

Celtic Revival and Modern Literature, Dr. Eglantina Rempert

Modern English Literature, 1890-1960, Autumn 2019

Celtic Revival 1890s-1930s: increased interest in Celtic languages and Celtic mythologies (see Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, London: Faber and Faber, 1985) SEAS Library: PR8718.D43

Ireland: increased interest in the Irish language and in Medieval Irish legends (especially: Cuchulain and Finn McCumhail legends)

John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907)

written in Hiberno-English (special variety of English spoken in Ireland)
(Hibernia – Latin/Roman name for Ireland)

- linguistic variety
- linguistic innovations
- the text (of the play) looks different to contemporary pieces

SHAWN: Aren't we after making a good bargain, the way we're only waiting these days on Father Reilly's dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome.

CHRISTY: It's that you'd say surely if you seen him and he after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or before it maybe, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars till he'd put the fear of death into the banbhs and the screeching sows.

WIDOW QUIN: I'm after meeting Shawn Keogh and Father Reilly below, who told me of your curiosity man, and they fearing by this time he was maybe roaring, romping on your hands with drink.

CHRISTY: It's that you'd say surely if you seen him and he after drinking for weeks, rising up in the red dawn, or before it maybe, and going out into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of May, and shying clods against the visage of the stars till he'd put the fear of death into the banbhs and the screeching sows.

- embellishments – the text full of stylistic innovations that give the text a modern / modernist character

use of the Irish language: shebeen, poteen, boreen, banbh, Pegeen (Margaret → Peg → Pegeen)

Setting: Co. Mayo -- *Mhaigh Eo* “plain of the yew trees”

(story from *The Aran Islands* –see Synge's trip to the Aran Islands)

Criticism: *St John Irvine*: “contrived literary stuff” which is “entirely unrepresentative of peasant speech”

Defence: Synge: “I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland.” *Synge*, “Preface,” *Playboy of the Western World*, Oxford: OUP, 1998, p 97.

Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939)

Title in Irish – a place name: *Snámh dá Én* (from the Sweeney legend)

- Structure of the novel: “triadic structure”
incorporating: old Irish legend of Finn MacCumhail
old Irish legend of (mad) King Sweeney

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant an pre-occupied expression. I

reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the presence of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939)

- Structure: no beginning, and no end; has a circular structure

(see Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*)

makes use of the old Irish legend of Finn McCumhail

full of double and triple meanings:

e.g title: Finn again is awake?

It is Finnegan's wake?

Or Finnegan is at a wake? (see Michael in *The Playboy*)

- its Modernist character due to technical innovations
and linguistic innovations

See first page of *Finnegans Wake* (then entitled *A Work in Progress*)

