

## **Interpreting Lyric Meaning in Irish Tradition: Love and Death in the Shadow of Tralee**

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In the study of oral poetics, progressively greater attention and accord have been paid to the capacities of the traditional audience, that group of knowledgeable individuals for whom or before whom a poem or song was originally performed. Past research on oral or oral-derived works, conditioned by certain fundamental assumptions regarding texts and authors, focused on the text itself or on the skills or identity of a reconstructed author/performer. The audience involved—not seldom long lost in the past—was often simply assumed, its interpretative arsenal and methods subsumed under tabulations of information with which audience members were said to have been familiar: “folklore,” “native lays and traditions,” “analogues,” “traditional matter,” “vernacular learning.” In his seminal 1936 essay on *Beowulf*, J. R. R. Tolkien used just these terms to describe a set of information shared between author and audience that he found implied by the rich fabric of allusions and contrasts of imagery inherent in the Old English poem. In describing these, he was able to conclude that “the whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet’s contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with deep significance . . .” (107). Dorothy Whitelock’s *The Audience of Beowulf* (1951) took these assumptions regarding the “minds of the poet’s contemporaries” further by trying to establish what backgrounds, gender, and livelihoods the “alert and intelligent” audience of the work was likely to have had in the first place. But as scholarship revealed ever-greater complexities in both the composition and performance of oral works, some scholars refused to accord an equal sophistication to their audiences: Paul F. Baum (1960), for instance, roundly rejected Whitelock’s assumptions, preferring instead to see *Beowulf* as the product of a genius poet writing largely only for himself and probably comprehensible to barely a handful of highly gifted readers. And although modern reception theory has rekindled scholarly interest in the audience as a significant part of the performance of

verbal art (Jauss 1974, Iser 1989), it remains true that relatively little ethnographic work has aimed at elucidating the role(s) of competent audience members in the act of interpreting a given performance.

In a critical climate such as this, scholarship that explores audience competence in the interpretation of oral poetry, termed variously “oral literary criticism” (Dundes 1966, Narayan 1995), “traditional referentiality” (Foley 1991), or “native hermeneutics” (DuBois 1996), offers valuable insights. It allows us to deepen and expand the arc of knowledge that we may assume of a traditional audience to encompass not only the exact “traditional matter” with which the audience was familiar but also the *manner* in which such an audience approached the interpretative challenges of the work as performed. And although we may never know with absolute certainty just how much or just *how* the original audience of a work like *Beowulf* actually understood the *Beowulf* text, we may look to living oral traditions today for some inkling of the actual interpretative competencies expected of native audiences in receiving performances of oral poetry or song. If these can be shown to be complex—as complex, indeed, as the genres they accompany—then we are in a position to accord past audiences the esteem evinced by Tolkien and Whitelock rather than the apparent disdain shown by Baum.

Since the appearance of Albert Lord’s *Singer of Tales* (1960) a degree of scholarly consensus has developed regarding the kinds of knowledge commanded by singers and, perhaps more passively, by their audiences. Among scholars in the field, it is generally granted that audiences share with their performers not only stores of common knowledge (particular plot or character details, and distinctive turns of phrase) but also broader narrative patterns and assumptions regarding how such elements will be combined into overall performances. These audience expectations can be termed “generic” in the sense that they are based on shared (but ever negotiated) assumptions about how one performs a given *genre*: what works for an audience in a myth or epic performance, in other words, may differ from what the same audience is likely to expect or accept in the performance of a different genre. Further, any genre is likely to possess hermeneutic conventions concerning how an audience ought to interpret the choices and achievements of any given performance within the tradition. In a very real sense, because performers share these conventions with their audiences, they become members of their own audience, evaluating their own distinctive contributions along lines conditioned by past performances, by the weight of tradition. An audience as such is not *a priori* inferior to the author/performer: it exerts influence over the performance as constituted, it

sustains the performance in its execution, and ultimately it shares in deciding the meaning that the performance is said to express.

It is in this light that I present the following analysis of the apparent negotiated meaning of two lyric songs performed in 1998 by Michael Lyne of Tandragee, County Meath, Ireland. This study is part of a larger research project that focuses on North European lyric songs: a genre characterized by its focus not on an explicit plot (as in narrative songs) but on the depiction of feelings, personalities, or situations glimpsed in the persona of an inscribed lyric “speaker,” whose words or perceptions make up the fabric of the song. In their freedom from the immediate strictures of erecting and furthering a narrative plot, lyric songs represent startlingly open texts, ones surprisingly indeterminate in their overt meanings. To a listener from outside the tradition, the song may appear cryptic or confused and the question of what a “knowing audience” would make of it springs readily to mind. Yet within the local lyric tradition itself, this openness is artfully filled by normative modes of interpretation that, along with the songs themselves, constitute the tradition. A lyric may be glossed by means of a narrative contained partly within the lines of the song or absent entirely from the text at hand and provided only subsequently in a prose explication (a “narrativizing” hermeneutics). Alternatively, the lyric may be explained with reference to the general lot of persons within a given situation, e.g., the “typical” plight of a daughter-in-law or orphan (a “proverbializing” hermeneutics). At the same time, or in contrast, the song may become meaningful to an audience or even to the singer through reference to its supposed creator, supposed recipient, or personal experiences or resonances evoked by the song. These generic hermeneutic strategies appear to vary from culture to culture, although it may be possible to offer an overall etic typology of them (DuBois 1996). By attending to them in a given lyric performance, we may arrive at some understanding of the complexities inherent in the traditional audience role and of the mechanisms by which a tradition selects and organizes the likely interpretations of an audience into a manageable set of norms. In so doing, we may take stock of the sophistication a living oral tradition may expect of its audience.

