

Jameson Hogan

Doctor Renk

English 607/691 – Media and Culture in Ireland

30 July, 2010

Guarding Henry's Death: Miss O'Shea's Morrigan-Like Role in Roddy Doyle's

A Star Called Henry and *Oh, Play That Thing*

In her article "Aspects of the Fantastic in Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry*: Deconstructing Romantic Nationalism," Janis Dawson convincingly draws parallels between the titular Henry Smart and the Irish mythic hero Cuchulain. However, there is one particular in which I must disagree with Dawson – her identification of Miss O'Shea with Queen Maeve. While both of these characters are indeed brimming with "fierce determination, fearlessness, and sexual energy" (Dawson 179), Maeve and Cuchulain have a relationship that fails to fully parallel the one between Henry and Miss O'Shea. In order to properly identify Miss O'Shea's place in relation to Henry's Cuchulain, we must find a feminine entity of great power and violence who like Maeve is fearless on the battlefield, but is tied to Cuchulain in a way that is not entirely adversarial. Based on these traits, there is one candidate that stands out above all others: the Morrigan.

The Morrigan is a complicated figure in many ways, due in part to an element of uncertainty over who, or what, the name actually refers to. She is sometimes referred to as an individual entity (often grouped with related entities), sometimes as a triple-goddess, and sometimes as a category of beings rather than a unique identifier (Herbert 141). Much of Irish mythology was recorded by Catholic priests, who put their own perspective on it. Combine this with the relative dearth of surviving information, and we are left with knowledge of the belief

system which is more anecdotal than canonical and frequently lacking in information on the systems and structures of the mythology (Ibid.). Additional controversy arises in assigning her a function; though she is most commonly identified as a goddess of war and death in battle, the stories told about her indicate additional dominion over fertility and sovereignty (Herbert 143; “Morrigan, The”). In order to facilitate the drawing of parallels to Miss O’Shea, a single individual, I will also be treating the Morrigan as a single individual whose functions include war, death in battle, and sovereignty.

Dawson suggests that the Morrigan is present in *A Star Called Henry* in the person of Granny Nash due to her hag-like appearance, dark clothing and rotten smell as well as the fact that Henry refers to her as a witch (Dawson 174). Although her apparent betrayal of Henry to British forces might parallel the Morrigan’s attempts to injure Cuchulain during battle, attempting to identify Nash with the Morrigan puts the latter in a precarious familial relationship to Cuchulain, weakening the analogy. I contend that Miss O’Shea is a far more appropriate analogue for the Morrigan due to parallels between the two in terms of their violent natures, aggressive sexuality, obsession with and protection of Cuchulain/Henry, precognition where his fate is concerned, and their ability to influence the fortunes of those who would control their lands.

Whatever the Morrigan’s specific function, she has historically been viewed as a figure to be feared, a violent and aggressive force that presages and attends a warrior’s death. She is listed as one of the greatest of the women of the Tuatha De Danaan, called the Crow of Battle (Gregory 17); early in their history, the Morrigan “sent showers of fire” upon her enemies (Ibid. 19). She is cited as stirring up conflict between enemies and even among allied forces (Gregory 68, 489), predicting loudly towards the end of the Tain Bo Cuailnge that the Irish soldiers would have

“ravens picking [their] necks on the morrow” (Ibid. 68). She famously attempted to hinder Cuchulain in his battle with Loch, attacking him first as a white cow leading a herd, then as an eel, and finally as a wolf; each time being driven away with a new injury (Ibid. 461).

Like the Morrigan, Miss O'Shea becomes a figure of great danger and violence, armed to the teeth and referred to by the sobriquet “Our Lady of the Machine Gun” (Doyle “A Star” 305). During the Easter Rising, when the women of Cumann na mBan were being evacuated from the General Post Office as the fighting worsened, she has to be physically removed by two other women, insisting loudly that she is as capable a fighter as any of the men who remain behind (Ibid. 149), a sentiment she reiterates when she and Henry reunite (Ibid. 258). Her wedding to Henry is protected from British interference by armed guards, a waiting car bomb, and a kidnapped British sergeant held as insurance (Ibid. 261). In addition to fomenting resistance to the British, she and Henry travel to Tipperary to stir up chaos among the faithful at the site of a crying statue of the Virgin Mary (Ibid. 309). Later, in America, Miss O'Shea continues to stir up conflict during the depression by organizing strikes, destroying farm equipment, and robbing banks in the name of the “Oklahoma Republican Army,” echoing her youthful exploits against British forces in Ireland (Doyle “Oh, Play” 358-9).

