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Ireland Defined as Place

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Honors College Project

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The concepts of place and space were originally terms used exclusively in the study of geography but are now discussed in a variety of fields. While the relationship between the two ideas is complicated and debated, the basic definitions of each concept are relatively agreed upon. Space is defined as a physical, concrete location, a point on a map; it is the collection of matter that makes up a certain spot in existence. Place is how one thinks about a certain space. This includes the culture that is practiced, the ideas and emotions associated with the space, the name given to a space, and all the meanings given to the space beyond its material makeup. For example, the coordinates 22.3964°N , 114.1095°E indicate a certain space, and the name Hong Kong is part of its place; in fact, even the coordinates, a label given to a space to define its location in relation to others, are part of its place. To provide a more detailed example of place and space, the home I grew up in has a small creek that runs along the side of the yard. About half the time it is dry with a bed of large rocks, and when it rains, the water is generally about a foot deep and is filled with algae. There are a few trees along its banks, a concrete bridge/tunnel that allows cars to pass over it, and a long piece of moss-covered limestone that allows you to walk carefully from one bank to the other. This is simply a space, but this place is much more significant. This creek is where all of my childhood adventures took place. Myself, my younger brother, and anywhere from two to six neighborhood friends used this creek as our new world; we created nations, streets, magical abilities, battle scenes, x-games, houses, and so much more in this short length of creek. Even now, walking down the small slope that leads from my front yard to the grassy banks stirs up memories of chewing on dandelion stems and sprinting across tall rocks. Even though none of us have played in the creek in many years, it still feels magical to me and it makes me feel as if adventures are still out there to be explored. This is the place; the creek is more than just a creek because it holds a certain meaning in my mind.

This example, however, indicates but one of the theorized models of how place and space interact together. Among the various models there are two that I would like to discuss. The story of my childhood creek is an example of the layer-cake model, a term coined by Kling et al. (2; Dourish 300). The layer-cake model, the most accepted model of interaction, sees the relationship between space and place as sequential in nature; that is, that place exists because of, and so comes after, space. In this view, space is a physical entity that exists outside of social constructs and place in the social understanding of a known space (Dourish 300). In contrast to this perspective, Dourish proposes the idea that space as well as place is a social construct. In this model, space and place have a more interconnected relationship where space is influenced and even created by characteristics normally ascribed to place, such as a location's history and cultural practices. Space is defined not merely by the natural facts that make up a location, but by the way it is interacted with. Dourish gives as an example Munn's work with the Australian Aboriginal people (302-303). She found in her study that Aboriginal people, when moving through a space, do not take the most direct path to their destination but instead appear to meander through, following an invisible path; however, this wandering is not accidental. In fact this pattern of movement is done in order to avoid interacting with certain locations. I encountered this myself in Ireland. There are many locations in Ireland that were known at one time to be fairy meeting spots; and although the people of Ireland today do not generally believe in fairies, the people's love and respect for their history-filled culture have allowed many people today to remember those locations. The fairy meeting spots are held in such high regard that roads and other structures are built around them so as to preserve those ancient spots. In this case, space exists as it does because of the culture of the people and therefore, according to Dourish's argument, the space and its culture cannot be separated. Another part of Dourish's

argument is that space is a social construct just like place; he gives the examples of human created systems of measurement such as cartography, navigation, and geometric proofs as aspects of space that are socially constructed, emphasizing that place is not the only aspect of a location that is socially based (301). Dourish also argues that space does not necessarily come before place (301). He claims that the scientific and mathematical inquiries into space are not what we as human beings interact with first. Instead, we first experience places: a country's name, the stereotypes of a people group, the cultural meaning associated with certain areas, and other characteristics of a place. These things are what we encounter first and it is only after this experience that we come to learn about space.

Dourish's argument, however, does not hold. His argument has two main points. The first is that space is a social construct, an idea largely based on the fact that systems used to measure and define space have been set in place by society. Dourish's mistake here is in assuming that an entity and its measurement are the same. Let's say the distance from point A to point B is two feet. Although that measurement and even the term "distance" are socially created, the physical space between the two points is not; whether we have organized distance in such a way as to say that point A and point B are two feet, eight miles, or half a kilometer apart, the locations of the two points do not change, nor does the amount of existence between them. Society has created ideas and measurements like cartography and geometry in an attempt to organize our world, and the same idea applies to language. The word "apple" and the actual object of an apple are not equivalent; instead, the word "apple" developed to represent the object in communication. Space, therefore, is not a social construct, but an already existing plane. By attempting to make space seem as much a social construct as place, Dourish overemphasizes the role of space, which brings me to my next point of criticism. His second main point is that place oftentimes comes

before space, citing everyday human encounters with the two as evidence; however, what he fails to acknowledge in his article is that space had to come first at one point in time. There were not always meanings attached to certain countries and landmarks, and cultures did not exist before continents. While we do experience the world in terms of cultures and ideas today, those cultures were formed in response to a physical space in an attempt to survive and thrive in a certain location.