### Mick Lyne's Performance

When there's brighter days in Ireland,  
I'll come back and marry thee . . . .

Mick Lyne's voice rises in a thin quaver, embellished by the nearly endless gracenotes typical of Kerry Gaeltach *sean-nos* singing. At high points in his rendition, his voice mingles with the earthier, robust tones of Lizzy, Mick's West Meath bride of 27 years. It is a second marriage for them both: their courtship began in pubs after the deaths of their first spouses and when all of Mick's six children and Lizzy's two sons were raised and had moved away. Tape recorder in hand, I sit in their parlor by the grandson of Mick's eldest sister Noney, who emigrated to America when he was only fourteen. Mick, Noney's youngest brother, is singing me his repertoire. The date is July 17, 1998.

Few performative genres delineate the passage from normal discourse into performance as clearly and cogently as Irish lyric singing. The performer closes his eyes or stares off toward some otherworldly spot, his voice, mannerisms, and tone all transformed. He maintains this performative frame until the final syllables of his song, when he slips, tired but seemingly fulfilled, back into the conversational tone of the ordinary world. Yet elements trail Mick from this world to the next, and he would be a poor performer in Irish eyes if they did not. Mick takes stock of his audience, of himself, and of the issues of the day, creating a performance that uses a stable repertoire but comments on various issues germane to the moment at hand. This particular moment involved me as Mick and Lizzy's guest as well as political events then occurring in Northern Ireland, and the wider context of a changing Ireland. As we shall see, Mick's performance finds some of its meaning in each of these contextual factors, but only with the cooperation and collaboration of audience members.

I follow Margaret Mills (1991) in adopting a reflexive approach in this description, including myself as a factor and force in the performance. I was, after all, part of the audience that evening. Further, Mills shows in her study of Afghani storytellers the sometimes subtle, sometimes strident commentary on political situations that may occur within performances directed at ethnographers. Such turns out to be the case with the present performance as well.

Michael Lyne was born in 1912 in the tiny village of Ballinskelligs, a small cluster of farmsteads and fishing cottages on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in the far west of County Kerry. He grew up in an Irish-speaking household of seven children and distinguished himself in early manhood as a

champion rower as well as a fine singer. He moved to County Meath in 1960 as part of a government resettlement program that gave Westerners from heavily populated areas tracts of redistributed farmland in Ireland's most productive agricultural regions. This program aided farmers like Mick, although it also caused some friction, particularly between newcomers to the region and local farmers or farmworkers, many of whom remained unable to acquire land of their own. Regional and linguistic differences, too, sometimes caused conflicts: Mick and his five daughters attest today to the hostility they faced in Meath when they first arrived. Perhaps partly in response to these conflicts, Mick maintained close ties with his family in Kerry, through letters and visits and eventually by telephone.

Mick visited America twice during my childhood and always made a point of singing his songs for the assembled families of his sister's children. When I visited Mick as a college student in the early 1980s, I was able to see him perform his songs in their primary context, the various pubs and homes of the area surrounding Tandragee. I remember during those visits that Mick's repertoire was well known to his friends and that they called for particular songs of his by name, rewarding performances (as was customary) with pints of porter. Favorite among these locals was Mick's rendering of *Little Thatched Cabin*, a song that relates the mournful nostalgia of a Kerryman remembering his humble childhood home. Clearly, people from Meath liked to hear their Kerryman friend sing a song that embodied his experience of migration to their region. They even enjoyed the songs Mick sang in Irish, itself a shining symbol of the unique Irish identity of Kerry and a symbol of Irish culture throughout the land. People asked what the Irish songs were about or they simply knew from previous performances. Quite often, they simply seemed to enjoy the sound of the language, but were also glad when the singing returned to English. When I wrote to Uncle Mick to ask if I could come and record his songs in 1998, it was important to Mick and Lizzy both that I requested the songs by name: I had to show an interest in and cognizance of his repertoire, it seemed, before I would be granted the performance I requested. In this way, Mick and Lizzy seemed to assimilate my request into the same category as that of pub friends' requests I had witnessed years before.

