus, we see that Joyce makes careful use of the Gothic, setting it up as an antagonistic mode of production—as seen in the sparring between Stephen and Buck. This literary sparring clears the way for a feminine mode of productivity that doesn't romanticize or shy away from harsh everyday realities but rather produces and creates beauty within and in spite of the horror.

"[L]oosely defined as the rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader" (Halberstam 2), the Gothic genre originated in 1764 with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto.* Replete with castles, ghosts, rape, incest, and murder, the Gothic experienced its heyday in the late 18th and early 19th

centuries; however, it refused to die, rearing its head throughout different time-periods, including the Victorian era and even today. In Ireland, the Gothic played a key role throughout the 19th century with notable authors such as Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, Charles Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Maria Edgeworth.

Although *Ulysses* typically does not fall into the Gothic genre, Joyce does appropriate many Gothic elements in certain episodes, and recently, critics have begun to explore the strong link between the Irish people and the Gothic tradition. Several critics have commented on this, including James Wurtz in his article "Scarce More a Corpse: Famine Memory and Representations of the Gothic in 'Ulysses.'" Wurtz posits that Joyce appropriates the Gothic style of Irish poet James Clarence Mangen, focusing on the anxiety, terror, and guilt that derives from within as well as from without.[49] Specifically, Wurtz sees echoes of Irish trauma (e.g., the potato famine) represented in Joyce's use of Gothic tropes throughout *Ulysses*. He maintains that, ultimately, the trauma of memory and repression combine, transforming into ghostly representations of Dublin's paralysis. In addition, Jim Hansen's book *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* describes the Irish Gothic tradition as a reaction to colonialism and as a key part of the Irish modernist tradition. Specifically, Hansen studies the Gothic elements found in the texts of Wilde, Joyce, and Beckett to explore Irish gender anxiety: both masculine anxiety and the dual treatment of the feminine as idealized/sentimentalized and as an inspiration of terror. Ultimately, Hansen argues that this anxiety "grows out of and responds to the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish Gothic's confrontation with Britain's colonial politics" (4). The Gothic has always been a site of feminist inquiry and

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[49] This is not surprising considering Joyce's paper on Mangen presented in 1902.

exploration, and this combined with Hansen's reading of the Gothic as a reaction to British imperialism helps to explain why Joyce uses it within his masterpiece *Ulysses.* In essence, the Gothic offers a space to explore the male/female binary as well as a space to explore why the Irish have been characterized as a "savage but strangely feminine race" (3). Thus, Hansen sets a precedent for reading the Gothic as a subversive, Irish method of questioning the gendered tropes and stereotypes that "sentimentaliz[e] the feminine while representing any identification with femininity as the foundation of all terror" (6). In effect, the Gothic genre becomes an ideal vehicle to help Joyce (and the Irish people in general) cope with identity creation during imperial rule, famine, and hardship.

Because the Gothic genre delves deeply into desire, absence, and loss (especially of the mother), Joyce's use of it in *Ulysses* is not surprising. The Gothic ghost of Stephen's mother encompasses the entire text of *Ulysses,* beginning with "Telemachus" when Buck mocks Stephen's refusal to kneel at his mother's deathbed. This exchange summons the ghost as well as a Gothic description of death itself:

> Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart. Silently, in a dream she had come to him after her death, her wasted body within its loose brown graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath, that had bent upon him, mute, reproachful, a faint odour of wetted ashes. Across the threadbare cuffedge he saw the sea hailed as a great sweet mother by the well fed voice beside him. The ring of bay and skyline held a dull green mass of liquid. A bowl of white china had stood beside her deathbed holding the green sluggish bile which she had torn up from her rotting liver by fits of loud groaning vomiting. (5; 102-110)

Then Stephen sees "her wasted body within its loose graveclothes giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath bent over him with mute secret words, a faint odour of

wetted ashes" (9; 270-272). These images progress to a haunting obsession and illustrate

Stephen's inability to let go:

> Her glazing eyes, staring out of death, to shake and bend my soul. On me alone.
> The ghostcandle to light her agony. Ghostly light on the tortured face. Her hoarse
> loud breath rattling in horror, while all prayed on their knees. Her eyes on me to
> strike me down. . . . No mother. Let me be and let me live. (9; 274-277, 280)

Immediately upon beginning the text, the reader is consumed by Gothic images of the

maternal ghost, with words such as "ghostcandle," "agony," and "horror." These

descriptions demythologize the ideal image of the mythic maternal as it begins to crack

and represent terror and anxiety rather than an acceptable romanticized national Ireland.

By presenting the ghost of his mother, the victimized symbol of systemic oppression and

failure, in a Gothic context, Joyce emphasizes his disgust with Irish nationhood as it has

been presented to him. The horror and terror inherent in these Gothic representations

illustrate the exigency for Joyce to find new modes of national identity creation.[50]

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[50] To understand Joyce's appropriation of the Gothic genre, we must delve somewhat into psychoanalysis. Even though psychoanalysis and the use of Freud and Jung are often seen as out of date, Joyce himself used them, and, therefore, this is an interesting avenue of exploration, especially when discussing the Gothic genre. While this approach should not be the only one taken when analyzing Joyce, it is a very important part of the Gothic genre and cannot be ignored in *Ulysses.* For example, while William Fitzpatrick acknowledges the critical tradition of highlighting myths within *Ulysses,* he finds it more productive to merge a mythic and psychoanalytical approach when considering Joyce's use of maternal archetypes and self-creation. In addition, Christina Froula utilizes a multi-pronged literary approach— sociocultural, psychoanalytic, and feminist—to illustrate the ways Joyce brings forth the "repressed maternal substrate" (3) through his modernist depictions of desire and re-depictions of mythological stories. Most importantly, we have concrete evidence that Joyce uses psychoanalysis in his writing. Specifically, Kimberly Kimball uses information taken from Richard Ellmann's catalog of Joyce's "Trieste Library" to illustrate Joyce's familiarity with psychoanalytic texts—specifically ones he owned that were about or by Freud and Jung. Kimball also uncovers the ways Joyce immediately incorporates these psychoanalytic ideas into his writing, ultimately linking Stephen's ghostly mother in *Ulysses* to Jung's focus on the figure of the mother as a symbol of anxiety, guilt, and repression. In sum, Stephen's feelings of maternal absence and loss coupled with his dread of the haunting mother, create the perfect environment for Joyce to appropriate the Gothic genre (and by association, conduct a psychological consideration of the mother figure). In addition, there exists a long tradition of seeing Joyce in his character Stephen, and much of this comes from psychoanalytic analysis. Mark Shechner, for example, justifies a psychoanalytic reading of Joyce by maintaining that all of Joyce's art derives from loss and

Stephen and Buck as Representations of the Female and Male Gothic Genres
(Respectively)

While many critics have considered Joyce's use of Gothic tropes in *Ulysses,* I

push the discussion further by analyzing these episodes through the lens of two subgenres

of Gothicisim—the Female (represented by Stephen) and Male (represented by Buck)

Gothic. Ellen Moers, in her groundbreaking book *Literary Women*, first defines the

Female Gothic simply as work done by women in the Gothic genre (90). However, by the

1990s, "partly as a result of poststructuralism's destabilizing of the categories of gender,

the term was increasingly being qualified" (Smith and Wallace 1). For example, Alison

Milbank writes *Daughters of the House,* (an exploration of the Female Gothic in 19th

century masculine writing) in 1992, and critic Robert Miles describes Female Gothic as a

literary category in 1994 (Smith and Wallace 1). Despite some continuing debate over

whether Female and Male Gothic exist as separate genres, many literary critics have

spent a great deal of time defining the differences between them. While some variation

exists in classification, most critics believe Female Gothic follows the model set in Anne

Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* focusing on the female space and thus employing

images of maternity, birth, rape, and the home. In comparison, the Male Gothic takes

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* as models,

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absence which create the perfect atmosphere for both fear and desire. Relaying information about the correspondences between Joyce and his mother as well as descriptions of her death, Shechner, through biographical criticism, links Joyce and his character Stephen Dedalus and ultimately names maternal loss the well-spring of artistic inspiration for both. In addition, Sheldon Brivac "analyzes" both Joyce and his works, using biographical criticism combined with Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis while blurring the lines between Joyce and his characters. Even Joyce's biographer, Richard Ellman supports the idea that Joyce purposefully laces his texts with psychoanalytic images. However, While Joyce does indeed resemble Stephen (beginning with Stephen Hero), and these comparisons help us understand Joyce's writings, it is a slippery slope to completely merge author and character.

focusing on outside threats to the home—villains, usurpers, and murderers. Even though critics concretize the literary categories of Male Gothic and Female Gothic years after Joyce writes *Ulysses,* authors as early as Anne Radcliffe herself noticed and commented on them. Specifically, in response to masculine forms of the Gothic such as Matthew Lewis' *The Monk,* Anne Radcliffe writes an essay entitled "On the Supernatural in Poetry" that differentiates terror and horror. According to Radcliffe, "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (n.p.). Building on Burke's idea of the sublime, Radcliffe sees terror as the superior emotion evoked by Gothic writing and as the emotion that she uses in her own works. She revolts against baser forms of Gothic that use horror to elicit a response. Although there definitely exists an overlap between the two styles of Gothic, each seems to function in a different manner: Female Gothic provides a space for female exploration and identity creation outside of the glorified role of the saintly mother or Cathleen ni Houlihan (a realistic identity focused solely on the home, Ireland), and Male Gothic explores the impact of outside threats on the idealized notion of the home and the role of men and women within it (focusing on identity as a reaction to British rule). Kate Ferguson Ellis explains, "In the feminine Gothic the heroine exposes the villain's usurpation and thus reclaims an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison," while "[t]he masculine Gothic gives the perspective of an exile from the refuge of home, now the special province of women. It works to subvert the idealization of the home, and, by implication the ideology of 'separate spheres' on which that idealization depends" (xiii). Although Joyce would not be familiar with the terms

Female and Male Gothic, his varied uses of Gothic tropes suggests that he was aware of both the Radcliffean and Lewison models.[51] As Kelly Anspaugh argues, Joyce anticipates the "feminism in Gothicism and the Gothicism in feminism" (11).

In order to understand the different Gothic strategies Joyce employs in *Ulysses,* we must first consider the antagonistic relationship between Stephen and Buck, which Joyce elucidates in the first episode, "Telemachus." For example, contrary to Stephen, who refuses to kneel at his dying mother's bedside, Buck reveals his willingness to play by religious norms that he doesn't respect and often mocks. We see this as the episode begins and "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan" enters the scene in "a yellow dressing gown, ungirdled" with "a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed" (3; 1-3). He uses these items to parody a priest for Stephen's benefit, conducting a mock mass, using his shaving water as holy water and distorting Latin canonical sayings. Later in the episode, Buck breaks out into an irreverent poem, "The Ballad of Joking Jesus." Buck also reveals his performative nature when it comes to colonialism, filling the poem with English stereotypes of the Irish, who must contend with the constant presence of the British.[52] In fact, the episode uses a literal British interloper, Haines, to express the

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[51] Critic Kelly Anspaugh also contends that Joyce uses the Female Gothic in her article "'Three Moral Hour[i]S': Female Gothic in Joyce's 'The Dead,'" which explores Joyce's use of the Female Gothic in "The Dead." She argues that Joyce anticipates the "feminism in Gothicism and the Gothicism in feminism" (11).

[52] Text of "The Ballad of Joking Jesus" in *Ulysses*:

> I'm the queerest young fellow that ever you heard.
> My mother's a Jew, my father's a bird.
> With Joseph the joiner I cannot agree,
> So here's to disciples and Calvary….
>
> If anyone thinks that I amn't divine
> He'll get no free drinks when I'm making the wine

complicated nature of English rule on Irish land. When the episode begins, Stephen is "displeased and sleepy" (3; 13) because Haines had been "raving all night about a black panther" (4; 57), shooting off his gun in his sleep. Buck agrees that Haines is horrible: "God, isn't he dreadful? he said frankly. A ponderous Saxon. He thinks you're not a gentleman. God, these bloody English. Bursting with money and indigestion" (4; 51-52). However, while Stephen decrees that "If [Haines] stays on here, he is off" (4; 62-63), Buck decides to use Haines for money. In fact, he encourages Stephen to sell his "art," his witty "Irish" ideas, to Haines:

> Buck: The rage of Caliban at not seeing his face in a mirror, he said. If Wilde were only alive to see you. . ..
>
> Stephen: It is a symbol of Irish art. . ..
>
> Buck: Cracked looking glass of a servant. Tell that to the oxy chap downstairs and touch him for a guinea. He's stinking with money . . .. (6; 143-144, 146, 154-155)

While Buck succeeds in manipulating the British presence in Ireland for his own benefit, Stephen is disgusted by the thought of selling his art, of prostituting his ideas about Irish identity. This seemingly insignificant interaction reinforces two different ways to deal with the British presence in Ireland: work with them as a Buck Mulligan or struggle to recreate a separate Irish identity like Stephen Dedalus.

