Exploring Femininity and Subjecthood within the Irish Colonial System

Student presenter: Hannah Roach
Project advisor: Amy Martin

My project works to compare two time points in Irish history, particularly focusing on how both women and marriage engage with the current political moment. The first historical moment I am interested in is the turn of the 19th century. At this moment, the Act of Union was passed, officially uniting Ireland under the British Empire. The second time period I am studying is the early 20th century. At this time, we see the beginning of both modernism and Irish independence, making this time one of transition. By looking at these two distinct times in Irish history, we can see how political and historical contexts impact the representation of women and marriage within these texts.

The texts of the early 19th century often provide political commentary through the marriage plot. The rhetoric surrounding the Act of Union often involves allusions to matrimony, making marriage a powerful allegorical tool for authors to use in this time. The three texts I explore, Castle Rackrent, The Wild Irish Girl, and Belinda are all authored by women and therefore work with both gender politics and the colonial state. In studying how these texts engage with the image of marriage and the trope of women-as-nation, we can accurately see how Joyce navigates this literary history.

My work surrounding James Joyce in the early 20th century focuses primarily on A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Dubliners, and Ulysses. I also work with his political and non-fiction work as a means of understanding his political stance at this time of uprising and transition into independence. Joyce is writing amidst political and social upheaval; his publications span from just before the Easter 1916 rising (with Dubliners’ publication in 1914 and Portrait in 1916) to Finnegans Wake in 1939. I have studied Joyce’s texts through his depictions of women, particularly in how they function within marriage and as political tools. I argue that Joyce works to subvert and undermine the use of women as symbols and marriage as allegory, particularly in nationalist writings. Joyce explores adultery as a means of undermining societal and patriarchal structures. Adultery and femininity are discussed hand-in-hand as Joyce writes about women as often engaging with infidelity or uses feminine language explicitly in moments of infidelity. I have also studied Joyce’s use of water and the coast as a means of writing women. Joyce places women in liminal spaces, such as the coastline as a means of subverting existing patriarchal structures. I argue that both this space of adultery and the image of water are used by Joyce to grant subjectivity to women as opposed to objectification. These unbalanced spaces are used to subvert systems of authority and provide political commentary, often through women and feminine language.

Through these two time periods, we can see a remarkable shift in the representation of women and marriage in Irish literature. This project aims to understand how historical and political contexts can influence how women are read and written.