

Task #2: Ghostly readings – Literature about Roger Casement

Since Roger Casement's death in 1916, different stories have been written in which he, in one form or another, appears as a ghost.

1. Choose one of the following texts to read (you will only read a couple of pages).

A. *The Knight of the Flaming Heart* by Michael Carson, novel, 1995.

This novel begins as Boma, a young woman overwhelmed by her unwanted pregnancy and the recent break-up with her boyfriend, attempts to end her life by drowning herself in the Atlantic Ocean. However, she is miraculously rescued from the waves and led ashore by a tall stranger who turns out to be the ghost of Roger Casement, who asks people to call him by his nickname "Roddie." While only Boma and few other chosen ones are able to see "Roddie's" ghost, the town of Tralee and the rest of Ireland soon become obsessed with the apparition. In the passages you're about to read, Roger Casement's ghost talks to various inhabitants and visitors of Tralee, the small town on whose shore he landed and was arrested in 1916.

→ In terms of vocabulary and writing style, the novel is probably the most approachable (i.e., easiest) of the three texts to understand.

B. "No Other Place" by Martina Devlin, short story, 2016.

This short story is about Alice Milligan (1866-1953), an Irish writer, journalist, publisher, activist and lecturer. She devoted her life to the cause of Irish Nationalism and was involved in the Celtic revival efforts. She was a friend of Roger Casement's and witnessed his execution in 1916 (adapted from Devlin 127-8). The title of Martina Devlin's short story is inspired by the inscription on Alice Milligan's gravestone: "is *Níor car fód eile ach Éirinn* – She loved no other place but Ireland" (Devlin 128). The story begins as Milligan is visited by a local police constable who does not appreciate the way she remembers Roger Casement, a hero of hers, on the anniversary of his death.

→ This short story is written in a more heightened and complex style and probably the most challenging of the three.

C. "The Butterfly Collector" by Rebecca Solnit, essay, 1997.

This text is inspired by the author's visit to the Natural History Museum of Ireland in Dublin. The passage you will read begins after the author has come out of the museum and sits down in a nearby park, called St. Stephen's Green, to eat a sandwich and "digest the museum" (Solnit 38). What does a case of butterflies have to do with Roger Casement?

→ The most experimental in terms of genre, this essay incorporates the author's, Roger Casement's, and other writers' voices seamlessly into one text.

2. Carefully read the text of your choice (A, B or C).

Please note that you will only read certain parts ("excerpts") from the original text, not the entire essay. This is why some parts of the document have been covered up. Some words have been underlined. For these words, you can find clarifications at the end of your text.

3. Complete the reading comprehension exercises for your text (A, B, or C) below.

Make sure to write down your answers on a separate sheet.

A. *The Knight of the Flaming Heart* by Michael Carson, novel, 1995.

- ◆ In the church scene (pp. 138-140), why does Canon Dawson believe that Roddie does not deserve to return to the world from the beyond? And what does Roddie personally think about this "scandal" (p. 139)? → The Canon believes Roddie's homosexuality should "[preclude his] return" (p. 139). Roddie himself believes that the importance of the "diaries" that document his homosexual activities has been overestimated (p. 139, bottom).

He also confirms that the diaries are authentic and that he considers his sexuality “God-given” and “a gift” (p. 140, top).

- ◆ Consider this sentence said by Roddie (the ghost of Roger Casement) to Canon Dawson: “I was made by my writing, then just as surely unmade by it” (p. 140). Is this sentence written in active or passive voice? How would you interpret this grammatical choice for this sentence? → “I was made [and] unmade” is in the passive voice (simple past). This emphasizes Casement’s lack of agency: the way *other people* interpreted Casement’s writing had a major influence on his life (and death), their interpretations *actively* shaped his biography. The British government knighted him as a result of his Congo and Putumayo reports; the publication by the English of his diaries, however, crucially worsened his reputation and arguably made it impossible for his (remaining) supporters to stop his execution.
- ◆ In the bar scene (pp. 190-193), what does Peter Coughlin believe is the reason why Roger Casement has come back from the dead? And why does Peter ultimately leave the bar? → Peter Coughlin thinks Roger Casement has come back to “expose the wicked lies spread about him by the English” (p. 192), i.e. that he had sexual relations with other men. The young men who fill the bar, however, believe the opposite, namely that Roger has come back to prove homosexuality is not a sin (p. 192). Peter leaves because they are in the majority and he feels alienated from his favorite bar.
- ◆ What word does Peter Coughlin use to describe Roger Casement’s sexual orientation? And what word do the younger men use? Do the words have different meanings? Why do they not use the same word? → Peter, who believes that Casement’s homosexuality was just a rumor and a “wicked lie,” uses the word “homosexual” (192), while the younger men use and self-identify as “gay” - “St. [Saint] Roger Casement was gay. I’m gay and I’ve never felt better” (192). The word “homosexual” is thus used pejoratively by Peter while “gay” is used descriptively (to state a fact, bottom of p. 192, “If he wasn’t gay [...]”) or positively ([...] show us that gay can be good” p. 192) by the gay men in the bar.