I do believe, however, that Dourish is correct when he states that the relationship between space and place is more complicated than a strict layer-cake model. I propose instead what can be thought of as a tablecloth model. Imagine that a unique table is constructed and a matching tablecloth is created for it that is tailored to fit the table exactly. Over time, the tablecloth obtains some damage; a knife stabs into the table leaving a small tear in the cloth and red wine is spilled, soaking through the cloth onto the table. The table, representing space, exists first, followed by the tablecloth which represents place; but the relationship does not end there. The knife that ripped the tablecloth has also left an indentation on the table and the wine that soaked through the tablecloth has caused some water damage. Similarly, place can affect space throughout time just as space affects the formation of place. This is the model that will be used in my reflection of contemporary Irish writers. In addition to this model I will also be contemplating Agnew's ideas about place and space. While Dourish seems focused on pinning down the relationship between the two, geologist John Agnew discusses the world's preference of one over the other. According to Agnew's theory, the world seems increasingly to disregard place in favor of space. He claims, "place is being lost to an increasingly homogenous and alienating sameness" (Agnew 7). Two hundred years ago, everyday life in Tokyo, Japan was radically different from that in London, England. Today, with the same technology and the same ideas being shared around the world,

life in any urban location is similar to any other; people wake up, go to work at a job that generally involves a computer, connect with friends and family through the internet, perhaps visit a shopping center, and return home. While in Dublin I saw many people walking to work in business suits carrying briefcases and using their phones; I was reminded of the people I have seen in Nashville, in Paris, and in Tokyo doing the exact same thing. Despite this worldwide movement away from place, the modern Irish writers that I examine in this reflection seem to rebel against the world's loss of place by examining their own sense of Ireland's place and conveying those thoughts through their writings. In addition to discussing my thoughts on these Irish writers, I will also be reflecting on my own sense of Ireland's place and how it evolved as I experienced Ireland first hand.

Many people, when thinking about a place, reflect on its borders and relationships with the other places that are around it. This kind of nationalistic reflection is relevant when thinking about Ireland; the Irish people are fiercely proud of their national identity in part because of the country's struggle for independence in recent history. The nationalism of Ireland, however, is not discussed in this reflection. Other aspects of Irish culture, such as its mystical heritage and love of the land, have had and continue to have a much greater impact on my idea of Ireland as a place.

William Butler Yeats is perhaps the most quintessential Irish poet. Unlike other Irish poets, like Kavanagh and even Heaney, Yeats seems largely unconcerned with the everyday life of the average Irishman and instead is much more enamored with Ireland's mystical heritage. Ireland's real meaning for Yeats appears to lie in its folklore and fantastic beliefs and traditions. His early poetry especially focuses on the ethereal legends of fairies and ancient Irish heroes. His poem "The Stolen Child" published in his collection entitled *Crossways* is an example of this.

The poem, written from the perspective of fairies, tells the story of fairies tempting a human child to come away with them. This is a reference to the myth of changelings, duplicate children that fairies would leave behind after taking the original. The fairies in this poem live in an enchanted version of the human world where they whisper dreams to fish and dance in the ocean. Yeats' writing includes other pagan beliefs of ancient Ireland, as is seen in his poem "The Two Trees." In this poem, nature is spiritual and the two trees are the roots of good and evil. Near the end of the poem Yeats mentions "when God slept in times of old" (32), a line that seems to allude to the seventh day of rest after the world's creation in the Christian tradition.

Incorporating the Christian God into a poem filled with pagan imagery reflects the actual religious history of Ireland in which Christianity was integrated into the culture through relating it to the ancient pagan beliefs, a practice which resulted in the making of the iconic Celtic cross.

Yeats' early poetry also references the heroes of Irish legend. His poem "Fergus and the Druid" is structured as a conversation between Fergus, a powerful king of Irish mythology, and a Druid, a member of the priestly, scholarly class of Celtic society (Fergus mac Roth; Jarus). Yeats has many other poems featuring Fergus, Conchubar, and other figures in Irish legend. These poems involve talk of magic and even grand or impossible feats. For example, "Cuchulain's Fight With the Sea" tells a story of Cuchulain, a great warrior, and Conchubar, the son of Fergus' wife and king of the Red Branch (Cuchulain: The Wooing of Emer; Fergus mac Roth). In the poem Conchubar, afraid of an attack from Cuchulain, calls upon the Druids to cast a spell on him, causing him to fight with the sea. Similarly, Yeats' poem entitled "A Faery Song" also incorporates both Irish mythology and supernatural beliefs. Like "Stolen Child," this poem is written from the point of view of fairies. The epigraph at the beginning of the poem reads, "Sung by the people of Faery over Diarmuid and Grania, in their bridal sleep under a Cromlech" (12).

Diarmuid and Grania, the king's loyal warrior and the most beautiful woman in Ireland, are famous in Irish legend for running from the king and his warriors their entire lives with the aid of the Celtic god of love (Diarmuid and Gráinne). Yeats' poetry indicates a fascination with the powerful and magical figures of Irish lore, a fascination that is apparent in his everyday life as well as his writing. Yeats was apparently so enamored with the mystical that he began to take part in occult practices of his own, joining the Order of the Golden Dawn.