But have to drink water and wish it were plain
That I make when the wine becomes water again….

Goodbye, now, goodbye. Write down all I said
And tell Tom, Dick and Harry I rose from the dead.
What's bred in the bone cannot fail me to fly
And Olivet's breezy... Goodbye, now, goodbye. (16, 584-599)

Joyce further differentiates Stephen and Buck through the role water plays in this episode. As they stand atop the tower, Buck introduces water as if introducing a main character: "God, he said quietly. Isn't the sea what Algy calls it: a grey sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. Epi oinopa ponton. . .. Thalatta! Thalatta! She is our great sweet mother . . ." (4-5; 74-80). By equating water with both Hellenism and the mother figure, Buck introduces it as a mythical maternal force; however, even as he elevates its status, he manages to mock its connection to Ireland through the phrase "snotgreen" and the suffocating description of "scrotumtightening." He then immediately turns the conversation to Stephen, introducing accusations of matricide. This conversation carries several different layers of meaning. It reveals Buck's willingness (although, at times mockingly) to accept mythic maternal (i.e., Revivalist) stereotypes of Ireland when they benefit him. This willingness is underscored later in the episode both when we learn that Buck has saved a man from drowning and when we see Buck joyfully plunging into the water, fully accepting its potentially Gothic danger. Stephen, however, turns away from the mythically maternal water as Buck calls after him: "A voice, sweettoned and sustained, called to him from the sea. Turning the curve he waved his hand. It called again. A sleek brown head, a seal's, far out on the water, round" (19; 741-743). Stephen's refusal of the water contrasts starkly with Buck's ability to derive sustenance from it. As Buck embraces the water and the stereotypical imagery of Ireland, Stephen refuses it both literally and figuratively: as Buck notes earlier in the episode, Stephen bathes at most once a month and has an irrational fear of water. Even more telling, Stephen immediately turns from Buck's immersion in the water, leaving the key to the tower and uttering the phrase "Usurper" (19; 744). While many critics have offered

different interpretations of this phrase, I maintain that it is a nod to the Gothic genre, which is filled with villains and usurpers, and a criticism of Buck's acceptance of the romanticization of Irish stereotypes and his willingness to play the part the British have assigned to him.

"Proteus" as Transformative Female Gothic and "Oxen of the Sun" as Parodic Male Gothic

This juxtaposition between Stephen and Buck sets Joyce up for a unique use of the two forms of the Gothic genre. An in-depth exploration of "Proteus" in comparison to "Oxen of the Sun" both continues this juxtaposition and clarifies the nebulous distinction literary critics draw between the Female and the Male Gothic. In these episodes, close examination reveals that Joyce purposefully contrasts serious Gothic elements (like the gut-wrenching image of Stephen's mother) with parodic elements (like the false identity of Haines) to privilege transformative art over imitation. In "Proteus," Stephen conjures images typically associated with what we now describe as the Female Gothic (e.g., a maternal ghost, the womb, and conception/birth), while in "Oxen of the Sun," Buck Mulligan invokes a masculine ghost, telling a Gothic tale replete with villains and murder (i.e., images typically associated with the Male Gothic genre). Therefore, looking at these two episodes in connection to each other underscores the dichotomous relationship between Stephen, who appropriates and reshapes the feminine maternal, and Buck Mulligan, who mockingly dismisses it. Ultimately, Stephen and Buck employ their respective Gothic tropes to help them produce literature; however, while Stephen's creativity manifests in the complete (and almost unrecognizable) transformation of a classic Irish love song into a Gothic poem, Buck's Gothic story manifests as an imitation

or parody. By contrasting the transformative nature of Stephen's poem with the imitative nature of Buck's story, Joyce argues for an Irish identity that looks past Revivalist stereotypes and works outside of imperial confines.

"Proteus" echoes Radcliffe's feminine form of the Gothic rather than Walpole's masculine form, focusing on a reclamation of the mother with images of birth, the sea, the midwives carrying a stillborn, the Omphalos, the womb, Stephen's Aunt Sara, Mulligan's Aunt, and Stephen's dead mother. Not only are these references Gothic in nature, producing fear and desire,[53] but they also underscore an absence or lack that is further characteristic of the Female Gothic: the midwives' presence implies the existence of a laboring mother even though we don't see her; Stephen imagines a visit with his Aunt that doesn't actually occur; and Stephen's mother is absent through death but ever present as a "ghostwoman with ashes on her breath" (32; 46). Literary critic Frederike Leeuwen's definition of the Female Gothic as a "mixture of real and unreal, of rational and irrational," which "creates an ambiguous situation, a nightmare dreamt in broad daylight" that "frightens us because we are both unfamiliar with it and yet, at the same time, only too familiar" (35) accurately describes these absent presences in "Proteus."[54] In essence, the Female Gothic allows Stephen a space to confront mythic images of the mother and, rather than embrace them as is, to use them in his own transformative

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[53] See Judith Halberstam's definition of the Gothic.

[54] Furthermore, these absent maternal presences represent one of the most pervasive Gothic tropes. As Ruth Bienstock Anolik notes in "The Missing Mother: Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode," "[t]he typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected," and "[t]hose Gothic mothers who are not actually dead are effaced by their husbands or other representatives of the patriarchy in some way" (25-26).

creation process. Literary critic Diane Stubbings has noted the importance of rejecting mythic images of the mother as a way to reject British rule: "By representing [the mother], and, importantly resisting her, it became possible to move beyond the constrictions of the cultural tradition and assert a subjectivity free of rigid discursive practices that were themselves an expression of British hegemony" (8). Stephen's rejection and resistance allows a subsequent reshaping of the mother figure—a manipulation of the mythic maternal that allows for his own personal and national identity.

Stephen's creation of the vampire poem further associates "Proteus" with the Female Gothic. For Stephen, the vampire is a symbol inseparable from the mother and represents the son's draining of the mother's lifeblood. In "Nestor," for example, he considers how Sargent (one of his students) must have "drained" (23;142) his mother's blood as she nourished him with life and love: "*Amor Matris:* subjective and objective genitive. With her weak blood and wheysour milk she had fed him" (23;164-165). In the maternal relationship, the child (the son) attempts to reclaim the space of the mother by literally being fed from her blood and her milk. While Stephen considers this relationship the ultimate expression of love—both of the child for the mother and of the mother for the child—his imagery of the vampire depicts a dread, a fear that the child somehow destroys the mother. This repressed guilt appears in the "faint hue of shame flickering behind [Sargent's] dull skin" (23; 163-164) and in the repressed and reproachful ghost of the mother that haunts Stephen throughout the novel. With this context in mind, the vampire poem takes on new meaning, symbolizing the suckling babe who drains and destroys the mother: "He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his bat sails

bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth's kiss" (40; 397-398). Thus, Stephen himself

links the Gothic symbol of the vampire with the female symbol of the mother, hinting at

the underlying guilt of the son's destruction of the mother. The maternal space becomes a

prison of guilt that Stephen must transform through his poem and through his substitution

of maternal imagery for maternal lack, and "Proteus" fulfills the purpose of the Female

Gothic as a search to reclaim "an enclosed [feminine] space that should have been a

refuge from evil but has become the very opposite, a prison" (Ellis xiii). Perhaps even

more interestingly, however, is that this transformation, can only take place when he rips

the bottom off of the pro-British Deasy's letter to create his own Irish poem.

While "Proteus" underscores the feminine, following a more Radcliffean model,

the Gothic section of "Oxen of the Sun" (lines 1010-1037) associates itself with Horace

Walpole and a more masculine form of the Gothic. In fact, many literary critics have

described this part of the episode as an outright imitation or parody of Walpole's *The*

Castle of Otranto, a story about usurpers, patrilineage, and hidden identity Thus, in

imitation, Buck recounts the story of a gruesome Haines, who evokes "horror" and

"loathing" as he appears out of a "secret panel" with a "portfolio full of Celtic literature"

and "a phial marked *Poison*" (336; 1011-1014) to take responsibility for the murder of

Samuel Childs and to reveal his own secret identity as Childs' brother. Although brief,

this story follows the Male Gothic conventions of focusing on murder, outside threats,

exiles, and the disruption of the home. In fact, this tale invites an allegorical reading of

Haines as the outside threat—the British imperator—who feels guilt for disrupting the

Irish home by murdering Samuel Childs. Ironically, Haines (in true Gothic form)

identifies with the Irish by identifying as Child's brother.[55] Several elements support this

reading, including the "portfolio full of Celtic literature," the use of the British interloper

Haines as the protagonist, and the line "I anticipated some such reception, he began with

an eldritch laugh, for which, it seems, history is to blame" (336; 1016). Interestingly, in

spite of providing his audience with an allegory about British rule, Buck does not exhibit

Stephen's antipathy. In fact, Buck plays the system, telling his story in an episode that

represents the gestation of the English language and imitating an English Gothic story. In

other words, Buck immerses himself in English culture, using it for his benefit, while

Stephen literally rips his poem away from pro-British sentiment.

Perhaps the most striking difference between "Proteus" and "Oxen of the Sun,"

however, is the presence of a masculine rather than a feminine ghost in "Oxen": "His

spectre stalks me . . .. The black panther was himself the ghost of his own father"

(337;1024-1034). Although critics have analyzed this line in many ways, it interests me

because it focuses on a masculine ghost and on an image of the father, on patrilineage

rather than on the matrilineage of "Proteus." This focus on patrilineage is ironic given the

context of the entire episode, which takes place in a maternity hospital where a group of

men wait while Mrs. Purefoy labors. Ultimately, the men ignore and displace the

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[55] This disruption of the home from within the home is an important Gothic trope often described by using Freud's term the "uncanny." In his 1919 essay, Freud describes "uncanny" as the translation for the German word *unheimlich*. Ironically, the meaning of this word is difficult to translate because it essentially means *both* things that are familiar *and* things that are concealed or not familiar. In this context, the uncanny often embodies the concealed aspects of domesticity—things that we should know yet that have become strangely unfamiliar to us, "un-homeliness." Although Freud fails to specifically name the uncanny as an element of gothic literature, he does link it to terror in literature, and many literary critics now firmly place the idea of the uncanny in the gothic genre. See "The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*" by Terry Castle and "Virtue and Terror: *The Monk*" by Peter Brooks for some examples of critics using Freud's idea of the "uncanny" within Gothic Literature.

maternal element, focusing instead on the paternal and differentiating this section (and this section's Gothic) from "Proteus." This male versus female dichotomy also illustrates the "othering" of Ireland, representing Britain as the norm and Ireland as the other.

Stephen's preoccupation with feminine imagery associates him with the feminine, while Buck's omission of it associates him with the masculine. In creating this gender binary, Joyce plays with common feminine stereotypes, subverting them by giving them to a male: Stephen is mercurial (he decides to visit his sister on a whim and then immediately changes his mind), creative (he writes a poem), and obsessed with the womb.[56] Buck, on the other hand, acts as Stephen's stereotypically masculine foil, holding the power in their relationship: he takes Stephen's key in episode 1, essentially displacing Stephen from the home and earning the title "Usurper" (19:744). In Gothic terms, Joyce reclaims the feminine from these stereotypes by turning Stephen into a Gothic heroine juxtaposed against the villainous Buck. This subversive employment of a Gothic narrative convention and of the female mother figure not only casts doubt on the stability of traditional gender roles but also underscores the Irish need for an identity that is not just "other" or reactive to Britain: a power Stephen believes comes from creation and transformation.

Radcliffe's differentiation between terror (Female Gothic) and horror (Male Gothic) applies as we consider "Proteus" in comparison to "Oxen of the Sun" because "Proteus," following the Radcliffean model, employs terror to evoke the sublime. In this

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[56] For example, in line 44, he says, "Womb of sin"; in line 45, he says "Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten"; and, in lines 401-402, he says "His lips lipped and mouthless fleshless lips of air: mouth to her moomb. Oomb, allwombing tomb."

episode, the end result of each dreadful image is beauty in sight, in sound, in touch, and in writing. For example, immediately after Stephen begins to write his vampire poem, he transforms the dark, Gothic images of his shadow, mortality, darkness, and possible watchers into the beautiful potential of words (even dark ones) to transcend death and time and to join people together:

> His shadow lay over the rocks as he bent, ending. Why not endless till the farthest star? Darkly they are there behind this light, darkness shining in the brightness . . . . . . .in violet night walking beneath a reign of uncouth stars. I throw this ended shadow from me, manshape ineluctable, call it back. Endless would it be mine, form of my form? Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words? . . .You find my words dark. Darkness is in our souls do you not think? Flutier. Our souls, shamewounded by our sins, cling to us yet more, a woman to her lover clinging, the more the more. (40; 408-423)

Gothic fear and desire mingle in this passage as Stephen considers mortality—will his words outlive him; if they do, will they still be a part of him? Will they help create an Irish legacy? In this scene, the terror of death and darkness expand the mind, inspiring the sublime creation of language, linking words and identity, and fulfilling Stephen's deepest desires for creation and connection.

