

# Flann O'Brien: the Irish Burden of Story-Telling

A Thesis Submitted by  
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## Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explore the achievement of the Irish novelist Flann O'Brien through studying three of his novels. For many years O'Brien was considered a talent wasted on alcohol and a popular but rather futile newspaper column. Interest in O'Brien's work, however, ignited years after his death. Flann O'Brien would never have guessed that in 2011 a Flann O'Brien Centenary Weekend would be held at Trinity College Dublin, or that his first novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* will actually become a movie to be released in 2013.

Critics now regard O'Brien as one major Irish writer, describing him among Joyce and Beckett, as part of the trinity of great Irish authors. The importance of O'Brien today stems from the fact that he was among the writers who wrote about the process of writing itself in his fiction. The thesis at hand aimed at exploring how O'Brien channeled through his novels what for his generation was a paralyzing as well as a creative force, namely the influence of literary forefathers on individual creativity.

O'Brien was one of the writers who realised early on in their careers that to be original is impossible and, therefore, he played out his indebtedness to various sources in his work. The first chapter of this thesis explored O'Brien's attitude towards the two major influences that haunted Irish writers: the Irish Revival and James Joyce. O'Brien's negative attitude towards the Revival was studied closely through an unpublished manuscript of a three-chapter study of the Language Movement in particular. In addition, his attitude towards James Joyce was studied through various

articles he wrote throughout his literary career, especially his most direct statement on Joyce: "A Bash in the Tunnel".

O'Brien's first novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* is a rewriting of a number of texts, ranging from Irish myth and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to American western adventure novels. What was new about *At Swim-Two-Birds* at the time of its publication is that it proved, through its multiple borrowed texts, that no work of art is new including the one at hand. For the purposes of this thesis, however, particular attention was given to the Irish Revival as one of the main literary ghosts haunting the novel. Characters borrowed from Irish mythology and folklore were traced back to their original versions which were compared to O'Brien's. The chapter concluded with the note that O'Brien revered as well as defiled the mythology and folklore that were hailed by the revivalists. He did that the way a young writer should take his literary forefathers with a grain of salt; Irish myth and folklore were valuable to all the Irish but they are not necessarily the mark of all Irish writing. The work of the revivalists should not be deemed more valuable for strict adherence to its so-called "Irish themes". For him a twentieth-century Irish author should write about the old and the new, and more importantly should come up with his own definition of his Irish identity.

*The Third Policeman* showed the futility of the artist's plight as he/she tries to express again what has been expressed before him. O'Brien's second novel's language is more about the silence and the inability to create anew that result from the kind of literary influence expressed in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Special attention was paid to the kind of neutral inexpressive

language used by the narrator to prove that *The Third Policeman* is a snicker at both the optimist and cynic artist. This is because it tells the optimist that there is no way out of the labyrinth of artistic creation, and because it tells the cynic that knowing there is no way out does not alleviate the futility of the artist's work. Everything has been said and done before and for the artist to think there is a reward from his plight is naïve, yet he/she has to keep trying for art is the artist's compulsion.

*The Dalkey Archive* was discussed in this thesis as O'Brien's last word on his predecessor James Joyce, after which he hopefully buried him for good. Close study of the novel was carried out to clarify O'Brien's famous controversial stand on the Irish literary icon. It was commonly held that O'Brien felt an envious fascination with his literary master, which led him to say the foulest remarks about the man's art. In the final chapter of this thesis, however, it was proven that O'Brien's problem was not with Joyce himself as much as it was with his creators. In *The Dalkey Archive* O'Brien pays special attention to a different kind of influence, that of the critics or the meaning-makers. The portrayal of Joyce in O'Brien's last complete novel defies everything the critics wrote about him; it only proves that a writer is what the critical industry makes of him/her, that an author does not get to say more than the critics wants him/her to say. Through *The Dalkey Archive*, therefore, O'Brien invites a kind of revision of reading and meaning-making that was probably more advanced than his age.

To conclude, this thesis aimed at proving that influence exercised a potent force that shaped the novels of Flann O'Brien. Looking at three of his novels in the light of what has been written before them and in the light of

how the author utilized such writings to inform the texts, the reader finds a new appreciation for the author and his work. It is not merely through our author's awareness of the literary moment that preceded him that he finds a distinguished place for himself in literary history, but it is through admitting his inevitable unoriginality and more importantly recognising the role of the reader in the meaning-making process. Flann O'Brien managed to see himself within the bigger picture of Western Literature, where he is only part of a big whole, a speck of ink that helps form an entire corpus of literature stretching before and after him.