

Powerful Puzzles: Mapping the Symbiosis Between Two Great Signifiers of Irishness, The Writer and The Pub

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between the Irish pub and Irish writer. It traces how a contemporary drinks industry, cultural industry and ‘drinks culture’ industry has capitalised on that historic symbiosis and helped to secure the status of both pub and writer as powerful signifiers of Irishness. Representations of the pub provide the writer with a sense of place and a neutral setting in which diverse characters might interact, in the sense of Oldenburg’s characterisation of the Third Place. Referencing Bourdieu’s ideas of capital and Dietler’s ideas of commensal politics, the paper examines dynamics of power common to the Irish pub, notably within the rounds system as a ritual of reciprocity and pub talk as a ritualised forum for negotiating social status, illustrating these with a selection of 20th-century texts from Irish masters of the stage and page, including Synge, Joyce, Keane, Murphy and McGahern.

Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without passing a pub (Joyce 1992, p. 69).

So ponders Leopold Bloom as he passes Larry O’Rourke’s pub on his early morning wanders to buy a mutton kidney. We have only just met the protagonist of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and he has not yet had his breakfast, but his bourgeois advertising agent’s brain is already unpicking another puzzle: where do self-made publicans get the money to build such lucrative businesses? His theory is not altogether flattering.

Save it they can’t. Off the drunks perhaps. Put down three and carry five. What is that? A bob here and there, dribs and drabs. On the wholesale orders perhaps. Doing a double shuffle with the town travellers. Square it with the boss and we’ll split the job, see? (Joyce, pp. 69–70)

During the course of Bloom’s travels in and around Dublin city more than 50 pubs are name-checked (O’Brien 2014, p. 213). Several of these feature as settings for prominent scenes involving Bloom and a host of local characters, most of whom drink considerably more than our anti-hero.

Unlike Joyce himself, Bloom boasts a relatively modest appetite for alcohol. But both however seem to share a certain respect for the business nous of Dublin’s many publicans. Bloom knows that there is no use canvassing that ‘cute old codger’ Larry O’Rourke for an ad. ‘Still,’ he

admits, ‘he knows his own business best’ (O’Brien, p. 69). Meanwhile in a letter to his brother Stanislaus written in 1912, two years before embarking on *Ulysses*, Joyce suggests that most publicans would welcome some free advertising. The letter relays an argument with Maunsel & Co. who were considering publishing Joyce’s collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, but were nervous of being sued for libel by publicans whose businesses had been mentioned by name (Ellmann 1983, p. 331).

They may have had valid concerns, as explored in Declan Dunne’s book on Mulligan’s of Poolbeg Street — a famous Dublin public house (Dunne 2015, pp. 39–65). Dunne highlights parallels between an infamous 1868 manslaughter case and the *Dubliners* story ‘Counterparts’, in which a clerical officer called Farrington returns from a Bacchanalian drinking spree to viciously beat his young son. A key parallel is the setting of Mulligan’s pub as the site of the excessive drinking that fuelled the domestic attacks.

These parallels provide nuance to Joyce’s defence to his publishers that: ‘Nothing happens in the public houses. People drink’ (Joyce 1912, cited in Ellmann 1983, p. 331). While it is true that the violent denouement of ‘Counterparts’ does not take place in the pub itself, the story is carefully crafted to establish clear connections between the brutal violence and the pub-based activities and incidents that precede it. Farrington beats his son to redress the slippages of power that he experiences in the pub, and the publican is the only winner.

Nonetheless, Joyce remained confident that publicans would enjoy their premises being mentioned in *Dubliners*. He wrote to Stanislaus: ‘I offered to take a car and go with Roberts [the publisher’s managing director], proofs in hand, to the 3 or 4 publicans really named. I said the publicans would be glad of the advertisement’ (Joyce, pp. 331–332). Furthermore he warned that, while he was willing to appease the publishers by switching the real names for fictitious ones, ‘by so doing the selling value in Dublin of the book would go down’ (Ellmann 1983, p. 332). These canny and prophetic comments illustrate that, in spite of the implicitly critical nature of much of his depictions of public houses, Joyce was explicitly aware of the mutual benefits to both writer and publican of what has since proved to be a peculiarly symbiotic relationship.

