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Troubled Trinity: Love, Religion, and Patriotism in Liam O'Flaherty's First Novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Cross-Disciplinary Studies  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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by  
Robin Heavner Jackson  
August 2002

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## ABSTRACT

Troubled Trinity: Love, Religion, and Patriotism in Liam O'Flaherty's First Novel, *Thy*

*Neighbour's Wife*

by

Robin Heavner Jackson

The focus of this research is a detailed analysis of Liam O'Flaherty's first published novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, as an underlying autobiographical portrait depicted in the main character, Fr. Hugh McMahon. Although never touted as an autobiography, this study shows O'Flaherty drew upon his early cultural, historical, religious, and political influences in creating his main character. Primary and secondary sources, an ethnographic trip to Ireland, and a content analysis of the novel determined the findings.

The fictional McMahon faced difficult personal choices, subsequently coming to terms with past decisions. McMahon's foibles reflect O'Flaherty's early years. O'Flaherty wrote two acclaimed autobiographies, *Shame the Devil* and *Two Years*, during his later literary career. This analysis establishes that O'Flaherty used his main character in his first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, as a means of conveying in fictional form his own personal struggles, thus establishing this novel as a de facto autobiography.

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## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE STAGE: INTRODUCTION AND THESIS STATEMENT

Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty's first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, is a story of love, religion, and patriotism set in rural Ireland in 1910. My thesis examines the historical, parental, educational, religious, and political influences upon O'Flaherty's early life, from his Catholic upbringing on the secluded Aran Islands to the writing of his first novel in 1923 at the age of 26, underscoring O'Flaherty's choice of the main character in the novel, Father Hugh McMahon. I think that the manner in which a writer of fictional literature represents a particular time period reveals how an author perceives his or her heritage, identity, and sense of place and allows the writer a freedom of expression and presentation of emotion and sentiment. In *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, O'Flaherty employs the medium of fictional literature to convey his personal struggles during his early years growing up on the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland. This story encompasses his internal conflict with the oppressive Roman Catholic religion and his external struggle with the politics of Irish independence in the persona of Fr. Hugh McMahon, the curate of Inverara, O'Flaherty's fictional name for Inish Mor, the island on which he was born. O'Flaherty's early years, from birth until the age of 26, are characterized by extreme poverty, a harsh physical environment, an outspoken father who often was away from home attending Fenian<sup>1</sup> meetings expressing his political views, and a soft-spoken mother left home to care for her large family in the meanest of circumstances. Above all, the Roman Catholic Church overshadowed every facet of O'Flaherty's young life, both in and out of school.

Following in his father's footsteps, O'Flaherty gained notoriety with his outspoken views on the Republicans' (Separatists)<sup>2</sup> fight for independence from Great Britain, his short-lived flirtation with communist theory, and his cynical and distrustful opinions regarding Catholicism (O'Flaherty, 1981/1934, pp. 21-22). It is O'Flaherty's personal choices made during the period prior to his writing of *Thy Neighbour's Wife* that I analyze in order to establish how

characteristics developed from his upbringing and the personal choices he made of denouncing the Catholic faith, incorporating socialist ideas, and turning his back on Republicanism to fight for the British, shaped the religious and patriotic attributes of the main character in his first novel. Moreover, the primary thesis of my work shows that McMahon's relationship with Lily (the female protagonist of the novel) symbolizes O'Flaherty's love of Ireland and ultimate rejection by his native land because of his personal choices, thus completing the theme in the novel of McMahon's troubled trinity: love, religion, and patriotism.

I propose that fiction allows a writer to express his or her innermost thoughts and feelings to the reader about a specific situation through a third party, the character. I further suggest that through the medium of the written word, an author permits the reader to encounter another world and experience the character's heartaches, joys, frustrations, fears, hopes, and expectations. In his book *Literary Theory*, Terry Eagleton suggests, "In some literary work, in particular realist fiction, our attention as readers is drawn not to the 'act of enunciating,' *how* something is said, from what kind of position and with what end in view, but simply to *what* is said, to the enunciations itself" (1983, p. 170). If an author is successful in his or her writing, the reader unravels and deciphers the character and the culture being dissected and examined through the author's words. Literature reveals the mood, the attitude, the climate, and the intricacies of a society as seen through an author's words, especially a realist such as O'Flaherty (O'Brien, 1976, p. 321). Eagleton further notes that:

Part of the power of such texts thus lies in their suppression of what might be called their modes of production, how they got to be what they are; in this sense, they have a curious resemblance to the life of the human ego, which thrives by repressing the process of its own making. (1983, p. 170)

John Zneimer supports Eagleton's contention in his book *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty* by stating,

A literary artist must write in a language, and the works and structure of the language are his writing, but they do not determine it. His writing is an example of the language, but he does not write to create this example. So it is between the literary artist and his society. He is an artist because he shapes something from the potential that exists between himself and his world. His art is the shaping, and that shaping is the main object of literary study. (1970, p.xi)

Therefore, the consensus of Eagleton and Zneimer is that the strength of realist literary works lie within the message of the story, thus subordinating process to the end result. Eagleton's comments are in reference to general literature, while Zneimer is speaking specifically of O'Flaherty. Sean O'Faolain, a renowned Irish writer in his own right, says this of O'Flaherty's realism,

He does not mind breaking up his own well-created atmosphere with any kind of furious personal remark that comes into his head. But then, the immensity of his natural vigour, the undeniable fount of natural genius that has rightly put him at the head of the realistic school of his day, overwhelms our distaste and we are under his spell once more. He has more blemishes and more faults than any living writer of his rank, and he surmounts them all. (1937, p. 173)

My position supports O'Faolain's ideas when he comments that words of the realist writer, the message of the story, allows an author to express that author's innermost thoughts and feelings through a third party, the character, thus subordinating process to the end result.

### Chapter Synopses

The beginning of my thesis (Chapter 1) reflects on Ireland's history and the historical precedent that nurtured the political and religious divisions that are exemplified in the divergent attitudes of Catholics and Protestants, fueling the schism between Nationalists and Unionists.<sup>3</sup> These political and religious divisions cause the personal inner conflicts that shape the literary

work of Liam O'Flaherty. Chapter 3 of this thesis examines the effect these divisions had on his personality and resulting attitudes by understanding the formation of the attitudes and mind-set prevalent in O'Flaherty's family specifically, and his society, in general. The thesis further analyzes O'Flaherty's application of these resulting attitudes to the main character in his first novel.

Chapter 2 investigates O'Flaherty's early years, from birth until age 26, with respect to the following: his family life, cultural traditions, and his Catholic upbringing on the Aran Islands, the geographical and environmental characteristics of the island, education in a seminary, and stint in the British military. This investigation is necessary in order to comprehend the cultural dynamics that helped form his personality and ultimately affected the depiction of Fr. McMahon in his first novel. The Aran Islands are a desolate, environmentally harsh region where the inhabitants are close knit and steeped in their native Gaelic traditions and Irish Catholic values. Analysis of the severe environment, restrictive Catholic religion, and native traditions and values is vital to a comprehension of the impact of all three on the development of O'Flaherty's convictions. This chapter examines at length O'Flaherty's Irish Catholic education and brief stay at seminary, as well as the turn of events that led him to reject Catholicism, which is a predominant theme in *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. I also evaluate his father's Republican political aspirations, as well as the effect his revolutionary ideas and forthright opinions had on young Liam's political beliefs and subsequent political and military activities during World War I and the Irish Civil War. I then appraise these elements in order to explore the formation of O'Flaherty's character and temperament.

Chapter 3 is a detailed examination of the troubled trinity: love, religion, and patriotism in *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. This chapter focuses on the main character of the novel, Fr. Hugh McMahon. O'Flaherty chose to create the main character as an Irishman fraught with an inner struggle to comprehend his own call to the clergy and burdened with an external struggle placed upon him by the contemporary political situation. A character study of Fr. Hugh McMahon is,



therefore, imperative in order to uncover and examine McMahon's attitudes and beliefs. From this character study, a concrete comparison can be established in order to make a connection to O'Flaherty's own attitudes and beliefs. I examine Fr. McMahon's estrangement from his beloved Lily, the female protagonist, in order to establish that O'Flaherty's personal alienation from Ireland due to his religious and political beliefs metaphorically represents his literary, religious, and political alienation from his beloved homeland.

Chapter 4 draws together the analysis of the historical, parental, educational, religious, and political influences upon O'Flaherty's early life, from birth to age 26. This chapter concludes with the details of how these influences provided the personality created by O'Flaherty for Fr. Hugh McMahon.

From my research I determined that for a relatively minor writer in the grand scheme of Irish literature, that included James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, William Butler Yeats, and Sean O'Casey, other academics did a comparatively small amount of analysis on Liam O'Flaherty. However, in their research, the authors analyzed most of O'Flaherty's short stories and novels within their individual bodies of work. In contrast, my research concentrates solely on his first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, and the main character of Fr. Hugh McMahon. Through an exhaustive search of previous literature pertaining to Liam O'Flaherty, including monographs, dissertations, and journal articles, I found that no one examined his first novel in the manner that I have adopted.

Patrick F. Sheeran, in *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty: A Study in Romantic Realism*, assesses O'Flaherty's 13 novels, placing them into the categories of "The Spirit of Place: The Regional Romances;" "The Historical Romances;" and the "The Dublin Thrillers." He places *Thy Neighbour's Wife* in the first category, about which he says, "Liam O'Flaherty's best work is to be found in those novels which have been grouped together under the heading 'Regional Romances'" (Sheeran, 1976, p. 301). He goes on to describe the novels in this category as "bleak and crude" (1976, p. 301).

Sheeran's work, which covers 302 pages, devotes only 13 of those pages to *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. O'Flaherty had published short stories before the appearance of his first novel, but Sheeran contends that this novel is "his first critique of island life" (1976, p. 136). Sheeran affirms that O'Flaherty's first novel is "an apprentice work." I disagree, as his first novel offers a revealing insight into O'Flaherty's individuality at the time he wrote the novel. Sheeran suggests that there is, "Something of a greyness and heaviness of this work" (1976, p. 136). I contend that 1922, the time in which O'Flaherty penned his first novel, was indeed a time of greyness and heaviness in Ireland and in spite of Sheeran's suggestion of *Thy Neighbour's Wife* being "an apprentice work," O'Flaherty's treatment of this greyness and heaviness is far from novice. In this novel, O'Flaherty adequately depicts the grey and heavy atmosphere of Irish society, both on the small island where he was raised and throughout all of Ireland.

Sheeran agrees, "To a great extent . . . O'Flaherty's first book is rooted in the realities of its time and place," (1976, p. 136), thus setting the stage for O'Flaherty's inclusion into the realist school of writers. Sheeran discusses the main characters of *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, but mentions little about Lily McSherry, Fr. McMahan's female protagonist, and chooses to concentrate instead on Fr. McMahan. Sheeran point outs that "McMahan is a portrait of what O'Flaherty might have become had he accepted Holy Orders and stayed in Ireland" (Sheeran, 1976, p. 138). Only a cursory look at the novel will provide that conclusion, but Sheeran fails to take this main character's analysis to a greater depth, choosing instead to give a brief description of him.

By contrast, James H. O'Brien, in his relatively short book entitled *Liam O'Flaherty*, writes about the author's life, his novels, and short stories. In his 117-page text, O'Brien briefly examines virtually every aspect of O'Flaherty's life, choosing to use more biographical details than literary critique. At the time of O'Brien's 1973 work, there was very little written about O'Flaherty.

The novels of O'Flaherty have received only scattered attention in review and articles. However, there are a few good studies of the novels: William Troy's article in the *Bookman* in 1929, two doctoral dissertations, one by Anthony Canedo of the University of Washington, Seattle (1965), and the other by John N. Zneimer of the University of Wisconsin (1966), published in revised form as *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty* (1970). (O'Brien, 1973, pp. 35-36)

In 1971 Paul A. Doyle produced a work, *Liam O'Flaherty*, consisting of 121 pages of text in which he covered O'Flaherty's first two literary efforts. He briefly refers to O'Flaherty's first novel on only seven pages. By contrast, Doyle's book devoted one chapter to the novel, *The Informer*, and another chapter to O'Flaherty's short stories. In half of the nine-page section on O'Flaherty's first two novels, Doyle gives a brief overview and analysis of *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. Doyle says O'Flaherty's first novel "pursues McMahan's inconsistencies, whims, passions, and romanticizing in detail-and carries them to the very limits of credibility" (Doyle, 1971, p. 26). I believe Doyle to be incorrect in saying that "McMahon broods continuously, for he is a typical O'Flaherty protagonist-a hero in perpetual inner anguish" (Doyle, 1971, p. 26). Because *Thy Neighbor's Wife* is O'Flaherty's first novel, McMahon cannot be a typical O'Flaherty protagonist at this point in his writing career, indicating that O'Flaherty did not create this character out of literary habit (typical protagonist) but out of his own internal turmoil regarding his religious and political decisions that led to his alienation from his native land of the Aran Islands and Ireland itself.

John Zneimer undertook a more ambitious work in his book, *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, published in 1970. Zneimer originally wrote this work as his doctoral dissertation in 1966, under the title of "Liam O'Flaherty: The Pattern of Spiritual Crisis in His Art." Once again, Zneimer's work is an example of a generalist's examination of Liam O'Flaherty, for he attempts to delve into virtually all aspects of the author's personal life, as well as the various forms of his writings. As a result, Zneimer deals with all of the subjects in an abbreviated

manner. For instance, Zneimer briefly mentions *Thy Neighbor's Wife* on only 19 pages of the 198 pages of text.

Zneimer states that when O'Flaherty began writing his first novel that the "words began to pour out in profusion," but then his creative juices dried up and "he finished the novel with great difficulty" (1970, p. 30). Zneimer covers his synopsis of the novel in just over one page. He further notes that O'Flaherty is quite bothered by the fact that his first novel receives somewhat less than critical reviews. He uses O'Flaherty's own words as a critique of the critics: "'They go into rhapsodies here about my short stories but they refuse to discuss *Thy Neighbor's Wife*' (May 2, 1924)" (1970, p. 174).

Liam O'Flaherty's most prolific researcher is A. A. Kelly, who wrote *Liam O'Flaherty: The Storyteller* in 1976. Kelly briefly discusses *Thy Neighbour's Wife* on 11 pages in 137 pages of text. She breaks down the author's work into such themes as "Animal and Nature Stories;" "Stories of Emotional Response;" and "Urban and War Themes." When referring to O'Flaherty's first published novel, Kelly quotes the author's mentor Edward Garnett who suggested that the young writer should impose some discipline on his writing, "the lack of which appears in the formlessness of his first novel *Thy Neighbour's Wife*" (Kelly, 1976, p. 53).