That locals of Mick and Lizzy's generation equated Mick with his repertoire on some very essential level was evident from a number of comments I heard during my stay in 1998. For most people in Mick and Lizzy's acquaintance, Mick's particular life experiences as a migrant to the region are crystallized and embodied in his songs, even when they usually refer to emigration to America rather than migration within Ireland. When a friend mistakenly heard that Mick had died, for instance, she called Lizzy on

the phone, playing her recording of Mick's singing while she spoke tearful condolences to the supposed widow. Lizzy simply laughed and said that she could hear the same from the living Mick, sitting beside her in the house. For both women, it was the singing that characterized Mick and expressed his essence to others.

Mick, too, shares this view of his singing and accords his core repertoire of some twelve lyric songs—two in Irish and ten in English—great respect and seriousness. He will not sing other songs besides them. At one point during my visit, when Lizzy tried to get Mick to sing a song from outside his active repertoire, he snapped:

M: "I don't have that song!"

L: "Sure, but you *know* the song anyway, don't ya, Mick?  
How does it go again?"

M: "By God, Lizzy girl, I can't be bothered remembering that one!"

Being "bothered remembering a song" seems to mean that somehow the song resonates with Mick's own life: only then is it worth the work of learning and maintaining. Songs in this way are like "the company we keep": shapers as well as emblems of the selves we would like to be.

Lizzy, the former proprietor of a pub, has a lighter view of song, one that is, however, equally prevalent in the locale. Her own forte in years past was humorous songs, which contrasted markedly with the seriousness and sorrow of Mick's Kerry lyrics. When the two would drive to pubs in the 1980s, Mick would sing his sad songs of exile, battle dead, and tragic love, and Lizzy would lighten the tone with a performance or two of her own. In an analogous fashion, Lizzy regarded these songs as encapsulating her particular views on life and enjoyed expressing these to a circle of friends who would recognize in them Lizzy's own personality. The traditional becomes in both singers a vehicle for expressing the personal.

While Mick has obviously worked to select, learn, and develop his repertoire, asking and learning about songs are also viewed as important parts of a youth's role in folkloric performance. Mick and Lizzy expected me to ask questions about Mick's songs so that I could learn from him about Ireland and about my family. "You've come back to Ireland to learn about your family," Lizzy told me, "and you'll hear it all and then some in your uncle's songs." Whenever Lizzy herself gave information, she checked on whether I had committed it to memory. When driving in the region, she pointed to different houses and recalled residents and families who had lived there one or two generations ago. Then she drove the same way back and quizzed me on who lived where. At other points in our drives together

through the maze of small lanes between Trim, Longwood, Rath Maloyne, and Tandragee, Lizzy would stop the car and ask: “Now, Tommy, which is the right turn home?” When I pointed out the correct turn, Lizzy cheered with approval. But then she turned in the opposite direction, just to show me that we could get home by other ways as well. “Lizzy knows all the roads in these parts!” she said with delight. In traditional Irish learning, as modeled by Mick and Lizzy, elders impart knowledge that youth, if smart, seek out. As Meath is Lizzy’s land, she can purvey knowledge of its history by pointing out its landmarks and recounting personal narratives and legends. As Mick’s land is the absent Kerry, he must convey knowledge of it only through songs. The local is not really his, even if he owns land there and had by that time resided in the county for 38 years.

Since Mick’s lyrics tend to focus on either love or war, I present one of each below. The songs are presented in text form alone in order to focus attention on their comparability with other genres of oral poetry. After each song, I discuss the interpretations Mick and Lizzy brought to bear upon it and what these can tell us about hermeneutic traditions within their culture. Mick and Lizzy preferred to switch the tape recorder off between song performances, an act that indicates a clear differentiation in their minds between the performance of a song (which is to be recorded and esteemed) and the interpretative discourse that follows (which is merely to be received). In several cases, however, I was able to leave the tape running, and these allow for the detailed presentations of the discussions that follow the songs below.

The first song is amply familiar to fans of Irish folksong: *The Rose of Tralee*. It will illustrate the narrativizing hermeneutics that Mick and Lizzy (and Irish tradition in general: see Shields 1991) favor in interpreting lyric songs.

The pale moon was rising upon the green mountains,  
The sun was declining beneath the blue sea,  
When I strayed with my love to the pure crystal fountain,  
That stands in the beautiful Vale of Tralee.

She was lovely and fair like the roses and the summer,  
It was not her beauty alone that won me;  
Oh no, it was the truth in her eyes, they were darling,  
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.

The cold shades of evening her mantle were spreading,  
And Mary all smiling was listening to me;  
The moon through the valley her pale ray was shedding,

When I won the heart of the Rose of Tralee.