While "Proteus" corresponds to Radcliffe's ideas about terror as a creative force, "Oxen of the Sun" follows the Lewison model, evoking horror and thus freezing the soul. From the start of Buck's story, the audience becomes paralyzed: "But Malachais' tale began to freeze them with horror" (336;1010). Buck's language further expresses the horrific nature of his tale: "Which of us did not feel his flesh creep! . . .Surprise, horror, loathing were depicted on all faces while he eyed them with a ghostly grin" (336; 1012-1015). The plot of the tale itself reveals that even its protagonist, Haines, is paralyzed, forced into his own personal Hell (336;1021) in which laudanum offers the only relief

(337;1023-1024). Not only do these word and plot choices suggest Joyce's potential familiarity with Radcliffe's theory of terror versus horror, but they also effectively close off the potential for expansive or beautiful sections of thought like those we see in "Proteus"—the story itself is compacted, only occupying 27 lines of the episode. In other words, the Gothic form of "Oxen in the Sun" closes off creative production, while the Gothic form of "Proteus" opens it up. Buck remains trapped in a British story, using a British form of the Gothic genre, and, as a result, fails to create his own national identity.[57]

Keeping in mind Radcliffe's ideas about terror as a vehicle to higher thought helps to explain why Stephen's literary production in "Proteus" is so much more successful than Buck's in "Oxen of the Sun." Amidst the images of the sea, the darkness, and the maternal ghost, Stephen starts to think creatively, beginning with a "poetic improvisation on the closing phase of the lyric drama *Hellas* (1821) by Percy Bysshe Shelley" (Gifford 61). Unsatisfied with this pastiche, Stephen begins to compose his own poem: "He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his bat sails bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth's kiss" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 40; 397-398). Many critics read this poem as a version of Daniel Hyde's translation of "The Grief on the Sea" from *The Love Songs of Connacht*:

> My grief on the sea,
>   How the waves of it roll!
> For they heave between me
>   And the love of my soul!

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[57] Buck's parodic personality helps make him the perfect candidate to tell a British, Male Gothic story because the Gothic genre often bordered on the absurd.

Abandon'd, forsaken,
  To grief and to care,
Will the sea ever waken
  Relief from despair?

My grief and my trouble!
  Would he and I were,
In the province of Leinster,
  Or County of Clare!

Were I and my darling—
  O heart-bitter wound!—
On board of the ship
  For America bound.

On a green bed of rushes
  All last night I lay,
And I flung it abroad
  With the heat of the day.

And my Love came behind me,
  He came from the South;
His breast to my bosom,
  His mouth to my mouth. (Hyde 29-31)

While the phrase "mouth to her mouth's kiss" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 40; 398) echoes the phrase

"His mouth to my mouth" (Hyde 31; 24), Stephen's version goes beyond imitation,

adding the Gothic vampire and thus transforming the poem from a lamentation of lost

romantic love to a lamentation of *Amor Matris*.[58] In essence, Stephen moves from

imitating a male work to transforming a female work: Douglas Hyde obtained this song

from an old woman named Biddey Cussrooee (29). By embracing the feminine, and

specifically by transforming the mythic maternal into a form that is productive for him,

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[58] In *the Love Songs of Connacht,* Hyde explains that "The Grief on the Sea" explains "how a woman keenes after her love" and comes from an old woman (29).

he gives himself the tools to move beyond mimicry and stereotype. This poem both literally and metaphorically sunders him from the British and the male sphere of writing as he rips off paper from (the very pro-British) Old Deasy's writing and creates a new version of text—his own Irish textual Identity

The maternal entirely encompasses Stephen's writing process in "Proteus"—from the overwhelming repetition of the word "womb" to the haunting presence of the ghost mother. Many critics discuss the masculine need to create; for example, Suzzette Henke claims that "the artist must successfully usurp her [female] procreative powers. Stephen seems to consider the aesthetic endeavor a kind of couvade—a rite of psychological compensation for the male inability to give birth. (Henke, *James* 77). However, most critics, Henke included, claim that the Stephen must "repudiate" (77) or reject the mother. I believe that this loss serves a purpose up to a point—it allows Stephen to see past Cathleen ni Houlihan and other mythically maternal characterizations that Anglo-Saxons and the British often try to force on the Irish. However, to create, Stephen must go beyond repudiation—to appropriate the female creative power, he must embrace it. In "Proteus," Stephen accomplishes exactly this: he allows the womb to embrace him, vampirically absorbing it. As a result, he begins to think of immortality in terms of the language of (matri)lineage. Specifically, in the paragraph immediately following the poem, Stephen begins to muse about immortality, wondering if his words might behave as a child, providing a type of legacy, extending "his shadow" (40; 408), becoming "form of [his] form" (40; 414). With this hope in mind, Stephen continues to mold his vampire poem in his own image (his own version of Ireland), revising it throughout the text and

ultimately situating himself as the mother when he presents it in its finished version as a

quatrain in "Aeolus":

> On swift sail flaming
> From storm and south
> He comes, pale vampire,
> Mouth to my mouth. (109; 522-525)

In this rendition (the final one of the text), Stephen has become the mother, nourishing

the child vampire (Amor Matris). Rather than remaining terrified of mythical and

stereotypical maternal imagery, he appropriates it and successfully creates his own

language and literature and, thus, his own identity. In stark comparison, however, Buck

Mulligan creates only imitative literature. Critics have noted that "Oxen of the Sun"

imitates nine authors or styles of literature and that Buck's story parodies *The Castle of

Otranto.*[59] In Buck's version of this masculine Gothic story, he considers colonialism

through many symbols, including Haines' identity as the third brother, and the Celtic

folder. However, his use of a hyperbolic (and rather campy) style of the Male Gothic,

make light of the situation instead of revolting against it. The story, firmly placed

between other parodies of British literature, thus underscores Joyce's intention for this

Gothic section to be read as parody. Kelly Anspaugh reinforces this in her article "'Three

Moral Hour[i]S': Female Gothic in Joyce's 'The Dead,'" when she points out the

mocking nature of Buck's use of the Gothic: "Joyce's passage is in essence a parodic

inventory of Gothic motifs: he sets them up in order to knock them over with laughter"

(3). She then contrasts this to Joyce's use of the Female Gothic in "The Dead," which she

calls "more serious-minded" (3), further connecting the Male Gothic to parody or

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[59] See, for example, *Ulysses Annotated* by Don Gifford.

mimicry and the Female Gothic to transformation. Comparing the tone of the Gothic in

"Proteus" to the tone in "Oxen of the Sun" creates a similar dichotomy of seriousness

versus parody as Stephen creates and Mulligan imitates.

The rest of *Ulysses* further supports the imitative nature of Buck's literary

production. In fact, Buck personifies both imitation and mockery, "and whenever

Mulligan's name appears on the page, the words "mocker" and "mockery" are usually

nearby" (Tanyol 111). In addition, in "Scylla and Charybdis," Buck shares his play

Everyman his own Wife or A Honeymoon in the Hand, which represents a mocking

parody of Stephen's views of Shakespeare given earlier in the episode.[60] Throughout the

text, Buck plays the role of the masculine Gothic mocking "usurper" (Joyce, *Ulysses*

19;744), taking not only Stephen's ideas and key but also Walpole's Gothic conventions

in "Oxen of the Sun." In other words, Buck doesn't create or transform, he mocks and

imitates, and this lack of creation coupled with his exclusion of the maternal (even as he

sits in a maternity hospital) sets him up as the foil to Stephen, who draws on the feminine

maternal to transform and to produce his own personal and national identity.

Joyce's use of two different models of the Gothic does more than simply associate

Stephen with the feminine and Buck with the masculine, it upsets common gender

stereotypes and binaries by allowing Stephen to become his own mother as a way to

overthrow the British patriarchy.[61] The Gothic provides a valuable medium to subvert

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[60] Interestingly, this play hearkens back to the divide between Stephen and Buck in "Scylla and Charybdis." Earlier in the scene, Stephen presents his own form of scene or play which contrasts Buck's play, which ironically begins with the claim that he is about to give birth a play and results in nothing but a discussion of masturbation.
[61] See *Semicolonial Joyce* edited by Derek Attridge and Marjorie Howes.

and question gender norms because, as Anspaugh notes, it "deconstructs [gender relations] through a subversive feminist remainder" (4). Joyce values this deconstruction partly because of the stereotype of Ireland as the savage, feminine other to Britain.[62] While Irish literature of the 19th century famously used mythic maternal imagery to further this idea or to equate the national with the feminine, Joyce uses it as something more, as something that can be vampirically appropriated and used for a new type of identity creation, a new type of literary production.

Conclusion: A New Type of Mythic Maternal

> *"I am going to leave the last word with Molly Bloom--the final*
> *episode Penelope being written through her thoughts and body Poldy being then*
> *asleep."*
> *(letter from Joyce to Frank Budgen, December 10, 1920)*

Each of these episodes illustrates Stephen's use of language and mythic maternal disruption to become a self-creator of personal identity and of national identity. At the end of the book, however, Joyce presents us with a different type of mother—Bloom's wife, Molly. Molly is an extremely interesting character who has caused debate amongst critics: some view her as a mythically maternal being—Gea-Tellus—an earth goddess. Some see her as a parallel to Wilde's overtly sexual Salomé from the play that bears her name. Others focus on her preoccupation with the body, her realistic portrayal as someone who has sex, passes gass, and menstruates: "The final 'Penelope' episode, however, most flamboyantly asserts the novel's underlying tensions between body and text. Molly Bloom's monologue is notoriously preoccupied with her own physicality, as

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[62] See Jim Hansen's *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* and L. Perry Curtis Jr's *Apes and Angels.*

she ponders food, drink, clothes, her waning beauty, her sexual past and future,

childbirth, breastfeeding and death" (Mullin 184). Joyce complicates matters even more

when in one letter he describes her as a Gea-Tellus, and, in another, he describes her as a

fleshly being:

> Joyce himself encouraged an epic interpretation of her figure when he confessed
> in a letter to Harriet Weaver that he had "tried to depict the earth which is
> prehuman and presumably posthuman" (Letters 1:180). To Frank Budgen,
> however, he sketched Molly's more "fleshly" aspects, describing her as a
> "perfectly sane full amoral fertilisable untrustworthy engaging shrewd limited
> prudent indifferent Weib. Ich Bin der Fleisch der stets bejaht" (Letters 1:170)."
> (Henke, "Speculum" 149)

Erwin Steinberg also addresses this when he explains that "There is a great temptation to

see Molly Bloom as an archetypal image of the Great Mother, for at the end of 'Ithaca,'

Joyce has her 'reclined semilaterally, left, left hand under head, right leg extended in a

straight line and resting on left leg, flexed, in the attitude of Gea-Tellus, fulfilled,

recumbent big with seed' (U 17.2313)"; however, her period contradicts this image along

with the fact that she does not receive Bloom's seed (Steinberg 121). So, is Molly a

mythic maternal symbol or a realistic portrayal? Like Molly, I find the answer to this is

"yes." She is confirmation that Joyce has taken the mythic maternal and manipulated it,

rewritten it for the Irish, and by changing it, he has begun to develop a new national

identity.

This becomes extraordinary when we consider Molly's character. She does not

represent the typical Irish mother; she comes from Gibraltar; she does not represent the

moral mother; she does not represent the religious mother (she may attend confession, but

she "hopes she'll never be pious like Mrs. Riordan"); she makes her own way by singing;

she engages in affairs; and she discusses sex and her love of orgasms. Joyce ends with

Molly and her monologue because she offers possibility. There is a long history of portraying women in the epic tradition as static and lacking agency. Therefore, Molly's ending in "Penelope," is a reversal of a 3000-year tradition. She may not be Irish, but she is also not the colonizing master; she is not forcefully religious; she is not the haunting mother. Joyce takes Wilde's tradition and expands it, demythologizing the female body by making it real. He takes the mythic mother of Ireland and manipulates her, rewriting her, and, in doing so, takes control of his own narrative, which after all is the same as his own identity.

In conclusion, despite their differences, Wilde and Joyce are members of a tradition that reacts to both colonialism and the Revivalist movement, striving to create personal and national identities by demythologizing maternal mythic metaphor. Joyce takes Wilde's ideas and molds them into his own, appropriating mythic maternal metaphor and the Gothic genre to disrupt mythic and maternal images. In effect, Joyce relies on this use of the mythic and the Gothic, combined with parody, mimicry, and formal textual innovations, to conduct an exploration in self-transformation. *Ulysses* begins with the loss, absence, and the anxiety of the missing mother but moves forward under the ghost of Oscar Wilde as Stephen learns to become the creator—to feed the vampire, rather than to be the vampire. Through this journey, Joyce realizes that "the essential aspect of the formulation is that the creative act is personal in genesis, that it springs from the artist's self, person, or 'image,' and his "theory of creation is neither vatic nor mimetic; it is in a peculiarly radical sense expressive" (Kershner 219). As Joyce confronts the mythic, the maternal, and the mythic maternal, he pushes against their

conflation with nationalism and begins to recreate himself, illustrating this possibility with his creation of Molly.

