

# One Aspect of Irish Mythology in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*

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In 1923, a year after the publication of *Ulysses* Joyce wrote the first two pages of the enigmatic book, which would later become *Finnegans Wake*. After parts of it appeared under the title *Work in Progress*, the readers saw that Joyce took even more innovative and complex ways than in *Ulysses*. There was much criticism and Joyce's answer to it was simple: Firstly, in contrast to *Ulysses* the actions in *Finnegans Wake* happen during nighttime, making things more obscure and secondly he regarded it was easy to follow a simple, chronological scheme which critics would understand, but his attempt was "to tell the story of this Chapelizod family in a new way" (Norris 1976:2).

It may seem a bit weird, but if we remember his meeting with Harriett E. Weaver in 1922, in London, when he declared to his patroness that he desired to write the history of mankind, everything comes in its place.

*Finnegans Wake* is not Joyce's first attempt to achieve such universalization. Firstly his desire is shown in *Dubliners*, which at a glance is a collection of realist short stories, not to say anything about his *Ulysses*, but his last novel is the most radical experimental narrative.

Despite the numerous scholarly researches that exist and try to shed some light on this book, it still remains a great puzzle that will never be fully solved. Joyce's extensive use of literary, biblical, mythological or other kinds of allusions, while writing about a simple Chapelizod Family, makes it an archetypal image of the Family.

One important aspect of this book is that it is deeply rooted in Irish Mythology and Paganism, and although Joyce declared to be against the Gaelic revival, his works show the contrary. To create History of Mankind Joyce uses as many characters as possible and *Finnegans Wake* and its characters at one hand are limited (a story of Chapelizod family consisting of five members and two workers at the Inn), but on the other stretch from Irish to Egyptian Mythology. One and the same character in itself embodies all the similar characters/heroes/Gods/Goddesses/humans that bear resemblance with him/her.

The article will focus on the main character of *Finnegans Wake*, the Innkeeper Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, but will try to approach him from a specific point of view. My aim is to show one aspect of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, namely him as the High King of Ireland and his inability to preserve his kingship.

Before discussing this character in detail, I would like to outline the first confusion that the reader has to deal with and in most cases is not even noted - the title: *Finnegans Wake*. The title makes Finnegan not a single individual, but a collective face of fallen mankind in expectance of resurrection.

Finnegan's death and miraculous resurrection is a theme of a popular Irish Ballad telling a story of Tim Finnegan a hod-carrier, famous for 'a love for the liquor' who fell off a ladder and broke his skull. At his wake the mourners while having a row spilled whiskey over Finnegan's corpse, causing him to come back to life and join in the celebrations. Outlined should be the fact that whiskey caused both Finnegan's fall and his resurrection and what is more is not a mere drink or just an accident —whiskey is derived from the Irish phrase *uisce beatha* meaning "water of life".

Tim Finnegan's Resurrection is an irony on the long tradition existing in various religions and mythologies where only heroes and Gods are capable of Resurrection. In *Finnegans Wake* Hero/God is substituted by an alcoholic hod-carrier, who is far from being spiritual or divine. Probably this was the very reason what made James Joyce so interested in Finnegan's character. He wanted his main character not to be flawless and ideal, but on the contrary, to be corrupt and deprived of every virtue so that it could symbolize the fallen mankind. Finnegan for Joyce equals to Adam, the father of mankind who fell and whose resurrection is needed for humanity in order to regain Paradise. Furthermore, Finnegan serves not only as Adam but each fallen God, Hero, Mythological character or even ordinary person who has fallen and whose resurrection is vital for mankind and its prosperity.

The story of Finnegan's Fall and his Resurrection for Joyce, on the one hand, is a means of parodying fallen Gods and a giver of hope on the other – hope that if Finnegan managed to resurrect than there might be some hope for the fallen mankind.

It is also noteworthy that Finnegan's death, wake and resurrection is the subject of the opening chapter of the book, but the protagonist is not Finnegan but Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker; therefore Finnegan can be seen as either a prototype of HCE, or as one of his manifestations. Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker just like Finnegan is neither a hero nor a nobleman. Just like Finnegan and Adam and many others he is an ordinary human burdened with all human vices.