Part of the enduring intrigue of *Ulysses*, and perhaps one of the best-known elements in a book that ‘may be more talked about than read’ (Mullin 2016), is an extraordinary sense of place, achieved through its painstakingly accurate depiction of Dublin’s early 20th-century streetscape. And, arguably, the spin-off literary pub

culture that has since evolved in Joyce's home town has remained mutually beneficial to publicans and publishers alike and has helped to secure the status of both the Irish pub and the Irish writer as great signifiers of Irishness.

Methodology and selected texts

This paper will explore the theme of power within the context of that long-established, still-evolving and ever-ambiguous symbiotic relationship between the Irish pub and the Irish writer. It will trace the evolution of that relationship with reference to a selection of 20th-century texts from Irish masters of the stage and page, and outline how the broader contemporary drinks industry, cultural industry, and an emerging 'drinks culture' industry are capitalising on the power of that historic symbiosis. Referencing ideas of capital and commensal politics developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and anthropologist Michael Dietler respectively, it will examine the power play evident within key elements common to the Irish pub, notably the rounds system of buying drinks as a ritual of reciprocity and pub talk as a ritualised forum for negotiating social status and illustrate these with references from the selected literary texts.

Joyce was not the first writer to recognise the potency of the pub as both a resource to draw from and a setting to project onto, and nor was he the first to present a complex picture of these ubiquitous public institutions and the people who both run them and frequent them.

John Millington Synge, who wrote that 'what is highest in poetry is always reached where the dreamer is leaning out to reality, or where the man of real life is lifted out of it' (cited in Smith 1996, p. xvi), chose the pub as the prosaic setting for his poetic masterpiece *Playboy of the Western World*, a play so powerful in its unflinching portrayal of 'countrymen and women as capable not just of murder, but of idealising it' (Smith 1996, p. xix) that it caused nightly riots throughout its original 1907 run in the Abbey Theatre. Irish nationalistic audiences were outraged by its darkly comic narrative of Christy Mahon, a stranger whose hyperbolic tale of killing his father brings 'excitement and heroism to a small Irish community desperately in need of it' (Smith).

Kerry-born and based playwright John B. Keane had a unique insight into the world of the publican, being one himself. Much of the action of his 1965 play, *The Field*, is set in the public house owned by Mick Flanagan, who doubles up as the local auctioneer. He becomes embroiled in underhanded and eventually fatal machinations surrounding the controversial sale of a local widow's field that is being farmed under lease by 'Bull' McCabe. Again, the trope of a stranger's arrival — Irish emigrant William Dee, a prospective buyer of the field in question — provides the dramatic tension that drives the action of the play (Keane 1991).

This dualistic characteristic of the pub as both a gathering point of regular local clientele and a public space

frequented by newcomers or returnees is a key storytelling device in Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*, a one-act play written for and first performed by Galway's Druid Theatre in 1983. The conversations in question take place in their old haunt, The White House pub, between returned emigrant Michael who is fleeing his life as a failed actor in New York and his childhood friends who have stayed in their west of Ireland hometown. Much of their talk centres around an impassioned critique of JJ, the absentee publican who had himself returned from a failed life in England and had fired the imagination of locals with his similarities — in physique, charisma and promised ideals — to a young JFK (Murphy 2012).

John McGahern, described by literary critic Declan Kiberd as 'the foremost prose writer in English now in Ireland' (Maher and Kiberd 2002, p. 86), also used the setting of the pub for many short stories, notably 'The Country Funeral'. In this later story, three brothers travel from Dublin city to a Leitrim village for the funeral of their bachelor uncle, for which they organise provisions for the wake in the village's local pub. The return journey sees them stop in on various country pubs and the story is bookended by visits to their local pub in Dublin, Mulligan's of Poolbeg Street (McGahern 1992, pp. 374–408).