I'd like to end this chapter by returning to Joyce's implicit allusions to the presence of Oscar Wilde as both a type of literary father/mother and as a ghost. This haunting connection underscores Joyce's awareness of a new kind of Irish literary tradition as well as his fear of becoming part of it. Wilde was labelled an outcast and ultimately died for his beliefs; Joyce lived his life in a type of self-inflicted exile. Change is never easy, and as each author fought to reconstruct who they were and who they could be despite and because of British colonialism. They pushed their literature to the limits, experimenting with language and textual identity in a space they both referred to as the womb. As reluctant inheritor to Wilde, Joyce sets up future authors for similar textual identity experimentation and ultimately concretizes this new Irish matrilineal literary tradition.

Chapter 3

The Man, the Myth, the Legend: Flann O'Brien's Dialectal Search for National Identity Through Temporality and Mythic Time[63]

By the way, a friend of mine brought a copy of "At Swim-Two-Birds" to Joyce in Paris recently. Joyce, however had already read it. Being now nearly blind, he said it took him a week with a magnifying glass and that he had not read a book of any kind for five years, so this may be taken to be a compliment from the fuehrer. He was delighted with it—although he complained that I did not give the reader much of a chance, "Finnegan's [sic] Wake" in his hand as he spoke—and has promised to push it quietly in his own international Paris sphere . . .. Joyce was very particular that there should be no question of reproducing his unsolicited testimonial for publicity purposes anywhere and got an undertaking to this effect.
(Letter from Flann O'Brien to A. Gillett on May 1st, 1939)

Most copies of Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* include the Dylan Thomas'

quote "This is just the book to give your sister if she's a loud, dirty, boozy girl" on the

cover. It is with this spirit of humor and absurdity that I wish to approach my discussion

of Flann O'Brien and his novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* and with which Joyce himself

approached it. Any book that could catch Joyce's attention at a time when he had nearly

lost his sight deserves critical investigation and hints at a potentially significant

relationship between the two authors. In this chapter, therefore, I investigate O'Brien's

relationship to Joyce as well as the chaotic and humorously absurd novel *At Swim-Two-*

Birds, ultimately placing O'Brien in an Irish literary tradition with Wilde and Joyce by

illustrating the ways his use of multiplicity, dialogism, and time manipulate language to

create Irish identity.

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[63] Born Brian O'Nolan in 1911, O'Brien used several pseudonyms, including Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen, and Myles na Gopaleen when he wrote. In this chapter, I will refer to him as Flann O'Brien, his pen name for the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds.*

Critics, as well as the general reading public, have been quick to link O'Brien and Joyce, noting with glee Joyce's famous reaction to *At Swim*. However, while O'Brien appreciated the support, he also felt the expectations inherent in his frequent comparison to the famous James Joyce:

> This link with James Joyce was one O'Nolan embraced, at times begrudgingly or unwillingly, but always out of some inner artistic and psychic necessity. On matters of literary censorship, as with other aspects of his career, Brian O'Nolan measured himself against the figure of James Joyce. (Dotterer, 54)

The relationship, while fraught, has been traced by many literary critics, resulting in a consensus that O'Brien "regarded Dubliners and Portrait as ideal works of art; Ulysses as an epic chronicle filled with marvelous wit, though at times pretentious, blasphemous, or titillating; Finnegans Wake—though unreadable—as linguistic genius let loose" (63).[64] In fact, Ronald Dotterer refers to their connection as a "literary patriarchy" in which O'Brien behaves "reverentially" yet branches off to use Ireland and language in ways that differ from Joyce (63). In other words, O'Brien, like any child, develops a unique Irish literary persona as he matures as an artist and takes his place as Joyce's reluctant inheritor. [65]

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[64] O'Brien once stated, "If I hear that word 'Joyce' again I will surely froth at the gob!" (Letter from Brian O'Nolan to Timothy O'Keeffe, November 25th, 1961).

[65] The connection between Joyce and O'Brien is strong, from Joyce's endorsement to O'Brien's inclusion of Joyce in *The Dalkey Archive.* Dotterer perhaps sums it up best:

> Nevertheless,Brian O'Nolan had a rebel's reverence for Joyce, betrayed by O'Nolan's key role in launching the annual Bloomsday celebrations in Dublin—the ultimate act of public homage to a modern master and chronicler of O'Nolan's city. Joyce in The Dalkey Archive is neither a raving heretic nor a blasphemer but an ironic opposite: a man of simple piety falsely accused of sinning against the very forces he cherishes. . .. O'Brien's revenge on Joyce is subtle, freed of venom by more biting essays and reviews predating The Dalkey Archive.Yet there remains a consistent contempt for the efforts to canonize Joyce. . ... By using Joycean scenes and references in his novels, O'Brien shows respect for one of his masters, just as a deep reverence for the medieval text of Buile Shuibhne led to its inclusion and comic subversion in O'Brien's masterpiece At Swim-Two-Birds.By using Joyce as a character in The Dalkey Archive,O'Brien effectively renders a "fear-

O'Brien Joins the Matrilineal Literary Tradition

Not only does O'Brien become Joyce's successor, but he also enters into Wilde's

Irish matrilineal tradition through his appropriation of maternal procreation. This

occurrence happens quite literally in *At Swim-Two-Birds* when one of the characters,

Dermot Trellis, gives birth simply by writing about it:

> Propped by pillows in his bed in the white light of an incandescent petrol lamp, Dermot Trellis adjusted the pimples in his forehead into a frown of deep creative import. His pencil moved slowly across the ruled paper, leaving words behind it of every size. He was engaged in the creation of John Furriskey, the villain of his tale. (36).

As Trellis writes, he creates a son through his pencil, describing him as 5 feet 8 inches

with blue eyes, cavities, tobacco stains, and as not a virgin—fully grown. Trellis even

goes so far as to describe Furriskey as self-creation, aestho-autogamy, leaving out the

female aspect of procreation completely:

> The birth of a son in the Red Swan Hotel is a fitting tribute to the zeal and perseverance of Mr. Dermot Trellis, who has won international repute in connection with his research into the theory of aestho-autogamy. The event may be said to crown the savant's life-work as he has at last realized his dream of producing a living mammal an operation involving neither fertilization or conception.
>
> Aestho-autogamy with one unknown quality on the male side, Mr. Trellis told me in conversation, has long been a commonplace. . ... It is a very familiar commonplace in literature. (37).

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shaken Irish Catholic" searching for an appropriate faith, a consistent narrative perspective both in Joyce and in O'Brien. O'Brien proves his belief in Joyce by threatening to sacrifice all in his attack on Joyce's orthodox followers. In all of Brian O'Nolan's uses of James Joyce there remains a recurrent theme for Flann O'Brien's fiction: the heretic's sense of doctrine destroyed in order to give rise to new, more sound belief. As in other models of literary patriarchy, this reverential destruction lies at the heart of an author's creativity. To ignore it is to miss an important part of his aesthetic process. (63)

Through this example, O'Brien concretizes the creation of textual identity by an author who negates the power of female procreation and seizes it for himself. This creative power is the secret behind the tradition begun by Wilde and continued by Joyce.[66]

With the addition of O'Brien to the matrilineage, my project explores three different authors who write during three distinct political eras in Ireland—with Wilde writing during the peak of British colonialism in Ireland, Joyce writing during the Irish War of Independence and the subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty (in 1921), and O'Brien writing in the aftermath of the treaty as the Irish try to reestablish themselves as an independent nation. However, each author, including O'Brien, attempts to answer the same three underlying questions: What is literature's relationship to life; what is Irish literature? What is his own place in Irish literature? These answers provide the key to re/creating a new personal and national identity and to understanding how O'Brien fits in to this matrilineal tradition.

Ireland's struggle to rebuild and reform an Irish national identity without colonial rule underscores the intricacies of separating the point where Irish culture begins and where British culture ends (if such a point could even exist).[67] As Declan Kiberd explains,

> . . . the Anglicization which they countered had penetrated every layer of Irish life, a situation rather different from that to be encountered in Africa or Asia,

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[66] O'Brien complicates matters even more when he has Trellis create a virtuous and beautiful character named Sheila Lamont. After Trellis "gives birth to her," he "is so blinded by her beauty" (61) that he rapes her, causing her to give birth to a son named Orlick. This birth adds another layer to the story as a woman is involved, but the woman is solely the textual identity that Trellis has created, making Trellis the ultimate creator of both Sheila and Orlick and still by-passing the need for human procreation.

[67] See Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory. Kiberd describes it thus, "The English built their new England called Ireland: the Irish then played at building a not-England, but now they were playing at being not-Irish. That is a measure of the dire difficulty of reaching Fanon's third, liberationist phase" (289).

whose emerging peoples were generally not so deeply permeated by the culture of the colonizer. Ireland was so thoroughly penetrated that, apart from a few scattered areas of the western seaboard, it had ceased to exist as an 'elsewhere' to the English mind. (251)[68]

Even after the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Ireland faced civil war as the country separated, with Northern Ireland remaining under British rule and Irish Free State citizens debating which linguistic, cultural, economic, and political frameworks should remain. In other words, the Irish fought over what it meant to be Irish.[69] When Flann O'Brien entered the scene and began writing in the 30s and 40s, he had to contend with all of these issues; therefore, his writing benefited from this new tradition of creating national and personal identity through the art of language itself allowing him to use temporality and the heteroglossia of language in Ireland to disrupt power structures and linear stereotypes. By focusing instead on a mythic or monumental form of time, O'Brien pushes back against Revivalism and illustrates the multiplicity of Irish identity. Each of the authors in my project senses the urgent need for an unromanticized Irish identity in large part because of the role English colonization played in Ireland by creating

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[68] Although it was still seen as an "other."

[69] According to Kiberd,

> In theory, two kinds of freedom were available to the Irish: the return to a past, pre-colonial Gaelic identity, still yearning for expression if long-denied, or the reconstruction of a national identity, beginning from first principles all over again. The first discounted much that had happened, for good as well as ill, during the centuries of occupation; the second was even more exacting, since it urged people to ignore other aspects of their past too. The first eventually took the form of nationalism, as sponsored by Michael Collins, Éamon de Valera and the political élites; the second offered liberation, and was largely the invention of writers and artists who attempted, in Santayana's phrase, 'to make us citizens by anticipation in the world we crave'. The nationalism of the politicians enjoyed intermittent support from a major artist such as W.B. Yeats, but eventually he grew tired of it; the liberation preached by the artists sometimes won the loyalty of the more imaginative political figures, such as Liam Mellows or Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. Inevitably, neither model was sufficient unto itself: even its stoutest defenders were compelled by the brute facts of history to 'borrow' some elements of the alternative version. (Kiberd 287)

stereotypes and defining Irish as other.[70] Therefore, each creates types of bildungsromans

as identity experiments for themselves, their characters, and Ireland itself. This chapter

examines the strategies that O'Brien uses in *At Swim*—including a radical form of

heteroglossia and a radical experimentation with form and metatext that not only escapes

history's nightmare but also the diachronic nature of time itself. O'Brien's subversive use

of humor in a novel that can be neither contained nor described creates a radically

democratic form without a unifying consciousness that flattens the power hierarchies that

had taken Wilde, Joyce, and Ireland hostage.[71]

The Multiplicities of Flann O'Brien (the Man)

Coming of age during the Irish struggle for independence, O'Brien was forced to

live the multiplicities that he inserted into his texts. Beginning with his birth in Strabane

as Brian O'Nolan, O'Brien played witness to the dualities necessary to survive in the new

Free State of Ireland. For example, he observed as his father, Michael Nolan, changed his

name back and forth, depending on the occasion, from the Irish O'Nolan to Nolan

(perhaps inspiring O'Brien's own diverse collection of names used later in life). In

addition, he noticed how his father, a nationalist at heart, often worked in positions that

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[70] We know that evidence exists to suggest that O'Brien particularly disagreed with a Revivalist portrayal of Ireland because he used his Irish Times column (authored under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen) to "[rail] against the nationalist fascination with Irish myth and legend" (Booker, "Postmodern" 7). In addition, Edward Hirsch notes that "[f]rom James Joyce and Flann O'Brien onward," most important Irish writers have "felt compelled to demythologize the peasant figure that was first imagined by the Revivalists." (1116).

