The British and Irish Relationship through Text

The relationship between England and Ireland is one that has a long and controversial history. In relationship terms, there were good times and bad times, taking sides, back stabbings, affairs, possession, abuse, fights, marriages, divorces, and even rape. This is a history that goes back long before any of us can remember and there is plenty of literature demonstrating the rocky (to put it mildly) relationship between the two countries. It is a history that naturally inspires brilliant and dramatic literature through the many eventful stages of strife and battle, as literature naturally rises in times of great sorrow as well as great joy or triumph.

According to David Pierce, there are three ways to understand the relationship. The first is a clash, the second an encounter, and the third through the notion of interconnectedness. It is easy for me as a reader of Irish literature to choose the side of the Irish cause, perceiving the relationship as a complete clash. There was the Irish side and there was the British side; the Irish are the good guys and the British are the bad guys. Period. The Irish were the ones that were left to fend for themselves during the famine; the Irish were the ones that were taken advantage of by Parliament while the British degraded the Irish cause, too busy in the war – one that turned out to be quite horrific on all sides; the Irish were the ones being controlled by a country that totally disregarded their rich, long-standing culture and the revival of a language that came to stand for their independence. Part of the reason I take this stance behind Ireland, I think, is because the traditional perceptions of young America have a lot in common with Ireland through their
historical hardships as they fought for their independence from the oppressing British rule. I think the relationship is defined by what each country wants or does and how that meshes with what the other one wants or does. Viewing this relationship strictly in terms of a clash, though, can be problematic.

What the clash relationship does not account for is that, while all this animosity was harvesting in the two countries, there really were more than two sides. In Pierce’s terms, what the clash relationship does not account for “is common ground, markings other than black and white, and the intervention of politics.” There was so little common ground and so little politics due to the evidence of the oppression of the Irish culture by the British imperialistic attitude that that was so characteristic of their reputation and also due to the evidence of the Irish having virtually no say in their politics at all. However, I do agree that there is a gray area that exists going beyond a relationship characterized only by a clash. In this way, the nature of the connection between the Irish and the British lies somewhere between a clash relationship and an encounter relationship. I disregard Pierce’s theory of interconnectedness because I do not see the two countries in terms of a dialectal relationship that rises and converges at all.

With that being said, I feel comfortable saying that, through the literature that characterizes Ireland, I have a hard time seeing a relationship between the two countries in terms of anything besides a clash. Four texts – Poor Mouth, The Celtic Twilight, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and The Last September – confirm my beliefs. They demonstrate that indeed there are gray areas that complicate the history, bringing it beyond the realm of the simple black and white, but that, for the most part, the wellbeing of everyone involved is compromised due to whatever insistence of power is at play in any given point in history, including those who consider themselves neutral, those who are purely Irish, those who are absolutely for British rule,
and also anyone who holds any sort of sympathies for either or both sides. Whatever vantage point is held, the relationship between Britain and Ireland is an unhealthy one as far as the welfare and peace on either side and, therefore, it is a clash. I will trace various forms of this relationship through the previously mentioned three texts.

The first text is William Butler Yeats’s *The Celtic Twilight*. *The Celtic Twilight* includes themes such as the seen and unseen, the disparity between clarity and obscurity, the traditions of the written and the oral, the combination of work and play, and the disconnect between the human and the supernatural. Yeats’s purpose with the text was to replace an emphasis on Irish culture and tradition by recoding some of its myths and folklore. Ireland was undergoing severe cultural and national oppression by the British at the time and we see the revolt against this in Yeats as he creates a work that is meant to combat through the reconstruction of the country’s motherhood in its tradition. Yeats felt that a call to rise through the rich culture and tradition of Ireland was the surest way to inspire the people to reclaim their home from the British. In Yeats’s introduction chapter, originally titles “This Book,” he writes “Hope and Memory have one daughter and her name is Art, and she has built her dwelling far from the desperate field where men hang out their garments upon forked boughs to be banners of battle. O beloved daughter of Hope and Memory, be with me for a little” (1). Some of the stories included in the text have to with the supernatural and some on the purely human. Still others are more like scary stories and others have more to do with happy or even comical endings. Each story is a separate chapter, but the text is meant to be read together and taken as a whole unit. This ambiguity counts for Yeats’s own unresolved feelings toward his religion and his homeland Ireland’s tradition, history, and language reclamation, but, more importantly, by combining all of these things in one place, he makes a national statement. Yeats uses the recording of Irish folklore in
all genres to call for a belief in something that is considered unbelievable – the unbelievable, perhaps, similar to the notion of Ireland regaining its independence as a free state, making its own rules. He saw the disparity in the moral of the Irish people around him and, although he was not completely sure about where his complete faith lied, he had strong faith in the Irish culture and tradition, a culture and tradition that was actively and intentionally being forced away from the Irish people by the British, whether they were for English rule or not, or even somewhere in between. In this regard, *The Celtic Twilight* is important in a number of ways in terms of the relationship between the Irish and the British. The stories are important as they represent independent stories that have maintained a place in the heart of Irish oral faerie and folklore tradition, but the real significance lies in the framework of the entire text as the stories are all taken as one whole.