B. “No Other Place” by Martina Devlin, short story, 2016.

- ◆ When Norman, the policeman, mentions his bike (p. 134, top), Alice Milligan’s comment creates an awkward tension between them which only intensifies as their conversation continues. What topic is it that they have oppositional opinions about? And what are their opinions? → Alice Milligan’s comment reveals that she does not support the monarchy and the British rule over Ireland. Instead, she supports the cause of Irish Nationalism: “He’s her fifth monarch, imagine! None of whose rule she accepts” (p. 139). As a servant of the British empire, however, Norman disapproves of her views and, in turn, her character: “She’s a Fenian to the core” (p. 134) and “But he’s had enough of Alice Milligan. There’s no excuse for it [...]” (p. 136).
- ◆ What kind of anniversary is it? What does Alice Milligan do to commemorate it? And what does Norman think about the person she is remembering? → It is the anniversary of Roger Casement’s death. The British government had him executed for high treason on August 3rd, 1916. Alice Milligan gathers carefully chosen flowers from her garden (p. 129), turns them into a bouquet (p. 132) and sets it next to a framed image of him (p. 138). Norman first assumes that she is mourning a lost love (p. 135). When he realizes she is talking about a fellow Irish Nationalist, he considers his death a good thing: “Those renegades were rotten to the core – they were better off dead” (p. 136).
- ◆ What words are used to talk about flowers in this story? Does the choice of words say something about the importance of the flowers? Why are the flowers important (or not)? → The flowers are referred to as “sisters” (p. 130) or “queens” (p. 132), and Alice Milligan reveals that her first pen name was “a flower. Iris” (p. 133). In this way, the flowers are personified (given or associated with human characteristics). The personification here

underlines the importance of the flowers, emphasizing that they, too, play a role – like the other (human) characters. The argument that they are important is also supported by their omnipresence (they are mentioned on almost every page) and their power in shaping the story: it starts off in the garden, where the flowers are cut, then moves into the kitchen, where they are gathered into a bouquet, and finally to the drawing room, where Milligan sets the bouquet on the mantelpiece, next to Roger Casement's picture. They are essential to Alice's commemorative ritual; the practice helps keep Roger Casement alive in her memory. The flowers also have symbolical meaning: "ivy for remembrance," "white roses for hope" (p. 129).

- ◆ Consider the passages where Alice thinks about the monarchy (p. 139, bottom) and Norman considers the Irish Nationalists (p. 136, middle). Which kind of pronoun do both Alice Milligan and Norman use? Why is the use of this specific pronoun fitting in these contexts? → Both use the demonstrative pronoun "that" in the plural – "those." Alice: "Fancy! She has something in common with *those* British kings and queens" (p. 139). Norman: "*those* traitors" / "*those* renegades" (p. 136). It is fitting because the demonstrative pronoun "that" is used for things that are far away, not here. Both Alice and Norman use "those" to distance themselves from the characters they perceive as their enemies (the Irish Nationalists and the British monarchs, respectively).

C. "The Butterfly Collector" by Rebecca Solnit, essay, 1997.

- ◆ The text starts off just outside the museum but does not stay there for long. What other spaces are invoked in the text? And how does the author connect them to each other? → Firstly, the author imagines the same place, but in a different time: St. Stephen's Green Park during the Easter Rising of 1916 (pp. 38-39). Secondly, tracing the origins of the butterfly on display at the museum, the author invokes the Putumayo (South America) via Casement's journal entries from his 1910 expedition (pp. 49-50). Overlapping with this, the continent of Africa is also briefly mentioned – Casement had been on a similar expedition in the Congo Free State before. Finally, the author invokes Auschwitz as another space in which atrocities against humans are committed (p. 51). Notably, the butterfly connects all of these spaces.
- ◆ Notice the different tenses in the text. Which is the most frequent? Is there a passage that deviates from the norm? Did the use of tenses in this essay help you or confuse you while reading? → The text is written in past simple for the most part. (Past continuous and past perfect appear occasionally ("Stephens was teaching himself to read music" (p. 39); "The Sinn Feiners have seized the city this morning" (p. 38)). However, towards the end, there are two passages in the present simple: "One of his biographers *says* [...]" (p. 50) and "Maybe butterflies and atrocities [...] *are* inseparable in memory and experience [...]" (p. 51). This can be read as a sign that the text has now caught up with the present of the author's train of thought, rather than still "digesting the museum" via other writers' thoughts. This switch could be seen as a useful signpost. However, the use of past simple for the most part could be confusing because it blends the author's own narration with the voices of James Stephens (p. 38-19) and Roger Casement (p. 50).
- ◆ Have a close look at the words Roger Casement uses in his journal entries (p. 50, top half), specifically at the nouns in the September 30th entry and the adjectives in the various October entries. Do you notice a theme? Why do you think the author of the essay chose these specific journal entries for her text? → Some nouns from Sep. 30th entry: "method of torture," "floggings," "guns," "machetes" (p. 50). Some adjectives from the October entries: "splendid," "magnificent," "glowing," "extraordinary," "glorious" (p. 50). While the nouns in the first entry denote violence and cruelty, the adjectives in the second denote extreme joy and beauty – the entries seem to be polar opposites in terms of their vocabulary even though they were written only a couple of days apart, during the same expedition. The author could thus have chosen these entries to highlight the co-existence of both extremes.

- ◆ What question does the author link the butterflies to (p. 51)? And what does she think is Roger Casement's answer to that question? → The question is whether there should be joy in straining political and/or activist endeavors: "A perennial question for revolutionaries and activists is whether they should themselves enjoy the pleasant fruits they are trying to secure for others" (p. 51). The author arrives at this question by following the butterflies to camp Auschwitz and Theodor Adorno: "Theodor Adorno once said that after Auschwitz there could be no more poetry; should there be butterflies amidst atrocities?" (p. 51). The butterfly has become a metaphor for the joys of life. Accordingly, the essay suggests that Roger Casement's answer to the question is yes (p. 51).