Miss O'Shea readily and eagerly participates in military campaigns with Henry (and presumably without him); in a scene mirroring the Morrigan’s raining of fire on the enemies of the Tuatha De Danaan, she and Henry break a hole in the roof of a British military barracks, into which Miss O'Shea pours liquid paraffin which is then ignited in order to burn out the enemy. Henry refers to this as a night out with her, a phrasing which seems to imply that they are spending time together on her terms as much as his (Doyle “A Star” 289-90). While fleeing the site of the burning barracks, she is shot by the Black and Tans, and afterwards tells Henry that,

contrary to lessening her commitment, being shot made her fearless and unstoppable (Ibid. 294-5, 305). Intriguingly, Miss O'Shea is hit by three bullets, just as the Morrigan was injured three times by Cuchulain.

In addition to her overall violent nature, the Morrigan is often presented as an aggressively sexual being who is willing to aid her lovers in their pursuits. When the Dagda, a father figure of the Tuatha De Danaan, has a sexual encounter with her, she promises to bring him the blood of one of his great enemies, Indech (Gregory 47); a promise she later fulfills, inspiring his armies to renew their efforts (Ibid. 52). Máire Herbert suggests that this encounter evidences the Morrigan's ability "to influence the fortunes of those seeking control of the land" (143). This incident is reflected later in the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, when she appears to Cuchulain in the guise of a red woman in a chariot and offers herself to him, promising to aid and protect him in his exploits if he takes her as a lover. When he refuses, she becomes angry and swears to hinder him in a coming battle. Here again, she follows through on her promise when Cuchulain battles with Loch (Gregory 460-1). Here we see the Morrigan using her power to improve the fortunes of those who have loved her, and to hinder those who have spurned her.

This aggressive sexuality is first displayed by Miss O'Shea during her first sexual encounter with Henry at the Easter Rising; she pushes him onto a pile of stamps in the basement of the General Post Office and climbs atop him, slapping his hands away and demanding that he "do what [he's] told" (Doyle "A Star" 136). He calls her his tormentor, and during climax her rage and violence come to the surface:

She hammered me into the gum. (My forehead still carries two nipple-made pock-marks).

She pounded my chest. She cut my neck. She gave me a hiding I never recovered from.

She growled and hummed. (Doyle "A Star" 137)

Intimacy with Miss O'Shea is associated with violence throughout their relationship; after a second round in the Post Office, Henry tells us that they kiss until they bleed (Doyle "A Star" 140). Their first sexual encounter as husband and wife is described as an explosion (Ibid. 262); when he later bites her, believing her to be an amorous assailant, he recognizes (and loves) the taste of her blood (Ibid. 304), and after escaping from British forces in a river, they warm themselves by "mauling each other" (Ibid. 308). When they reunite again in America, her aggression and violence towards him worsen, beginning with the traditional slapping but culminating in a genuine and brutal beating that leaves him bloodied and desperate for escape (Doyle "Oh, Play" 194, 202). Doyle's choice of words and depictions of their time together tend to indicate an aggressive and volatile relationship in which Miss O'Shea as the apparently dominant partner.

The Morrigan seems to have something of an obsession with Cuchulain, appearing to him at an early age and continuing to encounter or seek him out until his death. While Cuchulain was struggling under a curse as a child, she visited him and accused him of not having "the making of a hero within [him]," and of being under the power of shadows (Gregory 68); in response, Cuchulain takes up his wooden hurling stick and beheads a nearby shadow. In the *Tain Bo Regamna*, they meet again when Cuchulain confronts her about a cow she (again disguised as a woman in red driving a chariot) appears to have stolen, and she prophesies that his death will come once the cow's calf is a year old ("Cattle Raid of Regamna, The."). She seeks him out to offer herself to him sexually during the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, famously attacks him during his fight with Loch, and visits his camp the night before his final ride. After Cuchulain finally dies, his enemies do not dare approach him until the Morrigan, in her form as a crow, alights on his shoulder ("Cuchulainn").

Though most of these encounters paint her as hostile towards Cuchulain, the Morrigan also appears to have a protective attitude towards him. During their confrontation in the Tain Bo Regamna, Cuchulain declares that she has no power over him, to which she replies “I have power indeed . . . it is at the guarding of thy death that I am” (“Cattle Raid of Regamna, The.”). When she offers herself to him during the Tain Bo Cuailnge, she informs him that “it is protecting you I was up to this, and I will protect you from this out” (Gregory 460) if he acquiesces to be her lover. Just before Cuchulain’s final ride to meet the hosts of Queen Maeve, the Morrigan damages his chariot to delay the death she knows is coming. Her statements to him, and her destruction of his chariot, become a true “guarding” of his death, ensuring that Cuchulain has played out his entire destiny before riding to his doom (Herbert 146).