[71] This idea is further strengthened by the ongoing debate about how to label O'Brien's work. Specifically, many classify *At Swim-Two-Birds* as a modernist novel. For example, in *Inventing Ireland,* Declan Kiberd refers to it as a "modernist masterpiece" (494). On the other hand, many classify it as a postmodernist novel (before its time), including Kim McMullen and Robert Alter, who describe it as one of the first postmodern novels (Alter 223).

went against his personal beliefs as a government official. Even the sign to O'Brien's

birthplace underscored the instability of national and personal identity: it was written in

both English and Irish (with the Irish ironically incorrect). At home, where Michal Nolan

only allowed Irish to be spoken, O'Brien grew up with Irish as his mother-tongue;

however, through friends and neighbors, he learned English, and he ultimately attended

Catholic Blackrock College in Dublin and UCD, where he perfected it. In addition, the

school setting offered O'Brien the perfect opportunity to begin playing around with his

name as he wrote various articles for journals and newspapers. Known as Brother

Barnabas, Myles na gCopaleen, Myles na Copaleen, and Flann O'Brien (among other

names), O'Brien wrote articles, responded to his own articles, and, in general, parodied

and underscored the idiosyncrasies of post-colonial life, notably writing in both Irish and

English.[72] In fact, many critics have argued that it was "his columns—for better or

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[72] He begins by writing mostly in Irish, however, he moves more and more towards English, probably because of the waning use of Irish as for financial reasons:

> 1943 is also notable for the author's steadily decreasing use of Irish. While this trend started in 1942, by December 1943 all but two of that month's articles appear in English. All of the reasons for this shift are unknowable, but how O'Nolan valued his time influenced his writing habits. In a letter dated 23 February 1943, O'Nolan writes to G.J.C. Tynan O'Mahoney, Manager at the newspaper:
>
>> I would be glad if you would bring the following matter before the Board of the "Irish Times". I have been writing the "Cruiskeen Lawn" features for two and a half years and doing it every day in two languages for a year and a half. From the beginning I have been paid at the rate of 17s 6d per article. This fee could have been justified originally as a reasonable return for stuff which was experimental and which had no established worth but it bears no relation to the value which my own hard work has given the feature in the meantime. The rate of 17s 6d per day is in fact considerably less than half what is paid to other writers in Dublin newspapers for matter incomparably less difficult to produce. I can only continue at a substantially enhanced fee and the figure I suggest is 30 shillings per day. . . .
>
> Here O'Nolan takes a stand for his work's value and his effort. Early in the column's run, O'Nolan argues that it makes little financial sense for him to continue. It is a reminder of the fact that he

worse—that captured the 'first draft' of Ireland's national—and cultural—aspirations,

often with a profoundly wicked sense of humor for revealing the soft cultural underbelly"

(30). After graduating, O'Brien published his few novels, his many articles, and his

column for *Cruiskeen Lawn*, and worked as a civil servant, following in his father's

footsteps. His work, however, consisted of mostly articles, which parodically critiqued

life in post-colonial Ireland. As Donald McNamara Kutztown explains,

> O'Nolan was thus part of a generation of writers who came of age after the
> political struggles with England had subsided and for whom political separation
> was not an overarching concern, although memory of the struggle was still fresh
> in the minds of many people. Because of O'Nolan's family background, the
> historical setting, and the fact that he was one of the few Irish artists who did not
> move to England or North America for any length of time, his column writing
> would display a thoroughgoing Irish feeling, and in particular a Dublin feeling,
> while exhibiting a cosmopolitan ethos (30).

In other words, O'Brien's life and work itself illustrates the juggling act necessary for

those living in post-colonial Ireland while his search for a new national identity

encouraged him to embrace multiplicities not only in his writings but also in his own life.

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was constantly juggling his life and work as a Civil Servant and that as a writer. (qtd. in Ahearn 32-33)

Of important note, is also his switch from his *Cruiskeen Lawn* pseudonym of Myles na gCopaleen to other variations including Myles na Copaleen (the former illustrating correct Irish grammar, the latter, an anglicized or deconstructed version of Irish).

Metatext: The Framework of *At Swim-Two-Birds*

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds,* is a novel of multiplicity. As Terrence Brown asserts, "each of [O'Brien's] works, his finest achievements in the novel form, can be read as a depressed commentary on the dismal conditions of life in 1930s Ireland . . ." (115). Terry Eagleton further explains that Anglo-Irish fiction illustrates the fissured nature of Irish culture and history, subverting English realism which offers a more stable representation of politics, economics, and culture:

> The major works of Anglo-Irish fiction . . . all parody or play havoc with the sedate protocols of English literary realism. . .. For one thing, classical realism is the home of a confident totalisation of social life; and Irish society, fissured, sectarian and partisan as it has been, proved a notoriously difficult place to totalise. . .. Classical realism depends on the assumption that the world itself is story-shaped - that there is a narrative somehow implicit in history itself, a middle march from a lower to a higher state which it is the task of the novel to unearth and figure forth. The disrupted course of Irish history is much harder to read in such seamlessly evolutionary terms, and much of the Irish novel from Sterne to O'Brien is recursive and diffuse, launching one arbitrary storyline only to abort it for some equally gratuitous tale, running several narratives in harness, ringing poker-facedly pedantic changes (think of Beckett) on the same meagre clutch of elements. Indeed It is a story within a story within a story (within another if one considers O'Brien himself). (30)

O'Brien's novel is absurd, chaotic, and unstable; its premise rests upon a complete collapse of time and story within story. His work thus represents this recursiveness, these fissures, and this multiplicity through its framework of story within story within story (within story) and serves as a subverting and parodic commentary on post-colonial life.

The novel resists order and description, making it a reading experience that is difficult to describe. It focuses on a nameless narrator who lives with his uncle and is a student at the University College Dublin. This narrator is in the process of writing his own novel about an author named Trellis who has an author son named Orlick. Ralf

Breuer's heroically attempts to describe the complicated narrative in one paragraph in his article "Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett":

> As all critics have noted, At Swim-Two-Birds consists of three stories on three different narrative planes: - the nameless UCD-student's book about himself and his world in Dublin, plus a fictional novelist, Dermot Trellis. - Dermot Trellis's book about characters taken from Irish mythology and Wild-West romances plus some characters made up by himself, including his son, Orlick Trelllis. - Orlick Trellis's book, the re-writing of his father's novel. The situation is further complicated by short passages on yet other narrative levels. Within plane one there is, for example, a short paragraph containing a theory of the novel, a theory, therefore, also of this novel, and thus a commentary on At Swim-Two-Birds. On plane two there is a sub-narrator created by Dermot Trellis, Finn McCool, who tells a tale of King Sweeny. Furthermore, a fourth ontological level can be added if the narrator of Flann O'Brien, the author of all the books mentioned, is taken into consideration. These different narrative and ontological planes are often juxtaposed in At Swim-Two-Birds by way of the chief narrator interrupting his story-telling with comments on his story-telling (343).

The story circles around itself; time collapses on itself; characters form layers as O'Brien tells a story about an author who writes about an author whose characters revolt. The text disrupts stability and our expectations of plot, preparing the reader to accept a reality in which nothing remains stable and everything resists order.

The beginning of the text reinforces this complexity and instability by introducing us to the narrator, who chews bread while considering the nature of novelistic beginnings and endings. This narrator asserts that "[a] good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings" (1), and then, true to form, he supplies three alternate openings: the first provides a brief introduction to the Pooka MacPhellimey; the second describes Mr. John Furriskey (a character created by the narrator's novelistic protagonist Dermot Trellis); and the third gives the physical details of Finn MacCool. Finally, O'Brien offers three potential endings to the novel: in the first ending, the narrator

graduates from college and receives a watch from his uncle; in the second ending, the

maid Teresa accidently burns Trellis' book manuscript and thus destroys Trellis'

characters; in the third ending, O'Brien considers the madness of Sweeny and Trellis,

completing the novel with the anecdote of a German who did everything in threes,

including slitting his wrist and writing his suicide note. Like the beginning, this ending

differs from expected conventions of plot and offers the reader a complex conclusion to

an atypical story. Tucked into the story are word for word excerpts from letters, conduct

manuals, and other sources. Far from simple, this book subverts English realism with its

recursiveness and a mythic temporality while introducing dialectically opposed and

intertwining linguistic elements. The multiple beginnings and endings reveal the true

genius of O'Brien's work as they gesture toward the danger of repetition and stasis by

leaving the reader with death by manuscript and death by suicide—a warning that

conventional realism and unchanging repetition will not adequately contain the emerging

Irish nation after colonialism.

Multiple Discourses Erode Power Structures: Bergson, Bakhtin, and O'Brien

O'Brien saw no prospect of reviving Irish 'at the present rate of going and way of
working', but agreed with O'Casey that it was 'essential, particularly for any sort of
literary worker.' Further: 'It supplies that unknown quantity in us that enable[s] us to
transform the English language and this seems to hold for people who have little or no
Irish, like Joyce. It seems to be an inbred thing.'

(Letter to Sean O'Casey following praise for *An Béal Bocht*, 13 April, 1942; quoted in
Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 1989, p.144).

Like Wilde and Joyce before him, O'Brien searches for identities within

language.[73] From birth, language plays an important role in O'Brien's life, whether it be

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[73] O'Brien has more to play with linguistically than Wilde or Joyce because of his fluent bilingualism.

his father's insistence on Irish in the home, his perfection of English at University, or his fluid ability to slide between the two in daily life and in his work. Speaking Irish was as much a part of his identity as was his ability to speak English. Thus, O'Brien uses *At Swim-Two-Birds* to underscore the fluid and integral nature of language in identity creation. Some critics have approached *At Swim* through the lens of Henri Bergson and Mikhail Bakhtin, and I find this a useful starting point, especially when one considers this crucial idea posited by Bergson:

> . . . a subversion of literal language was the vehicle of access into a deeper reality. This subversion hinges on two broad strategies: first, a dislocation of the syntactical structure of language, the effect of which is to emphasize language as a temporal process rather than viewing it as a spatialized system of conventional concepts. (Mambrol np)

By subverting language, O'Brien accesses a "deeper reality" and, as a result, transforms language into both a spatial and temporal concept. Bergson maintains that this process represents a rejection of the world around an artist and an attempt to "reach a higher reality" that can only be achieved through art itself:

> Secondly, literal language is situated as merely one among several registers which undermine it. Such a radical treatment of language is much more than "literary" experimentation; it is a symptom of transformed metaphysical and political premises, embodying a rejection of the world as given, as composed of discrete objects and appearances, and an idealistic attempt to reach a higher reality through art, especially through poetry. (Mambrol np)

In other words, Bergson equates linguistic subversion with a transformation to the temporal and sees multiple layers of language within experimental writings: taken together, this process disrupts systemic power, allowing the author to change reality, to produce an identity that is "higher" or more true.

Combining Bergson's ideas with Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and dialogism allows us to take this argument further, "taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (Bakhtin 271). This viewpoint empowers language to change reality and create identity. Introducing the ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia, Bakhtin gets at the core reason for linguistic fluidity. Viewing all language (written or spoken) as dialogic in nature, Bakhtin sees each word in art as already imbued with layers of meaning. The author then adds his/her own intention as they create. Therefore, for Bakhtin "word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object. A word forms a concept of its own object in a dialogic way" (Bakhtin 279). This dialectic gathers strength when combined with the idea of heteroglossia, or the idea "that what we usually think of as a single, unitary language is actually comprised of a multiplicity of languages interacting with, and often ideologically competing with, one another" (Mambrol np). An author can imbue political meaning and identity into language as they create art, but the new identity creation is stratified; it is an identity of multiplicities as it contains the layers that came before it and that respond to it. Multiple discourses thus have the ability to erode power structures

These ideas, when applied to *At Swim-Two-Birds,* help us to understand how O'Brien uses multiple discourses to erode power structures during a time of political turmoil. O'Brien takes full advantage of this heteroglossia; he understands that language is made up of multiple strands—dialects of Irish, English, corrupted versions of English, and corrupted versions of Irish. In fact, without considering all of these factors, it would

be difficult for O'Brien to navigate every-day life let alone to write literature. We can see examples of this littered throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds.* As Brown aptly points out, "[t]he English language cannot be taken for granted as a medium of communication in these texts. The narrator of *At Swim-Two-Birds* composes his narrative of seedy student life in an English that reads as if it had already achieved that condition of a dead language like Latin, oddly punctilious and formal." To illustrate this, Brown provides the title as an example: "From one of the book's interpolations that parody the weird 'translationese' through which Gaelic saga literature had been mediated since the nineteenth century and the Irish Literary Revival, we learn that its odd title is in fact a clumsy version of the Irish *Snámh dá-én,* as if to remind us that English is not native to the Irish ecosystem" (115). In essence, "A sense of what can be characterised (sic) as post-colonial dispossession and inauthenticity also permeates" O'Brien's texts (115). By simply pointing out the multiplicity of discourses, O'Brien denies the dominance of an English language system in Ireland and brings focus back to the rich Irish cultural systems that both respond to and resist complete Anglicization.