The literary pub

The above overview is by no means exhaustive but serves as a useful collection of texts for this paper's examination of power in relation to the Irish pub in Irish writing. There are several more writers whose lives were and legacies remain intertwined with Irish pub culture: poet Patrick Kavanagh, playwright Brendan Behan and writer Brian O'Nolan who wrote under the pseudonyms of Flann O'Brien and Myles na gCopaleen. While famed for frequenting pubs, these writers wrote little about them, although evocative accounts are provided by their friend and literary associate Anthony Cronin in his memoir of the 1950s bohemian pub culture they inhabited, *Dead as Doornails* (Cronin 1999).

If the 'literary pub scene' reached its heyday in the Dublin of the 1950s and 1960s, in the sense of pubs acting as the workshops of the writers, that symbiotic relationship has continued to evolve and remains evident in various expressions. Ranked number four in *The World's 50 Best Walks* by *The Sunday Times* (cited in Ireland.com), the Dublin Literary Pub Crawl enjoys an enduring popularity. Established in 1988, it runs nightly for most of the year, starting from The Duke and visiting classic literary pubs with selected citations from Joyce through Behan to more contemporary writers. Other literary pub tours available include the Joycean Pub Crawl offered by The James Joyce Centre (Jamesjoyce.ie) and a suggested 'read along pub crawl' based on Joyce's 'Counterparts' and devised by Publin.ie, which in 2017 began to offer themed pub crawl tours (Publin.ie).

Many of those pubs most famously associated with Irish literary figures such as The Palace Bar, McDaid's and Toners proudly display their literary associations with framed pictures or indeed that 'ubiquitous poster of "Famous Irish Writers" so beloved of pubs, especially Dublin ones' observed by Irish Times journalist Frank McNally, who remarks on its 'quasi-religious quality' (McNally 2011, cited on IrishPubsGlobal.com). Others have actively built on this literary legacy, as with the Davy Byrne's Short Story Award; or the Writers' Room in the The Wicklow Heather pub where they are 'proud to have on display many of the first editions of the best of Irish writing' including Joyce's *Ulysses* as well as much of Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney (Wicklowheather.ie).

The literary connections of Irish pubs are well documented in various non-fiction publications (Martin 2016; Dunne 2015; Kearns 1996). In *The Dublin Pubspotter's Guide* the author name-checks, amongst others, McDaid's, where 'many famous Irish writers drank and wrote... even bringing typewriters along with them' (Moloney 2012, p. 77). Among Moloney's comprehensive listing of Dublin pubs that are either trading or closed but still existent are many that appeared in *Ulysses*, from the obvious (Davy Byrne's, The Duke) to the more obscure such as Mullett's Pub or The Bleeding Horse. Also listed are pubs named after Irish books, plays, chapters and characters as in *The Ginger Man*, *The Plough*, *Sirens Bar*, *Joxer Daly's* and *Farrington's*. Curiously, Moloney's listings contain a just few examples of pubs named after specific Irish writers (including Sean O'Casey's, James Joyce Cafe Bar, Joyce's Lounge within Madigans of North Earl Street, and Oliver St John Gogarty's); this practice would appear to be far more prevalent in the Irish pub as exported overseas (Moloney 2012).

What can be more recently observed is an emerging trend amongst themed cocktail bars that tap into Dublin's literary heritage. In the Conrad Hotel, Lemuel's bar is named after the lead protagonist in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and its narrative-lead cocktail menu is 'developed around Gulliver's journey to the far reaches of the world', with cocktails adapted to each of the islands he visited (Lemuelsdublin.com). Another of Dublin's recent bar openings, Mulligan & Haines, is housed in the former home to the Dublin Bread Company in which Joyce's fictional Mulligan and Haines indulged in a pair of *mélanges* (the cappuccino of their day) and some 'damn bad cakes'. The cocktail menu claims that its signature drinks 'take their lead from *Ulysses* ideals and characters — each one bolder than the next' and includes offerings such as *The Big Buck* (described as 'wild and unpredictable'). Not all critics have been impressed, with one describing the new establishment as 'a truly mundane bar flavoured with a dash of stolen literary valour' (Totallydublin.ie).

However, it is not just a case of pubs tapping into an inherited or borrowed literary heritage. The cultural

exchange works both ways, as revealed by the trajectory of Roddy Doyle's 'Two Pints' from a regular whimsical skit on the author's Facebook page depicting two middle-aged men sharing a pint and sorting out the world from their barstools (Facebook.com/roddy.doyle) to two printed books containing these dialogues (Doyle 2012; Doyle 2014) and finally to a sell-out two-hander play staged offsite by the Abbey Theatre in 2017 in a tour of 23 pubs around the country. In a sort of reversal of how the emerging cocktail culture elevates its status by appropriating the cultural capital inherent in literary affiliations, the national theatre is appropriating the popular culture ideal of 'the local pub' as a way to access a broader non-traditional theatre-going audience.

One explanation for this enduring literary appeal of the pub is that, in welcoming patrons from all walks of life, its democratic nature makes it an adaptable setting in which to introduce different types of characters and show their social interaction. This quality is captured in Cronin's description of McDaid's, the primary haunt of the literary set in 1950s Dublin.

McDaid's was never merely a literary pub. Its strength was always in variety, of talent, class, caste and estate. The divisions between writer and non-writer, bohemian and artist, informer and revolutionary, male and female, were never rigorously enforced; and nearly everybody, gurglers included, was ready for elevation, to Parnassus, the scaffold or wherever (Cronin 1999, p. 9).

Cronin's description echoes Ray Oldenburg's idea of the Third Place which he characterises as being both 'a mixer' and 'neutral ground' (Oldenburg 1998, p. xviii). Defined as a social space that exists in parallel to the domestic place (first) and the workplace (second), Oldenburg's concept of the Third Place has been applied to the Irish pub by various commentators (Cabras & Mount 2017; Murphy 2014; Scarbrough 2008; Share 2003). The Third Place functions as a neutral meeting space where the mood is playful and conversation is the main activity and which regular customers treat as a home away from home — all of which the Irish pub has historically offered (Murphy 2014, p. 197).

All of these elements add to the efficacy of the Irish pub as a storytelling device. Of course, there are basic requirements for legitimate entrance to such places: some legal, such as the age limit for consumption of alcohol; some socio-historical, like gender; and some material, as in the requirement that patrons have either the economic capital to pay for their drinks or the wherewithal to source money or drinks by exchange for some other kind of capital that they possess. But for the writer, besides offering the acute sense of place that Joyce saw would elicit greater value from a local readership — this in a country where the unofficial rule of thumb for giving directions is that 'pubs must be used as the main point of reference' (DailyEdge.ie) — the Irish pub provides neutral ground in which citizens

(historically men) can meet to relax, exchange views and engage in open playful banter with not just their friends and acquaintances but also other patrons who happen to be in the pub.

Theories of power in relation to alcoholic drinks

I would argue however that what gives the Irish pub its particular literary appeal is the way in which this democratic 'neutrality' is complicated by the subtle struggles that are taking place beneath the surface. These can be understood in Bourdieu's sense of a field of shifting relative social status negotiated by actors in that field through the display and recognition of symbolic capital, which is based on the relative value given by the group to various forms of material, cultural or social capital that each individual possesses (Harker et al. 1990). Bourdieu's ideas inform Dietler's theory of the 'commensal politics' of communal feasting and the role played by forms of 'embodied material culture' such as food or drinks. This type of material culture is created to be ingested and therefore destroyed, giving it an 'unusually close relation to the person and to both the inculcation and the symbolization of concepts of identity and difference in the construction of the self' (Dietler 2006, p. 232). The psychotropic properties of alcoholic drinks heighten their value in ritualistic contexts and envelop their consumption in a particularly emotionally charged set of cultural rules and beliefs. As such, 'the consumption of embodied material culture constitutes a prime arena for the negotiation, projection, and contestation of power, or what may be called commensal politics' (Dietler).

