



Resonances of Celtic Pantheism in Claire Keegan's *Walk the Blue Fields*

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Abstract

The relationship between nature and religion has been a matter of philosophical and religious debate for centuries. Nature has been evaluated as a means of reaching God and is considered a reflection of creative power. Pantheism occurs as represented in particular narratives, exploring nature-human coexistence as a manifestation of God. This study aims to explore the elements of Celtic pantheism as a depiction of Christian perception of life, focusing on its attempt to find a reflection of God in nature. Drawing on the terminologies offered by Spinoza, the study analyses Keegan's *Walk the Blue Fields* within a conceptual framework of pantheism, associated with a long spiritual tradition that locates divinity within the natural world, challenging traditional Church doctrines and fostering a mutual relationship between nature and culture. The paper examines how the characters disappoint traditional conceptions by seeking God not within institutional organisations but in nature and the natural. Such an attitude revives the sensitivities of Celtic pantheism by blending natural elements with divine reflections and spiriting the material world with fancy and imagination. The paper also discusses how these stories offer new ethical considerations as to what is good or bad: naturalness. The study shows how the characters' 'natural life' and 'life in nature' yield a genuine moral expression and perception through unmediated natural experience. The study concludes that envisaging nature as a potential realm of spiritual connection and reflective involvement brings creative power and healing cure.

Keywords: nature, pantheism, Celtic pantheism, religion, