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Ritual Storytelling: Confessional Rhetoric in Synge, Joyce, and Yeats

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I. Introduction

Some Irish writers' attempts to deal with political and cultural turbulence in the early twentieth-century allow readers to see why it was important for these writers to play a central role in forming a national identity. They used their art as an impetus for change, hoping that they would help end ambiguity among Irish concerning their place and purpose as a nation. My intention in this article is to show the connections between three Irish writers by establishing their investment in Christian confession as a vehicle for promoting a unified Ireland. In J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and W. B. Yeats's *Purgatory*, the mind's exploration of itself is the aesthetic center. The exterior world—or physical reality—is internalized to function as a component of identity creation.

One dominant and recurring example of such interiority is the repeated use of confessional rhetoric in their works. Christian language is used for aesthetic

experimentation as a narrative device, and as a way to express an Irish yearning for secular national identity. Their investments in confession aesthetics illuminate the way in which these writers (Protestant and Catholic) use Christianity to narrate and critique national identity formation. To be sure, the reasons for borrowing and transforming Christian modes of expression are different for each writer (and even change, over time, for individuals), yet in the end each argues that a national identity that is less hegemonic and more accepting of secular, liminal, and subaltern groups should be the aim of a nationalism seeking to unify the country under a republican state. To this end, the writers dealt with in this paper argue for the importance of individuals and individual groups as part of the collective whole that compose the Irish culture.

In *Purgatory* W. B. Yeats, born to a middle-class Protestant family (though for Yeats Protestantism was more of a cultural affiliation than a religious one), employs confessional rhetoric in his play. His vision of Purgatory—a distinctly Catholic arena for souls enacting penance—suggests that a struggle with religious identity follows, but it doesn't. Yeats's reliance on Christian language reinforces his nationalist aims: a eugenicist purification of the Irish race, which promotes a hierarchy of political power.

J. M. Synge, like Yeats, was also born Protestant yet divorced himself from Christianity at age fourteen upon his discovery of Darwin's works. He seems to re-engage with religious aesthetics when he begins his ethnographic writing in the Aran Islands where he engages with Celtic and Catholic superstition. In *The Playboy of the Western World,* Synge is less interested in national identity through ethnography and more interested in individual representations; he relies less on scientific observation (Darwin) and turns to religious belief for identity construction. Synge presents Christy Mahon's confessions as a means of self-exploration and self-narration. Synge turns to the Catholic Church, which suggests that the most important part of confession is not in the telling, but in the amendment of a life, and this life change is evident in *Playboy*.

Whereas Yeats is interested in national identity, Synge explores society's impact

on individual identity. James Joyce, a Catholic, amalgamates Yeats's and Synge's views of Christianity and the nation: He presents Stephen Dedalus as a product of the society he, as an artist, creates. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Stephen seeks to "fly by the nets" of British Imperialism and Irish Nationalism, yet finds them (and himself) entangled with Catholicism. Stephen explains to Davin that his entire aesthetic is bound with Catholic definitions of beauty, challenging the notion that Joyce rejects Catholicism outright and places him in association with revivalist aesthetics which are at once Christian and national: "The soul is born, he said vaguely, first in those moments I told you of. It has a slow and dark birth, more mysterious than the birth of the body. When the soul of a man is born in *this* country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets." (emphasis added, Joyce 196). Here Stephen refuses external ideologies and limitations and turns toward introspection.

Clearly I am not the first author to explore the complex structure of Irish identity, nor the first to point to Christian aesthetics to do so. However, I am the first to group these three texts as representative works by Irish writers using confessional rhetoric, turning one's mind inward, to promote a national agenda. I also look at how confession, in the act of narrating the self, asserts a person's true character—thus realizing the role of Christianity in shaping a national identity that is constructed of collective individuals from various ideologies. I argue that Irish artists' political and cultural goals were reconcilable with postcolonial aesthetic aims: Irish writers were intent on constructing an image of Irishness that was not dictated by British coloring and was exportable through the medium of their art.