Dietler outlines a shift in anthropological thinking in the early 21st-century by which drinking practices were understood not merely as expressions of cultural identity and markers of existing social categories, boundaries and identities but rather as 'practices through which personal and group identity are actively constructed, embodied, performed, and transformed' (Dietler, p. 235). Drinking is thus seen to both construct an ideal of social relationships and to be a tool in creating or challenging one's place in that imagined ideal. This dual activity of constructing and marking the identity of the group or individual takes place along lines of social categories and boundary distinction such as age, gender, class, nationality, religion and so on. It is within and between these overlapping distinctions of identity and difference that relative social status is negotiated.

As a 'learned technique du corps', all aspects of our drinking practices play into these negotiations and 'are relevant in embodying and discerning identity and difference' (Dietler, p. 236). These aspects include the cultural capital derived from what we choose to drink and how we drink it. But they also include various other distinctions regarding our drinking practices, such as spatial distinctions (how the space is segregated and also how individuals position themselves and congregate within

that space); temporal distinctions (when people drink, but also the order in which they are served or they consume their drinks); quantitative distinctions (how much each individual consumes); and behavioural distinctions (how individuals are permitted or expected to behave in terms of how the alcohol affects us).

Dietler's conceptualisation of these various distinctions of drinking practices provide a useful lens through which to understand the richness that representations of those practices might offer to the writer. Crucially, he argues that these distinctions are more than an 'embodied Bourdieuan habitus' that an individual simply carries with them in the world; instead they can be consciously manipulated in subtle but powerful ways to influence or comment upon relative status, inclusion or exclusion within a social setting or field. For Dietler, feasts and other drinking rituals are 'a particularly powerful theater for such politically charged symbolic assertions and contestations' (Dietler).

It is these underlying negotiations, assertions and contestations that make the pub setting and its proverbial 'feast of pints' a particularly useful device to both the dramatist and the short story writer, in representing and highlighting a microcosm of greater societal struggles. For the short story writer, the microscale at which power is being negotiated provides a useful device for nuanced shading, while for the dramatist it enriches the layers of non-verbal language that can be choreographed to communicate to an audience well-versed in the subtleties of such arenas.

We regularly see examples in 20th-century Irish literature and drama of the pub as a setting within which to test out those commensal politics along lines of otherness suggested by age, gender, race and so on. In particular we see the exchange of various types of capital as distinguished by Bourdieu (economic, social and cultural capital, all of which can be converted into symbolic capital) for the reward of the communal consumption of embodied material culture in the form of both drinks and the company in which they are enjoyed. We witness the shifting of socio-cultural power within this arena or 'field' which, like all Bourdieuan fields, has its own clear rules of engagement. And we see how an individual's embodied Bourdieuan habitus is put to use in 'playing the game' of this particular field (O'Brien 2014; Harker et al. 1990, pp. 5–11; Bourdieu 1986).

The rounds system as a ritual of reciprocity

This exchange of forms of capital for embodied material culture serves to re-enforce the club effect of that very Irish institution of hospitality: the rounds system as a ritual of reciprocity. Bourdieu understood 'club effect' as being the result of shared symbolic or cultural capital such as shared interests and tastes amongst a group of people 'which are different from the vast majority and have in common the fact that they are not common, that is, the fact that they

exclude everyone who does not present all the desired attributes' (Bourdieu and Accardo 1999 cited in O'Brien 2014, p. 212). This might be exemplified by the shared status enjoyed by two connoisseurs of fine whiskey, perhaps, as in McGahern's short story, 'Oldfashioned', when the Anglo-Irish Protestant Colonel — a man who ritualistically drinks alone in the local pub, while his wife drinks her G&Ts outside the pub in their Jaguar — finds common ground with the headmaster of the local Catholic school over a mutual love of Redbreast, a superior brand of Irish whiskey (McGahern 2009, p. 46).

