

Celtic Culture in “The Story of O-Tei”

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Abstract

Many of Lafcadio Hearn’s short stories based on Japanese legends revolve around the death and rebirth of characters. Set in old Japan, “The Story of O-Tei” is centered on a relation between O-Tei and Nagao, her fiancé. Being sick at 15, O-Tei dies with a prophesy that she would meet Nagao again in the real world. Years later, Nagao is left alone without wife and child, and takes a lonely trip. At a mountain village called Ikao, he encounters a woman who resembles O-Tei. After saying that she herself is O-Tei, she loses consciousness. He marries the mysterious woman, who does not remember anything before the encounter. The atmosphere of space is similar to that of Otherworld and her image is reminiscent of fairy maid in the Celtic culture. Hearn’s work illustrates the common aspects shared by the East and West.

Keywords: Lafcadio Hearn, O-Tei, rebirth, Celtic, Other World

1. Introduction

Lafcadio Hearn(1850-1904) is mainly known as a writer who has reworked Japanese legendary tales during his stay in Japan around the turning point of century. Many of his short stories deal with the mysterious deaths and rebirths of characters. As a story included in *Kwaidan*, “The Story of O-Tei” published in 1904 is one of such stories. *Kwaidan* is the transliteration of a Japanese word 怪談 meaning eerie stories. Set in old Japan, it revolves around the relationship between two lovers, O-Tei and Nagano. O-Tei dies, yet she is reborn as another woman. Long after her death, Nagano

encounters her in a strange remote place, which is similar to Otherworld in the Celtic culture. It is not surprising in considering that “*Kwaidan* resembles *The Celtic Twilight* in its resolute attention to orature and folk antiquity.” “Hearn’s collections such as *Kwaidan*[Ghost Stories](1904) are part of this formative network of interculturality”(Hart 200). *The Celtic Twilight* by Yeats is one of representative works that shed light on the mythic and magic roots of Irish folklore.

For this reason, I will explore the tale in relation to the Celtic culture. It stems from his childhood. Hearn was deeply influenced by the Celtic culture while he was bred in Ireland, before coming to America at the age of 19. As Paul Murray indicates, Hearn spent “his most formative years in Ireland and no biographer can afford to ignore their impact” (1997 173). He was fascinated by ghost stories especially.

2. Rebirth of O-Tei

The plot of the tale needs to be reviewed before discussing its relation to the Celtic heritage. It commences with the portrayal of two main characters who are betrothed. O-Tei is to marry Nagao after he completes his study for getting a bureaucratic position. But O-Tei gets sick and calls Nagao before her death. She tells that they shall meet in the future. She says, “I am quite resigned to die; and I want you to promise that you will not grieve. . . . Besides, I want to tell you that I think we shall meet again” (30). It is not in Pure Land but the real world that she expects them to meet again. The Pure Land can be considered to mean heaven. She further says, “I must again be born a girl, and grow up to womanhood. So you would have to wait. Fifteen – sixteen years: that is a long time”(31).

He is spiritually devoted to her. Thus “in the hope of pleasing her spirit, he wrote a solemn promise to wed her if she could ever return to him in another body”(32). Loyalty is a virtue Hearn finds and highly evaluates in the old Japan aristocratic culture, as many critics including Mary Goodwin indicate. However, he is an only son, and thus, due to the pressure of his family, he cannot but marry another woman. So he gets a wife and child. But they die for disease, and thus he is left alone. 17 years after her death, he travels into a mountain village called Ikao, which is a remote area from crowded cities.

There he encounters a woman who seems to be strikingly same as O-Tei. With curiosity, he speaks to her:

“Elder Sister, so much do you look like a person whom I knew long ago, that I was startled when you first entered this room. Pardon me, therefore, for asking what is your native place, and what is your name?”

Immediately,—and in the unforgotten voice of the dead,—she thus made answer:—

“My name is O-Tei; and you are Nagao Chosei of Echigo, my promised husband. Seventeen years ago, I died in Niigata: then you made in writing a promise to marry me if ever I could come back to this world in the body of a woman;—and you sealed that written promise with your seal, and put it in the *butsudan*, beside the tablet inscribed with my name. And therefore I came back.” (34)

As O-Tei had prophesied, she was reborn through the body of the other woman. It could be realized as he anyway satisfied the condition that he wished to meet her in the present world. Love is a significant theme in Hearn’s revisions. In this light, Beongcheon Yu remarks: “In these Japanese legends, too, there seems to be no more intense human desire than love. For the sake of love many a ghost returns to its former human world, either visibly or invisibly, and fulfills its original wish”(64).