In addition to the aforementioned books written about Liam O'Flaherty, there also have been numerous dissertations on the subject of this author. The dissertations include the following titles: Flann O'Brien and Liam O'Flaherty: Refashioning Myth and Nationhood by Donald J. McNamara, (2001); An Old Order and A New: The Split World of Liam O'Flaherty's Novels by Hedda I. Friberg, (1996); The Motif of Physical Paralysis in the Literature of the Irish Renaissance: Studies in Martyn, Moore, Corkery, and O'Flaherty by Alexander Gonzalez, (1982); Images from Old Myths: An Analysis of Six Thematic Motifs in the Modern Irish Short Story by Laurelynn Kaplan, (1981); Aspects of the Art of Liam O'Flaherty by Joseph Brown, (1978); Four Irish Writers in Time of Civil War: Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, and Elizabeth Bowen by Gary Davenport, (1971); An Evaluation and Thematic

Assessment of the Short Fiction of Liam O'Flaherty by Virginia M. Detroy, (1970); Liam O'Flaherty: Literary Ethologist by Helene L. O'Connor (1970); and Liam O'Flaherty: Introduction and Analysis by Anthony Canedo, (1965).

Of the two dissertations that I consulted, Liam O'Flaherty: Literary Ethologist, by Helene L. O'Connor (1970); and Liam O'Flaherty: Introduction and Analysis by Anthony Canedo, (1965), neither proposed the thesis I am presenting. O'Connor's study evaluated O'Flaherty's work by means of O'Flaherty's views on nature. Canedo compiled an all-inclusive study of O'Flaherty's work. He gives an overall synopsis of the novel and refers to *Thy Neighbour's Wife* as a "crude and often vulgar first work [and] may still be profitably examined as an exhibit showing the permanent paths of O'Flaherty's imagination which later novels were to retrace but with a mature and practiced power" (1965, p. 3).

Other scholars wrote articles about Liam O'Flaherty, but none focused on my thesis topic, "Troubled Trinity: Love, Religion, and Patriotism in Liam O'Flaherty's First Novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*." The 1976 article from volume 5 of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* by James O'Brien; the 1981 article from volume 101 of *Contemporary Authors* by Frances C. Locher; the 1985 article from volume 36 *Dictionary of Literary Biography* by Mary A. O'Toole; and the 1985 article from volume 34 of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* by Sharon K. Hall are all written in a biographical and general manner and deal specifically with O'Flaherty and his novels and short stories as a whole.

James O'Brien refers to O'Flaherty as a realist incorporating in his novels "recognized settings and characters" (1976, p. 321). He briefly analyzes *Thy Neighbour's Wife* indicating that O'Flaherty "on occasion . . . develops a scene at two levels, mainly to show the confused mind of a protagonist" (1976, p. 321). Frances Locher comments on the inconsistencies that exist in O'Flaherty's writings noted by a host of celebrated critics, never mentioning *Thy Neighbour's Wife* (1981, p. 350). Mary A. O'Toole and Sharon Hall write biographical sketches of O'Flaherty and only offer a brief description of the novel, avoiding any type of analysis. Again, none of the

above-mentioned articles involve O'Flaherty's first novel or specifically the thesis of love, religion, and patriotism in *Thy Neighbour's Wife*.

Upon review of the previously written literature produced about Liam O'Flaherty, it is evident there has not been a great amount written about this Irish writer compared to other native Irish authors such as Joyce, O'Casey, and Yeats. My research found that no one attempted to take one novel and examine that one novel extensively, with perhaps the exception of *The Informer*, the O'Flaherty novel that was made into an Academy Award winning motion picture directed by John Ford. Further research did not uncover a critical study of *Thy Neighbour's Wife* with a focus on the main character of Fr. Hugh McMahan or a study in which the author posited that the character of Lily metaphorically represents O'Flaherty's personal alienation from Ireland.

I chose to examine Liam O'Flaherty's first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, in order to understand O'Flaherty's use of historical, parental, educational, religious, and political influences before the taint of literary criticism and economic success. O'Flaherty's homeland of Ireland, specifically the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway, provided the author a cultural background which thus permitted O'Flaherty the literary license to communicate these influences through the narrative, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, and in particular the main character, Fr. Hugh McMahan.

### Historical Influences

In order to understand completely the complex characteristics of Liam O'Flaherty and how Ireland's past influenced his personality and personal choices made early in his life, one must have at least a cursory knowledge of Irish history, because it affected a great deal of Irish literature. Specifically, Ireland's long religious and political conflict with Britain is a major factor in shaping O'Flaherty's personal and literary personality.

The divisions within Irish society at the turn of the twentieth century were not founded only on the differences in religious beliefs between the Irish Catholics and the Irish Protestants. Instead, the divisive parameters established and perpetuated by the two different religions created seemingly insurmountable political and cultural chasms between the two societies that have evolved over hundreds of years of Irish history. Historically, the politics of Great Britain and the religions of Ireland became inseparable with the evolution of the pro-British, Protestant minority culture within the majority Roman Catholic population of the island (Fitzpatrick, 1977, p. 55). The conflict between the Catholic and Protestant cultures began with events in the early 1600s (Leyburn, 1962, p.84). However, the political unrest between Britain and Ireland dates back much further.

The Ireland into which Liam O’Flaherty was born was a country of unrest. For nearly 750 years prior to his birth in 1896, Ireland had wrestled with English domination.

After the Norman Conquest the Roman Church in England claimed rights over the older Celtic Church in Ireland, which had survived after the departure of the Romans. . . . In 1155 Adrian IV (the English pope) awarded overlordship of Ireland to King Henry II of England to enable him to carry out this reform. (Hughes, 1994, p. 6)

If any one event could be singled out to have the most lasting effect on Ireland’s status today, the award of the overlordship would be given the distinction. “This award became the basis of the English Crown’s claim to Ireland” (Hughes, 1994, p. 6). Thus began the history of strife and conflict between the English and the Irish.

As far back as 1541, when Henry VIII declared himself king of Ireland, the English have maintained a stranglehold over the Irish people. The plantation system enacted from 1558 to 1603 relocated English and Lowland Scots to Ireland to subdue the rebellious Irish population, which had become discontented with the English encroachment upon their land, culture, language, and religion (O’Brien & O’Brien, 1997, p. 56).

By 1695 the English enacted the anti-Catholic Penal Laws that soon became an integral part of the culture and an integral part of the hatred toward all things English. The memories of this hatred lasted into the twentieth century. Tony Crowley writes in his book, *The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1366-1922*, “[T]hey formed a series of statutes which had the intention of denying civil rights to Catholics and Presbyterians” (2000, p. 83).

The 1801 Act of Union<sup>4</sup> disappointed the Irish immensely, thus adding to the growing hatred of the English government and the Protestant religion. “English rule came to be equated with religious repression, economic exploitation, cultural superiority and an alien ruling class” (Hughes, 1994, p. 12). The contempt for the English and their Irish Protestant partners resulted in the embracing of Irish nationalism by the Catholics. These unfolding events intensified nationalism and an Irish sense of patriotism on the island during the first half of the nineteenth century that would influence Ireland into the next century. According to R. Foster in his book, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972*, “Religion would thus become one conduit of anti-English feeling, and eventually of national identity” (1989, p. 30).

The Famine of 1845<sup>5</sup> continued to fuel the anti-English sentiment. The Irish perceived the English as deliberately inadequate with their help to alleviate the desperate economic situation. The death and emigration from the famine “completed the destruction of Gaelic culture. It built up a great reservoir of anti-British opinion among the Irish in the USA, Canada and Australia, which reinforced the Fenian movement” (Hughes, 1994, p. 13).

Out of the tragedy engendered by *An Gorta Mor*, the Great Hunger of 1845-49, an even stronger sense of nationalism emerged (Hughes, 1994, p. 13). Home Rule<sup>6</sup> sentiments became the order of the day. The establishment of the Home Rule League, founded in 1873, was another chapter in the fight to have Ireland govern itself and to uphold and preserve the Gaelic language and culture (Hughes, 1994, p. 14).

The year of O’Flaherty’s birth, 1896, was only three short years after the second Home Rule Bill (O’Brien & O’Brien, 1997, p. 128), which was passed in the House of Commons, but



rejected by the House of Lords (Foster, 1989, p. 610). The idea of Home Rule, abhorrent to the Protestants in the north, caused occasional violent rallies. The Home Rule bills solidified even further the concepts that the Irish Catholic, Gaelic inhabitants identified with Irish nationalism, while the Irish Protestants identified with the union and a loyalist feeling toward the English crown.

During the early 1900s, these cultural and religious differences between the nationalists and the unionists intensified, so that they became increasingly enmeshed with the country's political differences. This is the politically and socially charged atmosphere into which Liam O'Flaherty was born and raised in the Aran Islands under the shadow of a predominant Catholic society and a Fenian nationalist father, staunchly opposed to British rule.

By 1912 the third Home Rule Bill was introduced into Parliament. With the anticipation and intimidation of renewed violence, Parliament eventually passed the bill and placed the law on the statute book in 1914. Debate regarding the passage of the bill centered on the division of Ireland and the partition of the nine, predominantly Protestant, Ulster counties (Hughes, 1994, p. 36). Parliament, however, suspended the Home Rule bill and the clause dealing with partition when World War I broke out. The Prime Minister postponed the enactment of the bill until the war was over (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1997, p. 135).

With the suspension of the third Home Rule Bill, Ireland remained under direct control of Britain through the duration of World War I. At the commencement of the war, both countries were extremely anxious about the mounting unrest in the world. As Edward Raymond Turner writes in his book, *Ireland and England in the Past and at Present*:

The hour of the Empire had come: she had entered on the greatest of all her wars.

Like an avalanche the German armies rushed through Belgium, over France, straight upon Paris, and though almost by a miracle they were turned aside in the memorable weeks of September, people knew there was confronting them a struggle such as never before. (Turner, 1919, p. 350)

The war escalated and found Britain totally unprepared. “Britain was unready, and it was a question whether she could be ready in time. Every resource went to preparing for a contest in which almost everything but the navy had to be built up from the beginning” (Turner, 1919, p. 350). Britain turned not only to her own English subjects to volunteer for the army and boost her forces, but to the Irish as well. Francis Jones writes, “It was stated that Ireland, as a matter of gratitude for the passing of the Home Rule Bill, owed to England every man that could shoulder a musket” (1917, p. 105). The British army gave John Redmond, an Irish liberal who worked toward Home Rule, the responsibility of recruiting the Irish and throughout his campaign he found it necessary to persuade the nationalist Irish to enlist upon promising them that the issue of Home Rule was at the forefront of the British agenda (Hennessey, 1998, p. 102). During the early stages of the war, Liam O’Flaherty joined the college corps of Irish Volunteers while attending University College in Dublin in 1914. There is still a question as to whether O’Flaherty followed Redmond’s recruiting tactics or he joined for other reasons, but he soon left college to enlist in the Irish Guards of the British army (Doyle, 1971, p. 20).

The suspension of the third Home Rule Bill enraged many Irish Nationalists who had been working toward it for quite some time. The Nationalists proceeded with a plan for a rebellion to be held on Easter Sunday, April 1916. It was to correspond with the German deliverance of arms to the Irish Republican Brotherhood<sup>7</sup> off the coast of Ireland. The rebels claimed the General Post Office in Dublin and used it as their headquarters. Padraig Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, essentially a declaration of independence, and the rebels lowered the British Union Jack and raised the Irish Nationalist Tricolor above the post office on Easter Monday. Within a week the British had defeated the rebels and shortly thereafter executed all of the rebel leaders except for American-born Eamon DeValera (Coogan, 1993, p. 38). The majority of the Irish population, which had initially denounced the rebellion, took the executions as an act of malice toward the Irish in general and

became outraged at the British. A flood of new recruits for the nationalist movement ensued following the British miscalculation of Irish response to the perceived British cruelty inflicted upon the Irish revolutionaries. “The rising re-created a strong alliance between Nationalism and the Catholic Church” (Hughes, 1994, p. 41).

During World War I, O’Flaherty was not in the Dublin revolutionary arena, but instead was serving the war effort in the Irish Guards of the British army. In 1917, as a private, he was assigned to the infantry engaged in trench warfare on the Western Front. Tony Ashworth defines trench warfare during this time period as

intermittent, large-scale battles, where one side attacked the other, striving to kill the enemy, capture his trenches, and break through them into the open ground behind, and secondly as continuous but small-scale attacks where each side aggressed the other in a multitude of ways, while remaining mostly in their respective trenches. (Ashworth, 1980, p. 2)

Paul Doyle in his biography of Liam O’Flaherty explains, “While serving with the Irish Guards in France and Belgium, O’Flaherty was shell-shocked at Langemarck in 1917; and, after considerable treatment and hospitalization, he was eventually invalided out of military service” (1971, p. 20). A subsequent chapter covers the effect of trench warfare on O’Flaherty’s personality.

By 1918, many Irish supported the newly formed Sinn Féin<sup>8</sup> political party, which had affirmed allegiance to the creation of an Irish republic. According to Francis Jones in his article, “History of the Sinn Fein Movement and the Irish Rebellion of 1916,” “the first duty of the citizen [is] to oppose and seek to end that tyranny” (1917, p. 2). In the general election of 1918, Sinn Féin won an overwhelming majority of the seats. Because of their allegiance to the Irish republic, the members of Sinn Féin elected to the House of Commons declined to attend the sessions. In lieu of going to Westminster in 1919, they founded their own parliament of the republic, named Dail Eireann (Hughes, 1994, p. 48). They again professed their loyalty and

devotion to republican ideals. The act of defiance toward the British escalated to guerrilla warfare and the War of Independence, 1919-1921 (Hughes, 1994, p. 48).

In 1920 the British passed the Government of Ireland Act, which divided the island into North and South Ireland with two partially self-governing areas (Coogan, 1998, p. 17). The act resulted from the aforementioned Home Rule Bill that had been suspended immediately before the outbreak of World War I in 1914. During the truce that halted the War of Independence in 1920, further negotiations led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 (Purdon, 2000, p. 24). The treaty recognized a 26-county Irish Free State in a dominion status similar to Canada's arrangement with Britain (Purdon, 2000, p. 21). The six northeastern counties, primarily Protestant because of the establishment of the Ulster Plantation three centuries prior, were to remain under control of the British government. Attached to the treaty was an oath to the King of England that was to be honored by the entire Irish nation, both north and south (Purdon, 2000, p. 21; Foster, 1989, p. 507).

After the signing of the treaty, a provisional government took over the reins of Irish domestic control from the British government. The partition of Ireland outlined in the treaty reflected two schools of Irish thought<sup>9</sup>, one desiring full independence and the other accepting the split. The disagreement between the two schools of thought became so intense that an agreement was impossible to reach and in 1922 a civil war ensued (Purdon, 2000, p. 37). Individuals, who had once fought beside each other in the Easter Rising of 1916 and the War of Independence of 1919-1921, were now fighting against one another in the Irish Civil War. "The legacy of bitterness left by the war has affected Irish politics ever since" (Hughes, 1994, p. 57).

Thus the stage is set for the writing of *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. O'Flaherty's involvement in the tumultuous political and military events during early twentieth century through 1923, makes him a literary voice in the fictional, but no less reflective, telling of those troublesome times. By exploring his first novel, my thesis establishes relationships between the real O'Flaherty and his first major literary creation in the fictional persona of Fr. Hugh McMahon.

Furthermore, I posit that O’Flaherty uses the character of Lily metaphorically to represent his personal and professional alienation from Ireland because of his religious and political beliefs. The relationship between the author and his main character, along with the metaphorical use of the female protagonist, is grounded in the literary concept of time and place. This relationship illustrates the troubled trinity of O’Flaherty’s personal conflict of his early years, as well as the fiction of *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*.

Liam O’Flaherty’s novel, *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, is set in a specific place and time making the significance of the story difficult to separate from that specific place and time. As per new historicist thought that one should examine and interpret literature in its historical context, the realist perspective of *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* is best appreciated within its early 20<sup>th</sup> century context. To inspect the life of the fictional Fr. Hugh McMahon as a reflective alter-ego of the real-life Liam O’Flaherty in any context other than his contemporaneous surroundings, such as early 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary Ireland, negates the importance of the novel’s meaning. “The writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and . . . their achievements must draw upon a whole life-world and . . . this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 12-13). I emphasize this as an acceptance of the new historicist ideas, which therefore rejects the postmodernists’ view of a “deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life” (Sarup, 1993, p. 131). If, as Sarup suggests, postmodernism is “a transformation of reality into images” (p. 131), then this line of thought clearly does not apply to Liam O’Flaherty’s *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, which draws upon the realism of O’Flaherty’s “whole life-world” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, pp. 12-13).

## CHAPTER 2

### LIAM O'FLAHERTY: EARLY INFLUENCES ON HIS WRITING, 1896-1923

Inishmore (Aranmor), the largest of the three and the northernmost of the Aran Islands, County Galway, Ireland, was a drab, dreary, rocky, sea-swept environment in 1896 (Doyle, 1971, p.xiii; Forkner, 1980, p. 225). Separated from the mainland of Ireland by 30 miles of unpredictable ocean, the three islands situated in the Atlantic, off the west coast of Ireland, provided a quiet refuge to the poverty-stricken, Gaelic-speaking inhabitants who lived there. Even though Inishmore was isolated, the inhabitants were not immune to the political and social unrest that afflicted the Irish mainland in 1896. The islanders experienced many of the same frustrations as the mainlanders in the form of absentee landowners, economic hardships, and religious and political animosity. To the inhabitants of Inishmore, however, the Aran Islands were home and they overcame these everyday obstacles to endure the sparse existence of their homeland.

To the outside world, “The islands are unusually wild, desolate, frequently fog-bound, dominated by the sea and its storms. The soil is shallow and almost treeless” (Doyle, 1971, p. 17). Recounting his first visit to Inishmore in 1898, John M. Synge, who becomes one of Ireland’s most renowned writers, states in his book, *The Aran Islands*,

A little later I was wandering out along the one good roadway of the island, looking over low walls on either side into small flat fields of naked rock. I have seen nothing so desolate. Grey floods of water were sweeping everywhere upon the limestone, making at times a wild torrent of the road, which twined continually over low hills and cavities in the rock or passed between a few small fields of potatoes or grass hidden away in corners that had shelter. (1911/1988, p. 1)

Although written in 1911, Synge’s description of his visit mirrors the impressions I gained on my first visit to Inishmore during the summer of 2000.

The island today could pass as the exact replica of the 1896 Inishmore Liam O’Flaherty experienced, “so little did life change in those areas until the end of the nineteenth century” (Locher, 1981, p. 350). Except for the mini tour buses and the thousands of tourists who flock annually to see this incredible island, Inishmore is like stepping back in time to a century ago. Because very little has changed in the last 100 years, I obtained a firm understanding during my visit of what it was like to live on this desolate island at the turn of the 20th century. Thousands of miles of stonewalls weave through the island demarcating one resident’s domain from another. Transportation to and from the island is extremely limited, depending on the local ferry’s time schedules and the temperament of the sea. In Liam O’Flaherty’s day, small wooden sailing skiffs (hookers) and an occasional steamer which sailed depending on the tide made the 30-mile journey between the island and the Irish mainland (Synge, 1911, p. 1) but today the modern metal ferries make the watery journey. Approaching the island on the modern vessel as I did on a cloudy, misty morning, in which the sea was not in the best of moods, had to be what Liam O’Flaherty experienced many times over during his early years on the island.

The sea that surrounds the island provides a beautiful, yet treacherous, backdrop to the rugged cliffs, many of which drop hundreds of feet to the rocky shore below. The unforgiving topography continues to shape the very cultural nature of the inhabitants, instilling in the inhabitants of the Aran Islands an intense determination, resolve, and fortitude.

The Aran Islands, specifically Inishmore, provided a safe retreat for the Christian monks centuries ago. Scattered throughout the island are ancient ruins of churches, monasteries, and the uniquely carved Celtic crosses, all part of the early Christian era. Tim Pat Coogan, in his article in the *World of Hibernia* writes,

St. Enda, after whom many a male child is still christened, founded churches and a monastery at Killeany on Inis Mhor, beginning his labors in about 483 A.D. Many of Ireland’s most famous saints subsequently studied on Aran before going on to found their

own monasteries. These included giants of the Irish Church, like Kevin of Glendalough and St. Columcille, the founder of Iona in Scotland. (1998, p. 1).

The remains of the monks' teachings are seen not just in these stone ruins but also in the resolution of the islanders' Catholic faith. It is a strong faith that gives the inhabitants their strength to endure and face the ever-present hardships. It became obvious to this author through conversations with the locals while visiting the Aran Islands that the majority of the inhabitants were Catholic and not Protestant. When this author asked a local resident where the Protestant church was located on the island, he could hardly retain his laughter. He, as well as other locals, were quick to inform me that there was only one Protestant minister who serviced all three of the Aran Islands and he only came to Inishmore once every two weeks (Author's personal communication, Summer, 2000).

Inishmore, the island of Liam O'Flaherty's birth, proved to be both a heaven and a hell for its people. The populace consisted of hard-working individuals who lived one day to the next, eking out an existence from the rock-laden, barren land, and the erratic ever-changing sea. "For generations the men of Gort na gCapall [the village of O'Flaherty's birth] have hauled sand from this seashore, mixed it with seaweed and silt from the lanes to turn bare rock into tillage land" (Sheeran, 1976, p. 15). The natives fished for their food using nothing more than currachs. The inhabitants were alienated from the mainland, which was made passable only when an occasional steamer journeyed from Galway Bay bringing supplies and an irregular visitor (Coogan, 1998, p. 3). The harshness of nature that permeated the island often made existence on the island a living nightmare. It was also the harshness of nature, however, that formed the tenacious, determined, and strong-willed personalities of the inhabitants. Doyle explains the effect of the sea on the natives,

The surrounding sea, constantly stirred into fury by storms that cut off communication with the mainland, always maintains in the minds of the inhabitants a restless anxiety,



which has a strong bearing on character, sharpening the wits and heightening the energy, but at the same time producing a violent instability of temperament. (1971, p. 17)

Struggling to survive, the islanders depended on their own integrity, their ingenuity, their families, their neighbors and friends, and especially their God, to meet each rising sun.

This was the environment in which Liam O’Flaherty was born on August 28, 1896, to peasants Michael O’Flaherty and Margaret Ganly (O’Brien, 1973, p. 16; Sheeran, 1976, p. 14). O’Flaherty was born on Inishmore in the small rural village of Gort na gCapall, which literally means “the field of the horses” in the Irish language. “Every point on the island’s cliffs-some just a few feet apart-has a distinctive place name: Cruthalan (big breaking wave), Aill an Oir (golden cliff), . . . and so on” (Coogan, 1998, p. 10). He was the ninth of ten children and the second son born to Michael and Margaret (Kelly, 1976, p. ix). The O’Flaherty family would have been even larger, had several children not died in infancy or early childhood (O’Brien, 1973, p. 16). O’Flaherty’s family was one of the poorest in the village. As per Patrick F. Sheeran in *The Novels of Liam O’Flaherty*, “He was born in a hamlet such as that described by a parish priest of Aran as ‘the most poverty stricken hamlets in the kingdom, probably in the world.’ Poverty, famine and death were the everyday facts of life” (1976, p. 15).

Detachment from the mainland did not reduce the same wave of late nineteenth-century Irish nationalism budding on the Irish mainland. Parliament defeated the first Home Rule Bill introduced in 1886 and soon after came the defeat of the second Home Rule Bill in 1893. The British political occupation strengthened the nationalists’ fight to have Ireland govern itself and to protect the Gaelic culture. The early 1900s found the cultural and religious differences between the nationalist and the unionist populations widening and becoming inseparable from the political differences (McCaffrey, 1957, pp. 160-177).

Liam O’ Flaherty’s father, an undying nationalist Irish rebel, spent an inordinate amount of time fighting for his cause and often neglected his family in the process. He was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (founded in Ireland in 1858) and an active Fenian (a secret

brotherhood supporting Irish independence, founded in America in 1858), whose platform was that of gaining and maintaining independence from Britain (Foster, 1989, pp. 390-391). The elder O’Flaherty was also a Land Leaguer, who adhered to the Fenian and the Irish Republican Brotherhood philosophy of liberating the Irish tenant from the reins of the British government (Hackett, 1939, p. 275) and who “harassed the landgrabbers on Aran and was the first Sinn Féiner on the island” (O’Brien, 1973, p. 16). Litton, in the *The Irish Civil War: An Illustrated History*, explains the connection between the Fenians, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and the Sinn Féiners:

After the Easter Rising of 1916, which proclaimed a Republic of Ireland, the Irish Volunteers were reorganized, and gradually became known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Sinn Féin, . . . asserted control over this army, but in reality it was still commanded by the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood, which had masterminded the 1916 Rising. (1997, p. 11)

Margaret Ganly O’Flaherty, the glue that held the family together, struggled to offer the children a vague semblance of stability in light of their father’s active involvement in community affairs. Margaret’s family immigrated to the islands from County Antrim in the north of Ireland during the early 1800s to work on lighthouses (Sheeran, 1976, p. 19). At the age of 16 and one half she married 26 year old Michael and soon found that her life became “a tale of hardship and misery, an endless struggle to find food for her many children” (Sheeran, 1976, p. 20). James H. O’Brien described in his biography of O’Flaherty what the author remembered most about his mother,

Liam O’Flaherty speaks of his mother’s gaiety and of her story-telling, at times a means to divert the hunger of her children. He also recalls her lifelong combat against poverty, relieved partially by the memory that her husband stole her away from a mainlander just as the latter arrived to sue for her hand. (1973, p. 16)

The O’Flaherty family struggled to endure the ever-present hardships, as did the majority of their island counterparts. The islanders spent their days farming or fishing, and to help offset the adversities of the daylight hours, they spent their evenings in the O’Flaherty home with neighbors and friends. Stories, song, and discussion filled the O’Flaherty household at night. Mr. O’Flaherty held the reputation as one of the island’s best dancers. Mrs. O’Flaherty held the same status as the island’s best singer (O’Brien, 1973, p. 16).

The Catholic religion permeated virtually every facet of Irish society including the social, moral, educational, and political elements. Sheeran notes, “The Catholic clergy exercised extensive control over their flock. Every aspect of life was subject to their scrutiny and they did their best to eradicate those ‘remote or proximate occasions of sin’-courting, drinking and dancing” (1976, p. 52). The Catholic religion took on a newfound resurgence and became the inherent basis of their way of life after the repeal of the seventeenth-century penal laws. The design of the penal laws “based on the fixed Catholicism of the common Irish” (Hackett, 1939, p. 165) in effect banned all things Catholic. Among many other proscriptions, these laws did not allow Catholics to vote, teach school, send their children to school, marry a Protestant, or make more than a certain percentage of profit on leased land. It was not until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the British relaxed the penal laws (1939, p. 183). Once the British relaxed the harsh cultural, religious, political, and linguistic restrictions,

Irish nationalism as it emerged in the nineteenth century was to bear the marks of this long gestation: Catholicism and nationalism were inseparably linked in the consciousness of the people . . . and . . . it was to the Catholic faith that the Irish turned for a new cultural identity. (Newsinger, 1978, p. 610)

The parish priest and the curates played an important role in both the religious, political, and educational way of life for the islanders. “The parish priest, apart from his prominence as a religious leader, was also important as the link between the formal and informal political systems, the ‘natives’ and the ‘foreigners.’” The Catholic Church had its greatest impact on the

islanders' educational system. The parish priests "appointed and rigidly supervised the headmaster of the local school who, in turn, presided over social events and acted as adviser to the islanders in many matters" (Sheeran, 1976, pp. 52-53).

Raised in a large family within a cohesive village, O'Flaherty attended local schools (Kelly, 1976, p. ix) that taught in both Irish and English and established himself as a very talented student (Cahalan, 1999, p. 48). David O'Ceallaghan served as the schoolmaster for the children of the O'Flaherty family while they attended school at Qatquarters (O'Brien, 1973, p. 16). Mr. O'Ceallaghan encouraged O'Flaherty's creative endeavors and instilled in him a passion for the native Irish language and culture. Michael O'Flaherty, contrary to his own nationalistic leanings, strictly forbade his children from using Gaelic, as he thought English would provide a stronger educational foundation for his offspring to succeed in the outside world. The schoolmaster encountered grave criticism when he tried "to reverse the policy of the national school system which, since its inception in 1831 had aimed to produce good, law-abiding British subjects" (Jones, 1917, p. 2; Sheeran, 1976, p. 44). Mr. O'Ceallaghan's purpose was to make sure that the islanders did not lose their ancient culture and customs.

Liam was 13 years of age when Father Naughton, a priest of the Holy Ghost order of the Catholic Church, visited Inishmore from Rockwell College in Cashel, County Tipperary, on a quest to find likely seminarians (Doyle, 1971, p. 18; Kinsella, 1998, p. 161; McMahon & O'Donoghue, 1998, p. 166; O'Brien, 1973, p. 16). One of the school's primary foci was to train its students to be African missionaries. Sheeran explains,

Rockwell was one of the largest and most famous mission centers of Ireland and aspired to be 'a seat of Catholic moral and missionary culture'. It aimed, in common with other branches of the Church Militant, to 'convert the world in the present generation'. The College was a curious mixture of an English public school, a French *lycee*, and a monastery. (1976, p. 58)

The visiting priest recommended O’Flaherty as one of the young islanders who, because of his exceptional educational talents, was particularly deserving of the educational advantages Rockwell College offered. “O’Flaherty was, accordingly, taken into the Junior Seminary at Rockwell, where boys who had leanings toward the priesthood could obtain a secondary education for a small fee if tuition could not be paid” (Doyle, 1971, p. 19).

A vocation in the priesthood provided a viable solution for a young man to receive a formal education and break away from the restraints and confines of the culture of poverty prevalent among Irish islanders. The islanders were staunch Catholics and the church, even though folk tales and culture played an important role in their lives, “remained the Church Triumphant” (Sheeran, 1976, p. 51). Parents sacrificed and forfeited all other necessities in order for one of their children to have the opportunity to become a priest and, in return, they enjoyed the status of parents of a priest when their child completed their schooling. Becoming a member of the clergy was a status symbol and an opportunity that did not avail itself to many on the Aran Islands. O’Flaherty took this occasion to advance his education in fear that other offers might not come his way (Staley, 1985, p. 179).

O’Flaherty did not find Rockwell College to his liking. Because the majority of students who attended Rockwell were middle class, Liam, being of peasant status, found it difficult to assimilate with the other students. Consequently, Liam became disenchanted with the religious order and he decreased the amount of time spent on his religious studies. “He compensated for his isolation by working very hard with the singular effect, for a seminarian, of becoming, as he says, ‘a complete agnostic’” (Sheeran, 1976, p. 60). In his early years of school, he was a dedicated student who concentrated on his secular studies. “At Rockwell, O’Flaherty excelled; he was especially successful in both Classics and modern languages” (Doyle, 1971, p. 19). O’Flaherty spent four years at Rockwell, but when it came time to continue on the course to ordination by taking the soutane, he refused to do so (Sheeran, 1976, p. 60). O’Flaherty claims,

“I had no interest in interfering with the negroes of Africa and I did not want to suffer the humiliation of wearing a priest’s womanly rig” (1981/1934, p. 20).

In 1913 O’Flaherty left Rockwell to continue his studies at Blackrock College where he earned superlative grades. O’Flaherty’s religious objectives are difficult to establish because he was reluctant to divulge information about himself and often communicated varying and unreliable accounts of important aspects of his life while he was living (Doyle, 1971, p 7; p. 19). In 1934, according to Doyle in *Liam O’Flaherty*, “He gave up the idea of studying for the priesthood while at Rockwell” (1971, p. 19). O’Flaherty claims a clerical friend convinced him to continue his studies at Blackrock, not as a seminarian, but as a nonclerical student (1971, p. 19). At Blackrock it became evident that the elder O’Flaherty’s fiercely nationalistic nature was passed down to his son (Sheeran, 1976, p. 25) who in 1913 assembled a corps of “Republican Volunteers” from his classmates in his first attempt to raise awareness for his radical cause (Doyle, 1972, p. 20).

A year later, in order to please his mother who wanted her son to become a priest, Liam traveled to Dublin where he enrolled in the diocesan seminary, Holy Cross College (Doyle, 1971, p. 19). O’Flaherty explains the reason he attended the seminary for only a few months and did not elect to return after Christmas break in his autobiographical account, *Shame the Devil*,

I detested the other students and the priests in charge, who were soon outraged by the violence of my opinions. After a few weeks, I danced on my soutane, kicked my silk hat to pieces, spat on my religious books, made a fig at the whole rigmarole of Christianity and left that crazy den of superstitious ignorance. (1981/1934, p. 21)

Doyle continues the explanation of O’Flaherty’s anticlerical attitudes stating,

O’Flaherty felt that the Catholic Church was too wealthy while the people were too poor. This attitude served as an opening wedge to lead him to a complete break with the church. He also came to deplore the religious authoritarianism and puritanism which

were commonplace in Ireland, and he felt that many of the religious beliefs being inculcated were mere superstition. (1971, p. 20)

After only a few short months at Holy Cross, O’Flaherty used the entrance scholarship he was awarded while attending Blackrock to attend University College, Dublin (Doyle, 1971, p. 19). While Nikolai Lenin was putting Marxist theories into practice in Russia, O’Flaherty discovered his fascination with the subject of communism and egalitarianism, becoming an avid reader of Karl Marx and other proletarian authors while attending the university (O’Brien, 1973, p. 22). He also maintained his connection to the Irish Republican volunteers while attending University College (Sheeran, 1976, p. 62), but at age 19, with World War I in full swing, he abandoned his studies at University College to enlist in the Irish Guards of the British Army (Jeffares, 1998, p. 42; Hall, 1985, p. 356). The motivation for O’Flaherty’s sudden change of heart from his Republican involvement to his enlisting in the British army is difficult to ascertain, especially because this action would not please his family and friends. O’Flaherty writes in *Two Years* that he took part in the war due to “an idiotic passion for adventure” (1930, p. 151). Doyle addresses O’Flaherty’s change of heart in his biography of the author,

O’Flaherty is contradictory on the matter and the facts cannot be proved beyond a doubt. O’Flaherty has said in one essay that he became disillusioned with the Republican cause because its leaders appeared overcautious and reluctant to rebel. In another written statement O’Flaherty claimed that he enlisted on account of a ‘passion for adventure.’ (1972, p. 20; Hall, 1984, p. 356)

World War I, like all wars, was a war in which the countries involved rallied their countrymen and much of their economic resources to achieve victory. It was a war of the grandest scale, which pit totalitarianism against democracy, with the idea of it being the “war to end all wars.” Liam O’Flaherty volunteered to serve in the war and as a combatant found himself in the trenches of France and Belgium. Trench warfare, one of the more horrible and psychologically debilitating innovations of the war, employed parallel rows of fortified trenches

from which soldiers fought across a “no-man’s land.” John Keegan in his book, *The First World War*, clarifies,

In essence, the new frontier was a ditch, dug deep enough to shelter a man, narrow enough to present a difficult target to plunging artillery fire and kinked at intervals into “traverses,” to diffuse blast, splinters or shrapnel and prevent attackers who entered a trench from commanding more than a short stretch with rifle fire. In wet or stony ground, trenches were shallow, with a higher parapet to the front, built of earth, usually sandbagged. (1998, p. 175)

Joanna Bourke, in her article, “Effeminacy, Ethnicity and the End of Trauma: The Sufferings of ‘Shell-shocked’ Men in Great Britain and Ireland, 1914-39,” reflects on the sufferings of ‘shell-shocked’ men in Great Britain and Ireland, exposing the horrors of trench warfare. “In the trenches death is random, illogical, devoid of principle. One is shot not on sight, but on blindness, out of sight” (2000, p. 58). She continues her description by quoting psychiatrist, John T. MacCurdy in *War Neuroses* (1918),

Modern warfare was more psychologically difficult than warfare in the past because the men had to ‘remain for days, weeks, even months, in a narrow trench or stuffy dugout, exposed to constant danger of the most fearful kind . . . which comes from some unseen source, and against which no personal agility or wit is of any avail.’ This coupled with the fact that hand-to-hand fighting was rare, meant that many men never had ‘a chance to retaliate in a personal way’. It was their enforced passivity that was emotionally incapacitating. (2000, p. 58)

Trench warfare had a dramatic impact upon O’Flaherty’s personality (Kelly, 1976, p. x). While fighting for the British Army in France and Belgium in 1917, O’Flaherty suffered shell shock in Langemarck, Belgium, an injury that landed him in the hospital for an extensive period of time recovering from his wounds. A year later he was discharged with a certificate that stated he suffered from acute depression, *melancholia acuta*. (Jeffares, 1998, p. 42; Sheeran, 1976, p.



66). Like returning soldiers from other wars, “[O’Flaherty] came home from the war worn in body and mind” (Doyle, 1971, p. 20) and, “He became a bewildered civilian, cast back into a world in which he had no place” (O’Brien, 1973, p. 18).

The years 1918 to 1921 found O’Flaherty floundering, trying to find his niche in society (O’Brien, 1973, p. 19; Hall, 1985, p. 356). He lived a traveler’s existence, changing jobs continually as he journeyed around the world, to England, Canada, the United States, and Brazil. His résumé consisted of being an assistant foreman in a brewery, a porter in a hotel, a clerk in an engineering firm office, a seaman on several ships; and after arriving in the United States, a Western Union messenger, a printer’s helper, a factory worker, and a Long Island oyster-boat crewman (Doyle, 1971, p. 20). During this period in his life O’Flaherty characterized himself as intellectually paralyzed (O’Brien, 1973, p. 20). His brother, who had recently immigrated to the United States, encouraged Liam to attempt his hand at writing once again and even found a typewriter for O’Flaherty to use (O’Flaherty, 1930, p. 300). As boys on the Aran Islands, the brothers had attempted to write a novel jointly (Sheeran, 1976, p. 57), and he thought writing might help Liam settle in one place rather than roaming endlessly around the country. After an American publisher rejected four of his short stories, O’Flaherty immediately gave up any ambition of becoming a writer (O’Flaherty, 1930, p. 300).

Eventually Liam returned to his birthplace, the Aran Islands, hoping finally to recover from his war experiences. On the Aran Islands he explored further his earlier fascination with communism, indulged in while attending University College. “He did not, however, manage to formulate a balanced and consistent philosophy, but his principal intentions were to improve the lot of the poor and the working man,” made worse by the Catholic Church which he thought, “kept the people impoverished” (Doyle, 1971, p. 21).

O’Flaherty was not simply an armchair communist, but instead he put into practice his beliefs. On January 18, 1922, in the midst of the Irish Civil War, for instance, O’Flaherty continued his fight for the proletariat (Staley, 1985, p. 179). “He and a group of unemployed men

seized control of the Rotunda in Dublin and raised the Communist flag over the building” (Doyle, 1971, p. 21; O’Toole, 1985, p. 179; Staley, 1985, p. 179). Free Staters (government troops) threatened his group and surrounded them. In order to avoid any fighting, O’Flaherty and his group surrendered. This incident “gave O’Flaherty a nefarious reputation in Ireland” (Doyle, 1971, p. 22). O’Flaherty refused to apologize for his actions, knowing that the refusal would lead to ostracism by his family and friends on the Aran Islands. O’Flaherty recounts the after effect of this experience,

This adventure, which caused a great sensation in the public press, completed my ostracism. Ever since then, I have remained, in the eyes of the vast majority of Irish men and women, a public menace to faith, morals and property, a Communist, an atheist, a scoundrel of the worst type, a man whom thousands would burn at the stake if they had the courage. (1981/1934, p. 22)

He traveled to England “alone, disillusioned, and without any definite means of livelihood” (Doyle, 1971, p. 23) and “felt it was time to adopt some profession in life (O’Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 36). In London, friends encouraged him again to write as a profession. O’Flaherty took the thought of this profession more seriously and became resolute in his pursuit of a writing career (Cahalan, 1999, p. 48; O’Flaherty, 1981/1934, pp. 36-37). O’Brien verifies O’Flaherty’s literary aspirations,

His vocation as an Irish writer was confirmed, he said, by an experience in London. As he was walking on the streets, he thought how beautiful it would be to stand on a cliff in Aran ‘watching the great waves come thundering to the shore, while the pure wind swelled my lungs.’ He rushed to his lodgings, knowing that he must be the spokesman for his people: ‘It seemed as if the dam had burst somewhere in my soul, for the words poured forth in a torrent. They came joyously and I felt exalted by their utterance, just as I used to feel when telling my mother some fantastic tale in my infancy.’ (1973, p. 23)

While in London, O’Flaherty received support for his writing career. According to Cahalan, “A key turning point was meeting the London editor Edward Garnett, who became a key mentor to O’Flaherty, much as Garnett was also for Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence, and several other key modernists” (Cahalan, 1999, p. 48). O’Flaherty’s short story, “The Sniper,” was published in *The New Leader* in January 1923. Garnett had read the story and was favorably impressed with the young author’s writing ability (Kelly, 1976, p. x). Because of his first impression with O’Flaherty’s literary talent, Garnett recommended to the publisher Jonathan Cape, that *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* be published in 1923. With this vote of confidence began O’Flaherty’s prolific writing frenzy during the 1920s (Doyle, 1971, p. 23; Kelly, 1976, p. x; Sheeran, 1976, p. 79).

The geographical, familial, educational, and political influences predominant in O’Flaherty’s early years helped shape his character as reflected in Father Hugh McMahon, the main character of his first novel. Growing up on the Aran Islands, a ruthless, desolate, and isolated environment, O’Flaherty lived through the day-to-day existence to survive in extreme poverty. He watched his determined mother toil to feed and care for her large family. I saw first hand where O’Flaherty was born and raised and can only surmise, how at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a family survived in the cruel and unsympathetic environment. The village was sparse, isolated, and miles from the local school and other forms of civilization. Sheeran affirms, “Only the strong could survive the rigours of life there and the mere face of survival cast an heroic aura round their lives” (1976, p. 38). Doyle continues with a description of the unforgiving force of nature,

The surrounding sea, constantly stirred into fury by storms that cut off communication with the mainland, always maintain in the minds of the inhabitants a restless anxiety, which has a strong bearing on character, sharpening the wits and heightening the energy, but at the same time producing a violent instability of temperament. (1971, p. 17)

Liam O’Flaherty grew up against this harsh geographical backdrop of the Aran Islands and he commented on his life on the island in his autobiography,

When a man is born on naked rocks like the Aran Islands, where the struggle for life against savage nature is very intense, the instinct for self-preservation is strong in him. His character tends toward morbidness and reckless adventure. (1981/1934, p. 10)

As a Catholic on the Aran Islands, O’Flaherty’s studies were controlled by the Catholic parish priest and subject to strict rules and rigid teachings. Patrick Sheeran notes in *The Novels of Liam O’Flaherty*, “The Catholic clergy exercised extensive control over their flock. Every aspect of life was subject to their scrutiny and they did their best to eradicate those ‘remote or proximate occasions of sin’- courting, drinking, and dancing” (1976, p. 52). The scope of his formal knowledge was limited to his religious teachings and unfortunately, “the Archdiocese of Tuam, of which the Aran Islands form part, were probably the worst administered in Ireland and a scandal to the Church” (Sheeran, 1976, p. 53), validating his distrust of the Catholic Church.