O'Brien uses his multiple discourses to fight against the Revivalist and Nationalist fascination with the romanticization of some kind of Gaelic past. Carol Taafe describes O'Brien's ambivalence about Gaelic (Irish): on the one hand, it preserves culture (as seen by the fact that he begins his column in *Cruiskeen Lawn* with it), but, on the other hand, it also is a parody of itself and its decline. In unpublished manuscripts, O'Brien allows his true feelings about the Irish language to shine through, describing how the Irish language has declined but still has value to Irish culture. Therefore, O'Brien understands language, and especially the Irish language, in a different, if not deeper, way

than both Wilde and Joyce. He must wield it as both a weapon against dominant power structures and as a tool to create, all the while knowing that this creation is fluid, changeable, and in relation to the colonial past. O'Brien layers languages to disrupt the temporal to layer, to allow hybridization while knocking down the power and dominance of the colonizer's language: "All this suggests that language in Ireland is the site where the post-colonial condition of inauthenticity and dispossession finds an ambiguous, hybrid realization" (Brown 116). This understanding causes O'Brien's pushback against Revivalism yet allows him to integrate various parts of it into his work (myths, Irish words, etc.). As O'Brien subverts language, layering it, disrupting its temporality, and joining into its dialectal conversations, he makes the linear temporal, erodes power structures, and arrives at a place where artistic creation can truly begin. O'Brien thus illustrates a type of transformation of his unique Irish literary tradition: where Wilde begins with an individual (himself as aesthete or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) searching for a type of artistic immortality and Joyce moves forward with the creation of the artist in Dublin, O'Brien breaks from his Irish literary ancestors even further, eroding dominant power systems, disrupting linear time, and broadening his search for post-colonial national identity creation.

<center>Heteroglossia, Multiplicity, and the De-privileging of the Author</center>

O'Brien's multiplicities and use of metatext bring different discourses, worldviews, languages, and cultures into immediate contact. He refuses to imagine them as distant parallels but rather uses temporality to collapse them all upon each other: languages and dialects collide with culture, myth, and a layering of characters. An important part of this is the self-reflexive nature of O'Brien's text—we see hints of

O'Brien as well as ourselves as we read. As Carol Taafe emphasizes in her article "'Tell Me This, Do You Ever Open a Book at All?': Portraits of the Reader in Brain O'Nolan's 'At Swim-Two-Birds'," O'Brien's entire novel is written in a "collaborative and dialogic" (247) fashion, incorporating his own life as a UCD student, adding his friends to the text, and including excerpts from common UCD student readings into the book.[74] The result of these colliding layers is a disruption of power hierarchies through the refusal to privilege one specific element. Rather, the reader is immersed in a carnivalesque-type atmosphere within O'Brien's chaotic, nonlinear world.[75]

An important consequence of O'Brien's multiplicity and layering is the de-privileging of the author. O'Brien humanizes authorship rather than treating the author as a deity. We can see this occur throughout *At Swim-Two-Birds.* For example, he does not name the narrator (i.e., the character that most closely resembles himself). In addition, he adds layers of authorship through his excerpts, myth, and through Orlick Trellis. Specifically, we have a narrator (unnamed) who writes about an author (Dermot Trellis) who gives birth to a son (Orlick Trellis) who specifically tries to destroy Dermot. Meanwhile, every character that Dermot creates revolts against him by drugging him and

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[74] More broadly speaking, At Swim's implied reader (or at least, the reader best placed to appreciate its parodies and in-jokes) was the UCD undergraduate of the early nineteen thirties. Its self-reflexive nature is first made apparent in the student's semi-autobiographical frame narrative. . .. At Swim parodies a number of set texts which he studied in university, most obviously Standish Hayes O'Grady's Silva Gadelica and the Middle Irish Suibhne Gelt, both of which were cited in the bibliography of his MA thesis. A translation of Catullus, which Niall Sheridan published in 1935, made a brief appearance; while Brinsley's dry observation that 'the plot has him well in hand' (At Swim, p. 99) originated in Sheridan's announcement of O'Nolan's work in progress in the UCD student magazine, Comhthrom Feinne. The literary detritus of day-to-day living also turns up in the novel, such as the tipster's letter and the student's excerpt from a CBS reader. (Taafe 248)

[75] See Bakhtin's idea of the Carnivalesque.

living their own lives rather than accepting the lives that Dermot wishes to write for them. Through this de-privileging of the author, O'Brien allows multiple layers of creation and makes space for self-creation. His statement that the author should be invisible seems reasonable when considering the dialectics involved in creating a national Irish identity because dialogism necessitates communal rejoinders and allows identity to become more than the individual.[76]

In addition, O'Brien adds to his dialogic text, complicating ideas of authorship by "borrowing" characters from other authors. Specifically, he borrows two American cowboys—Slug Willard and Shorty Andrews—from the Western novels of the fictional author William Tracy. This creates a unique layering effect: O'Brien recounts a story about a narrator who writes a novel about an author (Dermot Trellis) who borrows characters from other fictional authors. In other words, Willard and Andrews represent four levels of fiction: the fictional Tracy creates them; the fictional Trellis then borrows them; the fictional narrator actually writes the story about Trellis borrowing them; but O'Brien ultimately authors all of them. In effect, O'Brien counters the simplified character types with his own uniquely complex, layered character types: he fights flat portrayals of national identity by creating rounded, dynamic personalities.

O'Brien continues the de-privileging of the author by scattering other authorial texts throughout the content of his own. We see this in *At Swim* with letters and excerpts from conduct manuals inserted word for word next to the narrator's story (which in turn is interrupted by Trellis' story or Orlick's story, or Finn MacCool's story . . .). The

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[76] In addition, O'Brien's belief that the author should be invisible may also partly explain why he continuously downplayed *At Swim* later in life, downplaying its genius by describing it as a youthful and naïve creation.

framework itself of this text reads more like a collection of works that must be pieced together to form a cohesive whole. This is perhaps not surprising when one considers that most of O'Brien's writing occurred in the form of articles. He constantly viewed his work in the context of a blip in between various other articles, pictures, stories, and reports. In fact, this aspect of his textual work gave him a unique perspective on authorship in general—a perspective that he underscores through literary creations in *At Swim* and "Scenes in a Novel" who overthrow the author to create their own stories. It is this dialectical form of writing that illustrates most aptly his idea that Irish identity creation must be a give and take; it could not wear the form of a romanticized past, but it needn't dismiss Irish myth and culture. It had to incorporate British changes, Irish language changes, different dialects, and a spectrum of linguistic elements in between. In order to create Irish identity in a post-colonial environment, O'Brien needed a communal, more expansive view of the author as a creator.

De-privileging the author, however, has several important consequences (whether intended or not). First, it allows for the destruction of Furriskey and Orlick's identity through the destruction of text. At the end of the novel, a maid, Teresa, comes in to clean Trellis' room. To light a fire, she uses several sheets of paper "the pages which made and sustained Furriskey and his true friends" (236). The effect of this burning is the obliteration of these characters, which, interestingly is brought about by one of the only females in the novel. Because the procreation is made entirely of text, it only exists as long as the female allows it, leaving the reader to wonder about the permanence of such creation and the precarity of identity projects which rest solely on the male pen. Despite this erasure, however, echoes remain, causing Trellis to wonder if he is mad. This is of

great importance when considering O'Brien's attempts to construct identity through heteroglossia because the echoes underscore the multiple layers that make up a complete identity, true stratification—as each layer of authors stop or die, identity is changed, and built anew. While these scenes of birth and death reaffirm the desire to create through the written word and firmly place O'Brien in Wilde's tradition of identity creation, O'Brien's layering of authors allows him more freedom and hint at the creation of a collective national identity that withstands certain erasures, changes, and distortions, one that collectively allows a forging of something new.[77]

This hearkens back to Wilde's original contention that identity may be constructed through art, and especially through literature. By layering the text with authors, O'Brien speaks to the importance of the written word—its ability to give birth to characters. This happens despite the de-privileging of the author as a deity; O'Brien gives many authors the ability to create or birth identities, upsetting power structures by placing the creative power into the hands of many authors rather than focusing on the individual as creator. As an author living in a postcolonial Ireland, O'Brien understands that the

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[77] In true O'Brien fashion, the echoes of these destroyed characters live on in earlier works by O'Brien. In fact, *At Swim* is not the first time that O'Brien writes about characters that try to destroy their author to regain control of their lives. Specifically, in 1934, O'Brien writes a short story entitled "Scenes in a Novel" under the pseudonym Brother Barnabas. In this short story, the narrator creates a villain named McDaid; however, when he tells McDaid to rob the church box, McDaid refuses, and ultimately McDaid becomes a convert. On the other hand, the hero that the narrator creates, Shaun, refuses to marry the virtuous character the narrator provides, choosing instead a "slavey" named Birdie. Ultimately, the characters conspire, and the narrator writes to us that he knows that they plan to kill him with a paper knife he provided earlier. This story not only illustrates the imminent creation of *At Swim,* but it illustrates a belief by O'Brien that someone else can not write your identity. In effect, this short story, added to *At Swim,* allows O'Brien to complicate and create national identity as he sees fit not as he feels it is thrust upon him or the Irish.

only way ahead is to forge together a multitude of ideas and identities in order to create a new Ireland.

Disrupting Temporality: Combining the Mythic with the Modern

O'Brien combines the de-privileging of the author with a collapse of linear time, resisting not only hegemonic authorship but also conventional constructs of time and plot. Specifically, O'Brien disrupts his linear presentation of plot by breaking the novel up into three types of sections—those which describe the life of the narrator, those which relay the story the narrator is writing, and excerpts from conduct manuals or other sources. An italicized heading precedes each of these parts, underscoring these interruptions to the flow of the story. The sections fail to follow any type of coherent order, circling around and around. For instance, although the story begins with a description of Mr. John Furriskey on pages 1-2, he isn't actually born until pages 36-38, and then pages 37-40 offer Trellis' testimony about the birth taken from a trial that occurs near the end of the novel: in essence, the tale of Mr. Furriskey's birth (and life) follows no consistent order but skips from section to section. In between Furriskey's tale, on page 5, O'Brien underscores differences in Irish language and time by presenting the modern words of a wagering letter, word for word, from V. Wright:

> *Mail from V. Wright, Wyvern Cottage, Newmarket, Suffolk:*
> V. Wright, the backer's friend. Dear Friend and member. Thanks for your faith in me, it is very comforting to know that I have clients who are sportsmen who do not lose heart when the luck is 'the wrong way.' Bounty Queen was indeed a great disappointment tho' many were of opinion that she had dead-heated with the leaders but more of that anon.

O'Brien includes the words of the wager order form as well:

To V. Wright, Turf Correspondent, Wyvern Cottage, Newmarket, Suffolk. Herewith please find P.O. for £ s. d. and hoping to obtain by return your exclusive three-star Plunger for Thursday and I hereby promise to remit the odds thereon to one shilling. Name. Address. No business transacted with minors or persons at College. P.S. The above will be the business, have the win of your life. Yours. Verney. (6)

Immediately after this glimpse into the Ireland of the present, O'Brien presents the reader with language from Ireland past, including an *"Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn MacCool and his people"* on page 6, a mythological description full of "honey-words" and folkloric references: "I will relate, said Finn. When the seven companies of my warriors are gathered together on the one plain and the truant clean-cold loud-voiced wind goes through them, too sweet to me is that. Echo-blow of a goblet-base against the tables of the palace, sweet to me is that." As O'Brien contrasts the false formality of V. Wright and his luck "the wrong way" with the romanticized language of Finn MacCool and his "seven companies of warriors" in the "clean-cold" wind, he sets up a dynamic echoed throughout the entire text—that of a romanticized language of Ireland's past sharply conflicting with the harsher reality of Ireland's present. However, each of these elements represent stratified layers of Irish culture and language; the modern is juxtaposed against the past, allowing the non-linear descriptions of Furriskey, and, ultimately, creating a more unified whole, a beginning of 3 beginnings, a start to the complex strata building of national identity.

Furthermore, O'Brien's opening pulls legendary and folkloric characters from the past into the present, disrupting linear time and offering an alternate version of temporality in which mythic personalities interact with modern people. This use of language to create a deviation from linear time represents a different type of time

reminiscent of what has been called mythic or monumental time. Mythic time has existed

for time immemorial as part of societies, including ancient Greece, ancient Egypt, and the

Mayan and Aztec cultures. Specifically, mythic time for these cultures allowed societies

to explain life as a series of recurrences, as myths that take place in the past, the present,

and the future—incorporating myth into everyday life and action.[78] *At Swim-Two-Birds*

thus represents repetition and the monumental placement of mythic characters,

complicating the linear progression of a realistic student coming of age, attempting to

overcome the immaturity of youth and become a successful adult who graduates and

takes his place in the working world—a steady plod forward from birth to youth to

middle age, ending with death.

