

2017

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Recommended Citation

Cantwell, N. M. (2017). "Keeping the past present": Time and the shifting bog in Bram Stoker's *The Snake's Pass*. *Supernatural Studies*, 4(1), 38-50.

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Supernatural Studies, vol. 4, no. 1, 2017, pp. 38-50.

“Keeping the Past Present”: Time and the Shifting Bog in Bram Stoker’s *The Snake’s Pass*

Nancy Marck Cantwell

Bram Stoker’s Irish novel, The Snake’s Pass, interrogates the continuity of Irish history and national identity through a legend explaining a Connemara bog’s supernatural influence, a story that portrays the trauma of Ireland’s dispossession as indelible and timeless. This reading of the novel employs Julia Kristeva’s conceptualization of linear and monumental time to argue for the preeminence of the supernatural bog as a totem of Irish identity that persists in cultural memory to counter the forward momentum of the Anglo-Irish assimilation narrative.

Keywords: bog, Bram Stoker, dispossession, Ireland, Julia Kristeva



In Bram Stoker’s *The Snake’s Pass* (1890), Ireland first appears a depopulated land of ruins, lost treasure, and shifting boglands, as readers encounter the western counties from an inexperienced English touristic perspective—narrator Arthur Severn quickly becomes entangled in a mystery surrounding the legend of a supernatural snake and a horde of gold hidden in a shifting bog, even as he courts local beauty Norah Joyce. Revisiting the marriage trope of Sydney Owenson’s national tale *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), which casts Ireland in feminine and England in masculine roles, Stoker promises to ameliorate the declining Irish economy through this Anglo-Irish union, as Severn purchases extensive property to benefit Norah’s family and intends to reclaim and convert the bogland into a prosperous limestone industry. However, the text evinces considerable anxiety about the continuity of Irish history and national identity, expressed through the legend explaining the bog’s supernatural influence, a story that offers the trauma of dispossession as indelible and timeless.

Stoker’s complex associations with both England and Ireland’s Ascendancy class lead some to believe that *The Snake’s Pass*, his one Irish novel, occludes the trauma of colonization by promising an

Anglo-Irish union capable of social and economic regeneration.¹ Nicholas Daly, for instance, remarks that “dissonant voices are largely unrepresented” (54), while Mark Doyle similarly marvels that the Land War of the 1880’s that so clearly influences the bogland dispute should be conspicuously absent “at the very time and place in which the novel is set” (277). Although William Hughes considers the ancient legend of the King of the Snakes and his bog a marker of a culture subordinated to English economic expansion, Joseph Valente’s reading of Stoker’s uneasy affiliations as “an inter-ethnic half-caste” better describes the ambivalence underlying the novel’s presentation of the gothic bog, as he points to “an uneasy social and psychic space between authority, agency, and legitimacy on one side and abjection, heteronomy, and hybridity on the other” (3). This reading of the novel will attempt to explore this “social and psychic space,” ultimately arguing for the preeminence of the supernatural bog as a totem of Irish identity that persists in cultural memory and resists the forward momentum of the assimilation narrative.

In “Women’s Time,” Julia Kristeva describes a tension between an “*identity* constituted by historical sedimentation, and . . . [a] *loss of identity* which is produced by this connection of memories which escape from history”; these opposed forces constitute “two temporal dimensions: the time of ‘linear history,’ . . . and the time of another history, . . . *monumental time*” (189, emphasis in original). In other words, linear historical time proceeds as a sequence of events, while monumental time does not progress—instead it resonates with a key event, often a traumatic moment that cannot be forgotten or erased. While Stoker appears to prioritize linear time through Severn’s narrative of solving a mystery and wooing a wife, he also emphasizes the equally linear colonial project of reclaiming Ireland from its desperate economic situation. In contrast, monumental time in the novel resides in the supernatural bog, which functions, as Luke Gibbons notes, “as a weapon of the weak and oppressed,” and in its legend as reactivated by new storytellers (15). Norah’s female subjectivity also undercuts chronological time; the very inaccessibility of her experience alarms the male narrator and instigates his efforts to impose linearity and define progress through a political union symbolically enacted

through marriage. The narrator's ambitions at the novel's close require procreation, since he must have heirs to consolidate and perpetuate the power of his possessions in Ireland and England, and for this project to succeed, monumental time—the traumatic memory of Ireland's dispossession—must be contained.