Finally I distinguish how Synge, Yeats, and Joyce arrive at similar conclusions by way of different political and social ideologies. Synge pursues personal transformation through confessional storytelling whereas Yeats seeks national transformation via confessional rhetoric, and Joyce complicates these views by presenting personal transformation *as* national change: As individuals realize the importance of individuality, not blind allegiance to nationalism, they might become

more accepting of ideologies that differ from their own, realizing the success of the Irish republic depends upon the coexistence of various Irish sects, including Protestants and Catholics.

Recognizing the negative aspects of Christian confession as argued by Michel Foucault, the scope of this paper allows only for an examination of the intense introspection and personal judgment afforded by confession. Certainly Foucault's argument is convincing, however, for the purposes of creating and sustaining national unity in Ireland, the confession ritual is a positive tool. It is a particularly apt metaphor for the creation of national identity because it offers a specific perception of identity through self-examination, whereas autobiography is inherently unreliable as the author always presents and omits certain information based upon the portrait that is being drawn and the intended audience. Jean Starobinski, a contemporary literary critic with ties to the Geneva School, writes in her seminal essay, "The Style of Autobiography": [Autobiography] is free to 'contaminate the record of the life… Not only can autobiography lie, but the 'autobiographical form' can cloak the freest fictive invention" (73-75). Yet in confession the penitent reveals him/herself in assumed secrecy. There is an essential difference between the internal self and the variety of external, social identities that the self is led to adopt as one develops psychologically.

Since, as the writers claimed, national identity must be made of collective, individual identities that are both influencing and influenced by society, then the reader must look at the act of confession to find the true individual. It is not through the "polished mirror" of autobiography, but the despair of putting into words the personal quality of one's existence (confession) that may lead to the possibility of a representation of Irish identity not colored by British cultural critics or the Irish government. Arthur Griffith reinforced the seriousness of this issue when he said, "The British had built a paper wall around Ireland; on the inside they painted what they wanted the Irish to know about the rest of the world, on the outside what they wanted the rest of the world to know about Ireland" (317).

II. J. M. Synge: *The Playboy of the Western World*

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge uses confessional rhetoric (an argument for the soul's readiness to accept God's grace and to amend one's life) to highlight the individual self as a concept for critical examination wherein personal transformation parallels national change.

Playboy is essentially a series of confessions. Christy Mahon initially feels meek about his life and personality; as he confesses his faults he begins to transform into a stronger character. Christy's story illustrates the transformative power of language. He begins his confession by answering a series of questions:

> CHRISTY [*twisting round on her with a sharp cry of horror*]. Don't strike me. I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week, for doing the like of that.
>
> PEGEEN [*with blank amazement*]. Is it killed your father?
>
> CHRISTY [*subsiding*]. With the help of God I did surely, and that the Holy Immaculate Mother may intercede for his soul.
>
> PHILLY [retreating with JIMMY]. There's a daring fellow.
>
> JIMMY. Oh, glory be to God!
>
> MICHAEL [*with great respect*]. That was a hanging crime, mister honey. You should have had good reason for doing the like of that.
>
> CHRISTY [*in a very reasonable tone*]. He was a dirty man, God forgive him, and he getting old and crusty, the way I couldn't put up with him at all.
>
> …
>
> MICHAEL [*making a sign to PEGEEN to fill CHRISTY'S glass*]. And what way weren't you hanged, mister? Did you bury him then?
>
> CHRISTY [*considering*]. Aye. I buried him then. Wasn't I digging spuds in the field? (80)

Christy throws off his old self to re-create his personality through self-narration during this interrogation. He initially exclaims the truth of his sin to defend himself from an anticipated blow. A few lines later, as he describes burying his father, he

has recovered and begins narrating the events (and his character) with assured zeal. Julie Henigan asserts, "In *Playboy*, language acts as mediator between actuality and potentiality, between reality and abstraction, for it is largely through language—through his successive accounts of the murder and his self-surprising eloquence in wooing Pegeen—that Christy projects and brings into being one of his potential selves that until now has lain dormant" (103). Christy's narration purges him of his dull life as a "dribbling idiot"; his transformation relies on confessional rhetoric: introspection, followed by self-narration, and the subsequent amendment of his life—he attempts to eliminate his weak personality for a newer, stronger one.