O'Brien's use of mythic time serves as a particularly effective tool in his

linguistic reaction against Revivalism and the creation of a new national identity after

British colonization. Although the Revivalists thrived on the appropriation of myth and

folklore in order to shape society's perception of a national identity and to separate

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[78] Literary critic Kieran Keohane explains how Giambattisto Vico made this idea popular again before Nietzsche renewed a discussion of monumental time and eternal recurrence in the 19th century—specifically in his works *The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* and *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence.*[78] For Nietzsche, eternal recurrence represents the repetition of all things due to infinite possibilities:

> Fellow man! Your whole life, like a sandglass, will always be reversed and will ever run out again, – a long minute of time will elapse until all those conditions out of which you were evolved return in the wheel of the cosmic process. And then you will find every pain and every pleasure, every friend and every enemy, every hope and every error, every blade of grass and every ray of sunshine once more, and the whole fabric of things which make up your life. This ring in which you are but a grain will glitter afresh forever. (qtd. In Levy, vol. 16)

With these definitions in mind, it is apparent how monumental or mythic time relates to O'Brien. As Keohane describes this "principle of ricorso—eternal return, the repetition in modernity of history as recurring nightmare—is a paradigm, a philosophy of history, an essential structuring principle, as well as a literary device for Yeats, for Joyce, and for Flann O'Brien" (195-196).

themselves culturally from Great Britain, they used myth in a romanticized way (i.e. Kathleen ni Houlihan); they encouraged a return to an idyllic (non-realistic) past. On the other hand, O'Brien insists on pulling mythology and folklore forward, incorporating them into an all too real future and language. This is especially apparent in his appropriation of the famous mythical character Finn MacCool, who first appears near the beginning of the novel and behaves throughout the text as a storyteller, narrating long monologues. Each of these narrations stands out from the rest of the novel's plot because MacCool's mythic "honeywords" (73) and legendary stories sharply contrast with the blunt speech and actions of the more modern characters. Not only does O'Brien set MacCool against rather sketchy characters such as V. Wright but he also juxtaposes him against what his characters describe as modern-day poets. For example, during MacCool's recital of Mad King Sweeny's story, another character named Shanahan consistently interrupts, supplementing MacCool's epic tale with the story of an everyday poet named Jem Casey, whose opus "The Workman's Friend," extols a "pint of plain" as "your only man" (78). Despite these interruptions, MacCool stoically continues orating, ignoring Shanahan and refusing to change the story or engage with him in any way. Thus, the text begins with Finn's poetic stanzas that romantically define legendary events and nature:

> O birch clean and blessed,
> O melodious, O proud,
> Delightful the tangle
> Of your head-rods. (72)

But it shifts to Casey's stanzas, detailing the difficulties of day-to-day life in Ireland:

> When money's tight and is hard to get
> And your horse has also ran,

> When all you have is a heap of debt—
> A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN. (78)

These stanzas illustrate a sharp divide between MacCool's language and the language of Casey and Shanahan, shifting from the beauty of nature and the Irish countryside to the beauty of inebriation. Interestingly, MacCool's recitations of mythology closely resemble the original versions. O'Brien revises these myths not by changing them but by placing them next to stories and language taken from the modern working-class.[79] MacCool's oration, therefore, represents the language of a romanticized Irish national identity, and his refusal to engage with Shanahan underscores his inability to accurately represent or engage with a changing Irish population. In other words, O'Brien textually illustrates the limits of the Revivalists' reductionism through his apposition of mythic character and the "everyday Irishman." To create an accurate representation of Irish national identity, however, more will be needed—an incorporation of each part of Irish past and Irish present to allow the Irish to create a future.

In addition, O'Brien's title itself brings myth into the present day:

The place name Swim-Two-Birds is an actual place, Snámh Dá Éan, an island at a ford on the River Shannon at the geographical centre of Ireland. Situated in the middle of floods and swirling currents, at the intersections of the mythic (Swim-Two-Birds is home to the Children of Lir), the legendary (St. Patrick and the Mad King Sweeney both rested there), the historical (the island is adjacent to the monastic site of Clonmacnoise and more recently it was the site of an English military base), and the modern (the German-built Shannon hydro-electric scheme is downstream, as are Foynes seaplane base and the Shannon Airport/tax-free zone) Swim-Two-Birds is the quintessential locus of liminality, immorality, and insanity in Ireland. Here, the Mad King Sweeney is stuck and painfully entangled in the fork of a thornbush, "a huddle between the earth and heaven" (O'Brien, At

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[79] Eva Wäppling, in her book *Four Irish Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds: A Study of Flann O'Brien's Use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka, and the Good Fairy,* discusses the authenticity of O'Brien's versions of myth throughout the text.

Swim 222). Ireland is a tragicomic hell: "Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular, and by nature it is interminable, repetitive, and nearly unbearable" (O'Brien, Third Policeman 207). (Keohane 196-197)

Therefore, the language of the title combines the mythic with the present and becomes a place of historical identity that represents a more complete picture of a current Irish identity rather than a romanticized, stereotypical past. The multiple meanings encompassed by this place—it's connection to mythology; its connection to madness; its locus as a British base and then a point of trade—build on the layers of language used to name it, as Snámh Dá Éan slides into a combination of English and incorrect Irish with the name At Swim-Two-Birds. Combining the multiplicity of the past and the present of the Irish and the British, O'Brien linguistically complicates both time and meaning, beginning his book with a powerful statement on what it might really mean to be Irish in a post-colonial world. Through O'Brien's use of mythic time, his many multiplicities of text and characters, he revises myth and provides a more accurate description of what it could mean to have an Irish cultural history and yet retain the reality of an unromanticized Irish identity that comes complete with British influence. This revision is necessary due to the inherent chaos of post-colonial Ireland and the struggle for a new national identity.

Another way O'Brien accomplishes this literary attack on Revivalism and attempt at identity re/creation is by appropriating figures from legends and mythology and weaving them into his plot to challenge simplistic images of Irish identity. For example, he appropriates the Pooka— "a species of human Irish devil endowed with magical powers" (O'Brien 60)—complicating him by characterizing him as a "courtly man" (1), who carries the miniscule Good Fairy around in his pocket. Ironically, O'Brien writes

the Pooka as a gentleman (rather than a devil), concerned with manners and good

sportsmanship, and he writes the Good Fairy as a devil and a cheat at cards. By inverting

these two folkloric personalities, O'Brien illustrates the dangers of sweeping

generalizations and thus implicitly critiques the nationalist tendency to essentialize and

romanticize Irish character types. In other words, O'Brien's novel *At Swim-two-Birds*

"deconstructs various efforts to inscribe 'Ireland' within the literary languages of the

Celtic Revival . . . as well as within the state subsidized discourse of post-independence

cultural nationalism" (McMullen 63), and "explicitly engages prior inscriptions of Irish

identity in a scrutiny that is necessarily historicized and political, exposing the 'authored,

prosaic, and historical' basis of the Celtic Revivalists' romantic antiquarianism and the

cultural protectionists' essentialism" (77). In effect, *At Swim-Two-Birds* allows O'Brien

to launch a literary attack on the Revivalists' construction of a reducible Irish identity and

to create one that reflects the past as well as the all too real future. He comes up with a

model of genuine multiplicity that is simultaneously translingual, transcultural, and

productive.

O'Brien gives three endings to the book, an antepenultimate, a penultimate, and

an ultimate conclusion. Interestingly, mythic time seems to end when the

antepenultimate ending occurs. In this ending, the narrator, stops writing, graduates from

college, and receives a watch from his uncle. The figure of the watch plays a crucial role,

restarting linear time, thrusting the narrator into the patriarchal order of working men.

The final pages of O'Brien's novel further underscore this shift to linear time:

specifically, in the penultimate ending of the book, the narrator's characters are destroyed

by a zealous maid, who burns Trellis' manuscript, mistaking it for sheets of unimportant

paper. Then, in the final sentence of the novel, the ultimate ending, O'Brien briefly recounts an anecdote about a German who commits suicide: "Well-known, alas is the case of the poor German . . .. He went home one evening and drank three cups of tea . . . cut his jugular with a razor . . . and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye" (239). The German's death represents O'Brien's fear of repetition without change; his belief that stasis leads to death. This death resembles what Julia Kristeva calls "the stumbling block" of linear time: it ends everything. In other words, this story provides textual evidence that the narrator has moved from mythic time to linear time—stasis—and the result is a repetitive march towards death rather than a productive, chaotic confluence of authorship, time, culture, and power. The anecdote about the German, the inclusion of mythic time within the narrative, and the subsequent return to a linear time all subvert novelistic expectations in O'Brien's text, adding depth to his plot and his characters and, by extension, adding depth to symbols of Irish national identity. In other words, these endings imply that rather than losing Irish identity or clinging to an old, romanticized, or unrealistic one, Ireland must move forward to create something new, bold, and innovative in this post-colonial world.

Conclusion: Fighting an Amalgamation with Simplified Symbolic Imagery

History is not a nightmare for O'Brien; rather, it collides with the present and future, just as his characters collide in a hotel of chaos and mischief. This Red Swan Hotel represents an interaction of disparate, literary, real lives that argue about who has power—a place where identities hold the power to create themselves in response to those around them. Identity plays a crucial role in this work. First, we are never given the name of the narrator. Therefore, even though we know him as a character, he lacks a kind of

identity. This is ironic because the textual characters all have names and identities. Interestingly, their identities are bifurcated. Trellis creates them to behave a certain way: for example, he writes Furriskey as a villain. In addition, he forces them to all live in the Red Swan Hotel with him so that he can monitor them. However, when Trellis sleeps, the characters are able to behave however they want. For example, Furriskey wishes to live a virtuous life with a wife and family. The characters thus have an identity forced upon them by Trellis and an identity they create for themselves. With this knowledge, the characters attempt to keep Trellis asleep at all times, and ultimately, they have Orlick write Trellis into a trial to be tortured. This surprising twist represents colonialism versus the construction of a unique Irish national and personal identity. Specifically, Trellis represents Great Britain's colonial rule, imposing stereotypes upon the characters; however, the characters forging of unique identities when Trellis sleeps illustrates the need for a separate Irish identity. Both identities must live parallelly and in conflict. In this way, O'Brien highlights the need for a reaction to both colonial and Revivalist identity and the desire for a new national/personal identity for the Irish. However, he only finds the ability to do this textually, in the novel within the novel. Like Wilde and Joyce, O'Brien appropriates textuality to develop nationality.[80]

O'Brien continues Wilde and Joyce's quest for an Irish identity; however, several differences exist between his quest and theirs. While Wilde focuses on the English, living in England, writing English plays of customs and manners, and using mythic paradox to show that one can be both Irish and English at the same time, Joyce focuses on Dublin.

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[80] See my comments on O'Brien's short story "Scenes in a Novel."

Joyce sets *Ulysses* in Dublin and focuses on a realistic, portrayal, complete with inner

dialogue. O'Brien, on the other hand, illustrates several more differences. Most notably,

he publishes *At Swim-Two-Birds* in 1939 after Ireland has become a state; therefore, he is

dealing with the aftermath of colonialism rather than writing during it. Furthermore, even

though he reacts against Irish Revivalism, he uses Irish mythology rather than Greek or

classical mythology. Juxtaposing correct versions of these Irish myths with the actuality

of Ireland after colonial rule, he seeks to complete the same identity project as Wilde and

Joyce, but he chooses a different route. In some ways, he becomes a kind of middle

ground between Wilde and Joyce, and, ironically, between colonialism and Irish identity.

He continues the tradition, but he also connects Wilde with Joyce in an even deeper way

through his inclusion of both British and Irish culture. However, even as O'Brien

continues Wilde and Joyce's work, he goes so far as to blow up ideas about the deific

author, collapsing worlds, language, and culture in a much more radical method of

identity creation. While Wilde understands the idea of duality and binary, O'Brien sees

multiplicities and stratifications. His dialogic texts become transformative through their

very multiplicity rather than through static portrayals.

O'Brien's appropriation of birth, myth, legend, and fairy tale serves as an

especially effective technique to round out flat symbols of identity because folk lore and

fairy tales have always shared a "persistent" connection to "nationalist or colonialist

ideology" (Benson and Teverson 13); therefore, revising or reusing these tales allows

authors to recreate their national associations. By collapsing the modern onto the

mythic—by contrasting MacCool's unchanging and out-of-touch version of the Mad

King Sweeny story with Shanahan's recounting of Casey's poem for the working-class—

O'Brien appropriates fictional characters to underscore the ways in which myths are disconnected from reality and address abstract concerns.

In addition, O'Brien's usage of non-linear time provides perhaps the most interesting example of his chaotic version of identity construction. By appropriating mythic time, O'Brien collapses temporality into something that is monumental, cyclical, and repetitive—a time out-of-time, a temporality that exercises "multiple modalities" (Kristeva 16) and thus allows for the re/creation or re/birth of identity. Indeed, large portions of the novel seem to take place in this time out-of-time—a limbo in which mythical characters like the Pooka and MacCool cavort with more modern characters like Slug and Shorty (from the fictional Tracy's Westerns) and Furriskey and Shanahan (representatives of the everyday Irish working-class). Interestingly, this limbo ends when the narrator graduates from college and receives a watch from his uncle at the end of the novel. The figure of the watch is mythic time's stumbling block, the symbol of patriarchal time and death, underscored by the German who commits suicide.

Finally, O'Brien's de-privileging of the author reveals his belief that heteroglossia plays a key role in the development of a new Irish national identity. Even as he believed that he could create identity as an author, he understood the collective nature of authorship and was able to adapt. Instead of viewing erasures, changes, and the simultaneous existence of various forms of language and culture as disparate, fighting forces, he sees them as a stratified means of bringing together a collective national Irish identity.

