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Hospitality as Authentic Irishness

The sixteenth-century Irish lord Hugh O'Neill defined the three central components of authentic Irishness as being Catholic, rural, and Irish-speaking. These defining characteristics may be helpful for categorizing the people and their culture, but they do not fully capture the distinct feel of authentic Irish life. The rural community of Ireland, with its separate language and religion from its eastern neighbor, is a society that is best described by its warm and welcoming spirit, both to those who are members of the community and also to those who arrive as visitors. Through literature spanning from the medieval period to the nineteenth century, the virtue of hospitality toward guests is revealed as the defining feature of authentic Irishness.

In Stoker's *The Snake's Pass*, Arthur's first encounter with authentic Irishness has a profound impact on him. He is travelling through a storm when he finds shelter and warmth in the confines of Mrs. Kelligan's sheebeen. Arthur, a hapless traveler through these foreign lands, receives "various salutations of welcome" (Stoker 12) as he enters. As he receives these warm greetings from complete strangers, Arthur feels completely out of place as they attempt to make him feel perfectly at home. He recognizes "feeling very awkward" (13) as he attempts to thank his new companions for their greetings, but everyone else who arrives embraces the spirit of their gathering effortlessly. As they continue to trickle in throughout the evening, whether it is Arthur's hired driver Andy, or the sensible priest Father Pether, or the devout family man Phelim Joyce, everyone enters with the chorus, "God save all here" (33). The shared community and sense of camaraderie is second nature to everyone in this rural Irish setting.

This warm spirit is not lost upon Arthur. When he shares a meal with his new companions, Arthur explains “a happier meal [he] never took part in—nor did [he] ever enjoy the food more” (13). The structure of his review of the meal indicates that his happiness in sharing the meal with his new friends is the proximate cause of his second conclusion—that the food tasted good. Throughout the evening, Arthur is drawn in and seduced by the warmth and openness of these strangers. Both Jerry Scanlon and Bat Moynahan generously share stories with Arthur after Andy explains Arthur’s interests in the subject. As the events of the night unfold, Arthur fully embraces this warm spirit. When Arthur realizes that he is the only one capable of assisting Joyce who desperately needs a horse, Arthur instantaneously responds by offering the horse Andy would have used to continue their journey. In this moment, Arthur has assimilated the Irish hospitality that he has learned in one night and wields it as his own tool for acquiring a place in the community.

Whereas Arthur is deeply affected by his warm reception at the sheebeen, Andy is similarly moved by Arthur’s compassionate offer toward Joyce. At their next encounter six weeks later, as Arthur attempts to revisit the rural community without any recognition, Andy makes it impossible for Arthur to continue without his assistance. Arthur hides in his hotel room, only to find Andy eagerly waiting for him as he comes out. When Arthur feigns that he wants to stay a few days and that Andy should return home without him, Andy ripostes his fake story, exclaiming, “Begor! but it’s more gladerer shtill I am” (50). For one act of kindness to a stranger six weeks earlier, Andy completely accepts Arthur as a new member of the community and makes every attempt to assist Arthur in all of his future pursuits.

After returning to the rural community, Andy continually attempts to connect Arthur to his fairy love interest Norah. He begs Arthur, “Take my advice surr—pay a visit to Shleenanaher, an’ see Miss Norah!” (115). On the morning that Arthur finally is going to the mountain with Dick to meet with Joyce, Andy arrives in his best suit. Arthur uses it as on occasion to make a playful joke at Andy’s expense, suggesting Andy “was going to meet his best girl” (115). Arthur misreading the situation is very much in

character for him. There is an old friendship between Arthur and Dick, but Arthur's best friend in the story is the one he hired to be his driver and welcomed him into the community. Andy is dressed in his best suit not because he is meeting his best girl: he is fitted for an even happier occasion. Andy wears his best suit on the morning when he believes he will finally connect his best friend to his unbeknownst love interest. Stoker's *The Snake's Pass* is the story of an Englishman encountering the societal embodiment of authentic Irishness on his first visit to the country. The novel creates a genre painting with "[t]he peasant class's welcome, warmth, and generosity" (Breathnach-Lynch 328), and when that spirit infuses itself within Arthur for one night in a pub, it sets in course the series of events that lead to his marriage to true treasure of Knockcalltore, Norah Joyce.

The importance of hospitality in Irish culture did not originate in the nineteenth century of course. It is an important pillar of society that is also clearly demonstrated in the medieval epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Similar to *The Snake's Pass*, the inciting event of the entire story takes place as travelers are being welcomed with food and drink. Medb sends a group of messengers to Cuailnge with an incredibly attractive offer to rent one prized bull for a year. The owner of the bull, Dáire mac Fiachna, immediately accepts, "jump[ing] for joy" (Kinsella 56), promising fulfillment of the agreed contract regardless of any other concerns, and providing his guests his best food and drink.

