



International Journal of English Literature and Literary Theories

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 7: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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**Water, Myth and the Otherworld in Colum McCann's
Fishing the Sloe-Black River**

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Abstract: Colum McCann's *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* is deeply rooted in the Irish landscape, where rivers, lakes, and waterways function as much more than geographical settings. Water emerges as one of the collection's most persistent and significant motifs, acquiring multiple meanings associated with memory, loss, displacement, identity, healing, regeneration, and cultural continuity. In particular, "Along the Riverwall," "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," and "Cathal's Lake" establish water as a central narrative element. The rivers and lake represented in these stories operate as liminal spaces between the material and the imaginative worlds and evoke concepts embedded in Celtic mythology and Irish cultural tradition. McCann's treatment of water is significant because it brings together the contemporary realities of Ireland and its ancient mythological heritage. His characters experience disability, political violence, poverty, migration, and separation, yet their relationship with water provides an imaginative possibility of transformation. Drawing upon Celtic beliefs concerning sacred waters, the Otherworld, transformation, and the continuity of life, McCann reinterprets traditional mythological ideas within modern Irish contexts. Water thus becomes a symbolic medium through which personal and collective experiences are remembered, transformed, and given new meaning.

Keywords: Celtic mythology, Otherworld, liminality, transformation, cultural memory, migration, displacement, regeneration, political violence, Irish landscape, myth and imagination.



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The River Liffey and the Possibility of Regeneration

In “Along the Riverwall,” the River Liffey occupies a central position in both the physical and symbolic structure of the story. The river can be understood as a reflection of Dublin itself. It contains traces of the city’s history, including objects discarded by its inhabitants, and consequently becomes a repository of collective memory. The river’s surface reflects the commercial and illuminated face of Dublin, while its depths contain the unwanted objects and forgotten histories of ordinary people.

This duality establishes the Liffey as a symbolic representation of Dublin’s social divisions. The river embraces both the visible and invisible aspects of the city. Objects such as discarded household items, bicycles, coins, and other remnants of everyday life suggest the experiences of people whose lives remain largely unnoticed. The river therefore becomes an archive of social memory, preserving what the city itself appears to reject.

This symbolism is particularly significant in relation to Fergus, the central character of the story. Fergus is a young cyclist whose dreams are destroyed following an accident that leaves him unable to walk. His physical immobility parallels the social stagnation associated with Dublin. The city appears incapable of providing him with a meaningful future, while the river, in contrast, remains constantly moving. The Liffey therefore represents an alternative to the paralysis of the city.

McCann’s representation of water also resonates with Celtic religious traditions. Water held considerable importance in Celtic culture and was associated with fertility, purification, healing, and regeneration. Sacred springs, rivers, lakes, and bogs were regarded as spaces capable of connecting the human world with supernatural forces. Offerings were often deposited in bodies of water as a means of placing objects beyond ordinary human control and entrusting them to divine powers.

Fergus’s act of throwing his bicycle into the Liffey can consequently be interpreted through this cultural framework. The bicycle represents his lost ambition, physical freedom, and identity. Rather than simply discarding it, Fergus symbolically commits its separate parts to the river. He imagines that the pieces may eventually be brought together again and that he might one day recover the complete bicycle. His fantasy transforms the river into a site of possible restoration.

The bicycle itself assumes further symbolic importance. Its circular wheel recalls the wheel symbolism associated with Celtic religious traditions and the sun. The wheel may suggest cyclical movement, continuity, and renewal. When Fergus throws the final wheel into the river, the movement of the circular object toward the water symbolically joins the celestial and earthly realms.

The wheel, associated with the sky and sun, enters the river, representing the meeting of different elements of the natural and mythological universe. Fergus's relationship with the Liffey therefore extends beyond physical geography. The river becomes a threshold between his present condition and an imagined alternative existence. His movement toward the river may be interpreted in relation to the Celtic conception of water as a boundary between the earthly world and the Otherworld. In Celtic mythology, the Otherworld is not necessarily a distant heaven but may exist beneath the earth, across the sea, or within lakes and other bodies of water. It is a realm associated with abundance, freedom, transformation, and release from ordinary human limitations.

Fergus's imagination of the bicycle being reconstructed in the river reflects his desire to enter such an alternative world. The river becomes a space in which what is broken may potentially become whole again.

"Cathal's Lake": Myth, Transformation and the Otherworld

The connection between water and the Otherworld becomes even more explicit in "Cathal's Lake." The story draws upon the well-known Irish myth of King Lir and his children, who are transformed into swans. McCann reworks this myth within the context of the political violence of Northern Ireland. Cathal, an agricultural worker, imagines finding the dead victims of the conflict in the soil and transforming them into swans. Each swan represents a victim of violence and is placed in a nearby lake. The transformation removes the victims from the categories that divided them in life. Civilian and soldier, Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and unionist cease to be meaningful distinctions within Cathal's imaginative world.

The lake consequently functions as an alternative realm in which political divisions disappear. It becomes a version of the Otherworld, a space in which the dead are not simply forgotten but imaginatively restored.

The choice of the swan is particularly significant. In Irish mythology, swans are associated with transformation and movement between different realms. The children of Lir, transformed into swans, inhabit water and move freely through different geographical spaces. Their ability to swim and fly gives them a symbolic relationship with water, earth, and sky.

McCann's use of the swan therefore allows him to establish a cyclical relationship between these elements. The dead emerge from the earth, enter the water, and acquire the capacity to move toward the sky. This movement suggests that death does not necessarily represent an absolute ending but can be transformed through myth and imagination.

Cathal's lake can also be interpreted as a metaphor for artistic creation. The story repeatedly blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined. The lake itself appears almost invisible to the outside world, suggesting that it may exist primarily within Cathal's imagination. His transformation of the dead into swans resembles the process by which an artist transforms painful reality into an image capable of preserving memory.

In this sense, Cathal becomes an artistic figure. His imagined swans immortalize the victims of violence, giving them a form through which they can continue to exist. Art and mythology consequently become alternative forms of resistance to historical violence. They do not erase suffering but provide a means of remembering it while imagining the possibility of reconciliation.

The Sloe-Black River: Memory, Migration and Cultural Tradition

In "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," water assumes another important dimension. Here, the river becomes a carrier of memory and cultural tradition. The story focuses on parents who repeatedly fish in the river while waiting for their sons, who have emigrated in search of employment and better opportunities.

The act of fishing is apparently futile, yet the parents continue to perform it. Their fishing becomes symbolic of their desire to recover the past and reconnect with their absent children. The river functions as a medium through which memory survives. The presence of Irish folk tradition strengthens this association. The song sung beside the river evokes an earlier cultural world in which rivers preserve memories of relationships, separation, and longing. The river therefore becomes more than a natural feature; it embodies the collective memory of the community. The concept of landscape is particularly relevant here. A landscape is not simply a physical location but also a space shaped by the memories, traditions, stories, and experiences of generations. McCann's river contains the history of the people who inhabit its surroundings. The emigrant children may physically leave Ireland, but the traditions associated with the river remain part of their cultural identity.

The river consequently challenges geographical boundaries. References to rivers such as the Thames, Hudson, Rhine, Loire, and Darling connect the small Irish river with waterways across the world. The movement of the sons from Ireland to distant countries is mirrored by the movement of the river itself. The river becomes a metaphor for migration: it flows outward while continuing to retain its connection with its source.

At the same time, the parents' continued fishing suggests that cultural memory is sustained through repetition. Even though they doubt whether the river can actually return their sons, they continue the ritual. Their actions reveal the tension between rational understanding and emotional faith. The river cannot literally bring the children home, yet it allows the parents to maintain an imaginative relationship with them.

Water as a Unifying Mythological Symbol

When the three stories are considered together, water emerges as a unifying symbolic element. The Liffey, the lake, and the Sloe-Black River have different narrative functions, but each is associated with a movement between states of existence. Water carries discarded objects, memories, dead bodies, cultural traditions, and hopes for renewal.

In "Along the Riverwall," water represents possible healing and regeneration. In "Cathal's Lake," it provides an imaginative passage into an Otherworld where victims of violence can be transformed and remembered. In "Fishing the Sloe-Black River," it carries cultural memory across geographical and generational boundaries.

The recurring movement between earth, water, and sky is particularly important. Fergus imagines the reconstruction of his bicycle within the depths of the river, while Cathal's swans emerge from the earth and move across water and toward the sky. These movements suggest a cyclical understanding of existence, echoing Celtic ideas about transformation and continuity.

Conclusion

McCann's use of water in Fishing the Sloe-Black River demonstrates the continuing relevance of Celtic mythology to contemporary Irish literature. Rivers and lakes are transformed into symbolic spaces where personal memory intersects with collective history and where the boundaries between reality and imagination become fluid.

Through the Liffey, the lake, and the Sloe-Black River, McCann addresses issues of social paralysis, political violence, migration, loss, and cultural displacement. Yet these waterways also provide possibilities of regeneration, remembrance, and hope. His engagement with Celtic mythology is not a simple reproduction of ancient stories; rather, he adapts mythological concepts to interpret modern Irish experiences. Water ultimately functions as a bridge between the past and the present, the individual and the community, Ireland and the wider world, and the material world and the Otherworld. Through this symbolism, McCann demonstrates that landscape is inseparable from cultural memory and that ancient myths can continue to provide imaginative ways of confronting contemporary realities. In *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, water becomes both a repository of what has been lost and a medium through which new possibilities of identity, healing, continuity, and hope can be imagined.

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