Christy becomes a "poet hero." He uses poetic language to enhance the narrative of his story, and the people of Mayo begin respecting him for his talent. His story is an internalized vision of self where Christy acts as the accuser, the accused, and the witness to his sin. The townspeople, however, serve an important role—they are the externalizing factor of the confession: the judge—and Christy eventually becomes that which society has projected upon him, the playboy of the western world:

> CHRISTY [*impressively*] With that the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. "God have mercy on your soul," says he, lifting a scythe; "or on your own," says I, raising the loy.
>
> SUSAN. That's a grand story.
>
> HONOR. He tells it lovely.
>
> CHRISTY [flattered *and confident, waving bone*]. He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet. [*He raises the chicken bone to his Adam's apple*].
>
> GIRLS [*together*]. Well, you're a marvel! Oh, God bless you! You're the lad surely! (91)

For Synge, *Playboy* was what Mary C. King calls a "fictionalized confessional

autobiography" in which he did not necessarily create faithful representations of rural Irish life, but rather modern drama that produced universal questions concerning social and human conflicts (xxxix). *Playboy* doesn't serve the politics of the nation, it complicates them by exposing nationalist distortions of logic—Synge constructs Mayo as a microcosm of Catholic, nationalist Ireland wherein Christy is influenced to take on the identity that the townspeople project upon him, and Old Mahon serves to expose multiple identities and nationalist mob logic. Christy was meek when he first arrived in the town, but the townspeople's judgments enabled him to become confident enough to confront his father without fleeing afterwards:

> CHRISTY [*in low and intense voice*]. Shut your yelling, for if you're after making a mighty man of me this day by the power of a lie, you're setting me now to think if it's a poor thing to be lonesome, it's worse maybe to go mixing with the fools of earth…If I am an idiot, I'm after hearing my voice this day saying words would raise the topknot on a poet in a merchant's town. I've won your racing, and your lepping, and…
>
> MAHON. Shut your gullet and come on with me.
>
> CHRISTY. I'm going, but I'll stretch you first. (114)
>
> …
>
> MAHON [*To* CHRISTY, *who is freed*]. Come on now.
>
> CHRISTY. Go with you, is it? I will then, like a gallant captain with his heathen slave. Go on now and I'll see you from this day stewing my oatmeal and washing my spuds, for I'm master of all fights from now. (117)

Narration of the mind's discovery of itself is a type of myth-making that is essential to identity formation, and Christy embarks on constructing his own identity by telling the townspeople a story and embodying their reaction to that story. They treat Christy as a hero, and he becomes the playboy of the western world. Ireland was going through a similar process in the early twentieth-century. Revival writers shaped Irish identity via exportable artistic representations of the nation. Synge's writing captures a variety of personalities within a single individual. It rejects the

possibility of a single national identity by illustrating fragmentation on an individual level: Ireland must exist as a nation of individuals.

As stated above, confession is a particularly apt device for creating national identity. Synge is confident that there is an essential difference between the internal self and the variety of external, social identities that the self is led to adopt. National identity must be constructed of collective, individual identities that are both influencing and influenced by society; therefore, confession, the practice of examining one's own mind and soul, has its place in ritual storytelling. It is not through the 'polished mirror' of narration, but the self-narrative despair of putting into words the personal quality of one's existence that uncovers the multiple identities within an individual and the nation. I turn from Synge's emphasis on individual identity as part of the whole to Joyce's rumination on personal identity as national identity.

III. Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

I have placed Joyce as the central author in this essay to stress his connection to both Synge and Yeats. I began with an exploration of Synge's use of confessional aesthetics that aims toward a greater truth than mere autobiographical or ethnographic writing. He relies on self-examination and the transformative power of language to capture multiple layers of identity that could not exist under unified nationalism. Following a reading of *Portrait* I will look at Yeats' investment in confession, especially penance, as a vehicle for defining Irish national identity—and to expose "the unpalatable aspects of nationalism that often lurk behind the facades of more attractive versions of the nation" (146). Yeats understood the power Christian rhetoric held over the Irish nation, and used it to critique the Old-Man in *Purgatory,* ultimately making the Old-Man a symbol of amalgamation.

Joyce complicates these positions: he is a dissident Catholic interested in the artistic creation of personal and national identities. Joyce gives Stephen Dedalus the

desire to be the creator of himself and his nation, but—in the end—Stephen cannot escape from the nets of Catholicism that inform all his discourse. Joyce is using Catholic rhetoric to critique the Church's authority because he feels that the Church (Protestant or Catholic) is an unjust presence in Ireland. He attempts to divorce individuality from the bonds of Rome, but fails. Much of what Joyce (and Stephen) creates is influenced by the authority of the church; he cannot reject Catholicism outright because it is so ingrained in him, and at the same time, he cannot completely reject the Revival or Irish nationalism because he is working within their rhetorical and aesthetic frameworks as well—frameworks that are themselves steeped in Catholic rhetoric.

Joyce found confession necessary as a means of self-examination. When he was asked by Ettore Schmitz (Italo Svevo) his opinion concerning psychoanalysis, Joyce stated, "Well, if we need it, let us keep to confession" (Lowe-Evans 565). He discards scientific analysis of consciousness for religious introspection. For Joyce, confession offers a more cogent understanding of the self than psychoanalysis, because confession is a more complete observation of the self: the penitent is at the same time accuser, confessor, and witness. In psychoanalysis, the subject is almost completely removed from the method of analysis. Joyce's work is exceptionally interesting because he was both a product and a critic of Catholic education. Mary Lowe-Evans suggests the unique position of *A Portrait* in her article "Sex and Confession in the Joyce Canon: Some Historical Parallels":

> Because *A Portrait* both includes the description of a sacramental confession conducted according to the Tridentine mandates, and is itself a more modern psychoanalytic confession, it proves a unique example of confession in transition from liturgical to secular catharsis. Furthermore, Stephen's confessional behavior in *A Portrait* demonstrates that one form of power wielded by a central, identifiable authority seems to have given way to another amorphous and devious one exerting pressure from all sides. For even as Stephen extricates himself from his entangling alliance with the Church, he falls into the net of a type of humanism whose dogmas (especially about so-called 'normal' sexuality) thoroughly determine how Stephen will conduct his life and his art. (567)

Lowe-Evans's examination of the connection between religious confession and psychoanalysis is central to understanding Irish conceptions of confessional rhetoric. Identity formation relies on *self*-narration therefore, one must employ the process of *self*-examination that is most commonly practiced, in this case Christian confession. Stephen's case is problematic because there have been many critics who believe Stephen does indeed break free from Church authority to practice secular examinations of himself and his society. It is, however, not wise to suggest that Stephen is completely successful in "extricating himself from his entangling alliance with the Church." Stephen is ultimately unsuccessful as an artist because Catholicism is one net that he cannot escape. It seems as though Joyce and Stephen give up on confession (really the Catholic Church altogether) and Ireland, but they do not. Joyce claims a complete rejection of Catholicism because it is detrimental to his individualism as an artist, yet much his work is written through a Catholic lens.