Unlike others in his village, Liam, because of his exceptional intellectual abilities, had the opportunity to leave the barrenness of the island. O’Flaherty received an exceptional opportunity for a first-rate education when he left the island. Sheeran confirms,

From remote Gort na gCapall to Rockwell, Blackrock, Clonliffe and University College was, in the early years of the century, something of a grand tour of the best that Irish Catholic education had to offer. These colleges maintained high standards of instruction along with a rigorous formation of their students in the general ideal . . . of the Christian gentleman, liberally educated. (1976, p. 63)

It is interesting to note that once he left, his eyes were opened to the vast array of other viewpoints and ways of life previously unknown to him. O’Flaherty’s intellectual astuteness allowed him to process these new and interesting viewpoints which resulted in his questioning the beliefs and teachings from his childhood. He explored the doctrines and practices of

Catholicism and determined that the Catholic philosophy was abhorrent to his personal views.

O'Flaherty felt

that the Catholic Church was too wealthy while the people were too poor. This attitude served as an opening wedge to lead him to a complete break with the church. He also came to deplore the religious authoritarianism and Puritanism . . . and felt that many of the religious beliefs being inculcated were mere superstition. (Doyle, 1971, p. 20)

O'Flaherty subsequently rejects Catholicism, turning his back on the avenue that gave him the freedom to receive a free education and leave the oppressiveness of the island.

Prior to writing *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, O'Flaherty exhibited conflicted political views. He accepted the Republican philosophy and while attending Blackrock College he organized a group of Republican volunteers. He was ready to fight for the Republican cause but rejected these views when the Republicans were not as militant in their struggle as he desired them to be. He discovered solace in the study of communist theory that professed socialist views. He found the socialist thought of improving the lot of the working class more evenly matched to his own temperament. Because of limited biographical information about O'Flaherty, there are minimal facts pertaining to the reasons why he ultimately fought for the Irish Guards in the British army. Joining the Irish Guards was contradictory to his earlier actions and detestable to many Irishmen during that time period. To aggravate his confused state of mind, he experienced shell shock while fighting in the trenches for the British. After suffering shell shock, O'Flaherty not only faced the stigma of mental illness associated with this injury, but he came home to face his native Irishmen who thought negatively about anyone who had fought alongside the British. Joanna Bourke describes the atmosphere the shell-shocked Irish ex-servicemen faced as they returned home from the home front,

Probably the hardest thing of all, however was returning home. Their masculinity was in doubt, their loyalty was derided, and the passivity engendered on the modern battlefield was also found on domestic turf where everyone from the bureaucrats at the Ministry of

Pensions to local employers seemed to gang up against them. Irish ex-servicemen were right to be particularly bitter as their activities in the British military were seen as the most shameful fact of all. (2000, p. 69)

O'Flaherty not only had to deal with his personal religious and political demons, but he also had to handle the alienation from his homeland, family, and friends.

Confusion and guilt dominate the formation of O'Flaherty's personality during the early years, from his childhood growing up on the Aran Islands until 1923 when he wrote his first novel, *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. He left the primitive conditions of the Aran Islands, leaving behind his family and friends to discover and explore life "on the other side." Like most young travelers, once away from the constraints of family, he explored other thoughts and philosophies and questioned the opinions and beliefs imposed on him in his early years, turning against the religious and political attitudes that were so strong in his native society. I propose that the geographical, religious, and political influences on O'Flaherty's early years, in conjunction with the decisions he made to reject the priesthood and Catholicism and to turn against Republicanism to fight in the Irish Guards of the British army, and the resulting alienation from his homeland, found O'Flaherty in an intense period of self-reflection when he wrote *Thy Neighbour's Wife* in 1923. As a young man he experienced life as other young Irishmen might not have and as a young adult and budding writer, he chose to deal with these experiences in his first novel. I posit that Liam O'Flaherty's influence of time and place in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland is an integral part of his artistic personality and, therefore, co-authored *Thy Neighbour's Wife*.

## CHAPTER 3

### *THY NEIGHBOUR'S WIFE: AN ANALYSIS*

*Two Years and Shame the Devil*, written by Liam O'Flaherty in 1930 and 1934 respectively, are the two works that he wrote specifically as autobiographical studies. Both of these books provide insight into the making of the artist and "serve as revealing portraits of O'Flaherty" (O'Brien, 1973, p. 15). O'Flaherty professes at the end of *Shame the Devil* the reason he wrote a second autobiography,

I have told the truth about myself, and in this way I have warded off my enemies, who are those that by their flattery would shackle me with the traits of their mediocrity. I have torn the veil of sanctity from my face for those who do not know me and I have deprived my friends of the pleasure of adverse criticism. (1981/1934, p. 284)

A content analysis of the autobiographies clearly illustrates the overwhelming religious, political, and cultural influences on O'Flaherty from his birth to age 26. James H. O'Brien, in his book *Liam O'Flaherty*, emphasizes that, "Although these books [the autobiographies] contain valuable insight into O'Flaherty's background and thought, they blur or ignore many events, especially conflicts that must have been of importance to him as an artist" (1973, p. 15). Patrick F. Sheeran, in the introduction to his book, *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty*, concurs that the O'Flaherty autobiographies are revealing but "are far from clear and are often contradictory" (1976, p. 11). In addition to the interpretation of O'Flaherty's autobiographies as inconsistent, actual biographical data regarding O'Flaherty is deficient (O'Brien, 1973, p. 15). Even though O'Flaherty's autobiographies are inconsistent and actual biographical data are limited, John Zneimer in his work, *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty*, credits the autobiographical sources as studies whereby, "We shall see that the man and the problems presented directly in the autobiographies . . . are closely related to the men and problems in O'Flaherty's fiction" (1970, p. 26).

O'Flaherty did not write *Thy Neighbour's Wife* as an autobiographical piece, but his use of particular cultural, religious, and political references as well as his characterization of Fr. Hugh McMahon, reveal the tremendous impact on him as a youth and young adult, spent on the Aran Islands. Therefore, an analysis of the cultural, religious, and political references within the novel, in conjunction with a character analysis of Fr. Hugh McMahon, demonstrate that the fundamental themes and representations in *Thy Neighbour's Wife* provide an underlying autobiographical portrait of the author as a young man. Although not touted as an autobiography, I contend that *Thy Neighbour's Wife* provides the reader a glimpse at the troubled soul of Liam O'Flaherty still attempting to put together a life compatible with his intellect. Unsure of his literary career and certainly not knowing that he would have a profession that would allow him to write two autobiographies, I further contend that O'Flaherty inserts more of himself between the lines of *Thy Neighbour's Wife* than he did within the lines of either of his two autobiographies. Very troubled by his own trinity, religion, patriotism, and love, he handles these themes fictitiously, but yet no less self-revealing in *Thy Neighbour's Wife*.

*Thy Neighbour's Wife* is set in Inverara, the fictional name for Inishmore, in 1910. There is some controversy as to the exact time of the novel's setting. Patrick Sheeran says that it is set in 1910 (1976, p. 136), while A. A. Kelly suggests it was set in the early 1920s (1976, p. 70). Basing my knowledge of that period of Irish history against a close analysis of the novel suggests to me that Sheeran is more nearly correct with his 1910 date. At the very least, I maintain that the novel is set between 1910 and 1916 because there is no reference to the Easter Rising of 1916, which, in my opinion, would be mentioned in several scenes of political discussion by O'Flaherty.

Religion and patriotism permeate the story line, as they did Irish society in 1910. Love, or more accurately the rejection of it, is the motif of a great deal of literature including *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. Liam O'Flaherty manages to tell his personal story within the confines of his fictional troubled trinity. The central character, Fr. Hugh McMahon, is the recently appointed



curate of Inverara, who serves the parish on the small island under the direction of Inverara's parish priest, Fr. O'Reilly. My thesis is that Fr. McMahon is also O'Flaherty's representation and mouthpiece through whom the author illustrates his own disillusionment with religion and politics, and his coming to grips with his personal and professional alienation from Ireland.

Approximately two years prior to Fr. McMahon's arriving in Inverara to serve as the island's curate, he was in love with the parish priest's niece, Lily O'Reilly. McMahon reminisces about their meeting,

It was at the feis at Athlone, when she was staying for the holidays at a cousin's house in Ballinasloe and he was visiting in Moate and had come . . . to see the feis and hear Fr O'Connor speak on the future of the Gaelic League. What a glorious day that was, and how little he thought then that he would be a priest. (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 31)

The two met, fell in love, and separated, with Lily driven away not by another woman, but by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Lily was devastated when McMahon broke off their relationship because he changed his mind and decided that in fact he did want to pursue a vocation in the clergy. When he left to enter the seminary, Lily returned to Inverara and a life with her uncle, the parish priest. The uncle eventually arranged a marriage between Lily and McSherry, a wealthy businessman twice Lily's age who wanted a woman for her physical attributes more than he wanted a wife (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, pp. 22-23). McMahon completes his clerical studies and is assigned the position as curate on Inverara.

The novel begins with the return of Lily and McSherry from their honeymoon to make a life on Inverara, thus creating the confrontation between McMahon and Lily, and between McMahon and his own soul. The story spans the course of eight days, from Saturday to Saturday, focusing on Fr. McMahon and his reaction to Lily's marriage and her return to the island. O'Flaherty introduces the principal theme of religion, which permeates the entire novel, when McMahon questions his dedication to religion and his God in his personal struggle between flesh and spirit immediately upon Lily's return to the island. Fr. McMahon wrestles

with his doubt and shame over the course of the novel and the story ends with the curate coming to terms with his guilt and his acceptance of his God and his chosen religious vocation (Zneimer, 1970, p. 89).

A secondary theme of the novel is political in nature and centers around a political rally held on the island on Sunday after Mass. Important individuals in the form of priests, politicians, and the organizer of the United Irish League, come to ““rally Inverara to a man behind the Home Rule Programme”” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 48). Liam O’Flaherty uses this fictional political rally as a forum to discuss the republican views of the day, giving both sides an airing, but with an obvious slant toward the nationalist platform (1997/1923, pp. 54-55). My contention is that Hugh McMahon’s nationalism indeed reflects that of O’Flaherty.

The third theme in the troubled trinity relates to love. Love in this instance is three-fold: the love of a person, the love of one’s God, and the love of one’s country and culture. It is my assertion that McMahon’s love of Lily and O’Flaherty’s love of Ireland is treated with metaphorical intertwining, that is, the fictional love of Lily is symbolic of O’Flaherty’s actual love of his country. The real life O’Flaherty became estranged from his beloved Ireland because of the consequences of his actions. When he wrote the character of Fr. McMahon, he included within the character development the same type of estrangement, except metaphorically written into the character of Lily. Lily’s rejection of McMahon, in my estimation, is a representation of Ireland’s alienation of O’Flaherty.

An analysis of any work ultimately should begin with the title. A title is extremely revealing and immediately sets the stage for the content of any literary work. In addition, a title provides the overall tone that the author wishes to convey to the audience. *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* is an intriguing title choice for Liam O’Flaherty’s first published novel. The significance of choosing this title to begin his writing career is a revealing link to his past. Liam O’Flaherty, raised in a Catholic home and educated at the seminary, would have known the significance of using a phrase from one of the Ten Commandments, the set of laws by which all Christians are

instructed to live and abide. The Ten Commandments are codes that O'Flaherty rejects in the act of denouncing Catholicism. They are also codes that Fr. McMahon assesses by virtue of questioning his religion and his God. The title chosen by O'Flaherty is, therefore, an illuminating connection to his state of mind when writing this work.

As a realist writer, O'Flaherty set his first novel in a location with which he was very familiar. The island of Inverara is in reality Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands and the island of O'Flaherty's birth. Kilmurrage, the setting where the majority of the novel takes place is Kilroran, a town on Inishmore and the location of the main pier for both real and fictional locations (Sheeran, 1976, p. 32; Author's research visit, Summer, 2000). O'Flaherty, in *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, describes the main pier in fictional Kilmurrage as the island's hub of activity and as the spot where the steamers arrive bringing food, supplies, and visitors from the mainland and beyond (1997/1923, p. 7). He also depicts Inverara as a very poor, desolate place, and verifies the description with a peasant's declaration, "There was nothing in Inverara but 'the Grace of God and the British Government,' both of which Liam O'Flaherty found quite objectionable" (p. 69). O'Flaherty makes a very similar statement in his autobiography, *Two Years*, stating that he "left home in August 1918 . . . I found the country extremely dull, depressing and alien" (1930, p. 9). In *Shame the Devil* he refers to the Aran Island as a naked rock where he was "born in extreme poverty" (1981/1934, p. 9). He describes the land farmed by peasants in Inverara as "barren crags" (1997/1923, p. 145). Tom O'Flaherty, Liam's brother, describes the village of their youth and the barrenness of the land in which they were raised in his book, *Aranmen All*,

Gort na gCapall was built on the rim of a semi-circle. The ancestor of mine who founded the village appreciated the value of the soil, so he picked the rockiest part of the townland for homesteads. The houses were built close together, thirty homes in all. It was necessary to break the rocks around them in order to make it possible to walk out at night

with a fair prospect of saving life and limb. Little gardens grew up alongside the houses, where the rocks were leveled. (1934, p. 68)

He continues his description,

The Villagers were allowed to live on the land the grabber thought not worth taking. For generations they have been hauling sand from the seashore, mixing it with seaweed and silt from the roads and turning bare rocks into tillage land. (1934, p. 154).

The difficulty of youth in that environment became even more appreciated after I walked at Gort na gCapall “on the rim of a semi-circle” and peered across the “barren crags.”