One of the complexities of the novel lies in the fact that Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker is an archetypal hero who represents not only a fallen mankind, but is also associated with a number of mythological, literary and historical names all so intricately intertwined and interconnected that sometimes it is difficult to understand who is who. As an example we can argue that Finnegan is not only Tim Finnegan but at the same time Finn MacCoul, the mythical hunter-warrior in Irish mythology, who is believed to be asleep, but who will awake to save Ireland when the latter most needs it. Therefore Finnegan, Finn MacCoul and Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker are used in one and the same context and the text abounds with parallels between them.

It seems to me worthwhile to focus on Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker's initials (HCE) first as they are rather interesting and have many symbolic meanings. To begin with, these initials characterize Tim Finnegan - 'this man of *hod*, cement and *edifice*' (FW 4.25), but at the same time it is associated with the name Haroun Childeric Eggeberth. Adeline Glasheen in her book *Third Census of Finnegans Wake* suggests that Childeric is one of 'three Frankish Kings; the third was the last of Merovingian Dynasty' (Glasheen 1977: 55). But this is not the only

version what Joyce meant under Haroun Childeric Eggeberth. Another explanation can be found in James Joyce's interest towards Lord Byron and his works what accounts for Haroun Childeric bearing resemblance with *Childe Harold*. Adeline Glasheen provides even more information related to Haroun Childeric Eggeberth: 'Hugh Kulling Eardly Childers was a famous British politician who had a nick-name "Here Comes Everybody" due to the amount of his children' and 'Erskine Childers was a clerk in the House of Commons, who resigned and helped run guns in Howth' (Glasheen 1977: 55). Another area of interest for James Joyce was *One Thousand and One Nights* and throughout his novel the reader comes across numerous allusions to this book (for example the famous ten thunder words of *Finnegans Wake*, from which nine consist of hundred letters and the tenth has one hundred and one, which in total amounts to one thousand and one letters - it cannot be accidental especially in case of Joyce, who thoroughly thought about each single word and letter). Therefore, we can argue that there are allusions to *One Thousand and One Nights* Haroun Childeric Eggeberth as well. If we divide **Childeric** in two parts we will get Childe-Ric, or Sir Ric, or Sir Richard Francis Burton, person who is famous for his translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*; as for Haroun, it could be Harun al-Rashid, the caliph in the book *One Thousand and One Nights*. The attempts of fully understanding what Joyce meant behind each word or name are always doomed to failure - the more the scholar tries to find an answer, the more he gets confused in those numerous allusions and sources behind them. And the problem is that while one spends hours on understanding what Joyce meant under Haroun Childeric Eggeberth, he/she loses the whole essence of the book and all those explanations become a burden.

In Chapter 14 of *The Last Unicorn* Peter S. Beagle wrote "Great heroes need great sorrows and burdens, or half their greatness goes unnoticed". I would argue saying that starting from Adam we all have to carry our share of burden, but unlike us Heroes are capable of managing their burden.

Therefore, neither Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker nor Tim Finnegan is an exception, but due to the fact that they are not heroes, but merely images of fallen men, they are unable to deal with their burden. On page 26 of *Finnegans Wake* we come across a rather interesting sentence packed with allusions: 'Hero! Seven times thereto we salute you! The whole bag of kits, falconplumes and jackbootsincloted, is where you flung them that time' (FW 26.8-10). In this one sentence we come across to both Buddhist and Egyptian Allusions. According to Buda's life, one of the monks addressed him as 'Hero!' and after reaching Nirvana he is greeted seven times. 'Seven times thereto' is important in Egyptian mythology too. Seth divides Osiris' body into fourteen parts and fourteen is seven multiplied twice. 'The whole bag of kits' is the bundle full of magic spells which is needed for the dead to achieve eternity. 'falconplumes' were worn by several Gods and Goddesses in Egyptian mythology, notably the Goddess Isis, and the creator God Atum.

As we can see, most of *Finnegans Wake* is deeply rooted in mythology and pre-Christian traditions. One of those authors writing about the importance of Irish mythology in *Finnegans Wake* is George Cinclair Gibson with his book *Wake Rites: The Ancient Irish Rituals of Finnegans Wake*, who gives detailed parallels between specific events and performers of the Rites and the episodes and characters of *Finnegans Wake*. Gibson aims to show that every event and performer at the Rites has a correlate in the novel, and all Wakean episodes and performers

have their parallels in the Rites of Tara. Ultimately, he argues that Joyce structured his novel according to the Teamhur Feis, and *Finnegans Wake* is a calculated reenactment of the most important event in Irish paganism – the coming of Saint Patrick at the Mount of Tara during the Teamhur Feis marking the end of paganism in Ireland.