*[Mick and Lizzy together]*

She was lovely and fair like the roses and the summer,  
It was not her beauty alone that won me;  
Oh no, it was the truth in her eyes, they were darling,  
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.<sup>1</sup>

The song as such appears to recount the moment at which the lyric speaker won the heart of a girl named Mary, the Rose of Tralee. The evening and location are depicted with some specificity, but the force of all the natural imagery—the weather, the valley, the rose—appears deployed as a commentary on the human emotion and moment at hand. The moment is depicted as in a nostalgic reminiscence, somehow removed in time from the narrative moment depicted. Within Irish lyric hermeneutics, the audience is expected to be interested in the identity of these two characters and to call for a narrative explication of the song if it is not yet known. Immediately following the song, Lizzy proceeded to supply me with her version of this narrative:

L: This was, you're asking about a folksong.

T: Yes.

L: This was a very high society sort of fellow. He was his uncle's son of the house, and she was a maid in the house.

T: Aha.

L: Right. And he was courting her.

M: Ah, my.

L: She started, I think she had a child from him. And I'm not terrible sure what they, *his* family was very much against it. But, eh, when she died, she died in Kerry. When she died, he was poor. He was the only son of this fairly wealthy house. And he wrote that song about her. But she has, eh . . . Nobody knows where the Rose of Tralee is buried.

M: No, somewhere in Kerry. She's buried in an unmarked grave and there's—

L: Even though *every* year there's the Rose of Tralee [beauty pageant] there's nobody knows where Mary the Rose of Tralee is buried. The song was composed by the boyfriend.

M: That's right.

L: "The truth in her eyes" that were—

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<sup>1</sup> As with *Valley of Knockanure*, the words to this song are transcribed as performed by Mick Lyne, and vary slightly from published versions of the songs.



M: That's right, [*sings*] "That made me love Mary." He gave her—she died of *grief*.

L: Yeah.

M: Poor Mary.

L: I don't know what she died of, but nobody knows where she's buried.

M: And every year there's a big celebration down in Kerry—

L: And nobody knows.

M: They can't find out where she is buried—a mystery.

Mick and Lizzy's explication offers an entirely different tone to the song as performed. Now, rather than the portrayal of a lover's fond memory, the song becomes an ironic contrast to the tragedy that will eventually befall Mary and her beau. Although the tale of class difference, familial pressures, out-of-wedlock birth, and death lies outside of the lyric's words, Mick and Lizzy found it evidenced in the phrases they quoted from the text: "the truth in her eyes" and "that made me love Mary." Just how these phrases are tied to the narrative events is left unclear in their rendering of them to me, but it is clear that for Mick and Lizzy lyric and narrative are inextricably linked.

As *The Rose of Tralee* is a very well known Irish song, the prose narrative that accompanies it is also familiar to many. On the website for the Rose of Tralee festival ([www.roseoftralee.ie](http://www.roseoftralee.ie)), the event organizers present both the song and its narrative explanation for interested readers to peruse. Their account differs somewhat from that of Mick and Lizzy's. For one thing, the published version provides more explicit information—the characters, for example, are named: William Pembroke Mulchinock and Mary O'Connor. And they pass through a variety of travails, though these do not include the birth of an illegitimate child. The lovers are separated at the moment of their engagement by the news that William is wanted (wrongly) for murder. He flees to India, where he is bolstered by his memories of his faithfully waiting bride-to-be. An additional stanza is included in the website's version to substantiate these narrative events:

In the far fields of India, 'mid war's dreadful thunders,  
Her voice was a solace and comfort to me,  
But the chill hand of death has now rent us asunder,  
I'm lonely tonight for the Rose of Tralee.

William returns to Tralee just in time to see Mary's funeral procession (the cause of her death is unspecified), eventually marries another woman, emigrates to America, divorces, returns to Ireland, and lives his last years by Mary's grave at Clogherbrien, dogged by her memory and a resultant

addiction to alcohol. The pageant's version, then, lacks the detail of the child or Mary's broken heart and remains silent concerning the point about which Mick and Lizzy were most adamant: the missing grave.

Mick and Lizzy's stress on the lost unmarked grave (a detail that would support the idea that Mary's child was illegitimate) somehow accords the song greater efficacy in their eyes. The only evidence we have of these lovers' tragedy lies in the existence of the song and its accompanying narrative explication. They have left no other mark upon the world. In this sense, Mick and Lizzy's understanding of *The Rose of Tralee* is quite different from what we might expect in the case of a historical ballad. In the latter, we would presume, physical evidence that ties the song unambiguously to the historical record would be seen to enhance the credibility and quality of the song. In *The Rose of Tralee*, in contrast, it is the very lack of evidence that intensifies the poignancy and effect of the lyric. The fact that millions of people know the song today and that a major festival takes its name from it attests to the power of this song to encapsulate enduring emotions, ones somehow emblematic of the Kerry experience.