Looking back on my experience of Ireland, my favorite places were those in which I felt most in touch with that deeper part of myself that my adult life does not always have room for. As a child, I lived in my imagination. Fairies, witches, and warriors were everywhere, but as I have grown older these mythical characters have moved further to the back of my mind; while in Ireland I reconnected with my childhood self. At Blarney Castle I separated from my group of friends to wander the gardens on my own and I encountered the sense of magic that Yeats' poems convey. I was able to leave an offering on a stone in a fairy glade and ramble through enormous pine trees like a wandering adventurer. Yeats' poetry, especially his early work, spoke to me so much before my trip because it painted Ireland as my childhood fantasy. After experiencing Ireland for myself, I feel even more confident that my love of this place stems largely from the fact that it reminds me of myself.

In addition to the legendary figures of Irish mythology, Yeats was also intensely interested in the legendary figures of modern Irish history. His later works are much less focused on ancient mythology and much more preoccupied with the Irish revolution. His iconic poem "Easter 1916" takes its title from the famous Easter Uprising that is still celebrated in Ireland today. In the poem he lists the names "MacDonagh and MacBride/And Connolly and Pearse" as the modern heroes that have replaced those of legend (75-76). In each stanza, Yeats describes a

facet of everyday life, such as passing halfway familiar people on the street. He uses phrases like “grey/Eighteenth-century houses” and “polite meaningless words” to emphasize the boredom of the average life (3-4, 6). Then, at the end of each stanza, the refrain “changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born” is repeated. This change implies that the uprising has brought life to the Irish people. A woman he first describes as “shrill” is later described as “young and beautiful” (20, 22); and a man the speaker dislikes, described as a “drunken, vainglorious lout,” is also mentioned as being changed (32). It seems that Yeats is saying that everyone involved in the uprising is a hero and deserves to be lauded as one.

Yeats’ poetry follows the tablecloth model fairly well, although it is not explicitly stated in his works. The ancient Irish beliefs that he writes about stemmed from a curiosity about the physical space; fairies and magic were used to explain the unexplainable. Yeats’ sense of Irish place, therefore, arose from a response to the space that was already there. As Ireland as a place progressed, the culture became incredibly nostalgic, as Yeats’ poetry in itself demonstrates, so much so that certain locations were and still are today revered and preserved; in this way, the place has affected the space.

When it comes to space, Kavanagh often writes about the iconic fields of his country. When thinking about Ireland, the first thing I imagine is the rolling hills and intensely beautiful green fields that gave Ireland its nickname of The Emerald Isle. While in Ireland I learned that farming and the raising of sheep and cattle are still vital to the culture and way of life for many Irish people. This importance is reflected in the amount of Kavanagh’s poetry dedicated to the land and to the simplistic, rural way of life for Irish farmers. While this lifestyle and the landscape are often romanticized, the fields of Ireland hold a darker meaning for Kavanagh. His most famous poem, “The Great Hunger,” tells the story of an Irishman so in love with his fields

that he shuns all other pleasures in life; it is the story of a man who is abused by his mother and convinced to reject women in favor of caring for the land. The field is described as “his bride” (57), indicating the lack of a human wife and a life dedicated to loving the land. Maguire’s decision to devote himself completely to the land is largely based on his belief that women and sex, and even the desire for them, are sinful (196-202). For Maguire, the fields are the safest place to be. Lines 62 through 65 say, “He was suspicious in his youth as a rat near strange bread/When girls laughed;” instead of women, the reader is told that he “dreamt/The innocence of young brambles to hooked treachery” (64-65).

“Stony Grey Soil” tells a similar tale. The poem begins with an accusation to the land as the speaker claims,

O stony grey soil of Monaghan
 The laugh from my love you thieved;
 You took the gay child of my passion
 And gave me your clod-conceived (1-4).

The speaker mourns the missed opportunities of love and children that he has forsaken to care for the land. The second stanza then describes how the speaker was deceived in his love for the land. Kavanagh writes,

You clogged the feet of my boyhood
 And I believed that my stumble
 Had the poise and stride of Apollo
 And his voice my thick-tongued mumble (5-8).

The mention of an ancient Roman god gives the poem a mythical feel, a device he uses in other poems as well. For example, in “Plough-Horses” Kavanagh writes of the horses, “I saw Phidias’

chisel there” (5). By comparing the horses to sculptures created by Phidias, the artist who designed the Parthenon, he suggests that they are not only works of great beauty but are also divine and meant for the gods (“Phidias”). In addition, drawing upon the religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans instead of the Christianity traditionally practiced in the West brings to the reader’s mind a sense of mysticism that is reminiscent of the ancient Irish belief in fairies and magic. These references only reinforce the sense of magic within the land of Kavanagh’s poetry. The fields of Ireland are enticing, as is seen in the way that they call to Maguire in “The Great Hunger”: “O the grip, O the grip of irregular fields! No man escapes” (67). The fields, however, are also dangerous in the sense that one’s life could be completely lost in them. In this way the fields are similar to the fairies in Yeats’s poem “The Stolen Child;” they call for the abandonment of one’s life in favor of being connected with nature; and although Kavanagh does not mention fairies or any other mystical beliefs of Ireland’s history, the power that the soil seems to hold is a kind of magic. The belief in magic still seems to be part of Ireland’s sense of place; it has simply been transferred from beliefs in fairies and mermaids to the land. This kind of magical misbelief regarding the land is found in many of Kavanagh’s poems. “Ploughman,” for example, is one of his only poems about farm life written in first person, and it describes a feeling of rapture felt by a worker of the land:

