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Garda as a Contemporary Film Narrative of Gerry Boyle as Heroic Outlaw and Post-Colonial Trickster

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“Garda as a contemporary film narrative of Gerry Boyle as heroic outlaw and post-colonial trickster”

The Garda's opening scene shows a car full of drunken young men careening down the road. As they pass the local policeman in his car, Gerry Boyle looks bored and disinterested in pursuit, evidently anticipating the inevitable outcome. When he arrives at the crash scene and verifies that the men are all dead, Boyle checks their pockets for drugs and consumes a tab of acid, saying “What a beautiful fuckin’ day.” Thus the viewer is introduced to the unconventional and seemingly amoral police man, Gerry Boyle. This scene is soon followed by Boyle’s encounter with his new partner, the Dubliner McBride, at a crime scene. As a native of west Ireland, Boyle views Dubliners as suspiciously elitist, a legacy of the colonial past. Much humor ensues after Boyle and McBride enter the house to investigate the murder scene. Inside they discover the corpse with a potted plant resting on his crotch and the number 5 ½ on the wall. Boyle rhetorically asks McBride about the significance of the plant and the number as possible clues, thus setting-up the naïve McBride who mentions the plant’s genus and films with numbers in the title such as 8 ½. When McBride protests Boyle’s fondling of the dead man’s crotch, Boyle replies, “I have the gift, clairvoyant like” reinforcing the viewer’s perception of Boyle as a darkly humorous, cynical man.

An anonymous informer, revealed later as one of the drug smugglers, calls the police with a tip about Billy Devaney and the crime scene having occult overtones. Annoyed by Boyle’s sarcasm, the informer asks him if he knows the meaning of the word occult. Boyle proves again that he is no ordinary cop when the name of Aleister Crowley and others associated with the occult roll off his tongue. Eventually the viewer’s perception of Gerry Boyle as an ambiguous trickster is reversed when the degree of local police corruption and collusion with drug smuggling is exposed proving that Boyle despite his quirks is the only honest cop in the region, a true outlaw hero in the Irish tradition.

This paper discusses the cultural and historical references of the film *Garda* to mythical hero tales; folklore narratives of the outlaw hero; and representations of the west of Ireland as a place of general outlawry from the time of pirate queen Grace O’Malley to the era of IRA gun smuggling and contemporary coastal drug traffic. The unorthodox character of Gerry Boyle, played with straight faced irony by Brendan Gleason, meets Black FBI agent Wendell Everett portrayed by Don Cheadle as straight man. Ultimately Everett accepts the role of unorthodox hero outlaw by partnering with Boyle to foil the drug smuggling operation. While their banter simultaneously comically deconstructs racist and colonialist stereotypes, it demonstrates the men’s integrity and courage.

The film’s director John Michael McDonogh is the brother of playwright Martin McDonagh. Like his brother, John McDonogh portrays Ireland with sensitivity to the paradox of the culture’s harsh yet beautiful landscape and history. As indicated by the profound words of Yeats “a terrible beauty is born,” the seemingly paradoxical contradictions of Ireland can be appreciated as the dark humor of Irish culture and the beautiful poetry and songs chiseled from centuries of suffering and survival.

McDonogh flummoxes the audience with the possibility that his film is simply a cops and robbers story, or rather in this case a cop, FBI agent and drug smugglers tale, but there are references that resonate complexly with Ireland’s colonial history and culture which produced the outlaw hero motif.

There is a long history of outlawry in Ireland from the era of mythological prehistory and the stories about fennidi in early Irish literature, which “reflect a dimly visible social reality, namely, some institutionalized form of extrasocial life, or what we can call ‘outlawry.’ . . . what appears to lie behind the lives of most so-called fennidi and fiana is an archaic formulation of life beyond the bounds of society” Joseph Nagy p. 18. Given the constant assaults on Ireland by Vikings and other marauders, the Fianna were not so much unlawful as they were outside of the law, functioning as guerillas, defenders of their homeland against invaders. The Feinid is an outsider because he is not protected by the law and therefore “acquires the right to secure justice for himself.” (Sjoestedt 84). In 16th century Ireland the O’Malley clan, especially Grace O’Malley known as The Sea Queen of Connaught, controlled most of Mayo. Grace O’Malley, who was accused of promiscuity because of her various lovers, directed her raids against the “enemies of England.” Richard Bingham claimed that Ní Mháille was “nurse to all rebellions in the province for this forty years” (Wikipedia).