It is also noteworthy that Mick's version leaves out the stanza that ties the song most concretely to its supporting narrative, namely the one that mentions India and Mary's death. Even by the website's account, this stanza must have been composed later than the rest—after William's return to Ireland and discovery of his true love's demise. Yet its absence in the case of Mick's version demonstrates that the lyric need have little explicit textual relation to its explanatory narrative. If the stanza were really necessary to an audience's understanding, it would not be left out, not at least by a singer who takes as much care about his repertoire as does Mick Lyne. It is, perhaps, the resultant abbreviated song's tone of optimism and stasis that gives it its force in Mick and Lizzy's eyes: the fond memory tinged by an unstated coming tragedy. This same notion of foreboding is reflected in the published narrative, in which the young Mary, upon hearing the song for the first time, is made to exclaim:

Oh William, it's the most beautiful song I've ever heard in my life. It's so beautiful that somehow—somehow . . . it somehow makes me afraid.

Mary's explanation for her fear is that music haunts the O'Connor family as an ill omen. Yet the explanation may arise equally from the interpretive tendencies of the lyric genre: even when a song relates seemingly happy events, the knowing audience recognizes a submerged narrative of sorrow.

In addition to this explanatory narrative, however, Mick and Lizzy rely on a further basis for interpreting this song: its relation to Mick. Lizzy introduced the song to me as follows:

L: Would you like him singing *The Rose of Tralee*?

T: Sure. Yeah.

L: Well, seeing's he had had a daughter in it.

Now, given the sad content of the song's explanatory narrative, this remark would be difficult to understand if one were unaware of the Rose of Tralee beauty pageant. In fact, for decades, this annual festival has expressed a cogent aspect of Kerry culture by staging a beauty pageant open to all women who have Kerry roots, regardless of where they currently live. This transnational local pageant draws women from as far afield as the United States and England, demonstrating the continuing legacy of leave-taking and absenteeism depicted in the song. In the early 1970s, Mick's daughter Noreen—then living in Liverpool—won the contest. This fact entitles Mick, in Lizzy's eyes, to an even greater right to perform the song than were he just an ordinary Kerryman. Here again, we find the notion that one's repertoire must be consonant with one's persona: Mick should sing lyrics that emblemize experiences in his life or in that of his family. The fact that the pageant itself is named after the lyric and that the pageant's rules stipulate a Kerry background indicates that this association is widespread within Irish tradition. The song—its narrative explication and its personal resonances in the life of the performer—become enmeshed in a single complex whole through the act of performance and its reception by a knowing audience.

The second song I present here reflects another side of Mick's repertoire: songs of war. Mick sang several such lyrics during his performance that evening and these appear equally as important to him as his songs of love.

You may come and speak about Easter week and the heroes of '98,  
 Of the gallant men who roamed the glen  
 In victory or defeat;  
 Their names were placed in history's page,  
 Their memories will endure;  
 Not a song was sung for our darling sons  
     In the Valley of Knockanure.

They were Walshe, Lynes, and Dalton,  
 Men that were in their prime.

In every house, in every town  
 They were always side by side.  
 The Republic bold, they did uphold,  
 They outlawed on the moor,  
 But side by side, they fought and died,  
     In the Valley of Knockanure.

At Gortnagleanna's rugged height,  
 Three gallant men took shape,  
 They viewed the soft sweet wheat  
 As the summer breeze did play.  
 It was not long until Lynes came on  
 Saying, "Time is not mine nor yours,"  
 But it was too late, they met their fate,  
     In the Valley of Knockanure.

They took them then beside a fence  
 Where the furze did bloom.  
 And like brothers so, they faced the foe,  
 To meet with their dreadful doom.  
 And when Dalton was dying, aloud he cried  
 With a fashion proud and true:  
 "For our land we're dying, as we face the sky,  
     In the Valley of Knockanure."

It was by a neighboring hillside  
 They listened in calm dismay.  
 In every house, in every town,  
 A maiden knelt and prayed.  
 "They are closing in around us, with a rifle fire so sure,"  
 And Dalton is dead and Lynes is down,  
     In the Valley of Knockanure.

There they lay in the hillside's clay  
 For the love of Ireland's cause.  
 The cowardly clan, the Black-and-Tans,  
 They showed them English law.  
 No more they'll feel the soft wild steel  
 Over uplands fair and high,  
 For side by side, they fought and died,  
     In the Valley of Knockanure.

I then met Dalton's mother and those words to me did say:  
 "May the Lord have mercy on those boys  
 Who died in that glen today,  
 Oh but I would kiss their cold, cold lips  
 My aching heart would cure

And we laid them down to rest  
 In the Valley of Knockanure.”

The golden sun was sinking,  
 far beyond Feilinlee.  
 The pale, pale moon was shining,  
 Far beyond Tralee.  
 The dismal stars and clouds afar  
 Had darkened over the moor,  
 And the banshee cried, where our heroes died,  
 In the Valley of Knockanure.