I turn the lea-green down
 Gaily now,
 And paint the meadow brown
 With my plow.

I dream with silvery gull

And brazen crow.
A thing that is beautiful
I may know.

Tranquility walks with me
And no care.
O, the quiet ecstasy
Like a prayer.
I find a star-lovely art
In a dark sod.
Joy that is timeless! O heart
That knows God!

To this farmer, ploughing is a spiritual experience; he sees himself as an artist and as one who is intimately connected with nature (3, 5-6). Kavanagh's poem "Plough-Horses" also uses peaceful and heavenly imagery to describe field work before acknowledging at the end the simple truth of horses being at work.

The obsession with the land that Kavanagh seems so concerned with is something I experienced even in the short time I was there. On the twenty-fourth of May I wrote in my journal, "Rapeseed. Rapeseed is everywhere on the way to Newgrange and Monasterboice and it's *bright* yellow and lovely. It's like patches of sunlight on the ground." As cliché as it sounds, sunshine is exactly how I remember it, even now. I had never seen such large patches of yellow flowers, and when they waved in the breeze they gave off the impression of sunlight shining

through moving clouds. I remember how I was glued to the window that day and I could not take my eyes away from the rapeseed.

Unlike Yeats, Kavanagh does not follow my tablecloth model of place and space. Ireland as a space contains many fertile fields and bog lands, which lead to the farm-based culture of the ancient Irish people; the dependence that the Irish people have on the land has led to the consuming devotion seen in Kavanagh's poetry. Here, the physical space has affected Ireland as a place but not the other way around. The Irish people are depicted by Kavanagh to be insignificant in reference to the power and vastness of the land. As mentioned earlier, poems like "Plough-Horses" and "Ploughman" depict the land as god-like and its workers as worshippers. In Kavanagh's Ireland, there is no give and take between the godly space and the human-created place.

Religion also plays a part in Ireland's identity as a place. In the poem, Kavanagh gives an account of Sunday Mass and explains how Maguire has the honor of holding the collecting box one month. During Mass, Maguire's thoughts wander away from God and to his fields; this seems contradictory to his intense desire to remain pure and away from temptation, and also seems to indicate that his obsession with the fields has grown to overcome his religious beliefs. Additionally, Mass is not described in terms of spiritual experiences, godly virtues, or even the beauty of the cathedral, but is instead described by the congregation's coughs and sighs; and when Mass is over, Maguire "coughed the prayer phlegm up from his throat and sighed: Amen" (195), implying that prayer and by extension, God, are things that should be expelled from the body before leaving the church. Mass in this poem feels rote and suggests that Maguire and the rest of the community are devoted not to God, but to Catholicism. Kavanagh appears to think this devotion is crippling. Lines 379 through 383 say,

Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the
 wind

Life dried in the veins of these women and men:

The grey and grief and unlove,

The bones in the backs of their hands,

And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.

The chapel, a symbol for religion, is oppressing the people of Ireland and is essentially taking the life out of the Irish people. This is an interesting contrast to the pagan spirituality described in “Plough-Horses” and “Ploughman,” which is characterized by divine imagery.

Ireland’s place, to Kavanagh, is characterized by an intense love of the land and a propensity to be culturally, though not necessarily spiritually, Catholic. Also, while I expected to experience the farm culture that Kavanagh writes so much about, it was interesting to see its abundance first hand. One tour guide joked that “if you don’t want to be in the sheep farming business, you can grow pine trees.” Cultivating the land is essentially the only way of life in rural Ireland, so I can see how an obsession with the land, like the one Maguire has, could develop.

Like Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney also recognizes the importance of the land; unlike Kavanagh, Heaney seems more concerned with what is in the land itself and with the act of digging into it than the Irish people’s devotion to tending it. Even the title of the book of selected poems used in this reflection is *Opened Ground*, hinting at the unearthing of history described in his many “bog poems.” Heaney’s poem “Bogland,” published in his collection *Door into the Dark*, expresses his fascination with the act of digging into the earth. The poem describes the incredible preserving power of the bog, citing the skeletons that have been recovered from it and

butter found beneath the earth that is still “salty and white” (15). The speaker then says in reference to the digging into the earth,

Our pioneers keep striking

Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip

Seems camped on before (23-26).