During the years 1916 to 1920 when the Irish fought for independence from the British Empire, gunrunning on a large scale was taking place on the west coast of Ireland. The American film *Ryan’s Daughter* portrays local villagers trying to assist the IRA in rescuing the arms on a storm damaged ship off the coast. On January 27, 1920, the *New York Times* reported that The Daily News Dublin correspondent claimed 2,000 rifles of American manufacture had landed on the coast of County Clare.

In more contemporary history, there is evidently a serious drug smuggling business off the coasts of Ireland and Neil Jordan’s film *Ondine* refers to this trend when the fisherman Syracuse rescues a woman who nearly drowns while trying to escape the coast guard with a drug bundle on her back. In 2007 The *New Statesman* reported that 105 million Euros of cocaine was recovered from a boat that tipped over in rough weather, noting that “The incident highlights a growing problem in Ireland itself, where the quantity of cocaine seized in the past four years has jumped by 750 per cent” (New Statesman July 16 2007).

In his article on the heroic outlaw, Ray Cashman asserts that the outlaw hero embodies “folk morality in conflict with the self-interest and inequity of the state. In the aftermath of British colonization, the Irish outlaw. . . provides a hero through whom ordinary Irishmen and women can vicariously enjoy brief victories, and imagine their collective dignity in the midst of political defeat.” Thus traditions of pirates and gun smuggling could be considered as resistance to the colonial oppressors (Cashman 191).

FBI Agent Wendell Everett arrives in Galway to bust a drug smuggling operation with the help of local Irish law enforcement. In the first encounter between Gerry Boyle and Everett, Boyle makes remarks that seem racist during Everett’s presentation to local police about the drug smuggling operation. Boyle disrupts Everett’s talk with the comment that he thought “only you Black lads and Mexicans were drug dealers,” to which the chief responds, “apologize for your racist slurs.” Boyle then replies “You’re in Ireland now; racism is part of our culture.”

As the film unfolds, the viewer and Everett eventually understand Boyle’s intent. First Boyle knows what Everett does not know, the extent of police corruption in the local area. In fact the Garda chief who is sharing the podium with Everett is later seen receiving a pay-off from the drug ring leader, who is ironically named Francis Sheehy-Skeffington the name of the Irish suffragist and pacifist who adopted

the surname of his wife, Hanna Sheehy. This juxtaposition of names and cops who are as corrupt as the drug dealers is an ongoing theme in the film which overturns all possible stereotypes and assumptions of the viewer..

While riding in the car with Everett, Boyle makes an odd comment about visiting Disneyland and having his picture taken with Goofy which causes Everett to remark "I can't tell if you're really mother fucking dumb or really mother fucking smart." Gradually as he is provoked by Boyle, Everett reveals his privileged background that includes having been a Rhodes Scholar assuming Boyle won't know what this is but he names Kris Kristofferson. When a Dublin police team sets up an outpost for the operation, Boyle feels disparaged by Everett's grabbing his arm and says, "Ya got your zombies around you now."

The Gerry Boyle character uses humor to demonstrate that while Everett has class privilege which Boyle does not, they have both been subjected to class and racialized stereotypes. Eventually Everett understands that Boyle is "messing with him" in an attempt to test the other man's character and demonstrate their similarities as outsiders. Everett ultimately gets the ironic humor as a subversive demonstration of trust when they bond over parental loss while drinking beer after the death of Boyle's mother. Discrimination against the Irish during colonialism under the British often represented the Irish as subhuman, even simian, in some Victorian era cartoons, a stereotype which was also used to justify enslavement of African Americans.