Like Joyce, Stephen's Catholic education began at an early age, and as a result he has been psychologically scarred. Joyce presents Stephen's horror following Father Arnall's terrifying sermon, "Confess! Confess! It was not enough to lull the conscience with a tear and a prayer⋯ Confess! He had to confess every sin. How could he utter in words to the priest what he had done? Must, must. Or how could he explain without dying of shame? Or how could he have done such things without shame? A madman, a loathsome madman! Confess!" (132-33). Quentin Donahue, in his study *Bless Me Father, For I have Sinned: Catholics Speak Out About Confession,* claims that "overscrupulous penitents are, for the most part, the result of religious instruction begun at an early age that overemphasizes sin, guilt, feelings of unworthiness, and fear of the afterlife" (120). This is half of Stephen's misfortune. Feelings of personal unworthiness initially lead Stephen away from the church, but ultimately it is the Church's inability to cleanse him of his self-diagnosed unworthiness that produces this divorce. Stephen is described in terms of Catholic guilt plagued with religious antagonism, "It humiliated and shamed him to think that he would never be freed from it wholly, however holily

he might live or whatever virtues or perfections he might attain. A restless feeling of guilt would always be present with him: he would confess and repent and be absolved, confess and repent again and be absolved again, fruitlessly" (147). Again Donahue's case-study of confessions confirms this fear of fruitless absolution among many penitent Catholics, "Confession leads to penance, penance to absolution. The slate, as we have seen, is wiped clean. But sometimes confession doesn't work as intended. Some people, consumed by guilt, are unable to confess. Others, obsessed by it, find that peace of mind eludes them even after confession and absolution" (144). Once Stephen discovers he cannot gain peace of mind through confession he attempts to leave the Church completely—He sets out to become an artist. At this precise moment Stephen has his vision of the bird-girl, an image that can be traced back to Synge's *The Aran Islands*.[1)]

Stephen holds the bird-girl up as a symbol and then deconstructs it. In this moment Stephen seems to reject Catholicism except for his betraying exclamation, "Heavenly God! Cried Stephen's soul in an outburst of profane joy" (165). Even in the act of artistic creation and religious rejection Stephen still reverts to the language of Catholicism. Shortly thereafter he again relies on Catholic conventions; his villanelle doubles as a confession of his love for the bird-girl, and his final journal entries slip into similar reliance. Jonathan Mulrooney observes: "Stephen's strident declaration at the novel's end demonstrates that his struggle for independent artistic identity remains as yet unfulfilled. His expressive stance is a lyric one that has so deep an investment in the linguistic formulations of a Catholic confessional identity as to be inseparable from them… it is, quite simply, too much an exercise in personal identity formation" (4). Stephen does fail, but he is designed to fail.

Catholicism, for Joyce, cannot be escaped because it is *part* of the Irish identity. Like the dissident Protestants, Synge and Yeats, Joyce exposes inherent

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1) "I often come on a girl with her petticoats tucked up round her, standing in a pool left by the tide and washing her flannels among the sea-anemones and crabs. Their red bodies and white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical seabirds, as they stand in a frame of seaweeds against the brink of the Atlantic." (Synge 33)

problems in attempting to create a unified national identity, and—in the end—subscribes to individuality. What we are seeing in *A Portrait* is not escape from Church authority, but submission to it. Stephen, as he examines his own conscience to prepare himself for absolution, only becomes more attracted to his sins. Jonathan Mulrooney suggests that eventually the process of examination makes him more creative in his interpretation of sin and ultimately unable to avoid sin at all (565). Stephen is constantly in a state of self-examination, a perpetual state which mirrors an ingrained Ignatian confession that requires constant, repeated, ritual practice. Stephen is too deeply engaged with this practice to simply leave it behind as he attempts to become a secular artist. Mulrooney's article appropriately states, "the aesthetic theory to which Stephen turns as a method of emancipation from Catholicism 'depends to a very large extent on the religious vocabulary in terms of which it is formulated' so the artistic identity informing his lyric stance is rooted in the methodology of Catholic self-examination" (5). I add to Mulrooney's argument that Stephen's failure to break from the Church narrates Joyce's reliance on Christian confessional rhetoric in his own work. This reliance places him among the other writers seeking individuality, *not* a unified national identity.