Two internal narratives explain the bog as an emblem of Irish separatist identity. The first narrative, of St. Patrick's conflict with the King of the Snakes, defines the bog as essentially supernatural, the form that the shape-shifting snake takes to guard the golden crown that he has hidden beneath the mountain—local raconteur Jerry Scanlan recites the legend of the King of the Snakes from memory, keeping “ould ancient times” alive as part of the oral history of the area prior to Christianity (Stoker 16). His dialect further marks Ireland's distinct cultural difference from England:

He was more nor tin times as big as any shnake as any man's eyes had ever saw; an' he had a golden crown on to the top of his head, wid a big jool in it that tuk the colour iv the light An' wanst in ivery year there had to be brought to him a live baby; and they do say that he would wait until the moon was at the full, an' thin would be heered one wild wail that made every sowl widin miles shuddher, an' thin there would be black silence, and clouds would come over the moon. (16)

The traditional practice of human sacrifice under the full moon comes to an end as Roman Catholicism infiltrates Ireland: the tale recounts St. Patrick's order for all snakes to leave Ireland, but the King refuses to depart until St. Patrick has forcibly gained his hidden crown.² At this point, Scanlan's tale integrates current events that refer to Irish dispossession in the Land Wars, a struggle between Anglo-Protestant landowners and Catholic tenants for control of property characterized by abrupt evictions and vengeful acts of violence.³ Nicholas Daly points to a disturbing instance of the novel's repressed memory in his discussion of the Land Wars—one of the most brutal instances of violence occurred in 1882 with the gruesome murder of an entire family, the Joyces of Maamtrasna in County Mayo, suspected of collusion with encroaching English landowners (60). In *The Snake's Pass*, Stoker rewrites events related to the Maamtrasna murders, erasing violent episodes and replacing them with incidents that predict a social and economic harmony

brought about by union. However, references to the Land War nonetheless make their way into the supernatural legend. When the King argues, “this is my houldin...be prescriptive right,” he refers to a legal term, *prescriptive right*, used to assert use or ownership rights to disputed property (Stoker 14). Defying St. Patrick, the King of the Snakes transforms his mountain holding, creating the chasm known as Shleenanaher, the Snake’s Pass, and locals believe that “the shiftin’ bog wor the forrum he tuk” (16). It is important to note here that St. Patrick’s efforts lack their legendary authority—the King of the Snakes ultimately resists his command and reconstitutes himself in a supernatural form, a shifting bog capable of further transformation. In this way, Stoker suggests that, despite English efforts to assert cultural and economic dominance, the dispossessed Irish will forever rebel and their resistance will continue to be retold and so live in the minds of the local people. After all, many critics agree with Mark Doyle’s assessment that the bog “is arguably the most interesting character in the book” (273).

The bog compels our attention as a site of the unknowable—its very texture is liminal, something between water and land, treacherously difficult to discern, and as a locus of the uncanny it projects both danger and instability, since its form changes unpredictably. As Derek Gladwin points out, even as the “visually deceptive” bog serves as an Irish “symbol of national identity,” it simultaneously “dismantles spatio-temporal authority” since it is concurrently a psychological and a historical site of uncertainty, marked by efforts to rewrite its hidden nature (1, 3, 16). In the novel, the bog perpetuates monumental time by evading such efforts to explain or control it. Even by the novel’s close, when the bog washes out to sea, its regeneration remains a potential threat; Severn’s engineer friend Dick Sutherland declares that “it is possible, if not probable” that the bog has washed out to sea and yet reformed “more than once, in the countless ages that have passed,” and efforts to drain it may be only temporary (Stoker 2015).⁴ Pervasive, capable of unpredictable transformation and regeneration, deadly, and unfathomable—the bog in Scalan’s tale of the supernatural registers Ireland’s distinct cultural identity and its resistance to dispossession through monumental time, its “memories that escape from history” (Kristeva 189).