The call for reclamation of a culture seems an odd thing to occur in times of general welfare. The way that Yeats calls his muse in Art, the daughter of Hope and Memory, is clear evidence he was creating a work with more than just a purpose in entertainment. The Irish needed hope that they would be able to prevail as a country and they need faith in themselves as an oppressed community. They need to memory in the sense that they needed to remember the ideas that made up their culture, like their tradition and their language, things that were being taken away from them. Remembering these things would bring back a sense of identity for them as a country and hopefully inspire them to take a stand as a country as well against the British. The purpose that Yeats places under the *The Celtic Twilight* clearly shows that the relationship between Ireland and Britain at the time is easily characterized a clash because there was animosity, oppression, and a hope for future independence.
James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* will serve as the second text through which the relationship between Britain and Ireland can be traced. The themes that make up this text have to with the cyclic nature of the relation to things in the past, the many uses and manipulations of language, a variety of certain image sets, such as the Virgin Mary and roads as a sense of a journey being taken, and there has been many a critical lens placed on the biographical similarities between Stephen Dedalus and Joyce himself. The importance of the text in determining the parameters of the British and Irish relationship lies in the relationship that Stephen has with Ireland and, furthermore, due to extent of evidence that *A Portrait* is semi autobiographical, the relationship that Joyce has with his Irish heritage as well.

A major overlying image in the text is the image of a woman, specifically the Virgin Mary. The image of women pervade the novel; the Virgin image from Stephen as a young boy, to his stint with the prostitutes as a teenager, and finally to the image of the woman in the water at the end of the novel reflects the progression of his perception of women as he grows older. The anchoring woman of the text is Stephen’s mother. Stephen’s feelings for her change from the beginning of the novel to the end. In the beginning he is attached to her, as most young children, especially boys, typically are as mothers are the nurturers and the caretakers and as Stephen’s father is not the ideal male authority in his life – another similarity between Stephen and Joyce. This relationship with his mother progresses as his idea of women change. *A Portrait* is a coming of age novel in which Stephen is on a journey to adulthood or awareness. Included in this awareness is the awareness of his lust for women as a teenager. Naturally, through Stephen’s growing up and along with his maturing awareness of women, the awareness that his mother has slept with his father is something that really disturbs him. Joyce narrates “Yet her mistrust pricked him more keenly than his father’s pride and he though coldly how he had watched the
faith which was fading down in his soul aging and strengthening in her eyes. A dim antagonism gathered force within him and darkened his mind as a cloud against her disloyalty: and when it passed, cloudlike, leaving his mind serene and dutiful towards her again, he was made aware dimly and without regret of a first noiseless sundering of their lives” (150). Stephen feels that his mother has betrayed him and his feelings toward her are never reconciled for the rest of the text. He denies the employment of the church and decides to move away for Ireland, away from his mother, in order to pursue an artistic career that he feels will serve him more as a person than he ever would have to offer his country for which his feelings and passion are also never reconciled or certain.

