

Deirdre in Irish Literature:

The voice of Synge's Last Confession and Woods' Socio-Political Revolt

Key words: mythology/ Deirdre/ Synge/ Woods/ death/ celebration of life/ criticism

Abstract:

Irish myths and folk stories have provided writers with rich material as they offer complete and well-structured plots. They could be described as parables that offer philosophical and social insight to those with a sensitivity to their peculiarities. For instance, the sorrowful myth of Deirdre, originally titled *The death of the sons of Usnach* and a part of the Ulster cycle, with its combination of both tragedy and romance, has inspired writers to use it in literary works. The oldest written records of the myth are: the romantic *Book of Leinster* (dated circa 1160 C.E.) translated in 1862 by Eugene O'Curry and the fourteenth-century C.E. barbaric *Yellow Book of Lecan*. This paper will present two playwrights and poets who were inspired by the myth: John Millington Synge with his play *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1909) and Vincent Woods with his *A Cry from Heaven* (2005). Despite the artistic liberties taken by both playwrights, the narrative remains essentially the same and the central theme is the inescapability of death. The two poets' works contain similarities. What is familiar to both Synge's and Woods' plays is the revival and the preservation of an authentic Celtic myth as well as centering them on the fate and strength of a woman and not on the death of warriors. However, the contexts and goals of the use of the myth diverge. Synge found in it a means of literary experimentation and a last confession in the face of eminent death as he tackled the project in hospital with a fatal disease. It mirrors both his anxiety about and stoic acceptance of death through the character of Deirdre who consciously walks towards her end and advocates a preference to die young and beautiful. For Woods, whose play is more macabre and different from the legend, reviving the myth of Deirdre allowed him literary criticism of the political bodies for disrespecting Celtic history and of social indifference to national heritage with the specific incident of constructing a motorway over historic lands in 1999. To delve into these details in a deeper way, this paper will first present the original recorded myth in its context of Irish mythological cycles, describe the variation in plots of both plays and the reasons behind such modifications first in Synge's work then in Woods'.

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