

## **Ireland: Princess or Prostitute?**

### **The Female Roles in Samuel Beckett's Short Story 'Love and Lethe'**

#### **I. Introduction**

*More Pricks Than Kicks*, published in 1934, is one of Samuel Beckett's early writings, in which he articulates his opinions about the Irish Free State and the Celtic Revival. Several critics note that Beckett uses the concept of Ireland's depiction as a woman to express his political beliefs, and that the grotesque characterization of the women appearing in *More Pricks Than Kicks* is Beckett's criticism against the politics of the Republic of Ireland, and their attempt to resurrect the Celtic culture.

*More Pricks Than Kicks* is a collection of short stories featuring Belacqua Shuah as he sets out on a journey across Ireland. In almost all of the short stories his relationship with women is explored, although these ties constantly break by either Belacqua running away, or by death. The behaviour of both Belacqua and the women he gets into contact with provide numerous occasions to explore Beckett's way of challenging the Celtic Revival.

My choice to study the short story 'Love and Lethe' is based on how the female character of this narrative is presented by similes as two almost opposing female roles: as a princess and as a prostitute. The constant presence of these two figures is intriguing, and it might imply that Beckett's feelings towards his homeland are more complex than simple dislike. In my paper I am going to examine some images of the princesses and prostitutes as they appear in 'Love and Lethe' and to see if it is possible that Beckett's view on Ireland consists of more than criticism aimed at the Irish Free State, and shows concern for Ireland as a whole.

First, I will attempt to outline the relationship between Belacqua and women in general, and how it parallels Beckett's political opinions towards Ireland. Then I will analyse the appearance of some of the referenced prostitutes in 'Love and Lethe', including the biblical figure, Mary Magdalene and Molly Seagrim, a prostitute from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Then I will move on to the hidden princesses in the short story. I will look at Florine and Truitonne, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's two princesses in her fairy tale titled *The Blue Birds*, and I will examine the relevance of a quote from 'Tears, Idle Tears' from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's larger poem, *The Princess*. Studying these examples should provide adequate information to decide to what extent Beckett wanted to break away from Irish politics.

## II. Beckett's Female Characters and Ireland

Beckett displays his anti-nationalistic ideas in *More Pricks Than Kicks* by how he forms the women Belacqua meets. According to Rina Kim, Beckett's female characters in his early works are "threatening, devouring and sexually provocative" (Kim 65). Several examples of this are given in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and when Belacqua feels endangered by the advances of the women, he runs away from them. Kim's opinion is that Beckett shaped these surreal and lifeless female characters and their demanding force based on Cathleen ni Houlihan, a woman who was the symbol of Irish nationalism during the war between the Irish and the English, and then during the unrest between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (Kim 65). This suggests that in his short stories, Beckett criticised the nationalistic literature, and that he, with the constant escapes of Belacqua, tried to isolate himself from its aims.

Another approach to Beckett's female characters is that they do not stand for the Irish Republic, but for the whole country of Ireland. Yoshiki Tajiri points out that "Belacqua is afraid of physical contact with women, which always threatens him even if he is spiritually attracted to them" (Tajiri 193). As Tajiri will later state again, Belacqua does not entirely separate himself from his female acquaintances. On the contrary, he is attracted to them, but only with "spiritual [...] love" (Tajiri 201). He only flees when the women demand physical intimacy. Translating Belacqua's unusual interest in women into Beckett's attitude towards Ireland shows that while Beckett removes himself from Irish nationalism, his mind is still occupied with the broken state of the country.

The short story, 'Love and Lethe' refers to prostitutes and princesses, abstract female images constantly appearing alongside the short story's female character, Ruby Tough. Combining what Rina Kim says about Ireland's image as a woman, and what Yoshiki Tajiri claims about Belacqua's potential for spiritual love, these two female concepts might also demonstrate the conflicted feelings Beckett might express in his work.

## III. The Prostitute

First, I will analyse some of the prostitutes mentioned in 'Love and Lethe' and see how their presence implies not only the Irish Republic but Ireland. Ruby is compared to Mary Magdalene twice during the narrative. Magdalene serves as the true danger to the spirituality of Jesus Christ, positioning her as the greatest and best known threat in common knowledge. Initially, Ruby and Magdalene are compared by their similar appearances based on Pietro

Perugino's *Pietà* painting (Fig. 1). The narrative notes that the only notable difference between the two women is that while Magdalene has ginger hair on Perugino's work, Ruby has black hair.

As James Knowlson remarks, Perugino's painting interested Beckett, suggesting that it is an essential part of Ruby's characterization. Knowlson "spent literally hours examining the painting" to memorise every detail (136). According to him, Beckett stated that he had to reconstruct the parts of Perugino's work in his mind, as he was not able to see the whole painting from the lights shining back from the glass that protected it (136). Beckett reconstructed Magdalene's face from his memory piece by piece, and this experience of fragmentation alludes to the shattered Ireland. The similarity between Ruby and Perugino's Magdalene confirms that Ruby represents Ireland.