Conversely, the beauty of the landscape provided a retreat for both O’Flaherty and Fr. McMahon, and O’Flaherty depicts another dimension of the island in his novel. One evening when Fr. McMahon was contemplating his fate and wrestling with his conscience, and could not pray, he reflected on the “peace of nature” in Inverara,

It was the June sunset in Inverara, more beautiful than the dream of a poet . . . looking out at the pale blue mists on the mountains of the mainland, breathing the still air that is fragrant with the sea, and flowers and peace. (1997/1923, p. 108)

O’Flaherty, nearing the end of the wandering years of his youth and dealing with his life choices, contemplating his fate and wrestling with his conscience, also looked to the beauty of the Aran Islands to find solace and decided to begin his “communion with the cliffs, the birds, the wild animals, and the sea of my native land” (1930, p. 351).

The dichotomy of Inishmore’s harsh and beautiful setting was reality to O’Flaherty. The poverty of his youth and the bleakness of his environment, in concordance with the inherent beauty of nature on the island, are brought to light in his choice for the setting of *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*.

The predominant theme of *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* and the one element that underlies the other two secondary themes of patriotism and love is religion. The religious theme is grounded in the characters of the novel, both central and secondary figures, as well as the overall story line.

The narrator escorts the reader through eight days in the life of Fr. Hugh McMahon, allowing the reader to experience McMahon's interaction with the native islanders and the various visitors from the mainland. A prevailing religious atmosphere underscores the daily activity of the islanders, as well as their interactions with each other. Through its description of the islanders' daily habits and customs, the novel parallels the same conditions confronted by Liam O'Flaherty, his family, and neighbors in 1910 rural Ireland. O'Flaherty further illustrates throughout the novel the specifics of the Catholic religion that he found detestable.

Early in the first chapter, O'Flaherty sets the tone for the entire novel by distinguishing between the divergent relationships of Protestants and Catholics, where they live in proximity to one another, and the respective perceptions by the islanders of the Catholic parish priest and the Protestant vicar,

The lowest level was reached by the residence of the Protestant minister, a beautiful place surrounded by trees, in a glen, and the highest level was reached by the parochial house, where Fr O'Reilly the parish priest lived. The natives of Kilmurragh, being ninety-nine and a half percent Catholic, reasoned from this contrast that the Protestant vicar was down in the hollow because he was well on the road to Hell, and the parish priest was on a height because he was well on the road to Heaven. (1997/1923, p. 7)

The islanders also consider there to be only two churches on the island, "that is, there were two Catholic churches, because the little Protestant church in Kilmurragh was not considered to be a church at all. 'How could it be a church,' said the people of Inverara, 'when there is hardly ever a service in it?'" (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 26). O'Flaherty clarifies this point even further by explaining that the vicar stopped preaching because the church was usually empty, there being only six Protestants on the island, "and of the six, not one was sufficiently religious to go to hear the vicar preach on Sunday" (1997/1923, p. 26). Tom O'Flaherty substantiates the passage from the novel, *Aranmen All*, when he makes reference to there being only two Catholic churches on the island: one in Eochail, where he and Liam served Mass as

young boys (1934, p. 160); and the other situated on the opposite side of the island. Liam O'Flaherty further maligns the differences between the two religions by making a derogatory reference about the landlords robbing the poor. "How could the landlords be living in accordance with the laws of God since they were nearly all Protestants" (1997/1923, p. 42), so says O'Flaherty's character John Hourigan, a poor parishioner attempting to raise a family of ten. Tom O'Flaherty, in his book *Aranmen All*, also comments about the landlords and their connection to the R.I.C. (Royal Irish Constabulary). He reminisces on the horrors of his family being evicted from their home in Gort na gCapall, so that the "punishment for poverty was not only visited on the parents but even on their little children" (1934, p. 70).

Throughout the novel O'Flaherty emphasizes the importance the islanders placed on the parish priest, the power that the parish priest had versus the curate, and the influence of the priest over the islanders. O'Flaherty sets the tone of the religious nature of the novel by describing the dwelling where the parish priest resides, "Then there was the house that the islanders built for him as a mark of their appreciation. It was the finest house in Inverara" (1997/1923, p. 11). The curate also had a fine house that was built by a shopkeeper on the island, but the curate was not able to afford the rent or the upkeep on the house. The parish priest paid him too little to live in this type of dwelling and therefore had to rent a room from Mrs. Shaughnessy at her hotel (1997/1923, p. 6). The parish priest's salary was a stark contradiction to the bank account of Father O'Reilly, "which ran well into four figures sterling" (1997/1923, p. 10).

O'Flaherty portrays Father O'Reilly as the "most important man in Inverara" (1997/1923, p. 9). He is also the most clever man on the island and extremely popular. O'Flaherty explains, "The people said he was the best man that ever came to the island since Fr McBride, who had built the Pier. They claimed that it was due to his efforts that the Congested Districts Board purchased the land from the landlord, though of course it was the Land League agitation did that. Then they pointed to the fishing industry with tears in their eyes. There it was 'on a sound business footing' (to use Fr O'Reilly's own words) and it was all due

to Fr. O'Reilly. He got the harbour blessed by the archbishop, and he got a committee of the Board of Fisheries to do something with the fishing grounds, plant seeds there or something. . . . Whether as a result of the archbishop's blessing or the planting of the seeds by the Board of Fisheries, there were good catches of fish every year since.

(1997/1923, p. 10)

The islanders held Fr. O'Reilly in a state of high esteem unlike any other person in power on the island. O'Flaherty elaborates,

For to them, Fr O'Reilly was neither a priest or a politician. He was a kind of reigning monarch, with the combined powers of the druid and king, armed with supernatural powers to heal disputes with the same stroke of the magic wand with which he healed diseases of the flesh, able to send souls to heaven with the same ease that he controlled the fishing industry and relegated the relations between the Government officials, the County Council and his parishioners. He was the ultimate expression of the life of the people, social, political, religious and economic. He was, in fact, the brains and thinking power of Inverara, the directing ability, the man who held in his grasp the levers of the mechanism that controlled every pulse and heart-beat, every thought and action of the parishioners, who were the limbs and bowels of the Inverara Social Organism.

(1997/1923, p. 57)

O'Flaherty puts Fr. O'Reilly's authority in perspective when the parish priest refers to his influence over the islanders as representative, "He was always desirous . . . to give every shade of public opinion and every branch of the community a voice in public affairs, always provided, of course, that the voice was not contrary to his own interests" (1997/1923, p. 163).

O'Flaherty underscores Fr. O'Reilly's popular reputation with the dark side of O'Reilly's personality. The author establishes that Fr. O'Reilly is also a greedy, money-hungry, power-hungry individual who would place the fortunes of himself over the concerns of his parishioners. He comments to McSherry that on one hand it would be a wonderful economic boost to the

island to build a kelp factory yet he fears that “if the peasants became comfortably rich and had money to spend, his power would not be so great” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 123). O’Flaherty provides the reader with an undertone of socialist/Marxist theory of bourgeois control over the proletariat, concepts which O’Flaherty studied before the writing of *The Neighbour’s Wife*.

Father O’Reilly also had his enemies, in part as a result of the amount of power he held over the islanders. O’Flaherty explains in the novel that when O’Reilly came to Inverara, newly ordained, he was a very poor man, but that over the years he accumulated a substantial amount of wealth. His wealth was accumulated primarily through his association with friends of government officials and his direct relationship with government officials “for his services in bringing the islanders to heel in the matter of payment of rents” (1997/1923, p. 11). He had even married his sister to the government contractor, “who was a man of good social position, and a man who had ‘pull with the Government’” (1997/1923, p. 11). Ellen, O’Reilly’s sister, further accuses the parish priest of arranging the marriage between McSherry and Lily for his own benefit, “You married Lily to a heathen dissolute wretch for the sake of the thousand pounds he paid you to clear the debt off the new church” (1997/1923, p. 25).

O’Flaherty describes all aspects of island life and the characters in the novel with reference to Catholicism. When O’Flaherty describes the individuals who arrive on the island by way of the occasional steamer, he refers to the character as someone’s sister returning home from the convent, or someone’s brother who has been away at college studying to be a priest, especially one who will be going to a foreign mission (1997/1923, p. 8). The novel critiques Inverara’s educational system by pointing out the curate’s influence over the instruction of the children. It was his position to inspect the boys’ school in order to correct the students’ mistakes, primarily the recitation of the catechism (1997/1923, p. 29). O’Flaherty explains Mass, describing the monotony of the service through the ritual aspects of the benediction. The Church even oversees what the islanders read: for example, there is a scene where Lily reflects upon a book that by papal edicts is forbidden to be read, because it refers to the fact that “people had



two brains, and that one brain might be thinking of one thing and the other brain thinking of something else, both at the same time” (1997/1923, p. 35). It is even taboo for the islanders to have fun in front of a priest, “for in Inverara it was considered in all ways immodest and indecent and unbecoming to dance, sing, or show any signs of levity in the presence of a priest” (1997/1923, p. 73).

O’Flaherty makes numerous references to the Divine Providence throughout the text in *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*. He most often makes references to Divine Providence when Fr. O’Reilly and Fr. McMahan are trying to explain to others or understand themselves the reason they are in a particular situation. When Fr. O’Reilly talks with Lily to convince her to stay with her new husband he pleads,

Lily, my child, you are young . . . too young perhaps to bear the cross that the Lord in His divine providence has thought fit to impose upon you. . . . The road to heaven is narrow and strewn with thorns, but the reward, the reward, child, is a glorious compensation for any troubles that we may be called upon to bear in this life. Go to your husband, child. It is your cross. (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 23)

O’Flaherty employs the use of Divine Providence several times throughout the novel with respect to Fr. McMahan. Fr. McMahan, while visiting the island doctor and his wife, whose personalities he found annoying, “felt that this was a visitation of Divine Providence to test him further” (1997/1923, p. 90). When McMahan is wrestling with his unrequited love for Lily and his doubts regarding his religious vocation, he believes McSherry is another of God’s tests as “another one who was appointed by Divine Providence to torment him” (1997/1923, p. 93). The ultimate utilization of Divine Providence is seen in the last chapter of the novel when McMahan tries to determine what he can do to remedy his sins. He recalls a passage from the *Early Saints of Inverara*, by Fr. Coumts Moore regarding a tradition in which,

the holy monks had a singularly severe manner for doing penance for their sins. Each evening they set out to sea in an oarless coracle, and allowed themselves to be carried

away by the tide. If any of them were in sin he was drowned, and if they were in the state of grace, Divine Providence brought them back safely to land. (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 233)

The religious theme of the novel is also an undercurrent of the secondary political theme of *Thy Neighbour's Wife*. O'Flaherty establishes the political atmosphere of the time period early on in the novel and mentions the concerns regarding the Home Rule Bill, the Land League movement, the Fenians, the United Irish League, Nationalism, and Socialism. Liam O'Flaherty's short-lived past was consumed with the political nature of Ireland and all of these aforementioned views. The one underlying theme of all politics in Ireland is religion.

O'Flaherty introduces the political nature of the novel by initially describing several of the important people who might come to the island in the summer on the steamer as ones who are associated with the United Irish League and whose purpose it is to gain the support of the islanders for the Home Rule Bill (1997/1923, p. 8). To represent the Nationalist political viewpoint, O'Flaherty utilizes a character in the persona of Hugh O'Malley who is an avid Republican and "was acquitted of the murder of three landlords [protestants] during the Land League movement" (1997/1923, p. 13).

A political rally, hosted by the United Irish League, is held on Sunday after Mass and O'Flaherty uses this rally to bring to light the political atmosphere of the time period and to pose all sides of the political question. He introduces religious overtones that are intermeshed within the political overtones exemplified by the parish priest, when, during Mass, the priest asks "everybody to come into Kilmurragh in the afternoon to attend the United Irish League meeting" (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 41). There are three main speakers at the political rally, two in favor of the United Irish League, one in opposition. The two in favor are of religious orientation, Fr. Considine, a noted clerical political speaker in Ireland and Fr. O'Reilly. The gentleman in opposition, Hugh O'Malley, is a Republican and a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and somewhat more radical in his beliefs than most of the islanders. Fr. Considine and Fr.

O'Reilly urged "moderation in political demands, and in the methods used to gain these demands" (1997/1923, p. 61). They also made it known that,

Neither Republicanism nor Socialism had any place, any roots, in the holy soil of Ireland . . . and the only hope of better conditions for the common people was in the establishment of better understanding between the employer and the employed.  
(O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 61)

O'Flaherty makes the distinction between the political involvement of the Catholics and the Protestants in the novel. The Protestant vicar is portrayed as an individual who had absolutely no interest in politics, either seditious or loyalist. He much preferred to stay in his room poring over Greek literature . . . considering this was more important work than endeavouring to give a salary to an Irish Catholic Commoner instead of to an English Protestant Lord-Lieutenant, which was all the Home Rule Movement amounted to. (1997/1923, p. 49)

Because of his earlier involvement in the socialist movement, O'Flaherty's treatment of socialists in *Thy Neighbour's Wife* is quite interesting. The character of John Carmody exemplifies O'Flaherty's attitude toward Socialists throughout the novel, "Evil-minded people like John Carmody, who came back from the United States a Socialist and an agnostic, were always in search of some scandal to cast a blemish on the fair fame of the parish priest" (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 11). O'Flaherty mentions John Carmody in several places in the novel and usually follows his name with the phrase "who came back from the United States a Socialist and an agnostic." Fr. O'Reilly, in his conversation with McSherry regarding the possibility of a new kelp factory on the island states,

'What with all the money it would bring into the place . . . but then again, on the other hand, wherever these factories come, atheism follows in their trail, and all kinds of new doctrines. You would have Socialists like that devil Jim Larkin, God forgive me, preaching socialism and organizing trade unions.' (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 25)

The islanders were surprised when one of their own, Tom Manning, was reported as doing well in his venture to America because “there were rumours that he had become a Socialist” (1997/1923, p. 27).