If the connection is drawn between Stephen’s mother and the idea of Mother Ireland, as the country is literarily perceived, a clash relationship can be drawn between Britain and Ireland. The issues that have taken and are taking place in Ireland during this time are almost incomprehensible to Stephen. Joyce himself had very specific ideas about Ireland and its battle against Britain, but it was not something that he felt a part of as an artist. He had to leave, just like Stephen did. The relationship is a clash in this sense because there are so many sides of the battle at play that neither Stephen nor Joyce feel they even want to partake in it.

The third text through which the British and Irish relationship can be traced is through Elizabeth Bowen’s novel *The Last September*. The relationship between Britain and Ireland in this novel is best characterized as a clash through a sort of character study kind of look at the quality of life that the characters live and its connection to the notion of hospitality that pervades the novel.

Each section of the novel is determined by the Naylors different acts of hospitality. The first section is titled “The Arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency,” the second is “The Visit of
Miss Norton,” and the third part is “The Departure of Gerald.” The Naylors’s quality of life is determined by their hospitality in welcoming guests into their estate, a lifestyle that is so much modeled after the British upper class kind of lifestyle. Throughout the novel, though, the Naylors treat the chaos that is happening outside the boundaries of their land as a mere inconvenience. This “inconvenience” has a great connection to the things that go on inside the estate.

The Naylors indeed welcome guests into their homes as far as lending them a room for a while, sitting on the porch drinking their beverages of choice, and playing a few all important games of tennis. Under the surface though, it is questionable whether these guests are genuinely wanted. It seems like the Naylors are going through the motions of this type of hospitality as it goes along with the British notion of the upper class. It is more like conformation to the idea that the Naylors welcome these guests because that is what they do as people who have a place for others to stay, whether they are welcome or not. They do not really even have a choice, just like Ireland does not.

While the Naylors are demonstrating hospitality in a twisted sort of way, Ireland is also being forced into by the British as they fight for independence. The British are Ireland’s unwanted guests that just will not leave and let the Irish live the quality of life that they want, without them there. The clash relationship between Ireland and Britian is shown in The Last September through this connection with the Naylor’s guests and the guests that are forcing themselves into Irish territory all around the estate.

Flann O’Brien’s The Poor Mouth shows the clash relationship between the Irish and British in a very different way. O’Brien seems to be representing the Gaelic throughout the novel in a way that would be insulting to them, and, therefore, to his own background. However, it is somehow clear that his intention is the very opposite.
It is important to recognize the oppressive events that occur throughout the story, such as when Bonaparte O’coonassa goes off to school to have the more English name of Jams O’Donnell literally beaten into him. This incident, along with others throughout, recognize the oppressive nature of the relationship of the British toward the Irish, but O’Brien exposes the clash relationship between the two countries not through the events that happen in Poor Mouth, but through the irony and satire that make up the entire representation of the Gaelic as a people and as a tradition.

At one point in the novel, there is a competition to see who has the most poverty. When the persona Bonaparte, otherwise known as Jams O’Donnell, introduces that character Sitric O’Sanassa, he says that Sitric “had the best hunting, a generous heart, and every other good quality which earn praise and respect at all times. But alas! There was another report abroad concerning him which was neither good nor fortunate. He possessed the very best poverty, hunger and distress also” (88). O’Brien paints the picture the poverty and distress is something to be desired or competed for among the Gaelic population. At other points throughout the novel, Gaels are cleverly mocked through incidents like the competition to speak the best Gaelic, which ultimately goes to the pig because the language’s value is measured for is inaudibility, and also in the ridiculousness of the situation when Bonaparte goes to get boots. It is important to notice that O’Brien uses these very condescending, but humorous notions as the very means to prove that they are completely false. The Gaels certainly do not read the text and assume these notions as true nor do they assume the O’Brien thinks so either. It is the Dublin Irish that are so urbanized, the Anglo-Irish who hold such sympathies for the British, and the British themselves who adhere to these ideas of the country people, the Gaelic.
By creating a text that uses extreme humor, he presents an ironic and satiric picture of the Irish people and mocks the ones that believe it at the same time. The disconnect between the reality of how the true Irish really live and the perception of the way they live by the people who could likely be considered more British in a number of ways is the way that *Poor Mouth* demonstrates a relationship between Britain and Ireland as a clash.
Works Cited