The second instance Mary Magdalene is mentioned is when Ruby and Belacqua travel through the land, and Ruby is described as "looking more bawdy Magdalene than ever" (100-101). By the time of this second remark, Ruby already got rid of her skirt to be able to travel more easily, and soon after this reference, Belacqua will ask her to put it on again, so that he can avoid temptation. Ruby will refuse, which hints that she wilfully poses the same threat to Belacqua and his plan that Magdalene was to Jesus Christ. At the end of the short story, her seduction deters Belacqua from his plan, and they both stay alive.

With this second reference to Magdalene, and because of Ruby's actions, she is identified as the grotesque female character Kim describes as someone "who, by means of sexuality, entrap the male protagonists in the earthly world which is particularly defined as Ireland" (Kim 65). Kim suggests that Ruby symbolises the Irish Republic's possessiveness. Ruby also shares physical attributes with Perugino's Magdalene however; an image Beckett was captivated with, and described as shattered. This suggests that while Ruby's likeness to Magdalene is not a positive feature, Beckett's interest in Perugino's *Pietà*, which serves as the centre of Magdalene's allusion, presents a different point of view to both the image of the prostitute, and to Ireland.

The second reference to a prostitute is Molly Seagrim, from Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. When Ruby is waiting in her home for Belacqua to arrive so that they can embark on their journey, Ruby is described sitting "in the posture of Philosopher Square behind Molly Seagrim's arras" (96). Molly is the first love interest of Tom, but she has two other lovers, one of whom is Tom's teacher, Philosopher Square. The scene described in 'Love and Lethe' is when Tom arrives to Molly and finds Philosopher Square hidden behind Molly's arras.

Although it is Molly's character who links the image of the prostitute to Ruby's character, Ruby is compared to Philosopher Square instead of Molly. The possible purpose for this is that Philosopher Square betrays his own reliability as the teacher of virtuous and decent life with his misconduct, which is a greater sin than a prostitute's behaviour. That Ruby is not compared to Molly, but to a man who betrays himself shows how the Irish Republic is a danger to itself and the whole of Ireland, further hinting at Beckett's interest in Ireland as a country.

#### **IV. The Princess**

As demonstrated above, Ruby's identification with the Irish Republic is not necessarily connected to the Ireland the prostitutes represent, and this creates a tension in Beckett's political views in his writing. In addition to the previously discussed female role, the short story lines up examples to the figure of the princess too, also bearing the image of the entire country.

The first allusion to a princess in 'Love and Lethe' is related to the fairy tale titled *The Blue Bird*, by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. After Belacqua and Ruby leave the house of the Toughs, Mrs. Tough, Ruby's mother shares her anxieties with her husband about their daughter and Belacqua. Mr. Tough's negligence is expressed by the statement "there are better things in this stenching world than Blue Birds" (98).

D'Aulnoy's fairy tale features two stepsister princesses, Florine and Truitonne. According to the narrative, when Prince Charming arrives to arrange a marriage with Truitonne, he mistakes her with Florine and asks her hand instead. Truitonne takes revenge on both of them by imprisoning Florine, and by turning Prince Charming into a blue bird with the help of her fairy godmother. Despite Truitonne's efforts, Prince Charming often flies to Florine's prison and brings her presents, keeping their love alive.

Florine and Truitonne are each other's opposites in their attitudes, and Truitonne's jealous actions against the innocent Florine place the two princesses into contrast. With this reference to the fairy tale, Beckett shows that the mainly positive image of the princess can be divided into two conflicting behaviours within a single narrative, exemplifying what happened to Ireland.

The second princess is hidden in the words Belacqua quotes when he and Ruby are drinking, and before he decides to show her the final message he prepared for them. The lines

“O Death in Life the days that are no more” close the poem ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, which appears as an interlude in a much larger poem, titled *The Princess*. As Henry Kozicki points out, Tennyson believed “that one of the two great social questions impending in England was the “higher education of women”” (106). Judging from this, the whole composition and its title character, Princess Ida can be seen as the manifestation of Tennyson’s concerns about the education of women, which counted as a progressive notion in the Victorian period the poem was written in (Kozicki 103).

‘Tears, Idle Tears’ however, is the lamentation of Princess Ida’s handmaiden, Violet, who opposes Ida’s interests and seeks happiness in her past and more particularly, in “love-melancholy” (104). Violet’s obsession with the old days is an attribute she shares with the Celtic Revival’s mission to resurrect a culture left behind. As Violet’s point of view resembles the notions of the Irish Republic, it becomes probable to regard her and Ida as representatives of Ireland’s two parts in Beckett’s narration. Such an analogy concludes in a conflict similar to what Florine and Truitonne illustrated, and shows that Beckett used the princess images in ‘Love and Lethe’ to illustrate a country that serves as the location to a sharp political discrepancy.

## **V. Conclusion**

After examining some of the prostitutes and princesses referred to in ‘Love and Lethe’, I found that Beckett often established contradictions between the two female images and Ruby. Ruby, the exaggerated figure of the Free Ireland in the short story seemingly coincides with several prostitutes and princesses, on closer inspection however, the allusions to the two female roles seem to display the scattered existence of Ireland, leading to the conclusion that while in the short story Beckett criticises the Irish Republic, he might also express an interest in the shattered Ireland.

Fig. 1



Pietro Perugino, *Pietà*

Olga's Gallery <https://www.freeart.com/gallery/P/perugino/perugino31.html>

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