For Dietler, however, the very act of sharing an alcoholic drink with its heightened ritualistic valuation 'serves simultaneously to construct a communal identity for those drinking together or sharing tastes and a sense of difference and boundaries from others' (Dietler 2006, p. 236), creating a sort of club effect regardless of how common that drink might be. Even in a pub of stout drinkers, the act of buying a round of pints of stout invokes a club effect of sorts, as would buying a mixed round, albeit to a slightly lesser extent.

There is a powerful appeal to this levelling and bonding club effect of the round of drinks as shared in the Third Place, itself a leveller. In Joyce's 'Counterparts', Farrington's longing for this place builds in parallel to his acute awareness of his inferior and increasingly insecure workplace status. 'The dark damp night was coming and he longed to spend it in the bars, drinking with his friends amid the glare of gas and the clatter of glasses' (Joyce 2000, p. 68). His longing is a physical one, not just for the relief of alcohol but for the equitable arena of the pub with his drinking buddies where any man can hold his own, provided of course that he can pay his way.

Farrington pawns his pocket watch to fund his night's drinking before locating several friends to share it with. The rounds system operates according to clear rules that are understood by everyone, as we see when two drinking buddies run out of funds. 'When that round was over there was a pause. O'Halloran had money but neither of the other two seemed to have any; so the whole party left the shop somewhat regretfully' (Dietler, p. 72). If you can't pay your way, you have to leave the game, even if that is to the regret of other players such as Farrington and O'Halloran who must now regroup.

These rules are complicated by the fact that other forms of capital exist alongside the straightforward economic capital of money in your pocket. In 'Counterparts', a young English acrobat called Weathers joins the drinking party and is bought several drinks but is slow to reciprocate. After 'protesting that the hospitality was too Irish', he attempts to pay his way with the promise of introductions to some 'nice girls' later, cashing in on the social capital that his theatrical profession affords him (Dietler). Farrington, 'who had definite notions of what was what', finds this promise unsatisfying, in part because it bears a greater value for his bachelor friends than it does for him as a married man, something that he is 'chaffed' or teased

about. Later in Mulligans pub Weathers fails to follow through and Farrington feels snubbed by an attractive English woman from the theatre, further fanning the growing rage that will find release in the unprovoked beating of his small son at home. The disruption of the rules of this particular field of play have ripple effects in other fields — their counterparts — as individuals try to redress their perceived loss of power and status. Dietler's distinctions of age, race and gender are all evoked as contested markers of identity, difference and relative status in Joyce's representation of the evening's chain of events.

As a ritual of reciprocity, the round works best when everyone has the necessary resources to pay their way and they are all in synch to such an extent that they are even drinking the same thing, reinforcing the shared cultural capital of mutual tastes and backgrounds. At the outset of Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*, when returning emigrant Michael is asked by Junior 'what're ye having, boy', his best friend Tom teases: 'Oh a brandy, a brandy, a brandy for the emigrant don't ye know well', suggesting that Michael may have previously displayed 'notions' of newly acquired sophistication. Michael replies that he will have a pint, which is what the others are drinking, eliciting an approving 'Fair play to yeh' from Junior (Murphy 2012, p. 9).

Later, however, even the ritual toasts that accompany each round prove incapable of relieving the growing unease between the old friends as they realise that they are no longer as bound by shared life experiences and associated values as they once were. When they switch en masse from pints of stout to short measures of whiskey, Michael provocatively marks his isolation by ordering a Scotch and not the Irish whiskey that his friends seem to consider as much a matter of patriotic duty as their nationalistic sympathies (Murphy, p. 35).