O’Flaherty employs Fr. Considine, the noted clerical speaker at the Sunday political rally, to sermonize on the evils of anarchical teachings,

He referred to the danger of Socialism. There were people among them who were advocating the impossible ideal of human equality, the impossible ideal of the abolition of poverty and suffering, and under the cloak of this idealism were scheming and plotting to destroy all vestiges of private property and disrupt all their social and moral ties. He felt that Ireland had no room for that pernicious imported doctrine, and he would confidently assert that he and his Church, and his comrades in the struggle for Home Rule by constitutional means, would put up a successful fight against it. (1997/1923, p. 60)

In the novel, Fr. O’Reilly, being the most important man in Inverara, and the brains and thinking power of Inverara, speaks his opinion at the political rally and indicates his support for Fr. Considine and the United Irish League. Fr. Considine convinces the islanders to join forces and unite with the United Irish League. Only Fr. McMahon is unable to express his ideas due to the fear of excommunication and expulsion from the Catholic Church and as a result is tormented with his patriotism. Fr. McMahon is “an extreme and enthusiastic Nationalist. He dreamt of a great Irish Catholic Republic” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 17). He was an advocate and a defender of the political views Hugh O’Malley endorsed and “felt a corresponding exaltation in his own breast when O’Malley enthused over the present unjust system of government in Ireland” (1997/1923, p. 56). However, McMahon was unable to profess his beliefs “for fear of being suspended” (1997/1923, p. 62).

The third theme of the novel, and the completion of the troubled trinity, is love. An element of many fictional works, O’Flaherty uses love to push his characters apart and to tie his themes together. Fr. Hugh McMahon traded his love of Lily for his love of God and, therefore,

had to reconcile the recurring doubts of that decision. His ambition at the time of his fateful decision was to become a priest “who was to achieve fame and prominence” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 18), worldly goals for Godly decisions. And now upon Lily’s return to the island, he grappled with his feelings for Lily and the choice that he made two years prior. Lily did not talk or acknowledge McMahan upon her return and her rejection of him was more than McMahan could bear, stripping away the veneer of his priesthood to show his weakness for the flesh. O’Flaherty exposes McMahan as a man faced with the responsibilities of the decisions he made in the past. McMahan agonizes about his decision, his resurfaced love for Lily, and the fact that he will never be able to be with her again because of the bridges he burned in their relationship,

The abyss that he himself fashioned when he forsook her love for the priesthood, the abyss that he fashioned when he allowed another man to take her and brand her as his, with the indelible brand of marriage. Always they would be divided ‘until the axle breaks that keeps the stars in their round.’ Had sickness or death or war or poverty divided them, did they watch and wait divided by the stretches of ocean, there would be hope.

(O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 70)

The story line throughout *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* is replete with references to religion, patriotism, and love. They are inescapable in every plot twist and in every character. The one character O’Flaherty uses the most as his literary vehicle is Fr. Hugh McMahan, through whom he is able to reveal so much of himself and his beliefs. Therefore, a firm understanding of this main character is necessary to understand the complexities with which O’Flaherty planned, plotted, and wrote this story.

First and foremost Liam O’ Flaherty, in *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*, characterizes Fr. Hugh McMahan as a man of God, although often a man troubled with God. McMahan is a man whose ambition it was to become a priest, so much so that he gave up the love of a woman to study the doctrine of the Catholic religion. He was tempted by the devil to give up his vocation and marry

Lily, but he rebuked the calling of the Devil and cast aside his chance of an ordinary life with a wife and children (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 18). Fr. McMahon recalls his decision to end their relationship,

She did not seem to him of much importance that evening compared to his vocation, to his ambitions as a priest who was to achieve fame and prominence. . . . The next moment he thought of his vocation, of what people would think of him if he didn't become a priest, that he would never come to any good in life, saddled with a wife and poverty, having to fly to some foreign land, just as they all did, when they lost their vocations. He had to Persevere and . . . He told her all that. (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 18-19).

O'Flaherty represents Fr. Hugh McMahon as a young, foolish man, as well as “a man of strong passions and with a highly sensitive nature” (1997/1923, p. 16). “He was liked by the ‘natives,’ because he mixed with them and praised their language and their old customs, and used to tell them that by right they should pay no rent for land that had been stolen from them by the English. . . . The only people who did not like him were the potheen vendors and the school children” (1997/1923, p. 17). McMahon was a total abstainer and believed “potheen was the curse of the country, that and lack of education” (1997/1923, p. 17). McMahon's parishioners are unaware that Lily's return and her subsequent rejection weakened his determination to abstain from any type of alcohol. McMahon did not want to follow in the footsteps of his father or his ancestors because “the curse of the drink had been the ruin of his father's people for ages” and his father had died “in an inebriate's home” (1997/1923, p. 41).

O'Flaherty continues his description of McMahon as a poet and a writer of revolutionary material,

He wrote poetry. ‘The Death of Maeve’ had been pronounced the best poem of the year. He wrote articles for clerical periodicals. Worse still, there were rumours that he contributed to revolutionary papers in Dublin. Not exactly revolutionary papers, like Jim Larkin's Socialist paper *The Worker*, he was too responsible for that, but seditious papers,

plotting treason against his Britannic majesty, and advocating an Irish Republic.

(1997/1923, p. 16)

Father McMahan is a conscientious individual and feels his calling is to instruct and assist the inlanders and steer them in the right direction. McMahan reflects, “Those peasants they were his to train, to educate, to rouse, to make the vanguard of the great Catholic Republic of Ireland” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 30). McMahan is truly a man of God and was steadfast in his decision to become a priest. Only after he was ordained and assigned a position as curate on the island of Inverara, where he confronts Lily and her new husband, did he question the choice he made several years earlier.

The novel’s primary focal point is the internal turmoil Hugh McMahan faces between his religion and his love of God versus his love of Lily (Sheeran, 1976, p. 138). The turmoil surfaces when he sees Lily for the first time after he severed their relationship two years earlier to pursue a vocation in the clergy. Upon seeing Lily he realizes, “What a fool I was to think that I had forgotten her” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 19). From this point on in the novel, the curate is filled with internal strife, wrestling with his unrequited love of Lily, and his chosen vocation and vows he has taken to the church. He could tell from the look on her face that she was disgusted with her arranged marriage and new husband and equally disgusted with him and the way he had cast her aside for religion (1997/1923, p. 18). Lily rejected McMahan and throughout the continuation of the novel, McMahan’s internal demons torment him. His normal reasonable decisiveness and strength of will is overshadowed by his emotional upheaval. He repeatedly lost his concentration in Mass, daydreaming of Lily and how his life might have been had he made different choices in his life (1997/1923, p. 39). McMahan, “a total abstainer,” (1997/1923, p. 16) and one who adamantly stayed away from alcohol “not so much . . . from a religious point of view as because drink had been the curse of his family, and also because he considered that it was the drunken habits of the Irish that kept Ireland in subjection to England” (1997/1923, p. 41), succumbed to the drink during a period when he was in complete agony over his loss of Lily

and the uncertainty of his religious faith (1997/1923, pp. 135-136). McMahon, torn apart because of his transgressions and his surrender to temptation, shouted to himself that “He, a priest of God, ordained to the service of the Divinity, to be shepherd of the weak, to be the guide of the doubtful, the comforter and saviour of sinners, fallen a victim to temptation.” At this point he was ready to repent and pray to God for mercy when he sees the potheen bottle and gives in to temptation once more (1997/1923, p. 140).

McMahon, an ardent Nationalist, confronts a secondary conflict with respect to his patriotism in the explosive Irish political atmosphere. He wishes to support his Republican beliefs, but as a curate, he is unable to express his political views lest he be released from his position (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 62). He sees other more powerful clergy standing up for their nationalist beliefs, but he becomes conflicted with the thought of losing his clerical lifestyle because of his political views. Up until this point he had only been

tormented by the conflict of religion and love. Now was added the torment of patriotism.

. . . Yet it did not altogether collapse, but now the three objectives of his life, his religion, his love, and his patriotism, surged one into the other in his brain. (1997/1923, p. 56)

During the eight days represented by the novel’s plot, Father Hugh McMahon lives by fluctuating ethical and moral standards. One minute he is proud of being a priest and “feels a surge of piety and zeal for his priesthood and pride in himself and his flock” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 29). The next minute, feeling the desire for Lily’s flesh, he begins “to doubt about the wisdom of the step he had taken, when he renounced Lily for the priesthood” (1997/1923, p. 29). It is the constant inner combat raging between his religion, patriotism, and love that drives him to a point of despair and near insanity. And when he succumbs to this inner struggle in the form of alcohol, the war explodes into a private battle between him and his God. His actions become illogical and inconsistent of those befitting a man of God (1997/1923, pp. 136-139).

McMahon prays constantly to God for help in overcoming his wavering and tormenting amorous feelings for Lily, his fear of rejection by Lily, and his questionable love of God and fear



of rejection by God. When the thoughts continue to recur, he becomes disgusted with himself and his world. He is so engrossed in his prayers and thoughts that he becomes “exceedingly careless in his duties” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 94). When the islanders begin to notice his strange behavior, he retreats to his small room looking for solace, only to find himself face to face with his own demons. O’Flaherty describes McMahon’s battle with his internal monsters,

Then a host of thoughts, terrible thoughts, rushed at him pell-mell, overwhelming him, screaming at him and gesticulating, as if in revenge for having been suppressed for so long. There came the thought of Lily, the thought of his career destroyed, the thought of his soul damned, the thought of devils devouring him in everlasting torments.

(1997/1923, pp. 137-138)

McMahon commits the ultimate sin for a man of the clergy; he doubts God’s presence in his life and determines that God has forsaken him. He then succumbs to alcohol to relieve his pain, a path his father had used, one which McMahon so diligently had avoided. When alcohol does not relieve his pain, he remembers a tradition used by holy monks to determine who was in a state of grace:

Each evening they set out to sea in an oarless coracle, and allowed themselves to be carried away by the tide. If any of them were in sin he was drowned, and if they were in the state of grace, Divine Providence brought them back safely to land. (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 233)

Drunk and distraught, McMahon heads for the shores of Rooruck where the monastery of Cregeen once stood. He finds a small curragh and sets out to sea unaware that a storm was brewing in the distance. McMahon is terrified as the waves fill the small boat with water and as the storm grows in intensity pushing the boat further out to sea. O’Flaherty recounts the frightened curate’s thoughts and conversation with God,

For an instant of time he thought that it was the voice of God condemning him . . . The veil of drunkenness fell from his eyes. He became sober. . . . He underwent a

transformation. The curate died. The intellectual died. The visionary died. The drunkard died. The lover died. The pious, shrinking, conscientious priest, fearful of himself, torturing himself with doubts and temptations, they all died. There remained but Hugh McMahan the man, the human atom, the weak trembling being, with the savage desire to live, to save himself from the yawning chasm of death that was opened up about him by the storm. (1997/1923, p. 251)

McMahan makes a deal with God that if God returns him to land safely, he will volunteer to be a missionary in China. Apparently a good bargain had been struck between the two, for Fr. McMahan is returned from the stormy seas alive, upholding God's end of the deal, and Fr. McMahan subsequently volunteers for mission work in China, thus upholding his part of the bargain.

At the time Liam O'Flaherty began writing *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, he was 26 years old and already had experienced the many multi-faceted sides of life (O'Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 36). He experienced a life of poverty with his family on the desolate Aran Islands; and escaped the stagnant opportunities of the island to attend seminary as a young man. He went on to study at University College Dublin, touted the Irish Republican philosophy, and dabbled in the growing revolutionary ideas of early 20<sup>th</sup> century communism. O'Flaherty also experienced trench warfare during World War I and suffered the neurosis of shell shock. An unsettled personality led to travels for several years through various continents, working in a variety of odd jobs, ending in a visit to his brother in America where he became involved in the Socialist movement. During the Irish Civil War, with a group of revolutionaries, he seized the Rotunda in Dublin in the name of Communism. O'Flaherty accomplished all of these life experiences by the age of 26 before fleeing to London alone, disillusioned, and penniless. Liam O'Flaherty experienced more by the time he was 26 years old than most people do in a full lifetime. These life experiences are the reality of his past world and the well of influences from which he drew his characters as he began his writing career. The author states in his autobiography, *Shame the Devil*, "In order to

console myself for my unhappiness I began to think of my native island. . . . Suddenly I realized that if I must write, I must be the spokesman of that life” (1981/1934, p. 38). It is apparent in his first published novel that there is an underlying autobiographical portrait of the author in the main character, Fr. Hugh McMahan.

Liam O’Flaherty created Fr. Hugh McMahan as his alter ego in *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* and displays numerous aspects of O’Flaherty’s personality in McMahan’s persona. McMahan and O’Flaherty are both products of the seminary. O’Flaherty, knowing the cultural prison to which he would be sentenced, opted to study for the priesthood as a means to obtain an education and “in order not to disappoint my mother” (1981/1934, pp. 20-21). O’Flaherty also characterizes McMahan as a poet and writer, whose poem, ‘Death of Maeve,’ was chosen as best poem of the year, an accolade to which O’Flaherty aspired for his writing. In addition, both O’Flaherty and McMahan are well-educated intellectuals who share the same rebellious tendencies in their political attitudes (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 62; Doyle, 1971, p. 19). McMahan considers himself to be more than just an ordinary priest. “He was an intellectual, the most brilliant man of his year at college” (1997/1923, p. 100).

The personality traits exhibited by the fictional McMahan and the real O’Flaherty eventually give way to the similarities of the internal turmoil encountered by both men. O’Flaherty spent the last several years prior to writing *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* in precarious and potentially explosive situations. Not only did he struggle to find meaning in his life and purpose in his religious and political viewpoints, but he also battled melancholia acuta, a form of insanity from the shell shock experience during World War I (O’Flaherty, 1930, pp. 71-72). His doctor during the time of his mental instability informed him that he will ““have to go through life with that shell bursting in your head”” (O’Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 83). He turned to alcohol to forget his pain and agony (1981/1934, p. 10). O’Flaherty projected his past turmoil onto McMahan by placing him in a volatile situation for a man of the clergy. He places McMahan in a position in which he questions the validity of the Catholic religion and his God. In addition, McMahan

doubts his worthiness as a member of the clergy, because he yields to temptation of the drink and thoughts of a woman's love and companionship.