When Everett interviews the locals alone because it's Boyle's day off. He discovers that they are reluctant to speak with an outsider and pretend they don't know English. When Everett knocks at a door and the couple speaks to him in Irish, he asks if there isn't anyone home who speaks English. The man responds in Irish, incomprehensible to Everett but subtitled for the viewer, "This is Ireland. If you want to speak English, go to England."

The film's use of the Irish language by locals trying to baffle the outsider FBI agent brings to mind Roger Casement's article on Irish. Casement, who was hanged for treason in 1916 because he tried to smuggle weapons into Ireland, wrote the "The Language of the Outlaw," on the importance of preserving the Irish language in which he quotes a speech in defense of the language by John Taylor.

"if Moses had listened to these arguments, what would have been the end? Would he ever have come down from the Mount, with the light of God shining on his face and carrying in his hands the Tables of the Law written in the language of the outlaw?" Casement 158.

Near the film's ending as Boyle and Everett face a life-threatening showdown with the drug smugglers, Everett wants to call for support and Boyle indicates that they are on their own saying "you know what I'm talking about, ½ a billion, It's just you and me." In the film's final scene when Everett believes Boyle has died in the boat's explosion or by drowning, the young boy and maverick photographer remind Everett that Boyle was an Olympic swimmer which Everett thought was just more of Boyle's bullshit. After the boy and young man depart, Everett continues looking out at the water and suddenly smiles as he recalls the grin on Boyle's face when he said these words to him, "I don't know if you're really m f dumb or really mf smart."

The guile and integrity with which Boyle foils the drug smugglers and avenges the murdered McBride, resonate with Ray Cashman's criteria for the folk outlaw heroes of 17th-century narratives. Redmond O'Hanlon one such hero "Irish guerrilla soldier-outlaw" is portrayed as demanding of himself and his men a "high level of moral and, indeed professional integrity" (196). He lives by a "code that obliges him to protect the poor, weak and disenfranchised" (197). In his article "The Heroic Outlaw in Irish Folklore and Popular Literature," Cashman identifies several motifs which are constant in most outlaw stories and ballads although not every outlaw has all characteristics. Of the ten qualities identified in the article, Gerry Boyle possesses many of them, including supernatural protection, chivalry, guile, bravado, fair play, self-sacrifice and betrayal by those he trusts.

Nature seems to sympathize with the outlaw and he receives aid from animal helpers and in other cases a wise woman or magical stone. In Boyle's case, we could consider Eugene Moloney, the young boy with his dog who is often around when Gerry needs support, to be a sign of his "supernatural" support. The boy finds the gun cache which allows Gerry to trade the guns for the drugs his mother needs to choose her manner of death. The derringer in the cache that Gerry keeps is the concealed weapon he uses to kill O'Leary in self-defense. When Boyle drives down the road to his possibly single handed showdown with the drug traffickers, the boy is on his bicycle to salute Gerry. In the film's final scene, the boy is with the young photographer when they try to reassure Wendell that Gerry could have survived the explosion of the trafficker's boat.

Wendell and the viewers gradually recognize that Boyle is very intelligent and clever despite his blustery buffoon persona. Gerry converses with his mother about Russian literature when he notices she is reading a novel by Oblamov during their visit. Gerry's guile is demonstrated when he appropriates the derringer and some other weapons from the IRA cache in anticipation of needing them during the confrontation with the smugglers.

According to Cashman, The outlaw's intelligence is often displayed in his "ingenious escapes" (206). The greatest proof of Boyle's guile is his knowledge that he will need to go into hiding after the confrontation with the smugglers because, as he says, "The big boys will be after me; I'll have no fuckin peace. . .you can go off to the States. Where can I go off to? That's the trouble with the Irish isn't it? They never forget." In the final scene when Everett is contemplating the water where the boat burned and Boyle disappeared, the boys remind him that Boyle was an Olympic swimmer. When he remembers the goofy smile on Boyle's face when Everett said that he couldn't decide whether Boyle was really smart or really dumb, Everett realizes the cleverness with which Boyle planned the shootout and his escape.