“Downwards” is the physical motion of digging and is the literal delving into the earth; but “inwards” implies introspection and the searching into oneself. It appears that in Heaney’s view, going deeper into the earth also causes one to go deeper into oneself; the two experiences are linked, suggesting a connection between the Irish people and the land. By identifying themselves with the land, however, the Irish people are also identifying themselves with the past. As lines 25 and 26 say, “every layer they strip/Seems camped on before.” In digging deeper into the earth, and so into themselves, the past emerges and continues to reappear “with every layer.”

“Digging” also conveys this idea. In this poem Heaney discusses digging in terms of the speaker’s own personal history, giving the examples of his father digging potatoes and his grandfather digging peat. The act of digging reminds one of one’s own sense of the past. In addition to literal digging, Heaney also discusses metaphorical digging. The last four lines of the poem read,

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it (28-31).

The speaker is participating in the introspective digging hinted at in "Bogland" and connects this with the physical digging of his forefathers.

In Heaney's poetry, the act of digging always connects one to the past; however, sometimes this penetrating into the earth can be destructive. "Bog Queen," one of many poems about the ancient bodies found in the bogs, suggests that these long-buried corpses in the bogs should not be excavated. The woman whom Heaney calls the "Bog Queen," who is the speaker of the poem, describes what is happening to her body under the earth in a way that feels peaceful and even intimate. Twice the phrase "I lay waiting" appears, along with words like "pondered," "fermenting," and "hibernated;" these words all create a sense of time passing quietly and patiently. Heaney uses a lot of tactile words in describing the decay of different parts of her body and writes, "My body was braille/for the creeping influences," conjuring an image of the earth running hands over her body. Stanza nine even says, "I knew winter cold/like the nuzzle of fjords/ at my thighs--" (34-36), which depicts the earth as the speaker's lover. There is then a sudden turn in stanza eleven. The speaker says,

My skull hibernated
in the wet nest of my hair.

Which they robbed.
I was barbered
and stripped
by a turf-cutter's spade (39-44).

The short statement “Which they robbed” feels angry, as does the word “stripped;” and when the body is pulled from the bog, the language used becomes ugly. Before, the speaker describes herself in terms of beauty, referring to “Baltic amber,” “gemstones,” and “Phoenician stitchwork” (21, 26, 31). In the final stanza of the poem she instead says,

I rose from the dark,
hacked bone, skull-ware,
frayed stitches, tufts,
small gleams on the bank (53-56).

Heaney portrays the body as wanting to stay hidden within the bog.

All of the bodies found in the peat bogs are somber reminders of the difficult times in Ireland’s history. “Punishment” tells of a woman killed for adultery, and “The Grauballe Man” is described as “seem[ing] to weep/the black river of himself” (4-5). Ireland’s history, and so its land, is full of pain. Heaney’s poem “Sibyl” sums it up by saying,

The ground we kept our ear to for so long
Is flayed or calloused, and its entrails
Tented by an impious augury.
Our island is full of comfortless noises (17-20).

The “entrails” of the ground are the bodies found buried inside and they are described as being unholy. Ireland is injured from its past and the obsession with the earth only serves to perpetuate that injury. While the status of its injury was difficult to determine in the nine short days I was there, the people of Ireland were definitely very aware of their history. At the time I was there, the country was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Easter uprising of 1916, the nation’s most famous rebellion in its long attempt to separate from the United Kingdom and become its

own country. The deaths of the rebellion's leaders are still honored with reverence and there were signs and banners all over Dublin advertising the anniversary; I imagine that this is the kind of obsession that Heaney was concerned about. While I still find it difficult to integrate this idea of Ireland as injured into my sense of Ireland as a place, the harshness of the land now does belong to my idea of Ireland. One of the first days in Ireland I wrote, "I've noticed that while the land is absolutely gorgeous, it's not soft-looking. There are harsh, almost dry-looking plants (which, of course, is impossible because of all the rain) and shrubs and lots of bristly pine trees. The flora is all very bushy." I see the Irish land not just as beautiful, but as harsh and unforgiving; and while this is based simply on the physical landscape that I encountered, it is the same feeling I get from Seamus Heaney's poetry about the dangers of the land. One of the things I now associate with Ireland that I did not before is the peat bogs; Heaney was not exaggerating their importance. Information about peat and how it is used was discussed by tour guides and in museums, and a pile of it was even put on display at a reconstructed bog village. I also saw the incredible preserving powers of the bogs that are seen in his poetry. The bog bodies on display at the National Archeology Museum were just as haunting as Heaney describes; the idea of Ireland's past being connected to its land is easy to understand after seeing the remains of these people.

Of the poets that I examined, Seamus Heaney follows the tablecloth model the most literally, which is seen largely in his fascination with the bog bodies. Heaney writes about the bodies of ancient people who were typically killed as a sacrifice or executed for a crime. When these bodies were buried in the bog, the space of the land was changed, a phenomena that Heaney acknowledges in poems like "Bog Queen," in which a body has become one with the bog. As the land is dug into and these bodies are unearthed, a connection to the past is created; in

this way, space influences place. Heaney does seem to view the interconnected relationship between place and space in a way that seems backwards from what I originally described, at least in terms of the bog bodies. In these poems, place seems to affect space first, whereas Yeats and Kavanagh show space first affecting place. Nevertheless, both elements of the tablecloth model appear in his poetry.