McMahon, like O'Flaherty, questions the oppressiveness of the Catholic religion. O'Flaherty, beginning with his early years in seminary, had doubts regarding the "religious authoritarianism and puritanism which were commonplace in Ireland, and he felt that many of the religious beliefs being inculcated were mere superstition" (Doyle, 1971, p. 20). McMahon follows suit by questioning the validity of religion and whether it has any hold on the islanders, "beyond the reverence they had for it as something they could not understand, and which was supposed to help them without much effort on their part" (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 32). O'Flaherty "grew increasingly anticlerical, initially because he felt that the Catholic Church was too wealthy while the people were too poor" (Doyle, 1971, p. 20). McMahon also has the same concerns with the Church. He is concerned that they are reducing religion to business and he is appalled at the higher priests flaunting their wealth while the peasants suffer (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 188). McMahon feels the peasants "lived more in accordance with the laws of God than most bishops whom he knew" (1997/1923, p. 33). He asserts that he "should have become a Jesuit, cut away from the world, so that he could give all his time to the development of the spiritual in him, and have the association of men who were intellectuals like himself, not vulgar priests like Fr O'Reilly" (1997/1923, p. 187).

The internal turmoil escalates inside McMahon as O'Flaherty projects into his fictional character his own reservations about the religious teachings he received in seminary. O'Flaherty was taught that Catholics blindly accept the Pope (Zneimer, 1970, p. 34) and that "Darwin's theory of evolution was heretical" (Kelly, 1976, p. 68). McMahon, as an intellectual, reflects on the inconsistencies,

He wonders whether there is any sense in confession and the giving of absolution for their sins, "There was Darwin and Huxley and Haeckel . . . Without a doubt there was a conflict between the discoveries of science and what had been hitherto accepted as the

origin of the world and of God according to the Biblical version. (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 190)

McMahon knew the priests had read these books as he had seen them firsthand at school,

It was all very well for them to define as good what suited their own interests as priests or what praised their religion, and as bad whatever was contrary to their own interests. . . .

‘Bad is a diminution of reality.’ . . . Oh yes, that’s what that theologian had said, McDonald or somebody, but he didn’t say what was reality. (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 193)

The religious turmoil inside McMahon existed in conjunction with his love for his country and his stance as a passionate and dedicated Nationalist. McMahon “dreamt of a great Irish Catholic Republic, an Ireland that would again become the torch of learning and sanctity for the whole world” (O’Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 17). At one point in O’Flaherty’s political activities, he was also an enthusiastic Nationalist and had grown up with a rebel Fenian father who detested anything English. Tom O’Flaherty refers to their father as “a Fenian and a Land Leaguer, and most of the time he forgot that he was a father of a large family. He was used to police attentions and accustomed to jails” (1934, pp. 70-71). In his early teens, Liam rallied a group of students behind the Republican Volunteers and continued his association with the group while attending University College. McMahon’s and O’Flaherty’s thoughts become solidified as McMahon reflects on the speeches being delivered at the United Irish League political rally,

But the curate, being an intellectual, was beyond being impressed by the oratorical buffoonery of Mr. Donovan, and being a Republican in his soul, though he dared not confess it in public for fear of being suspended, he hated the British Empire and he hated the United Irish League and Mr. Donovan, as representing the British Empire. Further, being an intellectual, he understood that all politicians would sell their souls along with their own country for private gain, and he knew that they were not out for the love of

Ireland, but for the sake of the emolument that might accrue to them by advocating the ideals of Irish liberty. He was not impressed. (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 62)

McMahon and O'Flaherty both wrestle with their religion and their politics, with O'Flaherty's confusion reflected in McMahon, who remembers his mental conflict between his vocation and his nationalism before he became a priest. "He was then in two minds, whether to throw aside his vocation and give his life for the liberation of his country or persevere" (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 31).

McMahon chose to persevere; O'Flaherty did not. McMahon turns to God for support when he feels himself slipping and wrestling with his religion,

He was preaching to himself. He was trying to empty his soul of the wild torrent of passion that he felt was going to overwhelm him. He was crying aloud, like the prophet in the wilderness, casting his voice to the four winds of heaven, appealing for help against his temptation. His soul was contracted in an agony of pain, fearful of the chasm that stretched before it, magnifying the chasm, so that if it did fall, if it did succumb, if it were defeated in the struggle with sin, its conscience would understand that it did not fall without a superhuman struggle. (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 43)

If God in his Divine Providence allows McMahon to survive his ultimate ordeal in the oarless coracle, McMahon vows to leave his appointment as curate on Inverara and dedicate his life as a missionary in China. God's test is the solution to his conflict amongst his three personal objectives in life: religion, patriotism, and love, the troubled trinity. Fr. Hugh McMahon survives the ordeal of overcoming worldly temptations, thus bringing himself back into the fold of God, settling his conflict with his troubled trinity (O'Flaherty, 1997/1923, p. 252-256).

O'Flaherty's fictional character of Fr. McMahon personifies all of the characteristics that Liam O'Flaherty rejects in his early years with the effect that his beloved Ireland alienated him both personally and professionally. The two personal choices that O'Flaherty makes of rejecting Catholicism to pursue the Socialist movement, and turning his back on the Republican ideals to

join the Irish Guards of the British army, result in the personal and professional rejection and alienation of Inishmore's native son. O'Flaherty attests to this fact in *Shame the Devil* when he talks about joining the Irish Guards,

This was a far greater blow to my relatives than my refusal to become a priest, and is was the event in my life most responsible for the outcast position in which I now find myself. . . . When I came home from the war in 1918, I was regarded as a pariah and a fool and a renegade. Those who did not hate me for having worn an English uniform pitied me, which was equally unpleasant. (1981/1934, p. 21)

Liam O'Flaherty, had he made the same choices in life that his fictional character Fr. Hugh McMahan made, would have experienced the acceptance felt by McMahan instead of the rejection he experienced in real life. O'Flaherty chose to sever his ties with Catholicism because he thought the Church had too much power and wealth and did little to help the common man. He despised the authoritative and puritan aspects of the Catholic religion. His choice, therefore, was to break ties with the Church, knowing that his family and friends would be appalled at this decision. He also elected to throw aside his Republican ideas, much to the dismay of his father and his native islanders. He knew both of these decisions he made in life would alienate him from his native land, but these were his beliefs and he was steadfast in his decisions. It was not until later that he realized the impact of his decisions upon his return to the Aran Islands,

I have remained, in the eyes of the vast majority of the Irish men and women, a public menace to faith, morals and property, a Communist, an atheist, a scoundrel of the worst type, a man whom thousand would burn at the stake if they had the courage. (O'Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 22)

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

As so often happened in the Irish diaspora, which lasted over several centuries, many men and women left Ireland never to return physically, but they lived elsewhere with thoughts of their homeland always in their minds. Liam O’Flaherty left the Aran Islands to roam halfway around the world to return mentally through his writing *Thy Neighbour’s Wife*.

At 26 years of age, O’Flaherty decided he “had had enough of manual labour and wandering” (1930, p. 348) and “thought it time to adopt a profession of some sort” (Sheeran, 1976, p. 78). A friend, who was familiar with O’Flaherty’s articles in revolutionary papers, encouraged him to write stories. At that point in his life he was dead to “Catholicism, Republicanism and Communism” (1976, p. 78), three components of his past that held significance for much of his young life. The most obvious material to draw upon for the story of his first novel was the realism of life that he experienced growing up on the Aran Islands and in his worldly travels (O’Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 38). Thus began O’Flaherty’s career as a realist writer and artist as he “shapes something that exists between himself and his world” (Zneimer, 1970, p. xi).

*Thy Neighbour’s Wife* is a story of a troubled trinity: conflict among religion, patriotism, and love. Liam O’Flaherty’s early years are also a story of the same troubled trinity. O’Flaherty draws upon his cultural, historical, religious, and political influences of the first 26 years of his life to create his first novel. He projects his inner tensions onto the main character, Fr. Hugh McMahan, who ultimately represents an underlying autobiographical portrait of O’Flaherty. *Thy Neighbour’s Wife* in its entirety, along with the central character of Fr. Hugh McMahan, are used by O’Flaherty to convey his own personal struggles prior to the writing of the novel.

My thesis examines the historical, parental, educational, religious, and political influences upon O’Flaherty’s early life, from his Catholic upbringing on the secluded Aran



Islands to the writing of his first novel in 1923 and how these influences affected the writing of the first novel. Through analysis of these influences, I illustrate that O'Flaherty drew from his past experiences to develop the storyline, as well as his main character, Fr. Hugh McMahon, and the relationship with his female protagonist, Lily.

*Thy Neighbour's Wife* is grounded in the author's time and place of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. The novel is set around 1910 on the island of O'Flaherty's birth and it was during this time in his real life that he contemplated leaving his home to study for the priesthood. The setting of the novel is crucial to the development of O'Flaherty's fictional characters, because it reflects a time in his own life when he left the island and became educated to the ways of the world.

Religion was an integral part of the novel. Religion and education were crucial to O'Flaherty's personal life and he chose to incorporate these influences in the novel in various fashions. The main character is a Catholic curate and the primary thread of the storyline is the curate's conflict with God and worldly temptations, particularly a woman in the name of Lily. O'Flaherty began his schooling in seminary and would have become a curate himself had he completed his studies for the clergy.

McMahon's superior, parish priest Fr. O'Reilly, represents all that O'Flaherty finds disgusting with the Catholic Church. He incorporates in Fr. O'Reilly all that he finds abhorrent with religion by portraying him as a money hungry, power hungry, parish priest who has his best interest at heart, rather than those of his parishioners. Elements that disgusted O'Flaherty in religion, such as lust for power and money, resulted in his personal decision to leave the priesthood. In O'Flaherty's fiction, Fr. O'Reilly represents two sides of religion, the good and the bad. The Aran islanders placed the parish priests on a pedestal, giving rise to the desire for young men to become priests. But the fictional O'Reilly also represented what O'Flaherty perceived as the ugly side of religion: excessive wealth and power-hungry authoritarianism. O'Flaherty's decision to leave the seminary disgraced his family in the eyes of other islanders, culminating in his alienation from those around him.

Throughout the novel, O'Flaherty makes a distinction between Catholics and Protestants, particularly in their respective socioeconomic stations in the community. The historical divisions between these two religions set the stage for the airing of much of O'Flaherty's own political views within the novel's plot and characters. Political influences in the form of nationalism and republicanism illustrate McMahon's love of his country. O'Flaherty depicts other political representations using characters attending a United Irish League political rally, supporting the Home Rule Movement, the contemporary sentiment of O'Flaherty's day. It is also interesting to note the treatment of socialism in the novel, because O'Flaherty was an advocate of that doctrine, which led partially to his alienation by Irish society. He treated socialism in a negative light by depicting socialist characters as less than desirable.

The third part of the trinity, love, is three-fold: love of one's country, love of God, and love of a woman. Fr. McMahon traded his love of Lily for his love of God and, therefore, had to reconcile the recurring doubts of that decision. Both O'Flaherty and McMahon made choices in their past that triggered internal conflict in their presents. McMahon came to terms with the choice he made by the selection of spirit over body. He overcame Lily's rejection and thus brought himself back into God's grace. O'Flaherty also came to terms with the choices he made regarding his religious and political beliefs. However, his homeland of Ireland rejected and alienated him because of the decisions he made. Therefore, I contend that O'Flaherty used McMahon as a mirror on his own troubled past, with the rejection by Lily being employed as a metaphor for Ireland's rejection of himself. O'Flaherty, had he made the same choice as McMahon to continue in the priesthood, would have avoided the alienation of his homeland.

A character analysis reveals that Fr. McMahon is a man of God, although a man often troubled with God. O'Flaherty characterizes him as a writer and a sensitive individual, much like himself. He projects onto McMahon the inner turmoil that he experienced when writing the novel. O'Flaherty was at a time in his life where he was trying to come to terms with his past

personal choices. He depicts McMahon as an individual with the aforementioned inner turmoil brought about from his choice of God over his love of Lily.

In *Thy Neighbour's Wife*, McMahon represents an underlying autobiographical portrait of O'Flaherty. Both men faced personal choices, dealt with them in their own distinctive manners, and came to terms with their decisions of the past. Both O'Flaherty and McMahon were in flight from their own personal demons:

And then again I saw myself in flight. A lean man with terrified, furtive eyes . . . I tried feverishly to drive him away, but he kept coming back, and then I knew that I must face him, talk to him and find out what he wanted. He was myself and therefore I must gain mastery over him, or he would remain there for ever at the back of my mind, to rush at me when I was in distress. (O'Flaherty, 1981/1934, pp. 34-35).

Fr. McMahon could have spoken the above sentiment. However, O'Flaherty wrote these words in one of his autobiographies about himself prior to writing the novel. O'Flaherty's first novel is indeed autobiographically revealing in nature, as both O'Flaherty and McMahon could have said, "And as soon as I agreed to face him I grew calm" (O'Flaherty, 1981/1934, p. 35).

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APPENDIX  
FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Fenian Brotherhood was a secret society formed in America in 1858 dedicated to the ideals of extricating the British government from the entire island of Ireland (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1997, pp. 107-108).

<sup>2</sup>Republicans are also referred to as Nationalists or Separatists. At this time, the Irish are divided into either Unionists, those who support the Home Rule Bills, and Separatists, who wanted complete separation from the British government, the same as George Washington wanted from Britain for American in the 1770s (Joy, 1916, pp. 5-6).

<sup>3</sup>“Unionists held...that their claim to remain under...the Imperial Parliament is an inalienable right of their citizenship which no Government of any time has the right to deprive them of” (Hennessey, 1998, p. 16).

<sup>4</sup>On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1800, the Act of Union created a constitutional union between Ireland and Great Britain (Jackson, 2001, pp.19-25).

<sup>5</sup>In 1845 a severe blight infected the potato crops throughout the island. The Irish, the majority of whose economic mainstay and sustenance was the potato, starved and perceived the English as deliberately inadequate with their help to alleviate the situation (Crowley, 2000, p. 135).

<sup>6</sup>The establishment of the Home Rule League, founded in 1873, was another chapter in the fight to have Ireland govern itself and to uphold and preserve the Gaelic language and culture (Hughes, 1994, p. 14; McCaffrey, L. 1957, 160-177).

<sup>7</sup>The Irish Republican Brotherhood was a secret society founded in Ireland in 1858 with the ideal of complete independence from Great Britain. It was the precursor of the Irish Republican Army (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1997, pp. 107-108).

<sup>8</sup> Sinn Féin is a political party of Ireland whose basic tenet is the freedom of the Irish people from Great Britain (Jones, 1917, p. 1-2).

<sup>9</sup> One school, the “Free Staters,” believed the treaty was at least a start to full independence and by not ratifying the treaty, complete and total independence for Ireland would be prolonged. The opposing school of thought, the Republicans, was adamant about Ireland remaining whole and refused to consider the concept of partition that allowed Britain to retain control over a portion of their country (Purdon, 2000, p. 20-21).

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