Therefore, there is no wonder that the actions done by main character of *Finnegans Wake* remind us of the rituals of Tara, especially those performed by the High King of Ireland in order to become one.

R.A.S. Macalister in his book *Tara: A Pagan Sanctuary of Ancient Ireland* describes the rituals enacted on the mountain of Tara. One of them is the ritual of a sacred dance that the person intended to be the High King of Ireland had to perform in order to prove his masculinity and sexual maturity. Macalister writes that the High King of Ireland ‘danced publicly and carried earth on his back’ (Macalister 1931:129). This dance measured not only the masculinity of the King, but at the same time his physical endurance. Carrying earth on the back is not accidental in this case, because the Celtic Goddess Anu or Danu, the hypothetical mother goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danan, is associated with land. Therefore, by the ritual dance including the High King and the Goddess sky and earth, feminine and masculine beginnings, physical and spiritual would unite causing the continuation and prosperity of Civilization.

The dance of the King is rather an important aspect and if he is unable to do so, this will cause problems. The fallen King will lose the sympathy of the Goddesses as well as their interest towards him. When his share of burden falls from him it is a depiction that he is not mature and will not be capable of satisfying the Earth Goddess and will not prove her righteous partner: both directly and symbolically he will not manage to master over her.

Joyce describes Finnegans movement up and down the ladder as some kind of ritual dance; and in order to become the High King of Ireland performing a ritual dance was required from the candidate during the Teamhur Feis. Finnegans mission at a glance is simple - to carry the hod up the ladder and come down for some more. But by this act he becomes a mediator between Heaven and Earth. This ritual dance at the Mountain of Tara should serve as a basis uniting physical and spiritual, femininity and masculinity, yin and yang. It should also stress Finnegans sexual potential as he has to prove himself as a father-creator for mankind. On page 29 of *Finnegans Wake* we read “tuck up your part in her” (FW 4.29-30), where a female is being mentioned and 'tucking up one's part in her' refers to a sexual act. This ritual dance that serves as a proof of masculinity and viability of the High King of Ireland has a great importance and even one mistake may lead to the downfall and loss of his Kingship.

No need to mention that the High King of Ireland should be of noble descent, therefore Joyce compares Finnegans to an ancient nobleman ‘Of the first was he to bare arms and a name’ (FW 5.5). Here we can argue that Joyce may not be writing about Tim Finnegans, but about Finn MacCoul, who in reality was a nobleman. In this respect the coat of arms is rather interesting and catchy

‘His crest of huoldry, in vert with ancillars, troublant, argent, a hegoak, poursuivant, horrid, horned’ (FW 5.6-7). What draws attention is the horns, which like everything in *Finnegans Wake* also has dual meaning. First that strikes our mind is that ‘horned’ is the one who is being betrayed by his wife. But Joyce who was trying to create the History of

Mankind and tried to make the text as complex as possible, would not be satisfied by this mere meaning. Joyce would have gone deeper in paganism where the Horned God is one of the primary deities and is the male part of the triple Goddess. Anna Livia Plurabelle, who in the novel is the representation of the Triple Goddess, makes HCE the Horned God. Thus, HCE unites in himself the Horned God, the High King of Ireland and the horned husband – who is being betrayed by his wife.

It should be mentioned that no matter how powerful and mighty the High King of Ireland may be at some point he becomes old and incapable of providing his wife with all her needs and she betrays him with a younger partner, therefore making the Old King doomed to fall.

On that ‘tragoady thundersday’ (FW 5.13) Finnegans Ritual dance ends by his fall ‘His howd feeled heavy, his hoddit did shake. He stottered from the latter. “Damb! he was dud” (FW 6.8-10). It should be noted that his fall is predicted a page ahead before it actually happens. On page 5 we read ‘It may half been a missfiredbrick, as some say, or it mought have been due to a collupsus of his back promises, as others looked at it’ (FW 5.26-28). Interestingly enough, nobody is sure and nobody actually knows the real reason of the fall, because if it were obvious than nobody would do the same mistake in the future. What is for sure is that Finnegans/Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker’s physical fall, especially his incapability of carrying his share of burden (directly or indirectly) causes his fall and death.