In my efforts to understand Ireland as place, the Irish poetry was much more beneficial than the prose. The prose works I read each contain a plot, a setting, and characters, but equal attention is not necessarily given to each. When I read plays or novels, my interest lies almost always in the storyline. I love a good story. I love well-placed characters, effective pacing, and character development; the focus, for me, is not on the setting's space or place. This natural inclination toward storylines and characters made reading prose as a way to understand place and space very difficult. The focus on poetry is much different. Poems are written in a way that accentuates language rather than characters or plot, and this enables me to pay more attention to the descriptions of a space or place. In addition, the poems I examined convey feelings about a place that are more easily picked up on than the feelings that might be conveyed in prose. Again, the focus on language helps me to notice specific words and their different connotations, allowing me to get a deeper sense of the feelings behind the poem. While the argument can be made that feelings exist in prose just as they do in poetry, poems do provide a more condensed dose of thought and emotion. A prose work might convey a feeling toward the land, but it is a feeling that is only sensed through the reading of an entire story; and the prose works that I read were generally novels and longer plays. The poems were relatively short and therefore had to convey a feeling in just a few stanzas, or even just a few lines. Even longer poems seemed to break down thoughts and feelings in a way that the novels and plays did not; Kavanagh's "The

Great Hunger,” for example, was broken down into stanzas that were all different from each other in terms of construction and they all conveyed different aspects of the singular thought that Kavanagh was conveying. The concentrated nature of poetry created in my mind more intense emotions and a stronger understanding of what the writers were attempting to convey.

Sean O’Casey’s plays suggest that Ireland’s meaning lies in its people and their interactions and struggles, as opposed to its legends or traditions. *The Shadow of a Gunman* is a short play that includes the personalities, beliefs, and interactions of its few characters in a firm and moving way. Seumas Shields shows one side of an Irishman. He is a practicing Catholic, which is the traditional religious practice in Ireland, and he is very superstitious, associating his misfortunes with not attending Mass and believing that a strange knocking noise will lead to death. He believes in honest, physical labor and even tells Donal Davoren “it doesn’t pay a working-man to write poetry” (35); yet he also has a healthy dose of slothfulness in both his sleeping and cleaning habits. Donal Davoren is almost Shields’ exact opposite. He is up early despite appearing not to have a traditional job; he is also not at all religious and in fact has no belief in anything supernatural. Both the Catholicism of Seumas and the atheism of Davoren foil the Protestant beliefs of Mr. and Mrs. Grigson. In this play Protestants are revealed to be harsh in their religious practices. Mr. Grigson once says to Davoren, “I know how to keep Mrs. Grigson in her place; I have the authority of the Bible for that; I know the Bible from cover to cover” (46). Contrast this with Seumas’ Catholic beliefs. It is emphasized that he skipped Mass that morning, indicating less religiosity than Mr. Grigson; however, Seumas reveals himself to be very spiritual, praying fervently when the bombs are discovered and being much kinder to Mrs. Grigson than her husband is.

O'Casey's plays also show the conflicting roles of women in Ireland; however this aspect of Ireland does not speak to my own sense of Ireland's place. Until recently, I was fairly unconcerned with what are referred to as "women's issues." The idea that implicit sexism still existed in my own communities seemed almost ridiculous because I had never experienced that myself. Growing up, I would play Star Wars with a group of boys, and they would play dress-up and dolls with me. In addition, I had a few female friends that were quite different from me. One friend was into hair and makeup, another friend enjoyed skateboarding, and I liked to read and play pretend. There were no roles that only boys or only girls could play, so the idea that women *should be* a certain way never entered my mind. It took me a while to understand that some people, however, did think that women and men had certain roles that they should play. Women in O'Casey's plays seem to follow my own ideas about men and women and their complexities; he refuses to put women into a box. Mrs. Grigson, for example, is married to an abusive alcoholic who she is continually in submission to, despite being more hardworking and sacrificing than her husband. Her role is contrasted with that of Mrs. Henderson, who is also married but lacks the pitiful submissiveness of her Protestant counterpart; instead, she is loud, confident, and gregarious. While her husband does not appear in the play, so we do not see their interactions, she completely eclipses her male companion Mr. Gallogher thereby revealing herself as a dominant, fearless woman. Minnie Powell appears to be the balance between Mrs. Grigson and Mrs. Henderson. Although quiet and feminine, she is also described as "unafraid" (14) and seems to be much less traditional in her relationships with men, as seen in her relationship with Davoren; she also declares a lack of concern about her reputation and shows great presence of mind in an emergency when the bombs are discovered, unlike every other character in the play.