This kind of rebirth is one of distinguished traits of Celtic shamanism. As Sharon Paice MacLeod indicates, “[o]ne shamanic element in Celtic literature . . . is the initiatory death-and-literature”(77). The ways of being reborn might be different from the rebirth of O-Tei. However, the preoccupation with the conception of being reborn is identical. With this notion of similarity on the whole, we can make a comparison.

A significant aspect of the rebirth worthy of attention is its spatiality. The place where he meets the reborn O-Tei has a mysterious atmosphere. O-Tei prophesied that they would meet at the present world. It is not the world after death, that is the heaven. However, it is not an ordinary place, but a mystic place recalling Otherworld. Otherworld in the Celtic culture is a sacred realm different from common spaces. “The term ‘Otherworld’ signifies a realm different from that inhabited by normal humanity, variously defined as the dwelling place of the gods, the souls of the dead, or other

supernatural beings”(Carey 624). It signifies transcendence rather than Otherness. Although the term originates from the Celtic culture, Ikaos as a Japanese region seems to be an Otherworld which can be often found in Irish tales. The Otherworld is a space where souls are reborn. An Otherworld journey can be defined as a journey to a supernatural world, often a world of the dead.

Another similarity between the story and the Celtic culture is her prophesy. Prophecy is one of the main traits of Celtic shamanism. “Prophecy is a pervasive feature of all traditional Celtic cultures and their literatures”(Koch 646). The realization of prophesy also reflects the influence of the Celtic shamanism upon Hearn.

As found in the story, many critics have indicated the Celtic elements in Hearn’s stories. In “Foreword” to *A Fantastic Journey: The life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn*, Roy Foster connects Hearn to the Irish Celtic Revival. Paul Murray also associates Hearn with Celtic Revival. According to Murray, “Lafcadio’s devotion to folk material links him, not alone with his contemporaries, but also to the younger figures of the Irish literary revival—Yeats, Lady Gregory, Synge”(1997 180).

There is an episode that may substantiate Hearn’s recollection of the Celtic culture in Japan. There is an interesting remark by Toki Koizumi, the grandson of Hearn. He saw a Celtic pattern on the cover of the first edition of *Kwaidan*, Hearn’s major work. *Kwaidan* contains stories based on Japanese tales. Koizumi persuasively suggests, “we may deduce that when Lafcadio was writing *Kwaidan* in Japan, he recollected his memories of Irish tales, mixed them with those of Japan, and put a Celtic pattern on the cover page”(33). In addition to this, a letter written during his stay in Japan also shows his preoccupation with the Celtic tales. In a letter to Yeats in 1901 Hearn wrote: “I had a Connaught nurse who told me fairy-tales and ghost-stories. So I ought to love Irish Things, and I do”(Hirakawa 14). The reason why he recollected the old memory might be attributed to its similarity to the Japanese tales. For Hearn, Japanese legends had a lot of similarities with Celtic tales. George Hughes properly mentions that “Hearn thought Celts looked Oriental”(195). As many critics indicate, there is the undeniable intercultural relation between the two cultures geographically far distant.

3. Conclusion

By observing the traits of the mysterious place and situation, we can verify that the story has the vestige of Celtic Culture, Celtic shamanism at root. Thus, we can find the linkage between the old Japan and Celtic culture. As Peter Mcmillan indicates, Hearn provides “an important cultural link between Ireland and Japan”(121). In consideration of the cultural universality, Malcolm Cowley writes:

Long before coming to Japan he had shown an instinct for finding in legends the permanent archetypes of human experience—that is the secret of their power to move us—and he later proved that he knew which tales to choose and which details to emphasize.(15)

Archetypes are a concept suggested by the psychiatrist Carl Jung. According to Jung, the archetypes represent universal patterns and images that reflect the collective unconscious. “Psychologically . . . the archetype as an image of instinct is a spiritual goal toward which the whole nature of man strives”(Jung 416). In literature it refers to a typical character or situation that represents universal patterns of human being. The return of lover also can be regarded as an example of archetypal representations found both in the East and West. The return is motivated by the unconscious desire to restore the former relationship. If the Japanese originals, from which Hearn reconstructed his stories, had lacked universal merits, it could not have gained attention from readers and scholars in a culturally wide range.

Through the story, we could observe some typical aspects of Hearn. It is a specimen through which Hearn’s way of recreating Oriental stuffs can be comprehended. As a profound material for a cross-cultural study, Hearn's corpus contributes to constructing the intercultural bridge.

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