The second narrative, also retold in public, places the bog in a more clearly historical context, as it conceals a chest of gold sent by the French as part of General Humbert's mission to assist the failed Irish Rebellion of 1798—this tale awakens the trauma of colonial violence, still alive in the memories of the Irish peasantry. Scorning Scalan's supernatural tale, bystander McGlown says he prefers "facts" and points to another, more authoritative interlocutor, old Bat Moynahan, who relates an eyewitness account of the French soldiers: "me own father tould me that he seen the Frinchmin wid his own eyes crossin' the sthrame below, an' facin' up the mountain...he seen two min carryin' the chist, and it nigh weighed thim down'" (Stoker 21-22). This past emerges in the present when Arthur, Norah, and Dick explore a cave vacated by the bog and discover the chest, accompanied by two skeletons, whose bony hands still grasp its handles. Dick marvels at the bog's ability to transfix a moment in time, as he imaginatively relives the Frenchmen's deaths by suffocation, drawn down by the heavy gold: "See how the bog can preserve. This leather strap attached to the handles of the chest each had round his shoulder, and so, willy nilly, they were dragged to their doom. Never mind, they were brave fellows all the same, and faithful ones; they never let go the handles; look, their dead hands clasp them still" (207). The bog preserves the leather strap even as it fixes the bodies at the moment of death, so that this spectacle brings the past forcibly into the present, dissolving linearity as the intervening years seem to collapse for the spectators. Instead, Dick calls attention to the bog's deadly power, even as he reads the horror of suffocation as a sacrifice valorized as part of the ongoing struggle for independence from English rule. Strangely ignoring their English loyalties, Arthur and Dick decide that "France should be proud of such sons," and that the treasure should go to Norah's father, Phelim Joyce, who without hesitation dedicates it to the nationalist cause since "the money was sent for Ireland's good" (207).⁵ Monumental time takes precedence, even in this scene that refers to an historical event, because, as Daly puts it, "England's historical relation to Ireland is too vividly evoked by these spoils of war" (49).

Writing of the traumatic in *Dracula*, Jamil Khader makes two points that are helpful here—first, that a trauma such as colonization has "an effect on memory and representation" (74).

The experience of the colonized is as indelible as the bog is elemental, even when characterized from a variety of perspectives, as in this scene where English and Irish agree on an interpretation of the bog's gruesome human artifacts. Time stands still as they enter the traumatic past imaginatively, superceding discussion of the fact that the money was initially intended to support Ireland's rebellion against English rule. Despite the fact that he intends to move to England, Phelim instinctively dedicates the money to continue efforts to gain Ireland's independence. Khader also observes "an overt link . . . between traumatic experiences and place, suggesting that something of the original trauma still inheres at the site of its occurrence" (75). This further aligns the bog with Norah, since both evoke what Kristeva calls "a monumental temporality" that more closely resembles space than any notion of linear history—for Norah, this space is that of "self-oblivion," an abstracted state in which she is forgetful of all but her experience in nature as she wanders the wetlands; for the shifting bog, it is one of unknowability and an affiliation with rebellion (191). The equation of Norah with the bog that lies partly on her family's property begins when Severn's Irish driver Andy initiates a series of jokes in which "bog" stands for "woman"—he intends to tease Severn when the young narrator feigns interest in the bog in order to see Norah. But the bog itself is shifting and treacherous, "a carpet of death" associated with the monumental time of Ireland's past (Stoker 47).

Severn's narrative is invested in linear time for a variety of reasons. First, as an adventure-romance novel, *The Snake's Pass* promises its readership of armchair explorers the successful mastery of a problem in an exotic foreign location; here, a young Englishman untangles a centuries-old legend about gold hidden from St. Patrick by the King of the Snakes, who guards his treasure with an impenetrable shifting bog. The English narrator listens to the tale but ultimately regards it as a manifestation of backward Irish culture, a superstition that makes for a good yarn, but nothing more.

Severn's unraveling of the mystery of the shifting bog and the hidden gold also takes place in the linear time of his coming of age—his Irish adventures "allow him a form of heroic subjectivity

denied him in England . . . [since] the colony seems to open a space for epic” (Daly 47). As in *Dracula*, Stoker applies technology to the problem here, as Severn “defeats” the supernatural bog with the expertise of his school friend and fellow Englishman, Dick Sutherland, an engineer specializing in the reclamation of wetlands. As difficult times have forced many of the region’s inhabitants to sell their land and emigrate elsewhere to find work, the two plan to assist economic recovery in this region. The engineer enthusiastically proclaims that Ireland’s economy is of “vital interest” to the English because it “touches deeply the happiness and material prosperity of a large section of Irish people, and so helps to mould their political action” (Stoker 43-44). Just as Stoker believed that political union with Britain would benefit Ireland’s economy and prevent rebellion, Arthur Severn and his friend believe that English technology will give rise to Irish prosperity, forestalling the need for political separation or further emigration. However, in the novel, many of the local Irish either emigrate or become increasingly dependent on the narrator, who not only discovers the hidden gold and expands English influence in the area by purchasing an extensive property, but also legitimizes the transfer of power by marrying into one of the important local families. Although Stoker justifies the influx of English money and ideas as the means of strengthening and sustaining rural Ireland, its land and peoples show the ability to withstand external influences, sustained by narratives that suspend progress by reactivating the traumatic memory of dispossession.