While this is an interesting observation, the role of women in Irish society does not speak to my own sense of Ireland's place, because it was not something that I particularly encountered in my short time there. Like the United States, Ireland is a relatively progressive country in terms of social issues, including so-called "women's issues." On the surface, it seems that women are seen as whole, complex people who are equal to men; and this is what I saw in my short time there. If lingering sexist attitudes exist, which is a real possibility, they are implicit, lying below the general social conscience, and not something that I was able to experience through writing or while there.

O'Casey also demonstrates an aspect of Ireland's place in showcasing the Irish dialect. His play *The Plough and the Stars* demonstrates this in many of the characters. The Irish pronunciation is denoted by a phonetic spelling of a word according to the way the character pronounces it; for example, "Jesus" is spelled "Jasus" to emphasize the "a" sound substituted for an "e." The ends of words are also clipped off in the characters' speech. "The" is usually shortened to "th" and words ending in "ing" are pronounced without the "g." Mollser demonstrates these trends in Act 1 when she says, "mother's gone to th' meetin', an' I was feelin' terrible lonely" (93). O'Casey also makes a point of contrasting the Irish accent with that of the English. English soldiers appear at the end of the play and their speech strongly emphasizes the "oy" and "aw" sounds. As an example, Corporal Stoddart says in Act 4, "Ow, I fink it's nearly hover. We've got 'em surrounded, and we're clowsing in on the bloighters. Ow, it was only a little bit of a dawg-foight" (150). The exaggeration of the Englishmen's speech causes them to immediately stand out and separates them from the Irish people. This is interesting to me because by studying the Irish dialect in O'Casey's work, I can better understand the stereotypical Southern accent of the United States. In this region of the United States, many

people also leave the endings off words when speaking and pronounce the long “e” sound as an “a.” When comparing these ways of speaking, I am reminded that many Irish immigrants settled in the southern United States, and so it makes sense that their way of speaking would transfer to others as time passes. However, perhaps because of this familiarity, the Irish accent does not play a large role in my idea of Ireland as a place. If the Irish dialect did represent Ireland as a place, as it does for many people, I would say that through this disparity of language, the Irish claim another aspect of life that contributes to Ireland’s own unique sense of place. Another Irish author, Roddy Doyle, also includes the Irish way of speaking as part of Ireland’s meaning; however, instead of the Irish pronunciation of words, he focuses on the Irish vocabulary itself. In his novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, Doyle’s characters use words that belong solely to the Irish dialect. For example, Mrs. Clarke once tells her son, “You’re a gas man, Patrick,” with “gas” meaning funny (179). The young boys in the story also use the words “mickey” and “gick” as slang terms for a penis and once used the word “spa-face” as an insult that roughly translates into calling someone a “fool” (5; Slang.ie). While Ireland is known for its accent around the world and was definitely part of my idea of Ireland as a place before visiting there myself, it was only when I arrived that I understood how unique the Irish way of speaking is. The accent itself was much more difficult to understand than I thought it would be, and this was made even more difficult by the addition of slang terms that I was quite unfamiliar with. At one point in my travels my friends and I found a suggestion note that read, “The girl at the counter was well sound and gas craic.” Slang terms like these were much more prolific than I expected and they only served to reinforce the sense of Ireland’s own unique culture.

While I read almost all of the Irish literature for this reflection before traveling to Ireland in the spring, I read one book while I was there to be able to compare the experiences in the book

with my own experiences. I read the novel *The Country Girls* by Edna O'Brien while in Ireland, and I found that my travels in that country followed a similar path to those of the two main characters, Caithleen and Baba. Their stories move from a small, quiet town in the country to the bustling noise of Dublin, just as my own journey through Ireland began with explorations of the countryside and drives through various small towns and ended with a few days in the big city. While reading *The Country Girls*, I enjoyed the story more in the first half of the book, while reading about life in Caithleen's small town. The town itself seems to have its own personality; the descriptions of life on her family's small farm, including growing cabbage and caring for chickens, identified themselves as a part of Ireland as did the mention of bluebells and wool clothing, two things that I discovered were very plentiful in Ireland. Moreover, O'Brien's description of the countryside creates an image of Ireland that is similar to my own ideas and feelings about its place. On the first page of the novel she writes,

The sun was not yet up and the lawn was speckled with daisies that were fast asleep. There was dew everywhere. The grass below my window, the hedge around it, the rusty paling wire beyond that, and the big outer field were each touched with a delicate, wandering mist. And the leaves and the trees were bathed in the mist, and the trees looked unreal, like trees in a dream. Around the forget-me-nots that sprouted out of the side of the hedge were haloes of water. Water that glistened like silver. It was quiet, it was perfectly still.

This description paints the Irish land as beautiful and enchanting; it simply *feels* like Ireland. This is perhaps so beautiful to me because it is reminiscent of my own childhood place that so defines me. This connection to my childhood and myself explains my love for Ireland: although Ireland itself is a faraway place with its own culture and its own history, my idea of Ireland

parallels my childhood. While in Ireland, I wrote in my journal, “it seems like the only sense I ever actively pay attention to is smell. Like today in the beautiful gardens of Blarney Castle I kept noticing the smell of soil; not mud or mulch, but fresh, moist soil and it was lovely. There were also all these pretty white flowers everywhere that smelled like wild onions; it reminded me of summers when I was little.” In writing about this small town O’Brien creates a place that is unique and seems to accurately convey the spirit of rural Ireland.

