

## 'Censorship and Dung' 1930s Ireland: The psychological landscape

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Out of the smoke of revolution and through the turmoil of civil war, the Irish Free State emerged in the 1930s as a quaking fortress buttressed by a puritanical form of Catholic morality, that in actuality cloaked the turmoil of a troubled psychological landscape in crisis. Liam O'Flaherty, an Irish writer who was censored during this time, captured the effects of the collusion between the State and the Church on the outer cultural milieu of the decade in a poignant literary 'snap-shot' as he described the social environs of a small Kerry backwater in 1932 just after the Eucharistic Congress had been held. His recollection of its sense of place was certainly at odds with the period's official promotion of rural Ireland as a Gaelic idyll:

*It has a population of two thousand people and fifty-three public houses. Like almost every other Irish provincial town, it is incredibly dirty and sordid to look upon. In the long back street inhabited by the proletariat, I came across human excrement at every second step. There is no vestige of culture in the place. The local priests were sour and secretive fellows, who confined their activities to the prevention of fornication, dancing and reading. The only past time permitted to the males was drinking in the fifty-three public houses. The females wandered about with a hungry expression in their eyes. (Flaherty, 1932; 1990: 139)*

The juxtaposition of the gender roles in the piece, with men finding solace from puritanical sobriety in alcoholism and women seemingly forlorn wraiths haunting back streets strewn with excrement, overseen by feudal-like religious overlords, brings forth a joyless, deprived landscape - echoing with the destitute overtones of the famine - where intellectual pursuit, creativity and healthy desire had been starved from the culture and subsumed in Flaherty's words to:

*The tyranny of the Irish Church and its associate parasites, the upstart Irish bourgeoisie, the last posthumous child from the wrinkled womb of European Capitalism [which] maintains itself by the culture of dung, superstition and ignoble poverty among the masses. (Flaherty, 1932; 1990: 140).*

The relationship between the Church and the government in the Irish Free State during the 1930s calls to mind an observation of Michel Foucault's that

*In a society... prohibitions interrelate, reinforce and complement each other, forming a complex web, ...the areas where this web is most tightly woven... where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality...(Foucault, 1969: 216)*

And in the case of Ireland, the repressive web created by *The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929* and the 1937 Constitution, ensnared gender roles and sexual mores in a political discourse with misogynistic undertones stemming from a paternalistic nineteenth-century dialectic between British colonialism and Catholic

nationalistic religious hegemony with psycho-geographical effects from which the contemporary Republic is just beginning to awaken.

The *Censorship of Publications Act* of 1929 resulted in the ban of over 1200 texts and 140 periodicals during the 1930s (Brown, 1985). An examination of the *Register of Prohibited Publications* from 1929-1939 reveals a plethora of censored works including pulp romances, as well as serious fiction by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Ernest Hemingway and Vladimir Nabokov among others. However, more substantially medical texts concerning women's sexual hygiene, reproduction, and contraception including works by Margaret Sanger- founder of the American birth control movement, were explicitly banned (Adams, 1968).

The enactment of the 1937 Constitution further corseted the gender role for Irish women. Taoiseach Eamon De Valera and his Fianna Fáil government consulted the Catholic hierarchy on its contents before revealing it to the Irish public for referendum. In particular Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution (still included in the Republic's constitution) emphasized that a woman's place 'was within the home' and that, 'the State shall...endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties at home' (Lee, 1989).

Indeed the choices left for many women of the period, outside of the 'kitchen sink' role allotted to them by the government were permanent celibacy, enrolment in a convent or emigration; with transgression from the socially enforced mores of sexuality punished by relegation to the notorious Magdalene laundries or placement in various industrial schools. However, not all women at the time were passive agents, accepting their submissive 'official' roles:

*a few educated women did repudiate the kitchen sink role allotted them in the constitution. Criticism by the National University Women's Graduates' Association disturbed de Valera and the Irish Press sufficiently for them to devote considerable space refuting it . . . [and] . . . various women's groups..joined together to work towards the goal of full and unfettered citizenship. (Lee, 1989: 207; Valiulis, 1997: 160).*

Still, the effects of the 1937 Constitution upon the contemporary social landscape of Ireland still resonate from this period, particularly for women. Divorce which had been outlawed during the 1920s became legal by referendum in 1995; contraception was banned in 1935 and not legalised until 1980, and not widely available until the mid 1990s, and despite the 2001 electoral rejection of a referendum to further restrict reproductive rights for women, the illegality of abortion is still enshrined in the Republic's constitution and over 6000 Irish women annually travel to Britain, the former colonizer to avail of this procedure (Holland, 2000; Lee 1989).

The roots of this paternalistic censoriousness can be found in the emergence of a traumatized post famine *fin de siècle* Irish consciousness, strongly affected by the relationship between agrarian land tenure, its effect on increasingly late rural marriages and the tenacity of Catholic ideology, adhered to by a majority of the population. For example, in the late-nineteenth century, militant Irish nationalism

took both the guise of an infantile and ethereal maiden named Erin, and a wise benevolent old mother figure to represent the country in opposition to racist British representations of the Catholic colonial subject (Bonnett, 2000; Innes, 1993).

This combined with the phenomenon of the cult venerating the mother of Christ, which promoted virginity as the ideal state of Irish womanhood, linked gender roles to an ideology that caused Catholicism and nationalism during the era to be 'increasingly identified with another by Irish Catholics' (Innes, 1993: 23).

Indeed the combination of British colonialism, the effects of the famine and the role of the Catholic church during the nineteenth century created an environment where ideological repression became an underlying social and cultural motif that would play a role in fomenting the violence of the 1916 Uprising and the Anglo-Irish War, which gave birth to a fractured Irish independence.