IV. Yeats: *Purgatory*

In 1938, before leaving Ireland for the last time, W. B. Yeats staged his penultimate play, *Purgatory*, "to a final public flurry of uncomprehending disapprobation of [his] work" (Brown 155). I have turned to *Purgatory* specifically because of this "uncomprehending disapprobation." Yeats, infamous for constantly realigning himself with current social and political climates, shifts again in the late 1930s to produce his final attempt to construct Ireland's national identity along Anglo-Irish lines. What this means, is that Yeats was interested in a unified Ireland, just one that operated within a traditional lord (Anglo-Irish)—serf (Catholic Irish) hierarchy. I establish Yeats's decision to employ confessional rhetoric to an

anti-Catholic end, and examined the play's precursors (which Yeats would have viewed as ineffective) – *Playboy* and *A Portrait* – that led to that decision. By the end of his career Yeats is decidedly less interested in his earlier hope of a gaelic Ireland and much more focused on an Anglo-Irish Ireland as separate and superior to Catholic Ireland. Ultimately, as Dorothy Wellesley would proclaim about *Purgatory*, "it seems to me that you are hurrying us back to the great arms of the Roman Catholic Church" (195), yet he was all-the-while campaigning for racial hygiene via an anti-Catholic purification of the Irish race.

Yeats rejects utopian cohabitation; his aesthetic purpose for employing confessional rhetoric as a narrative device was to implant fear into the Protestant Ascendancy. The aim of *Purgatory* was to stop the contamination of Anglo-Irish aristocratic blood because of mixed breeding with Catholics. By using confessional rhetoric and Catholic superstition, Yeats predicts the outcome of mixed breeding – a terrifying landscape ruled by Catholics.

Purgatory is narrated by an Old Man (of Protestant and Catholic blood) who tells the story of his mother and father to his son:

> *Old Man.* My mother that was your grand-dam owned [that house],
> This scenery and this countryside,
> Kennel and stable, horse and hound –
> She had a horse at the Curragh, and there met
> My father, a groom in a training stable;
> Looked at him and married him.
> Her mother never spoke to her again,
> And she did right. (ll 46-53)

Yeats's rejection of intermarriage speaks to the dying Protestant Ascendancy, yet he fails to recognize that for the upper-class woman there were no men (most having died off in WWI) – the Old Man's mother was biologically forced to mingle with her Catholic servant because there simply was no one else.[2] The narrative

2) Elizabeth Bowen, in *A World of Love* (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), makes it clear

continues with the Old Man charging his father with the capital offence of destroying the big-house "where great men grew up, married, died." The implication is that his Catholic father destroyed not only the physical house, but a pure aristocratic bloodline. In turn the Old Man kills his father for this unforgivable offense (of which he is the monstrous product) and the whole of *Purgatory* reads like his confession. In fact, the play also contains an explicit auricular confession between the Old Man and his son:

Boy.	Is what I have heard upon the road the truth, That you killed him in the burning house?
Old Man.	There's nobody here but our two selves?
Boy.	Nobody, Father.
Old Man.	I stuck him with a knife, That knife that cuts my dinner now, And after that I left him in the fire··· (95-100)

In this scene Yeats begins demonstrating Catholicism's connection to evil—the Old Man confesses parricide. Yeats uses the confession scene to illustrate the bestial nature of Catholics, a characteristic illuminated in the Old Man's subsequent hallucinations:

Old Man.	Listen to the hoof beats! Listen, listen!
Boy.	I cannot hear a sound.
Old Man.	Beat! Beat! This night is the anniversary Of my mother's wedding night, Or of the night were in I was begotten···. Look at the window; she stands there···.
Boy.	There's nothing but an empty gap in the wall. You have made it up. No, you are mad!

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that bourgeois, Protestant Irish woman had a limited selection of male partners because a great majority of the Anglo-Irish male population had died in service during World War I.