At first glance, this song would appear to contain more narrative clues to its interpretation than *The Rose of Tralee*. It clearly memorializes a specific battle and set of executions of Irish nationalists during an uprising. The prime heroes—Walshe, Lynes, and Dalton—are named, as are the places of the tragedy: Knockanure, Gortnagleanna, and Feilinlee. Yet the focus of the song is more on the emotional effects of the event than on the event itself. And the explication offered by Mick and Lizzy, as we shall see, moves away from the explicit narrative toward a more proverbialized rendering of Irish suffering over time. Thus the expected narrative explanation, once given, proves only part of the means by which Mick and Lizzy interpret the song.

In terms of structure, we may note that the song’s first three stanzas are devoted to depicting the heroes amid their community and ideals, closing with the men’s capture and execution. Stanza 4 depicts the heroes’ noble words at the execution itself. The final four stanzas portray the mourning of the community and landscape after their deaths, with a narrator persona and first-person quotations emerging in stanza 7, where the lyric speaker seems identical to Dalton’s mother. She entones a familiar sentiment of sorrow for her son (“If I could kiss those cold, cold lips”), one paralleled by the other standard images of prayer, banshees, and sorrowful landscape. The final image of the land and nature here is one of silence and desolation: without the human spark brought by the noble heroes, the land stands mute and static. We may note that Mick’s version of the song is more lyrical and less narrative than some collected variants; whereas Mick’s song goes into detail on the emotional aftermath of the deaths, some versions<sup>2</sup> devote much more attention to the narrative events of the ambush and battle only alluded to in Mick’s rendition. Mick’s song appears in this light as a highly lyricized version of a formerly explicitly narrative song.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., that collected from Mrs. Bridget Howard Gladree of Co. Mayo in 1955 and conserved at the Department of Irish Folklore at University College Dublin.

Given the specificity of the narrative surrounding *The Rose of Tralee*, one would perhaps expect an even more detailed narrative in a song that announces its historicity in its very first lines and that relates events connected with an uprising. Yet the degree of detail of the text itself appears sufficient for Mick and Lizzy, and their explication provides few further points:

T: What year was that?

L: I think 1917 or 1918.

T: Okay.

L: That's what he's giving you a lesson in history for—

M: The Black-and-Tans would kill people like you.

L: Sure they had hooks and chains with them and they'd shoot you for fun  
at the sight of you.

M: Ah my, quite a fight with the Black-and-Tans.

In this short response to my question, then, Mick and Lizzy locate the events of the song in the aftermath of the 1916 East Uprising, perhaps during the May 1917 executions, an event that galvanized Irish sentiment against the continuation of British rule (McCartney 1967). This event proved pivotal in modern Irish history, and Mick and Lizzy fully expected me to know about it already, as Lizzy's half-critical remark about history lessons made clear. Following the 1918 parliamentary elections, British authorities clashed with Irishmen bent on independence in the fierce Anglo-Irish War or War of Independence. McCartney characterizes the period as follows (331):

The Anglo-Irish war from 1919 to July 1921, or the "troubles" as the people euphemistically called it, seriously embittered Anglo-Irish relations. It was a struggle characterised by guerilla warfare, ambushes, raids on police barracks and planned assassination on the one side; and reprisals, the shooting-up and burning-up of towns, executions and terrorizing on the other, as the "flying columns" of the Volunteers took on the "black-and-tans" and Auxiliaries of the British.

Mick has considerable personal connection with these events, as his only brother died of head injuries sustained in one of the later Kerry clashes. As Lizzy put it later in the evening: "See. He's *steeped* in the Troubles." Yet it was not these personal events that the couple used in the subsequent discussion to further explicate the song. Rather, they broadened the focus from the particular war to the entirety of English oppression, and then to the specific fates of Kerry and Meath within this larger history. This discussion eventually led to their collaborative account of Mick's resettlement in Meath, a topic that thus became tied to the narrative events of the song,

however unforeseen that may have seemed at the outset of the discussion. By analyzing their talk in detail, we can follow the thread of this discussion and the ways in which the song's meaning becomes negotiated by the singer, his audience, and the context of performance.

I initiated the competitive portion of this explanatory process through a simple question, as the transcript shows:

T: Where did they [the Black-and-Tans] come into first?

M: Well, they came into the South.

L: They came into *all* Ireland.

M: Into Kerry most of all.

L: Into Kerry.

M: Into Kerry. They came in boats into Kerry. They didn't come into the Midlands as bad; they slaughtered them before, long before.

In this exchange, then, Mick has been able to erect his home district as the prime victim of Black-and-Tan aggression, as described in the song, thereby edging out Lizzy's assertion of all Ireland (including the Midlands) suffering equally. This small victory is important, because Mick's authority as a singer of tragic songs hinges in part on his identity as a native Kerryman. Therefore, Kerry must be shown (as in the song itself) to have suffered considerably in the war.