As Arthur Severn struggles to assert this mastery, which we have associated with *linear time*, heroine Norah Joyce promotes *monumental time* in her performance of female subjectivity, registering a “self-oblivion so complete” that it threatens to extricate her from the narrative sequence, from the progressive outcomes of hybrid union that Stoker’s English narrator anticipates (60). Like the bog, she remains inscrutable despite the flatness of her characterization, her unknowability creating ambivalence and uncertainty in the text similar to the bog’s dangerous instability. The narrator’s initial encounter with Norah Joyce constitutes an *aporia*—in their first meeting at the foot of Knockcalltecore, “The Hill of the Lost Golden Crown,” darkness obscures her visually, so that he only encounters her through her handshake and her voice, a

mysterious event since he remarks that “not a thing could I see, while each of the three others was seemingly as much at ease as in the daylight” (35). In their second meeting, which takes place on the margin of the bog, the narrator again hears Norah’s voice, this time singing *Ave Maria*, a scene that strangely links three mysterious elements—the disputed but perilous bogland, femininity, and Catholicism (Norah’s family is Protestant)—to evoke two frequently yoked topics, “the conquest of a nation and the suppression of its religion” (Williams 99). Her face remains obscured from view as he approaches her as a voyeur, undetected, but with a guilty awareness of “profaning some shrine of womanhood” (Stoker 60). The voyeuristic event, however, reveals her sitting directly on the ground in a posture so natural that it displaces his cultural and temporal moorings:

For my pains I saw only a back, and that back presented in the most ungainly way of which graceful woman is capable. She was seated on the ground, not even raised upon a stone. Her knees were raised to the level of her shoulders, and her outstretched arms confined her legs below the knees—she was, in fact, in much the same attitude as boys are at games of cock-fighting. And yet there was something very touching in the attitude—something of self-oblivion so complete that I felt a renewed feeling of guiltiness as an intruder. Whether her reasons be aesthetic, moral, educational, or disciplinary, no self-respecting woman ever sits in such a manner when a man is by. (60)

Severn’s description reveals his discomfort at the suspension of the linear time of his adventure: he expects to witness a routine touristic performance, having already observed that “the women of this country have sweet voices . . . indeed, this was by no means the first time I had noticed the fact,” but Norah is wrapped in her own experience of the bog, unaware of her audience (59). Kristeva notes that female subjectivity becomes problematic for “the time of history” because “it renders explicit a rupture, an expectation or an anguish which other temporalities work to conceal” (192). Accordingly, Arthur critiques her posture as “ungainly” and unfeminine—that is, unresponsive to the present moment and to

his masculinity, equally abstracted from linear time and engrossed in her bogland reverie. Valente, in *Dracula's Crypt*, describes the Irish girl's "stationary life-posture" as "standing for her relatively unitary and organic, because premodern, ethno-national identity," and, here, that identity, like the bog, evades the narrator's efforts to incorporate it into a touristic experience, a colonial appropriation (13). The "self-oblivion" that Arthur points to as "touching" calls forth the emotional power of monumental time to reactivate traumatic memories, and his next remark about the impropriety of a woman sitting this way in the presence of a man imposes a judgment about what a "self-respecting" woman's behavior should be—i.e. *not* promiscuous, and therefore that of a potential wife and mother of legitimate heirs—again fixing her importance within a linear narrative, this time of inheritance.

Norah defines the spatio-temporal mobility of the bogland through this "self-oblivion," which Severn describes in sublime terms, as imbued with "some sweet, sad yearning, as though the earthly spirit was singing with an unearthly voice" that not only denies his presence and importance (he knows that he is not the subject of her yearning) but also more importantly eludes knowability, further linking Norah to the inscrutable King of the Snakes (Stoker 60). Norah's "unearthly voice" stands outside the narrator's experience, asserting a yearning for something that he cannot apprehend, like the mysterious shifting bog; both frustrate his own efforts to secure his identity as a competent adult male and an English landowner, and frustration awakens both his horror of her intactness and his desire to possess her, as he acknowledges that "Man is predatory even in his affections" (70). As Andrew Smith discusses Stoker's "horror of women's empowerment," he remarks that "what is horrifying . . . is the idea that women cannot be properly objectified: that they are not as they appear to be" (86). Like the snake that eludes St. Patrick by transforming a lake into a bog, a mountain into a chasm, Norah defeats Severn's efforts at control by asserting monumental time, the time of her own reflections defined without reference to his authority or cultural expectations. Lisabeth Buchelt raises the further question of Norah's resistance to the symbolic union enacted through her marriage, pointing out that the bog monument to her bravery does not mention Arthur (he is only referred to as "a man" she saved),

and Norah's insistence that neither her engagement nor marriage should be publicly celebrated in Ireland combine "to erase Arthur from the history of the place" (130).