Like the Morrigan and Cuchulain, Miss O’Shea and Henry first met when he is young and at a disadvantage, though in this case the disadvantage is the curse of illiteracy. At the age of nine Henry and his brother Victor sought education for the first time, and happened to knock on the door of Miss O’Shea’s classroom. At first she doubts whether she should allow Henry into her class, as he is well above the age at which students are to begin their education, but she is won over by his confidence, and according to Henry, by his appearance (Doyle “A Star” 81-3). By the end of his first day in class, she has apparently fallen in love with him; a love that will be consummated years later during the Easter Rising. Henry impresses her with his natural intelligence, and proves her initial doubts to be unfounded, just as Cuchulain proved his martial prowess to the Morrigan when she expressed doubt in him. A few days later the Mother Superior (clad in black, the color of shadows) finds out that Miss O’Shea has admitted two students without consulting her, and moves to throw them out. In a parallel to Cuchulain taking his

hurling stick to the shadows, Henry wields his father's wooden leg as a weapon to fend her off (Ibid. 89).

The Morrigan's obsession with and protection of Cuchulain is paralleled in Miss O'Shea throughout her encounters and adventures with Henry Smart. She takes him and his brother into her classroom when they seek an education. Some time after their tryst at the Easter Rising, it is Miss O'Shea's mother that takes Henry in after being injured in a fight (Doyle "A Star" 258). Working together to steal money and stamps from a post office, she rides on the handlebars of the stolen bicycle they share, steering for him while he pedals and manages a machine gun (Ibid. 276). When Henry is set to be executed at Kilmainham, it is Miss O'Shea who secures his escape (Ibid. 343).

During their attack on the barracks, the plan goes awry when their IRA compatriots lob explosives too early. She grabs him when the first one goes off, and as they escape she sends him down the ladder first; this leads to a moment when she, in her haste, lands on his head and makes a sexual remark, reinforcing the tie between sex and violence in her persona (Doyle "A Star" 291). Moments later, running from British forces, Henry reaches out and she takes his hand just before bullets begin hitting her; he notes that though he can feel the bullets' impact through her arm, she doesn't seem to slow down – in fact, after the third wound she accelerates. Shortly thereafter, Henry succumbs to his own wounds and, in a daze, realizes that despite her injuries, she is the one who is carrying him to safety (Ibid. 294-5). Like the Morrigan protecting Cuchulain, Miss O'Shea protects Henry, ensuring that he will survive to meet his ultimate destiny.

Prophecy is a power commonly ascribed to the Morrigan, especially in forecasting the outcomes of battles; some forces would consult her before a battle to learn their fate, though she

has been known to tell two opposing armies that they will each be the victor (“Morrigan, The.”). She is also a harbinger of the deaths of important individuals; in addition to Cuchulain, she warned Cormac Conloinges of his coming death by appearing to him as a red woman washing bloody armor in a river (qtd. in Herbert 147). In the *Tain Bo Regamna*, she shows her foreknowledge of Cuchulain’s death, and it is this kind of knowledge that is paralleled by Miss O’Shea.

When Miss O’Shea and Henry travel to the crying Virgin, they disguise themselves as a woman travelling with her one-legged brother to seek intercession. Once in the crowd, Henry will “grow” a new leg, requiring that they first strap Henry’s real leg up out of sight and attach his father’s wooden leg in its place. It is at this moment that Miss O’Shea proves prophetic, as she tells him that he was “born to it” (Doyle “A Star” 310); years later while travelling America with Miss O’Shea and their children, Henry does indeed lose a leg later in life when he falls under the wheels of a railcar, requiring him to make use of a wooden leg of his own (Doyle “Oh, Play” 362).

In addition to her warlike aspects, the Morrigan can be considered a deity linked to the sovereignty of kings. Her apparent promiscuity and connection to a number of geographical features whose names reference her ownership of them, place her as a goddess who was identified with the land (Herbert 143); in Celtic belief, this would also make her an embodiment of sovereignty (“Sovereignty”). In the Morrigan’s time, a would-be sovereign would symbolically marry the goddess of his land, making her (and by extension the land) fertile and ensuring both his own reign and the prosperity of his people (“Sacral Marriage, “Sovereignty”). According to Máire Herbert, the Morrigan’s dominance over the landscape can be seen in her straddling of a river when the Dagda finds her (143), and her influence over sovereignty becomes

apparent in the aid she gives him after he beds her. Conversely, when Cuchulain refuses to lay with her, she not only ceases aiding him, but for a time actively works against him, displaying the full wrath of a goddess scorned.