Whilst talking about the reflection of Irish Mythology in Finnegans/Earwicker’s image, the passage in the Book known as ‘Buckley and the Russian General’ (337.22-254.36) is also worth considering. The episode is in the form of a dialogue and represents the overthrowing/killing of the ‘father’ by a young man.

The story of Buckley and the Russian General gets told in the Butt and Taff radio drama which plays in the tavern scene and is mentioned as "How Burghley shuck the rackushant Germanon" (FW 338:2-3). The story is based on the tale which happened during the Crimean war. Richard Ellman points out that Joyce enjoyed telling his friends the story of Buckley and the Russian General and regarded it ‘to be somewhat archetypal’ (Ellmann 1983:90). And it indeed is. It is not a mere story about how an Irish soldier got rid of his rival, but an archetypal image of a son always trying to overthrow/kill his father and take his place. If the Russian General were just an enemy, Buckley would have killed him at once, he would not have hesitated twice. It is worth mentioning that when Buckley found himself near the Russian General (who was unaware of Buckley’s presence), his first impulse was to kill him, but after observing the splendid epaulettes and decorations of the Russian General, could not bring himself to shoot him. After a moment, alive to his duty, he raised his rifle again, but just then the general let down his pants to defecate. The sight of his enemy in such a helpless position made Buckley lower his gun again. But when the general prepared to finish the operation with a piece of grassy turf, Buckley lost all respect for him and fired.

The reader at a glance may be confused, what made Buckley kill the general just in the moment when he touched the ‘grassy turf’, but the answer lies in Irish mythology: the General by his actions of taking a piece of grassy turf insulted land, which is regarded as holy by the Irish

(due to the Goddess Danu) and the Russian General's abuse of land was unacceptable for Buckley.

Nathan Halper gives an interesting view in his article "Another Anecdote in Ellmann", published in *A Wake Newslitter* where he poses a question about the Buckley episode: 'What is there in the turf that made Buckley think that the Russian General was insulting Ireland? The answer can be found in the novel itself.' On page 346 of *Finnegans Wake* we read 'A hov and az ov and off like a gow! And don't live out the sad of tearfs, piddyawhick!' (FW 346:21-23). Therefore, Joyce uses 'Sod of Turf' and Ireland in many cases is called the Old Sod (Halper 1968:90). Halper also notes that this is an attempt of a lower-ranking Irish soldier to overthrow the Imperialist Power (Halper 1968:91).

The story of Buckley and the Russian General with its deep and allusive nature which is rooted in Irish mythology makes it quite a complex episode in the Book. Another connection of this episode to mythological and pagan Ireland is that after the story is told Butt and Taff merge and become one person, which they regard as Finn MacCoul "Like Faun MacGhou!" (FW 354.5-6).

Who are Butt and Taff and why on earth do they unite to become one person?

HCE and ALP have two twin sons - Shem and Shaun who complement each other, being in fact two sides of their father's personality. Throughout the novel they have many incarnations, such as: Dolph and Kevin, Mutt and Jute, Butt and Taff, Hengest and Horsa, Caddy and Primas, etc. Shem and Shaun are rivals, but sometimes they reconcile and unite in order to overthrow their father. After the tale of Buckley and the Russian General they merge in order to get rid of the father. They become Finn McCool, who was the legendary protector of Ireland and Chief of The Fianna, the elite bodyguard to the High Kings of Ireland. If HCE is the High King of Ireland, Shem and Shaun are his bodyguards who collectively have the power to overthrow the aging king and take his place. But in order to take his place they need to be one single person, because there is only one High King of Ireland.

Joyce's extensive use of literary, biblical and mythological allusions, as well as the numerous sources that he based his text on makes the reader conclude that he really succeeded in creating the text about the History of Mankind, which after the original sin is constantly striving for resurrection and re-gaining lost Paradise.

James Joyce starts his novel by mentioning Giambattista Vico: '...brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs' (FW 3:2-3).

Giambattista Vico in his '*Scienza Nuova*' argues that civilization develops in a recurring cycle (ricorso) of three ages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. Joyce uses all of the three ages in his magnum opus and by means of parodying Gods and Heroes gives humanity a hope that like the drunkard, hod-carrier Finnegan Mankind is capable of resurrection and renewal.

## References

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