In conclusion, O'Brien carries on a tradition begun by Wilde and Joyce, a mission to recreate a national and personal Irish identity in the shadow of both colonialism and Revivalism. Using the written word as the tool for identity re/creation, O'Brien creates a book that uses multiplicity and temporality to ensconce himself deeply within a matrilineal tradition while both mythologizing and de-mythologizing Irish history and culture. The old combines with the new. His refusal to give up many Irish characteristics (including elements of the Irish language), his focus on Irish rather than Greek myth, and his juxtaposition of the mythic with a post-colonial Ireland set him apart from Wilde and Joyce while allowing him to accomplish a similar project. With *At Swim-Two-Birds,* O'Brien offers readers the unique opportunity to understand Irish history, mythology, and culture as something more than the romanticized versions offered for years by Yeats and his associates but rather as something complicated, stratified, and communal. By cutting against the grain, by using narrative tools to disrupt and subvert expectations, O'Brien presents a new version of Irish identity—one that is irreducible. Critics often cite this subversion of conventional narrative as proof of O'Brien's modernist or even postmodernist literary aesthetic. I see it, however, as uniquely matrilineal in its refusal to allow an amalgamation of Irish identity with essentialized symbolic imagery. In other words, O'Brien uses a chaotic collapse of time, culture, and language to birth a crucial national identity after the advent of British colonialism, firmly becoming a part of a uniquely Irish matrilineal literary tradition.

Conclusion: Female Irish Authors Join the Matrilineage

This Irish literary matrilineage does not end with O'Brien. Many famous Irish authors engage in a linguistic creation of identity—specifically, one that appropriates the maternal space to create.[81] One of the most interesting aspects of this continuing matrilineage is the way that it gestures towards the work done by future female Irish authors. Each of the tools my authors employ to complicate portrayals of Irish identity— paradox, the Gothic genre, myth revision, borrowed characters, and non-linear time— prefigures tools later used by female Irish authors as they strive to carve out their own space in Irish literature. I argue that female Irish authors and the authors of my project use linguistic creation and formal innovation for a similar purpose, to destroy the illusion of a reducible identity, to modernize and enliven characterizations, and to cause readers to question simplified portrayals of nationality or femininity—to fight an amalgamation with simplified symbolic imagery and to create their own identities linguistically. With the addition of female artistry to my matrilineage, my project comes full circle, offering solutions to authors who have been "othered" by colonialism or gender (or both) and reaffirming the creative power of language.

The intersection between Irish gender and national identity gives future female authors motivation to join this matrilineage, to find ways to re/create identities that defy "othering." Female identity, like Irish national identity, often finds itself confined, forced to fit into the mold of society's expectations until it shrinks into nothing more than a static symbol. One of the most noted authors to discuss this—in both poetic and essay

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[81] Samuel Beckett's *Endgame,* for example.

form—is the Irish poet, author, and professor Eavan Boland (1944-2020). She asserts that

the term "nation" has been reduced and simplified, losing substance and becoming only

an abstract idea. She further claims that the "mixing of the national and the feminine"

occurs frequently in many forms of literary "rhetoric" (182).[82] This conflation is

problematic because "[o]nce the idea of a nation influences the perception of a woman,

then that woman," through association, becomes "suddenly and inevitably

simplified. She can no longer have complex feelings and aspirations. She becomes the

passive projection of a national idea" (136). Unfortunately, as Boland notes, often the

"attempt to make the feminine stand in for the national" ultimately "simplif[ies] the

woman almost out of existence" (142).[83] Literary critic Katherina Walter agrees when

she describes the female-as-nation trope as "reifying female corporeality and silencing

women's voices" (314). Furthermore, Walter claims that "[w]hen the discourses of

nationalism are amalgamated with those of femininity," female activities such as

motherhood are also flattened and simplified. Walter claims that contemporary feminist

Irish poets (such as Eavan Boland) break from this tradition, reworking the simplification

of female characters as symbols and presenting female action as lived experience. Or, in

other words, unhappy with a simplified, symbolic identity, feminists and feminist literary

critics use narrative techniques (e.g., myth revision, character borrowings, and non-linear

plotlines) to complicate and add substance to female identity—just as my project's

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[82] Boland specifically notes that this conflation of the national and the feminine occurs in newspapers: "The mixing of the national and the feminine is also a recurrent usage in the rhetoric of the newspaper" (182). She also points out that it happens so frequently that there seems to be no other option than to conflate the two: "So many male Irish poets . . . have feminized the national and nationalized the feminine that from time to time it has seemed there is no other option" (144).

[83] Boland specifically mentions this phenomenon when she discusses a poem written by Francis Ledwidge.

authors employ these same techniques to complicate and add substance to a national

identity.

Because my authors and female Irish authors share many common goals, it is easy

to find women who choose to engage with them. This engagement is made easier by

Wilde's proto-feminist behavior. As Michele Mendelssohn explains, "Wilde's valuation

of women was, for his time, a positive one, particularly when measured in terms of his

support for "the 'feminine' in all its guises," male or female" (156). Specifically, Wilde,

along with his wife Constance, advocated for dress reform, and when he became editor of

a woman's magazine, he changed it from a fashion magazine into a more serious

magazine with stories by excellent female authors:

> One of Wilde's first decisions as editor of the Ladies ' World was to modify the
> name to the Woman s World. The former title was "too feminine, and not
> sufficiently womanly," he said. The magazine needed to become more serious and
> responsible, to reflect "a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women
> wear, but with what they think, and what they feel." (156-157)

Thus, Wilde served not only as a progenitor for a productive literary tradition in which

women could inscribe identity, but he also enabled women to enact this work by

providing support and a space for them to publish.

Many Irish female writers take their place in this matrilineage as inheritors to

Joyce. As Gerardine Meaney boldly declares, "it appears to be Irish women writers in the

twenty-first century who have the most robust relationship with Joyce's work" (qtd. in

Mastronardi). In this, she is absolutely correct because a host of female writers not only

express their indebtedness to Joyce, but also speak openly about how they engage with

his Irish literary tradition. Perhaps one of the best examples is Edna O'Brien (born in

1930), who not only credits Joyce with inspiring her to write but also writes about him and includes references to him in her novels.[84] Edna O'Brien's works were banned when they were released because of their frank dealings with sexuality, and this has intensified many critics' linking of her with Joyce as someone who fights systemic oppression by demythologizing the mythic woman and making her a physical and real presence. Andrew O'Hagan goes so far as to claim Edna O'Brien "changed the nature of Irish fiction; she brought the woman's experience and sex and internal lives of those people on to the page, and she did it with style, and she made those concerns international" (qtd. in Cooke). As a result of her works' focus on women's lives, feelings, and sexuality, she has been credited with facilitating change for women and inspiring a host of future female Irish authors.

Edna O'Brien adds to the matrilineal tradition through her inspiration of Irish female author Anne Enright (born in 1962). Enright, a contemporary Irish author, who focuses on themes of identity, motherhood and the Catholic church, has also been compared to both James Joyce and Flann O'Brien.[85] Enright openly admits the impact Joyce had on her when she read *Ulysses* at 14, and, in an interview with *The Boston Globe,* entitled "For this Writer, Identity is Subject to Change: Anne Enright Pushes Back

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[84] She writes a biography about him and an article about his relationship with Nora Barnacle. In *The Country Girls* (1960), one of her characters references Joyce and *Dubliners.* See Annalisa Mastronardi's editorial "A Sense of Possibility: Contemporary Irish Women Writers on *Ulysses.*"

[85] See David Mehegan's article "For this Writer, Identity is Subject to Change: Anne Enright Pushes Back Against the Past" and Stuart Jeffries article "I Wanted to Explore Hatred and Desire."

Against the Past," Enright responds to her frequent comparisons to James Joyce in a rather unique fashion:[86]

> I don't want to get away from him. It's male writers who have a problem with Joyce; they're all "in the long shadow of Joyce, and who can step into his shoes?" I don't want any shoes, thank you very much. Joyce made everything possible; he opened all the doors and windows. Also, I have a very strong theory that he was actually a woman. He wrote endlessly introspective and domestic things, which is the accusation made about women writers - there's no action and nothing happens. Then you look at "Ulysses" and say, well, he was a girl, that was his secret.

Not only does Enright claim her literary heritage with Joyce, but she also makes it particularly matrilineal by situating Joyce as her female predecessor. Enright further follows in Joyce's steps when she claims her own identity project depends on "pushing back" as well as "embracing" Irish authors in order to dismantle the idea of what it means to be "authentically Irish"—something she describes as coming from "a series of stories that have been told to us, starting with the Irish Celtic national revival." With Enright, we see a true example of a matrilineage as she continues the work of Joyce and O'Brien through her literary forerunner Edna O'Brien. This combined with her need for self-creation—as a mother, as an artist, and as an Irish person—underscores the ways this Irish matrilineal tradition continues even today.[87]

As we see with Enright, Irish female authors also follow in Flann O'Brien's footsteps. In fact, years after myth revision and borrowed characters help O'Brien complicate Irish national identity in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* Irish female authors employ

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[86] "I first read into *Ulysses* at 14, when my idea of literature had no limitations. The process of narrowing that sense of possibility down has been a long and painful one" (qtd. in Mastronardi).
[87] See her non-fiction memoir *"Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood."*

these strategies for a similar purpose. This is largely due to the fact that myth revision

permits a reinterpreting of text in order to better understand its implications for women in

society.[88] Sometimes changing the narrative means borrowing characters or rewriting

these types of stories completely, and these alterations represent another strategy Irish

female authors inherit from O'Brien. For example, Emma Donoghue (*Kissing the Witch:*

Old Tales in New Skins 1993) and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne (*Midwife to the Fairies* 2003)

reshape familiar myths and fairy tale plots to serve their own purposes.[89] Subverting

traditional versions, they shock readers by changing conventional maternal relationships

to manipulate the outcomes as well as the inherent meaning of their stories (e.g., in

Kissing the Witch, Donoghue rewrites Cinderella with queer desire, making her fall in

love with the fairy godmother). Each appropriates classic tales and characters, providing

new insights through these revisions. As inheritors to O'Brien, female Irish authors often

participate in my Irish matrilineal tradition, addressing women's social issues (e.g.,

motherhood, mother/daughter relationships, and the objectification of physical

appearance) and gaining the opportunity and the agency to recreate and appropriate myth

and folkloric characters for their own goals.

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[88] For example, in the seminal feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar perform perhaps the most famous reframing of a myth or fairy tale through their exploration of "Snow White" as a story that considers "the conflict in the mirror between mother and daughter, woman and woman, self and self" (37). Gilbert and Gubar describe this fairy tale as the disenfranchisement of a Queen that occurs when "she pricks her finger, bleeds, and is thereby assumed into the cycle of sexuality . . . giving birth 'soon after'" and transforming into a "witch—that is, into a wicked 'step mother'" (37), who seeks to destroy the virginal, young daughter that has replaced her.

[89] Each of these authors also has a relationship to Joyce. Specifically, literary critic Teresa Casal writes the chapter "A Century Apart: Intimacy, Love, and Desire from James Joyce to Emma Donoghue" in the book *Voice and Discourse in the Irish Context.* This chapter considers intimacy and desire by reading "The Dead" in conversation with Donoghue's "Speaking in Tongues." In addition, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne claims that "all contemporary writers have been influenced by Joyce, whether they have read him or not and whether they know it or not." She goes on to explain Joyce gave her a "heightened sense of [her] home, Dublin, as an iconic place . . . worth writing about" (Mastronardi).

In conclusion, I have begun an illustrative rather than an exhaustive list of female Irish authors who inherit a matrilineal Irish tradition from Wilde, Joyce, and O'Brien. What is interesting about this matrilineage is its relevance to a post-colonial world and specifically to contemporary Ireland. Because women often face the dilemma of the mythic mother—becoming mythic symbols or familial non-entitities—they face the difficult fight to subvert and reappropriate maternal imagery, to re/create their own identities. This phenomenon is amplified for female Irish authors because of Ireland's colonial past, the Revivalist movement, and the powerfully haunting trope of the mythic maternal. Although I've only begun to express why the authors listed here continue in this Irish matrilineage (e.g., what makes their appropriation of myth or the maternal particularly matrilineal), their intense engagement with my authors combined with their search for a self-created identity warrant deeper investigation. I began by stating that Wilde does not set out to found a literary tradition. I stand by this statement, expanding it to argue that Joyce and O'Brien did not set out to offer a blueprint for future female Irish authors; however, their intriguing project of linguistic self-creation continues to offer women opportunities to affect change and alter identity.[90]

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[90] While Wilde has been described as a proto-feminist, I am not claiming that Joyce or O'Brien had a feminist project in mind. In fact, as M.K. Booker notes, "O'Brien is no feminist" (118) and *At-Swim-Two-Birds* is no feminist book. However, the appropriation and subversion of the maternal for self-creative purposes serves a uniquely and ultimately feminist purpose and hints at work done by future female authors and feminists.

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