Viewed from a Freudian psychoanalytical standpoint, sexuality -symbolized by the mythological construct Eros and by its extension creativity, when repressed can lead to the emergence of violence and a manifestation of the death instinct, symbolized by the construct Thanatos. The father of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud held that to avoid or sublimate violence, the struggle between these two constructs, -which he maintained were the 'locus of human conflict,'- must be allowed the freedom of creativity and that within the context of his own time the presence of a repressive government coupled with the lack of any creative avenues of expression resulted in an overt manifestation of violence (Vrachopoulos, 2002). Indeed one can see aspects of this psycho-dynamic struggle exemplified in the behaviour of two cultural icons of Irish independence, Padraig Pearse and De Valera, as they grappled with the violent birth of the modern nation, as it severed its umbilicus from the British colonial power.

Pearse, the leader of the 1916 Uprising, wrote a poem in 1912 called *Mise Éire* in which he equated motherhood and nationhood in a manner that hints at the presence of an unresolved Freudian Oedipal Complex:

Mise Éire:  
Sine mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra  
Mór mo ghlóir:  
Mé a rug Cú Chulainn cróga.  
Mór mo náir:  
Mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair.  
Mise Éire:  
Uaigní mé ná an Chailleach Bhéarra

Freud derived this complex, in which the male unconsciously bonded to his mother, breaks this tie after coming under threat from his father, individuates into adulthood, thereby healthily resolving the 'locus of conflict,' from the Greek drama by Sophocles, entitled *Oedipus Rex*. In the play, the protagonist unknowingly slays his father and becomes king of Thebes, only to unwittingly marry and sleep with his own mother, invoking the wrath of the gods, where upon he blinds himself and is exiled, as his Kingdom tumbles into ruin.

The psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, a disciple of Freud's wrote a piece in 1923 concerning the relationship between the creation of the Irish nation and the Oedipal complex. Regarding its geographical component, he noted:

*The complexes to which to which the idea of an island home tends to become attached are those relating to the ideas...which fuse in the central complex of the womb of a virgin mother. This means, of course, one's own birth-place (Jones, 1923: 401).*

Pearse was the child of a mixed marriage; His father was English, his mother being Irish. The rejection of his father's nationality during the Easter Uprising, coupled with a personal blood sacrifice for his idealised Irish birthplace, in turn influenced by his faith in the passion of Christ as promoted by Catholic ideology can be seen as an unresolved enactment of this complex.

In the case of De Valera, who was born in the United States and fought in the Irish War for Independence, his emphasis in the 1937 Constitution on the ideal 'Irish' family and its role for women could be seen arguably as an Oedipal projection in which his drive to rescue the victimized mother Erin from the colonial 'rape' of Britain, masked the troubled relationship he had experienced with his own biological mother, as well as the haunting memories of his own chaotic upbringing. On the latter it was noted:

*it was if were subconsciously striving to obliterate the memory of his own childhood. He had lost his father when he was a baby, and his mother had sent him back to her family in Ireland while she went out to work in New York... It was if the constitution tried to blot out the memory by denying it could happen (Lee, 1989: 207).*

Both Pearse and DeValera, stand as cultural icons, and it would be presumptuous to reduce the motivation behind their behaviours to a single psychological construct, but that aside, their conduct in the violent struggle for Irish independence curiously exemplifies strains of an unconscious discourse, which when traced back to the dynamics of their family of origin and placed in the historical context of the cultural nationalism of the period, curiously echo elements of the Oedipus complex.

In conclusion, the repression of sexuality and rigid gender roles inherent in Irish Catholic dogma in post famine Ireland and during the post revolutionary period can be seen in psycho-analytical terms, as partly contributing to the cultural deprivation of the 1930s as enforced by the Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 and the 1937 Constitution. These legislative efforts to effectively reconstruct an ideological Irish identity from a 'culture of dung' through the promotion of a illusory Gaelic idyll in this early post-colonial milieu certainly was a reaction to and stemmed from the post-traumatic collective experience of British colonialism, a culturally decimating famine, the violent conflagration of a guerrilla campaign for independence and the caesura created by the Irish Civil War.

Indeed it can be seen that the Ireland imagined by both Pearse and De Valera contain elements that suggest the effects of an unresolved Oedipal complex lurking in their unconscious mindscapes, that resulted in vision of the nation characterized

by denial, blindingly maintained by a conscious adherence to Catholic theology, whose repressive discourses manifested over the course of modern Irish history in violence, authoritarianism, physical and sexual abuse and an indifference to contradictory social and political realities on the ground. It is understandable that a rigid Irish identity, as exemplified by the censorship act and the constitution therefore coalesced during the 1930s as a defence mechanism to protect the embryonic Irish Free State from the stark truths of its new found independence from the British colonial mother, as well as the collective effect of centuries of colonial religious oppression.

However, writers of the period realised that such reactionary social and cultural repression would eventually impede the healthy growth of a truly liberated nation, and unwittingly maintained elements of a colonial discourse in the structures of the infant State. Their stance can be partly summarized in O'Flaherty's perhaps quixotic call for a second rebellion that would liberate the Irish identity from the puritanical metal slavery encouraged by the clerically minded ideologues controlling the State apparatus of the 1930s:

Before very long they'll be all hurled into the clean Atlantic, together with their censorship, their dung, their bawdy books and their black booze. Then we can once more in Ireland have wine and love and poetry; become a peopled famed, as of old, 'for beauty and amorousness' (Flaherty, 1932; 1990: 141).

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