In *The Snake's Pass*, this Irish hospitality—and Arthur's warm reception to it—leads to him achieving all of his goals. In the *Táin*, Medb's envoys spit in the face of this hospitality, and it leads to all of Medb's woes throughout the story. As they are enjoying their food and drink, one messenger expresses the sentiment that their host and trade partner must be the finest man in Ulster, but a second messenger inhospitably suggests otherwise. He admits that Dáire is a fine man, but suggests his leader Conchobor is a far greater man. The messenger argues that it would have taken four entire provinces to take the bull from Ulster, suggesting that Dáire was foolish to accept their offer. When this conversation is relayed to a third member of their group, this inhospitality is taken to a new level. The third

messenger takes strong offense that his two companions were grateful to their host, replying in disgust, "I'd as soon see the mouth that said that spout blood!" (57). The third messenger is unwilling to offer their host any praise and is disgusted his companions have offered as much. He continues that they "would have taken it anyway, with or without his leave" (57).

When this conversation is relayed to Dáire, the deal is called off, and Medb orders the cattle raid. All of the death that follows is a direct result of the behavior of Medb's messengers upon being received by their gracious host. If the messengers would have celebrated their success and joined the festive spirit of the occasion, Medb would have acquired her prized bull and achieved all of her goals. Instead, Medb and her armies set themselves on course to get demolished throughout the ensuing cattle raid. The epic tale, therefore, should be read as a strong critique of rejecting the important ideal of authentic Irishness of welcoming the traveler. Radner points out that many of these Ulster cycle tales revolve around these "[c]ommunal feasts – occasions to reinforce social bonds, to establish reciprocal obligations" (47) and the breaking of trust between host and guest. In the case of the inciting event of the *Táin*, Medb's side breaks the trust, and Medb's army suffers all the consequences throughout the raid.

After this failed negotiation, Medb fully endorses her parties' actions, affirming her chosen messenger Mac Roth, "We needn't polish the knobs and knots in this" (58). With this conclusion, the events of *The Táin* cannot be interpreted as a tragic misfortune that occurred due to the negligence of Medb's negotiators. Instead, Medb is fully indicted for opposing the important quality of authentic Irishness in warm hospitality toward guests. Medb offers a negative connotation of hospitality to neighbors and guests. The refrain "God save all here" would easily be considered "polishing knobs and knots" to Medb who rejects this important aspect of Irish identity. The sheebeen in Stoker's *Snake's Pass* demonstrates the benefits of Irishness at its core, and the failed negotiation of *The Táin* represents the perils of failing to uphold these tenets of the culture.

The Snake's Pass and *The Táin* both endorse the virtue of warm relations in Irish culture, but the poem "O It's Best Be A Total Boor" challenges these ideals sarcastically. The poet reflects on his chosen profession and contrasts himself with everyone else who he views as "these stupid people" ("Total Boor" line 4). He believes that he possesses a "lovely skill" (line 10) that imbues him with "music [and] metre [and] motherwit on his tongue" (line 18). The inspiration the poet receives from his studies guards "him against the gloom" (line 12), but he knows it is an arduous pursuit that others do not value. He argues that if others understood the benefits of his studies and profession, they would find it fulfilling.

Instead, the poet finds that "each boorish clod" is perfectly "happy in word and deed" (line 17) pursuing his vain lifestyle with no interest in the arts. The picture the poet paints of the peasant community is quite similar to the community existing in Mrs. Kelligan's sheebeen, but the tone toward these peasants is quite different. No one enters the pub and places themselves above the "stutterer[s]" (line 6) and views everyone else as the "blind ignorant crowd" (line 8). Even a man of learning like Father Pether warmly greets the patrons of the pub and fits into the community as a respected figure.

The poet wishes sarcastically that he lived the simple life of a peasant, but his argument is not convincing. The poet suggests that he would be willing to trade his studies for one of the peasant's clothes. He looks down upon the people in his community, and his feigned interest in their ignorant bliss exposes the poet's disapproval. Stoker's picture of the Irish peasant community does not look down upon the peasants. Stoker places the reader inside the community as a visitor through Arthur's point of view. Arthur—and the reader—are warmly welcomed to the Irish community, and Stoker's argument is much more persuasive. The trade proposed by the poet becomes much more appealing with a more complete picture of authentic Irishness.

Through the lens of Stoker's *Snake's Pass*, the importance of hospitality in Irish culture can be seen in literature from the medieval period. *The Táin* endorses this ideal by showing the consequences

of rejecting this authentic part of Irish society. The poem “O It’s Best Be A Total Boor” seemingly attacks the warm relations shared among the peasant community through a different perspective, but it affirms the picture painted by Stoker was not unique to the nineteenth century.

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