Celtic Revival and Modern Literature, Dr. Eglantina Remport

*Modern English Literature, 1890-1960, Autumn 2019*

**Celtic Revival 1890s-1930s**: increased interest in Celtic languages and Celtic mythologies (see Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, London: Faber and Faber, 1985) SEAS Library: PR8718.D43

Ireland: increased interest in the Irish language and in Medieval Irish legends (especially: Cuchulain and Finn McCumhail legends)

**John Millington Synge, The Playboy of the Western World (1907)**

written in Hiberno-English (special variety of English spoken in Ireland) (Hibernia – Latin/Roman name for Ireland)

- linguistic variety
- linguistic innovations
- the text (of the play) looks different to contemporary pieces

SHAWN: Aren’t we after making a good bargain, the way we’re only waiting these days on Father Reilly’s dispensation from the bishops, or the Court of Rome.

CHRISTY: It’s that you’d say surely if you seen him and he after *drinking* for weeks, *rising up* in the red dawn, or before it maybe, and *going out* into the yard as naked as an ash tree in the moon of May, and *shying* clods against the visage of the stars till he’d put the fear of death into the banbh and the screeching sows.

- embellishments – the text full of stylistic innovations that give the text a modern / modernist character

use of the Irish language: shebeen, poteen, boreen, banbh, Pegeen (Margaret → Peg → Pegeen)

Setting: Co. Mayo -- *Mhaigh Eo* “plain of the yew trees”

(story from *The Aran Islands* – see Synge’s trip to the Aran Islands)

Criticism: *St John Irvine*: “contrived literary stuff” which is “entirely unrepresentative of peasant speech”

Defence: Synge: “I have used one or two words only, that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland.” Synge, “Preface,” *Playboy of the Western World*, Oxford: OUP, 1998, p 97.

**Flann O’Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds (1939)**

Title in Irish – a place name: *Snámh dá Ėn* (from the Sweeney legend)

- Structure of the novel: “triadic structure”
  - incorporating: old Irish legend of Finn MacCumhail
  - old Irish legend of (mad) King Sweeney

Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes’ chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant an pre-occupied expression.
reflected on the subject of my spare-time literary activities. One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related, only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939)

- Structure: no beginning, and no end; has a circular structure

  (see Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*)

makes use of the old Irish legend of Finn McCumhail

full of double and triple meanings:

  e.g: title: Finn again is awake?

  It is Finnegan’s wake?

  Or Finnegan is at a wake? (see Michael in *The Playboy*)

- its Modernist character due to technical innovations

  and linguistic innovations

See first page of *Finnegans Wake* (then entitled *A Work in Progress*)