But Lizzy, native to Meath and equally proud of her county, quickly seeks to turn the attention away from Kerry and toward the district in which she and Mick currently reside:

L: You know why they didn't come into the Midlands?

T: Why?

M: Don't tell him.

L: Because, eh, this is the best land—

At this point, audience and singer appear equally in control of formulating the interpretive response to the song. Mick would maintain focus on Kerry, but in practice he is only one of the creators of the enunciated meaning. As Lizzy gains control of the floor, she initiates a new line of argument that will put Kerry, Meath, and the song in a broader historical perspective:

L: Meath was, as you went through Trim and saw all the castles, King John's Castle—

M: English, English had them all.

L: The English had this land.

M: And Tom, they were hunted down across the Shannon by Cromwell.

L: Yeah, with a pitchfork.

M: With a pitchfork. Ah, the Lord save us, they murdered.  
 L: "To Hell or to Cork!"

At this point, then, the discussion has somehow shifted to the seventeenth century, when English troops overran Ireland and imposed a repressive martial law. In the process, the story of the executions at Knockanure has become one with the struggles of the 1600s, and both have become integrally tied to the county of Mick's birth, the refuge of resisters in both eras. Meath figures as the prize for which the English vied; Kerry and Cork as the marginal tracts to which the Irish opposition fled. Mick again asserts his personal connection with these events by noting, "My relatives came from Shannon." This is an important element in his family's history, as Mick's ancestors, dispossessed by landlords, are known to have migrated to Ballinskelligs in Kerry from Clare, across the Shannon, in the seventeenth century. The family's Kerry life of small farming and fishing is thus represented as the victimized perseverance of a family following the loss of desirable farmland, a product of Cromwell's reign.

From here, Lizzy reprises the argument, drawing in greater detail the contrast between Kerry and Meath in a manner that places the images of landscape in *The Valley of Knockanure* in an uncompromisingly negative light:

L: The land was *so* good in the County Meath, all the *kings*, Strongbow,  
 and all the king's children wanted it. It was Leinster. Leinster.  
 And Meath's the—  
 M: Land of the world, Lizzy.  
 L: Meath's the last word in agriculture. The rich was in Meath. And all  
 there was down in Kerry was mountains and rocks and stones and  
 everything. [...] It was "to Hell or to Cork."

This topic shift, then, has turned Kerry, the shining refuge of Mick's telling, into an inferior wasteland to which disempowered Irishmen clung. Since in both Mick and Lizzy's eyes, the song is about Kerry in particular, this characterization comments directly on the song as well. We can see in it, as in Mick's words, varying interpretations of the lyric's imagery of "dismal stars and clouds afar / had darkened over the moor." But we can also see a very present vying between the relative stature of Meath and Kerry, the two counties closest to the hearts of the people assembled.

The turn in the argument has also served a deeper purpose in Mick and Lizzy's interpretive work, for it leads them directly to their tying of the song to Mick's experience of resettlement. The couple continues the discussion:



- M: They were giving land to anyone; that's why they were very populated back then. But they had to leave it all, and go *straight* back to America, because they had no living at all there—no, no, no living.
- L: The living, the living was in Leinster. In Leinster. This is Leinster.

In this commentary, then, Mick acknowledges the custom of partible inheritance in the West—the practice of heirs dividing their father's farm between them, making ever smaller holdings until virtually none could support themselves on their own lands. He also enunciates the theme of out-migration, crucial to Kerry identity (as we saw with *The Rose of Tralee*) and material to me personally, since my grandmother (Mick's sister) and grandfather both left Kerry for America in direct response to this situation. In this discussion, then, my history as well as Mick's own relocation to Meath are somehow merged with the history of oppression that brought people to Kerry and the history of perseverance emblemized in the song. From here, the discussion turns directly to Mick's resettlement:

- M: Now, where we're living there was 800 acres.
- L: This here.
- M: It was divided between Meath and Kerry. I'm the only Kerryman.

Mick's assertion of a binary Meath/Kerry split of the previous estate of 800 acres arises from the contrasts drawn by Lizzy in the discussion to this point and does not fit the facts of the resettlement process exactly. Historical accuracy compels Lizzy to correct the statement and note that migrants from other counties were given land there as well: "Yes, and Mayo and Clare." What is most important to the discussion at hand, however, is that the situation of injustice described in the song has finally been undone, with Mick's family (dispossessed by Cromwell centuries before) finally being restored to a workable plot of land and peace restored on the island.

Undoubtedly, the discussion that night might have proceeded differently if the audience had been differently constituted and/or in a different context. It reflected Mick and Lizzy's differing native tracts and the presence of a young relative from America. And it took place in July, 1998, while Ireland mourned the death of three Catholic children killed by a Protestant firebomb in the County Down. The Reverend Ian Paisley preached a message of Protestant defiance and aggression to devoted Orangemen encamped by the Garvaghy Road. And all these sad events were occurring mere weeks after national referendums in both the North and the South on the Good Friday accords. The ongoing "Troubles" of the North impinged in silent but menacing fashion on the discussion of the past

Troubles of the Anglo-Irish war, reminding all three of us that the song's narrative was not so distant after all.