Like Cuchulain, Henry Smart wants control of his land; as Cuchulain sought to keep Maeve's army out of Ulster, Henry seeks to drive the British out of Ireland. As a member of the Irish Republican Army, he travels across the island taking the fight to the British, and Miss O'Shea is at his side for much of it. They travel by bicycle, robbing banks to fund the resistance and mowing down any British who get in their way. They burn down a barracks together, then burn and bomb their way back and forth across the Midlands (Doyle "A Star" 307). They stir up new recruits and trouble for the authorities wherever they go, and are never apprehended until they separate from each other; it is when Henry goes alone to visit Granny Nash that he is finally apprehended by the British and thrown in jail (Ibid. 322-7). This parallels the relationship between the Morrigan and her lovers; Henry leaves in his wake a series of counties and towns which are effectively held by the IRA and all but abandoned by the British, just as the Dagda's forces marched to victory with the Morrigan's favor and aid. The reclaiming of territory from the British is Henry's sovereignty – like the Dagda, Henry became a willing lover of his Morrigan, and her presence and support makes him nearly unstoppable.

He retains her favor even when they are separated by time and the Atlantic Ocean; however, when they reunite in America years later, he admits to her a series of sexual encounters he has had with other women in their time apart. She is driven into a fury by the news (especially because she herself has been faithful to Henry), and beats him beyond the point of aggressive affection – he is in fact badly injured and bleeding profusely. For the first time in their relationship, he finds himself trying desperately to escape her physical assault (Doyle "Oh, Play"

205-6). Though in time their relationship resumes its previous level of intimacy, he has lost her favor and, like Cuchulain, this puts him in a precarious position. While riding the rails with Miss O'Shea and their two children, he falls under the wheels of a boxcar and loses his leg, just as she once predicted he would (Ibid. 356). As Cuchulain might tell him, there is grave risk in angering your Morrigan.

Miss O'Shea is vitally important to Henry's development and success as a soldier, and she must certainly be considered in any analysis of him. If he is indeed Cuchulain, as Dawson rightly claims, then it only makes sense to seek a strong female character from Celtic myth that is embodied in Miss O'Shea. Queen Maeve seems like a promising candidate as she is clearly a powerful and aggressive woman. However, when we take the events of the *Tain Bo Cuailnge* into account, it quickly becomes apparent that Queen Maeve and Cuchulain have a far more antagonistic relationship than the necessarily parallel relationship between Henry and Miss O'Shea. Admittedly, the Morrigan is not in a romantic relationship with Cuchulain either; and it would appear on the surface that she is as antagonistic towards him as Queen Maeve, analysis of her interactions with Cuchulain reveals a more complex relationship of desire and protection, manifested through a highly violent personality. It is this relationship that makes her a far stronger parallel for Miss O'Shea, and a careful examination of her dominions and power reveals further connections that strengthen the case for considering Miss O'Shea as the Morrigan to Henry Smart's Cuchulain.

Attempting to link mythological characters and relationships to contemporary fiction is fraught with perils, and Celtic mythology proves no exception. Differences of translation and interpretation blur the lines between characters and events, chronologies become confused, and stories (or texts) from differing eras lose their distinction. This holds true for Cuchulain, but

even more so for the Morrigan, whose true nature as a goddess is at best dimly understood, at worst flat out unknown. However, the texts that we do have to work with conspire to paint her as not merely a goddess of war or death, but a far more convoluted creature with implications of dominion over sovereignty, prophecy, fertility, and even the land itself. It is these very complexities that mark her as an appropriate analogue to Miss O'Shea, who is an equally complex mix of teacher, lover, wife, mother, and warrior. This connection is revealed through the relationship each has to her chosen champion, the Morrigan to Cuchulain, and Miss O'Shea to Henry.

Works Cited

- “Cattle Raid of Regamna, The.” ancienttexts.org. np, nd. Web. 31 July, 2010.
- “Cuchulainn.” *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*. 2008. Print.
- Dawson, Janis. “Aspects of the Fantastic in Roddy Doyle’s *A Star Called Henry*: Deconstructing Romantic Nationalism.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. 12.2 (2001):168-85. Print.
- Doyle, Roddy. *A Star Called Henry*. New York: Penguin, 2004. Print.
- . *Oh, Play That Thing!* New York: Viking, 2004. Print.
- Gregory, Augusta. *Lady Gregory’s Complete Irish Mythology*. London: Bounty Books, 2004. Print.
- “Hag.” *Encyclopedia of Irish Spirituality*. 2000. Print.
- Herbert, Máire. “Transmutations of an Irish Goddess.” *The Concept of the Goddess*. Ed. Sandra Billington and Miranda Green. London: Routledge, 1998. NIU Library.
<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/niuuniv/docDetail.action?docID=10054784>
- “Morrigan, The.” *Encyclopedia of Irish Spirituality*. 2000. Print.
- “Sacral Marriage.” *Encyclopedia of Irish Spirituality*. 2000. Print.
- “Sovereignty.” *Encyclopedia of Irish Spirituality*. 2000. Print.