Soon after, in a telling illustration of Dietler's temporal distinctions, we notice the strain of hierarchical structures being played out beneath the surface of the ritualistic round. A qualified auctioneer and eligible bachelor, Liam has the symbolic capital of being both upwardly mobile and unmarried, something of particular appeal to Missus, the woman of the house, in light of her late-adolescent daughter. Missus consistently serves Liam first whereas Junior — who, as well as being the youngest of the friends, is married and therefore without value in that regard — is repeatedly reminded of his peripheral or inferior status by being served last. Junior's attempts to challenge and disrupt this demeaning pattern result in him drinking out of synch with the others with no one to toast his new pint (Murphy, pp. 36–59).

We also see illustrations of how Dietler's spatial distinctions disrupt the equitable club effect of the rounds system, not just in the way that Missus slips Liam a drink on the house when he passes the bar on the way to the toilet, which he does on an unusually regular basis, but in the way that Michael's long-term girlfriend Peggy is

ostracised from the club as the boys move themselves to the bar while she is left seated at the table (Murphy, p. 74).

Though implicitly understood by those who engage with them, the rules of the round system repeatedly invite comment by those seeking to either challenge or reinforce them. In McGahern's story 'The Country Funeral' there is much discussion of the subtle distinctions that differentiate a 'small' man too mean to pay his way or the 'big' man too flash to distinguish between hospitality and ostentatiousness. Of the three brothers it is Fonsie, who lived away from Ireland for many years, that needs instruction on this distinction. The parallels drawn between hospitality in the pub and at the traditional wake show how these codes of conduct are applicable within broader fields of social engagement beyond the confines of the pub and remind us of how the pub acts as a microcosm of that broader world (McGahern 1992, pp. 374–408).

Pub talk as a ritualised forum for negotiating social status

In the world of the Irish pub, talk itself operates as another sub-setting in which the shifting power-plays of Bourdieu's field are manifested and negotiated. A good storyteller accrues symbolic capital in the Third Place (Oldenburg 1998, pp. 26–33). In Irish society, that symbolic power is accentuated by various factors including the importance of storytelling in an oral culture; the historically high social status of seanchaí — (storytellers) and poets; and the denial of other forms of status to the common Irish man under colonial rule.

An individual's storytelling prowess or his proverbial 'gift of the gab' is a significant part of his habitus, which constitutes his ability to play the game of whatever field he is in. It can be powerful enough to potentially transform a man's place in life. In Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, Christy Mahon is born again through the story he tells. This rebirth is facilitated by Christy's audience because his story allows them to escape their humdrum world and imagine a transformative bravery that could make a man master of his destiny.

But the symbolic capital that the story accrues can be revoked if it is shown to have been a tall tale. Just as corroboration has a value — as we see when Farrington's co-worker Higgins backs up his story (Joyce 2014, p. 72) — so does contradiction extract a cost, and one that is relative to both the damage it does to the storyteller's credibility and also to the extent that it shows up the audience's gullibility. Christy loses everything when his story is discounted, not just by his father's version, but by his very living presence, revealing in irrefutable terms to the patrons of Flaherty's pub that they were taken in like fools by a fabrication (Synge 1996, pp. 160–166).

Pub talk is a powerful resource in terms of having the value of capital that can be spent and exchanged. Christy's story is of such high value that it buys him not just a drink on the house but a meal, a bed, a job as pot-boy and

celebrity status in his newfound community (Synge 1996, pp. 122–136). And we see it again in 'Counterparts', as Farrington's reckless backchat to his employer, Alleyne, gets reframed as a good story that is repeatedly cashed in on for drinks: through Farrington replaying the story and casting the moment as one of transformative bravery, he offers a salve to his friends' own entrapment in their working lives (Joyce 2000, pp. 71–72).