In following the discussion of *The Valley of Knockanure* with the accuracy afforded by modern recording technology, one might well conclude that the "real" discussion of the meaning of the song ended with Mick and Lizzy's initial characterization of the Black-and-Tans. But ending the analysis there would truncate the elaborate rite of interpretation that spirals out from the specific lyric and its supporting narrative to a more proverbialized discussion of the situation the song emblemizes and finally toward the ways in which this situation finds expression in the present audience's lives. It is the balance of narrative specificity, proverbial generality, and personal resonance that gives depth to the meaning of a song and that ultimately includes all of the performance's participants, singer and audience alike. To refrain from that process would be to refrain from the important and empowered role of the traditional audience.

And if Mick and Lizzy's discussion can be said to "ramble," we must note that it rambles with a purpose—toward an ending of inclusion and ultimate relevance for the song and its attendant audience. Yet the tether on this rambling is relatively short after all: in fact, the content of the song and its localization in Kerry create limits on the directions the discussion can take. Indeed, because Mick's repertoire is so honed toward the twin themes of tragic love and other sorrows, his songs afford him—or his audience—little opportunity to discuss other topics of concern to Mick and Lizzy that evening in 1998: a burgeoning Irish economy, new traffic perils on the improved road from Dublin, a cooling of popular sentiment toward the Catholic church, and a general loosening of public views on moral issues. On these issues Mick's repertoire offers few openings, and so our discussions were led by the content of the songs as performed.

Nor could the discussion take place if Mick's songs failed to draw an audience. It is not in the performance of the songs but in the accompanying discussions that they are made relevant to the moment at hand and the listeners present. If listeners fail to listen and to discuss—as is increasingly the case in a modern Ireland taken with standardized, prerecorded music, made passive by the norms of concerts and absent performers, or accustomed to treating music as a background entertainment—this matrix of meaning is lost. And that shift in audience role—so familiar to folklorists in most of the West but relatively recent in Ireland—is a reality about which Mick's repertoire falls silent. Mick, like the tradition he performs, relies on an audience as eager to interpret as the performer is to perform.

Even when the performative genre in question, then, entails a fixed text that varies little from performance to performance (as opposed to genres

that permit more flexible combinations of lines or images), elaborate rules for interpretation may be shared by performers and audiences to achieve and to alter the meaning of a song. In the case of Mick Lyne's lyric songs, this shared hermeneutic tradition relies on narrative, but the narratives themselves take on both more general proverbialized significance and personal meanings tied to the performer, the audience, and the moment. *The Rose of Tralee* "tells the story" of a particular love relationship, yet it also comes to represent the ironies of life in general and the particular lot of wandering Kerry people in history. Mick's relation to the song—recognized by singer and audience alike—is deepened not only by his Kerry heritage but also by his daughter's status as a former Rose of Tralee pageant winner. *The Valley of Knockanure* "tells the story" of a particular set of wartime executions, yet it also comes to represent the broader history of oppression that has touched Kerry, Ireland in general, and Mick's own personal life, a life linked at some fundamental level with the resettlement that changed Mick's life nearly four decades earlier. The way in which Mick and Lizzy relate to the songs is conditioned by traditions of interpretation, which they enact, along with the actual performance of the songs themselves. Being a good audience member involves expecting these interpretive lines, asking for them if their details are not yet known, or acknowledging them if they are already familiar. In the pubs where Mick used to sing, the details I was told were probably most often already known. Yet they were always implicit in the performance, even if a given audience did not need to have them spelled out again at the moment.

Mick's singing and the discourse it provoked sheds valuable light on the issue of audience competence in oral traditions. From their example, we can see that the creator or performer of an oral poem may indeed be able to expect a great deal from an audience. Portions of the work's meaning adhere directly to the text and its (submerged) narrative, while other portions adhere to the communally recognized persona or experiences of the singer and audience. Neither is entirely predictable on the basis of the text alone, yet the competent audience is expected to discern both.

That such a rich and normative fabric of interpretation surrounds one genre should awaken us to the possibility that genres in oral traditions in general may possess similarly complex hermeneutic norms. The relation of these norms to each other and to other more formalized modes of interpretation within the culture (e.g., biblical exegesis in the case of medieval traditions, precedence in the case of modern American legal traditions, or literary criticism in the modern appraisal of literature) represents a valuable and little studied area of research for scholars. Whether or not we can ever know, then, the actual interpretive moves of the

original audience of a work like *Beowulf*, we can guess that they may well have been complex, multiple, and yet somehow also normative, contributions worthy of an audience who could comprehend and appreciate the oral poem as performed.<sup>3</sup>

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