Despite her submissive character throughout the novel, Norah's physical darkness also resists linear history. Severn's lengthy description of Norah lingers on her exotic features, as he tries to access and then master her inscrutability by contextualizing her difference. Severn interprets the darkness of her complexion and hair as "beauty of the Spanish type" in order to align her with Iberian rather than Scythian Celtic ancestors, a distinction later perpetuated by Yeats and others as a means of reclaiming a noble Mediterranean rather than a barbaric heritage (61).⁶ Her face appears "notably sunburnt," her hands "manifestly used to hard work"—to him she fascinates as the inaccessible Other—by virtue of her class status as Irish peasant labourer, of her uncertain race, and of her gender as a Woman participating in a sublime and monumental time that he cannot integrate into his own account (62).⁷ Norah's association with the murky, unfathomable bog, emblem of the monstrous that persistently defies incorporation, remains problematic until she saves him from its devouring momentum; he tries to impose intelligibility, creating the monument that identifies her as the bog's opponent and his ally, but also, as Buchelt notes, silencing her by excluding her story of the crisis from his narration. As the novel concludes with their wedding, monumental time appears to give way to the momentum of linear history, as the novel's gothic energies "reinststate these comforting categories with the expulsion of the monstrous and the transgressive" (Byron 49). Yet, despite Stoker's concerted effort to contain the unworldly energies of Norah, the bog, and the King of the Snakes by the closing chapters, these elements remain both transcendent and indelible, reasserting the traumatic memory of Irish dispossession. As Julian Moynahan convincingly argues, gothic elements may "subvert the official best intentions of [their] creators" (111).

Although the shifting bog and sublime heaths of *The Snake's Pass* eventually fall under English control, they nonetheless focus the reader's attention on the memory of violent colonial conflict by advancing Irish identity as distinctly and essentially unknowable

and therefore ultimately resistant to English claims. As Alison Milbank describes this tension, “To assert the suitability of Ireland as a Gothic—even a barbarous—site was a means of reestablishing its difference and integrity from Britain, as well as justifying the necessity of the ‘Ascendancy’ classes to control its primitive force” (13). Despite Stoker’s explicit endorsement of colonial appropriation, the novel’s gothic elements undercut its drive for Anglo-Irish union by asserting an entirely separate, ineffable Irish identity inscribed on a bog that reputedly “shifts” position, a supernatural manifestation of the King of the Snakes, whose legend adds to the region’s touristic appeal by advancing the exotic barbarity of the Celtic past. As forms of gothic energy particularly attractive to tourists from the increasingly attenuated British Empire, the otherworldly bog and its serpent king present subversive challenges to the colonial narrative of progress by making the past present, reactivating the monumental time of Ireland’s traumatic dispossession.

Notes

1. Born in Dublin, where he pursued a successful bureaucratic career, Stoker spent the majority of his adult life in London, where he served as manager of the Lyceum Theatre. He described himself in his *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* as a “philosophic Home Ruler,” meaning that although he supported Ireland’s economic independence and cultural distinctiveness from England, he nonetheless believed that the Union was advantageous. See Valente, p. 40 for a full account of Stoker’s ambivalences about his Irish and English allegiances.
2. Christianity was established in Ireland by the time of Patrick’s mission (CE 432-461), as a consequence of trade and cultural exchange with Gaul and Britain.
3. For a full account of the Land Wars as they appear in the novel, see Doyle.
4. I disagree with Hughes’s contention that “The infertile land is cast into the sea in a reenactment of the expulsion of the snakes by Saint Patrick” (294-295).
5. Lisabeth C. Buchelt observes that having the English characters participate as storytellers “complicates the equation of Irish culture as ‘native’ and ‘oral’ and English culture as ‘foreign’ and ‘textual’”

(118).

6. As Celticism emerged alongside Orientalism in the nineteenth-century, two explanations of Celtic migration appeared—Joseph Lendon explains that one view held that the Celts descended from the Phoenicians, who migrated to the British Isles by a sea route that would have brought them around the Iberian peninsula, while the other view identified the Celts with the barbaric Scythians, who migrated across Eastern Europe. Tsung-chi Chang discusses Yeats's view of Celticism and women.

7. See Glover, p. 69 for a discussion of Stoker's ideas about race and nationalism.

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