On the other hand, Dublin in the story did not seem as special. Caitheleen could have been in any big city anywhere in the world. O’Brien describes Dublin as, “Lights, faces, traffic, the enormous vitality of people hurrying to somewhere” (141), and this is all she says about it. Compared to the paragraph portrait about her childhood home, this one sentence description makes Dublin seem flat and two-dimensional. My own experience of Dublin was similar; although it was a beautiful city, there was not much to culturally differentiate it from any other beautiful city. In addition to the sameness of urban areas, immersing myself in the literature of Ireland also allowed me to feel a sense of familiarity with Dublin even though I had never been. Instead of being surrounded completely by novelty, I was able to recognize certain areas and landmarks and even speculate about their importance. In terms of familiarity, it felt more like I was visiting Nashville than a European city. If I were to walk down a street in downtown Nashville, I would recognize sites like the Tennessee Performing Arts Center and Centennial Park, and I would associate those with my own specific memories; I saw *Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked* in the TPAC building and I have feed ducks and geese in the park. I would also ascribe significance to certain sites. For example, I know that the original Tootsie’s bar in Nashville is where many famous country stars began and where some still visit, and I can smell whiskey and understand the importance of Jack Daniels. I was able to have a similar experience

in Dublin. I could smell Guinness and understand its significance to the Irish people; I could see the execution site of the heroes of the Easter Uprising and feel the reverence of the Irish people; I could recognize Raglan Road almost as if it belonged in my own memory and not Kavanagh's.

Nevertheless, this experience of the uniformity of urban life reminds me of John Agnew's comment that the world is becoming "placeless" (Agnew 5). As Agnew says, "Everywhere is increasingly alike as we spend more of our time in non-places such as airport lounges, shopping malls, and on the Internet, living lives increasingly without any sense of place whatsoever" (Agnew 7). As society progresses and technology improves, people are communicating more and more with others around the world, sharing ideas and growing together; but with this amazing interconnectivity comes a loss of individuality. Partly because of this advancement, the concept of place is often thought of in terms of the past, and quantifiable, empirical space is thought of as modern and progressive (Agnew 7). Associating space with a modern way of thinking has caused a general shift to prioritize space as more important than place (Agnew 7).

Many people, when thinking about a place, reflect on its borders and relationships with the other places that are around it. This kind of nationalistic reflection is relevant when thinking about Ireland; the Irish people are fiercely proud of their national identity in part because of the country's struggle for independence in recent history. The nationalism of Ireland, however, is not discussed in this reflection. Other aspects of Irish culture, such as its mystical heritage and love of the land, have had and continue to have a much greater impact on my idea of Ireland as a place.

Before delving into the world of Irish literature, my understanding of Ireland consisted mostly of beautiful landscapes, farm life, and revolutions. What these writers showed me is that Ireland's meaning as a place is much more complex than a simple list of natural qualities and

cultural characteristics. While Agnew claims that the world is losing its places, and I believe that he is right, these authors sought to bring their own place back to the forefront by reconnecting with their homeland. The Irish people are known for their fierce pride in their heritage, and these authors and poets have proven this characteristic by both celebrating and mourning their idiosyncrasies and making it known that place is still an important aspect of Irish culture. My idea of Ireland is no longer based on facts about its space. Yes, the Irish landscapes are beautiful; but Yeats and O'Brien reveal that fields in Ireland are not just beautiful but have an almost magical quality to them, and Kavanagh hints that the fields are perhaps like sirens—alluring and dangerous. Yes, O'Brien shows the simple joy of rural, small farm life; but Kavanagh shows the risk of entrapment that accompanies it. Yeats' poetry celebrates and reveres the supernatural beliefs of Ireland's past, while Heaney warns the country to let sleeping dogs lie. These writers have found the joys and the wounds of this country and have together constructed a complicated map of Ireland as a place. This was my expectation going into Ireland as a visitor. While there, I discovered that Doyle's and O'Casey's portrayals of the Irish dialect are incredibly accurate. I also was able to experience just a bit of the rural farm life that is mentioned in so much of the literature. The sheer amount of fields I saw impressed upon me the importance of agricultural life in Ireland and I was better able to feel connected to the poetry of Kavanagh and Heaney; somehow, seeing the land they felt so strongly about helped to me to draw out those feelings from their poetry. I was able to taste the fruit drop candies that O'Brien mentions, take a look down Kavanagh's Raglan Road, and read Yeats' thoughts on his occult beliefs. For the time I was there, I was able to put myself into the shoes of each of these writers and understand what their Ireland is or was; and now Ireland means all of those things to me. For me, Ireland as a place is comprised of magic, history, war, peace, injuries, and heroes. It is not simply a green

island on a map or a symbol for freedom and adventure, as it was for me before. The meaning of Ireland as a place is as complex as the writers who describe it and as varied as the people who make up its culture today.

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