You are getting madder every day. (113-127)

The madness is a result of the man's Catholic blood. He is like the savage, idiot Irishman stereotyped by English cultural critics. "As the Catholic middle class grew and began to occupy traditionally Protestant positions in municipal government and local structures of power, Protestants compensated for their loss of power in the real world by re-investing their energies in another, more obscure, and yet more powerful domain－－[art]" (Foster 220). Yeats's goal is to show the Protestant Ascendancy what will happen to their lineage, and ability to remain as a ruling power, if they continue to intermarry. He suggests the only possible outcome is a decline into madness. In fact, the Boy begins to show his untrustworthy Catholic heritage－he steals the Old Man's bag of money and threatens to kill him:

Boy. What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad,
Because you were young and he was old.
Now I am young and you are old. (168-170)

This is the speech that should strike real fear into a Protestant audience: It speaks of a Catholic uprising. As R. F. Foster points out in *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, "Thus [Yeats] was not immune to Protestant fears about Catholic ambitions to control free thought in an independent Ireland" (459). Yeats suggests the only way to end this threat is to cease mixing with Catholics－the Old Man must kill his son:

[*He stabs the Boy*.]
My father and my son on the same jack-knife!
That finishes－there－there－there－
[*He stabs again and again. The window grows dark.*]…
I killed that lad because he had grown up.
He would have struck a woman's fancy,
Begot, and passed pollution on. (191-206)

The Old Man confesses again after killing his own son, this time in the form of

a prayer to his mother in which he offers an explanation for his sin. This final confession reminds the reader that the Old Man is half Catholic, and he chooses the superstitions of Catholicism as a vehicle to preserve Protestant purity. Yeats's intention was to employ the Old Man as a warning—Catholics are mysterious, illogical, and dangerous people, they cannot be trusted as part of a Protestant family, and they certainly cannot be trusted to represent Ireland in Parliament. Though not preaching individuality, Yeats still fits the mould of a Revival writer promoting an ununified Ireland. He explicitly asserts a hierarchy where Synge and Joyce do not.

V. Conclusion

The above three writers' investment in confessional rhetoric points toward their desire to produce a distinct version of Irish identity, one that may not be unified. The question of this study has been why would dissident Protestant and Catholic writers employ the rhetoric and aesthetics of an institution they were trying to escape? Eli Zaretsky offers clarification—if not an answer— in "Female Sexuality and the Catholic Confessional": "The Catholic confession··· is not only a disclosure of sins for the sake of remittance, but also a means of directing the believers, regulating their everyday life" (178). Zaretsky speaks directly to the raison d'être of the writers: to direct the reader toward a desired national identity that offered various avenues to define Irishness. Christian Confession is a personal ritual that focuses on the individual as part of a whole. It follows that nationalist writers, attempting to unify the nation (albeit to very different ends and under different types of authority) would be drawn to confession as an appropriate vehicle to achieve this end. In the opening decades of the twentieth-century the Irish created modernized drama according to a Catholic nationalism—one that was at once passionately embraced and violently rejected. Synge, Joyce, and Yeats point us towards the future of identity construction in Ireland via confessional rhetoric, each

of them interested in aesthetic productions of Irish authors as exportable portraits of Irishness. The "second generation" writers (including Louis MacNeice, Elizabeth Bowen, and John McGahern) continue seeking individual and national identity in the later 20th century. And we shall recognize, as Walter Benjamin has suggested, that "every age not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels it towards wakefulness" (176).

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Abstract

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Synge, Joyce, and Yeats

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Some Irish writers' attempts to deal with political and cultural turbulence in the early twentieth-century allow readers to see why it was important for these writers to play a central role in forming a national identity. They used their art as an impetus for change, hoping that they would help end ambiguity among Irish concerning their place and purpose as a nation. My intention in this article is to show the connections between three Irish writers by establishing their investment in Christian confession as a vehicle for promoting a unified Ireland: J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and W. B. Yeats's *Purgatory*. Their investments in confession aesthetics illuminate the way in which each (Protestant or Catholic) uses Christianity to narrate and critique national identity formation. The writers dealt with in this paper argue for the importance of individuals and individual groups as part of the collective whole that compose the Irish culture.

■ Key words : confession, unified Ireland, individuality, identity construction, Christianity

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