Another of Cashman's hero outlaw criteria is bravado, "Cunning and sly, the outlaw is also cocksure, often taking incredible risks and flaunting his transgressions with provocative yet charming bravado" (207). Boyle's bravado is most apparent in the scene when he dresses in his uniform for his pursuit of the smugglers after he calls Everett to tell him that the intelligence he received was intentionally misleading. Everett at first is convinced that Boyle must be an idiot because he doesn't realize the extent of police collusion with the criminals. Boyle is very impressive in these film images showing him in full regalia with the weapons for the showdown. He drives over to Gabriela's house to tell her that he killed O'Leary and

is going after the other men who killed her husband, McBride. A weeping Gabriela cries out "Gerry" as he stoically gets back into his car driving into a potentially suicidal confrontation.

Thus Boyle's fearlessness in confronting the smugglers alone, which is extremely dangerous, demonstrates his possession of another outlaw hero characteristic, self-sacrifice. When Everett drives back to join Boyle, he says we need to call for reinforcements to which Boyle replies, No one's going to come. Everett is reluctant stating that "it's fucking suicide." Boyle jokes, "I know what you're thinking. Those men are armed and dangerous. You being an FBI agent you're more used to shooting at unarmed women and children. You going to help me or not?" Then Everett grudgingly picks up the machine gun, and Boyle thanks him for coming back to help.

Another characteristic mentioned in Cashman's article is betrayal by those he trusts. Since the heroic outlaw has exceptional qualities of integrity, fairness and chivalry, he stands apart from those who can be corrupted. When Francis Sheehy attempted to bribe Boyle, he let him know that all the local police have already been bribed thus Boyle knows his law enforcement colleagues, with the exception of Everett, can't be trusted.

Integrity or fair play is another hero outlaw theme. When Boyle meets one of the prostitutes, Sheehy soon arrives and leaves an envelope full of money assuming that Boyle will cooperate with him either because of blackmail or bribery. He is surprised at the man's refusal, which proves Boyle possesses integrity or fair play. Later Sheehy and his two partners discuss the fact that Boyle is the only unpredictable cop in the region, saying "It's not often you come across that kind of integrity in our business."

Finally, Gerry Boyle, despite his self-described predilection for "whoring around" abides by a code of chivalry. According to Cashman, "The outlaw is at all times chivalrous to women and would chastise a gang member for harassing or insulting a woman." When he sees that the hooker's face is bruised, Boyle is concerned about her. After Sheehy joins them to threaten and bribe the cop, Boyle remarks, "You know what gives me the creeps, it's cads who beat up women."

Boyle is also chivalrous toward Gabriela, the widow of McBride. When she first arrives at his door, she assumes she is from the "agency" and has the wrong date. As soon as he discovers that she is looking for her husband, he leaves to get dressed and treats her with consideration and courtesy. In the scene when he departs alone for the drug bust assuming he may never see her again, he kisses her hand and her cheek, saying "I'm sorry I didn't get to know you better. You're a lovely woman."

The most significant example of Boyle's chivalry is his kindness toward his dying mother. Early in the film when the doctor tells him she doesn't have long to live, Boyle says I just want her to be comfortable. As her condition deteriorates, she tells him that she would like to hear some live music so Boyle takes her to a local pub. In the next scene, Boyle is collecting her possessions after she died from the drugs he provided for her. The doctor is perplexed that she managed to save up the drugs and didn't leave a note. Boyle's comment is "She didn't have to leave a note. Nothing needed to be said. She was a proud woman. She was a brave woman. She was my mother." In fact, she did write on the fly leaf of the Oblamov book, "He dies in the end, sad. Love, Mum."

Thus the film ends with the audience realizing that the police officer who was taking acid, making rude jokes, and hanging out with hookers, is the only honest cop in the region, the one who couldn't be bribed or blackmailed. Boyle is the heroic outlaw, who together with his buddy Everett, also a man of courage and integrity stops the drug smugglers and apparently escapes the final catastrophe by his superhuman swimming ability. The film ends with the mystery of Boyle's outcome unresolved and John Denver's "Leaving on a Jet Plane" playing over the credits, letting the audience imagine Boyle may have escaped.

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