Talk is also a resource that must be spent wisely. In the Third Place, an individual is judged less by his views than his ability to communicate them in an inclusive, entertaining way and within the rules of engagement: 'Bores are the scourge of sociability and a curse upon the "clubbable"' (Oldenburg 1998, p. 29). The bore who abuses his audience depreciates his status in that arena.

In the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses* set in Barney Kiernan's pub, 'Bloom's self-proclaimed interest in every passing detail of life is proclaimed excessive' by the 'malicious narrator' of the episode, a debt-collector who is 'ferociously critical of Bloom' (Kiberd 2009, pp. 182–184). 'The narrator is scornful of Bloom's superiority of speech and understanding' (Blamires 1996, p. 122). Like the cigar that Bloom accepts in place of an offered drink, oblivious to how it marks his difference from other pint-drinking patrons, his persistent argumentation indicates to the narrator a self-perceived superiority — whereas the reader understands that Bloom simply longs to engage in a robust two-sided or 'two-eyed' conversation (Blamires, pp. 118–119). As the tension mounts, Bloom becomes physically marginalised within the pub setting which he moves in and out of, leaving himself vulnerable to the further alienation incurred by talk behind his back. The fault lines of the scene's power struggle begin to shift with the interrogation of Bloom's nationality, racial and religious identity — 'Is he a Jew or a gentile or a holy Roman or a swaddled or what the hell is he? says Ned. Or who is he?' (Joyce 1992, p. 438) — and eventually erupt into physical assault in the form of a biscuit tin sent flying by 'the Citizen' and ensuring the exile of Bloom the Irish Jew from the pub.

Talk can be a most powerful tool for a man who has little to nothing. In *The Field*, we see early on that the barfly character of 'the Bird' has limited economic capital but he knows how to use to great advantage his capacity to both listen and talk. The Bull compliments his 'good ear', recognising it as worth paying for in stout, albeit not whiskey as requested (Keane 1991, p. 17). Meanwhile the Bird repeatedly talks up the landlady Maimie Flanagan in exchange for drinks on tick. Besides simply telling Maimie she looks well, which has limited value coming from him, he offers her something much more valuable: vicarious access to those conversations amongst men that she is excluded from by virtue of being a woman.

Women are repeatedly marginalised and controlled through degrees of inclusion or exclusion from public conversation. We see this implied in *Conversations* when Peggy is continually hushed or told not to contradict Tom's version of events. Shortly after she objects that 'the women

are always left out of all the juicy things', she finds herself exiled to the doorway for transgressing those lines (Murphy 2012, p. 78).

Talk might appear to flow easily in the Irish pub but the stakes are often shown to be very high, depending on what resources are being traded through the currency of oral communication. In McGahern's story 'High Ground', the Master cashes in on the cultural and symbolic capital afforded him as the local schoolteacher. He strokes the egos of fellow regulars in Ryan's Bar at a late-night lock in — 'Ye were all toppers' — in exchange for the drinks that they buy him in return (McGahern 2009, p. 102). But the reader is aware of how low his reserves of cultural capital have run, with plans afoot to oust him from his official position. His talk of 'high ground' with which the story concludes remind us of his earlier warning: 'Beware of the high stool. The downward slope from the high stool is longer and steeper than from the top of Everest' (Murphy, p. 100).

Conclusion

The question of how to avoid those bar stools in a country that is full of them is a puzzle worthy of Leopold Bloom. Perhaps it is inevitable that the literature that represents a landscape and culture so full of pubs would by default include many pub settings and references. But these representations of the Irish pub do much more than locate their story or provide the writer with a neutral setting in which diverse characters might interact. They also represent the very best kind of puzzle: a playful complex one which contains enough subtle rules to keep all players — writers and readers — challenged and intrigued enough to return to them again and again. Surely Joyce was being wilfully disingenuous when he remarked that 'nothing happens in the public houses' (Joyce 1912, cited in Ellmann 1983, p. 331).

About the author

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