

#2: Irish conception of nature

For the Irish, and by extension the Irish poets, place is a living thing. The world that surrounds the Irish poet is alive with meaning and spirituality. Nature, for the Irish poet, is no mere backdrop for a poem, but a penultimate element of experiencing life through Irish eyes. Poems, such as "The Old Woman of Beare," "Kilcash," ^{both by anonymous authors,} and "Under Ben Bulbin," by W.B. Yeats, are evidence of ways the commonplace, ordinary aspects of nature are given extraordinary importance. ^{In Irish poems, the natural and supernatural are often linked; the spirit world co-mingles with everything else.} Very often, the natural back-drop of a poem is synonymous with the state of Ireland herself.

In "The Old Wife of Beare," the sea is an important image, an image that recalls the glory of ancient Ireland, and the subsequent desolation of Eire at the hands of those that invaded ~~depopulated~~ over the sea. In the first stanza, "The sea crawls from

the shore/Leaving there/The despicable weed, A corpses hair" (lines 1-4), the sea, the invading force, leaves undesirable detritus

behind. This desolate picture recalls the Irish themselves; with each subsequent invasion and colonization, the Irish are reminded of and punished for their "otherness." They are the "despicable weed"s that remain when the tide pulls away. With each invading tide, the former glory and strength of a civilization descended from the gods themselves is diminished until none remains.

All that remains of this proud race is weeds. It is highly important the poet uses weeds to personify the diminished people, for weeds are undesirable intruders meant to be eradicated.

The weed imagery is symbolic of the self-loathing many Irish ^{id. for} have at their lack of response to so many invasions throughout the ages. They are undesirable weeds because they did nothing to maintain their cultural superiority over their colonizers.

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Later in the poem, the sea is internalized by "The Old Woman," a nod to Kathleen O'Houlihan, Ireland personified. In this sense, the sea invades her mind, inundating her with memories of how great her land and culture had been. This is a sea of memories, making the old woman long for the past and look grimly at the present state of her homeland. When the sea is "Shoving, rolling through my head / Images of the drifting dead," (lines 35-36), it is reminding the old woman of all those in ^{gone} Ireland who were displaced or killed by invading forces the sea brought with it.

In the last part of the poem, the sea is a different type of invading force - it is the passage of time, the slow slouch toward death, the crumbling of a dying culture and dying language (Gaelic), and the languishing of one who knew greatness. ~~"The sea brought rings as stars to me"~~ Where once time and

the sea brought many to worship Ireland as a beautiful, wise, (4) and mystical place, now the sea evades the speaker, one who longs for the sea to take her as it has taken those before her. The retreat of the sea, much needed in the past, now lets those that remain despair, as they linger in desperation, remembering a glorious past that is lost forever.

The natural images in "Kilcash" recall much the same desolation and crumbling of a great culture as the sea in "The Old Woman of Beare." In "Kilcash," the home and its environment is in a state of great disrepair and abandonment.

not pass (15) former glory has been depleted by the passage of time and the natural progression of cultural decay. The lines, "What shall we do for timber? / The last of the woods is down" (lines 1-2) suggests the depletion of Ireland resources by those who invaded over the

centuries. The depletion of resources and nature echoes the decline⁽⁵⁾ of their culture. When all the great inhabitants of this once great place are "Beaten into the clay," they are re-absorbed back into their land, making them part of Ireland forever.

The third stanza deals primarily with birds, or the lack thereof^{if} in Kilcash. "Not even the song of birds there... singing the world to rest," (lines 21-24) recalls the lamentations for the dying breed of poets, those famed Irish poets that were revered higher^{valued} than any other in the Irish culture. The birds have gone because they have been dishonored - their culture has forgotten their importance.

This poem ends with a "deluge of waters" that Kilcash must be rescued from. These floods are the invading forces that have raped the lands and peoples of Eire for centuries, as in "The Old Woman of Beane," and those great returning birds are what will save Ireland in the end.

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In "Under Ben Bulbin," the natural and the supernatural coningle in an Ireland that is still aware of its roots, as descendents of the sidhe. In this poem, it is clear that Yeats means to convey the interconnectedness of the Irish countryside with spiritual powers that were greater than any colonizing force could attempt to eradicate. Yeats' use of the natural and supernatural suggests that some important aspects of Irish civilization and culture have remained intact. "Where Ben Bulbin sets the scene" is important, as the countryside surrounding Ben Bulbin is the racing grounds of those same gods the ancient Irish worshipped - this provides an important link of the present to the past.

The fifth stanza recalls the past in "Kilcash," with the people beaten into clay, and the longing for days past. This aspect of Ben Bulbin has not changed - although, throughout many centuries, many other lands have tried to make Ireland theirs,

there are still some parts of the country that belong only to Ireland's ⁷ original inhabitants. Clearly, Yeats believes this to be true, for he desires to be laid to rest under Ben Bulbin, one of the last truly Irish places in Ireland.

As we have witnessed in these three poems, nature is never unimportant in an Irish poem. The state of nature is synonymous with the state of Ireland, and the ways in which centuries of domination, invasion, colonization, and hybridization have changed Ireland (and the Irish), and the ways in which Ireland (and the Irish) have remained a (faded) reminder of the greatness of Ireland's past.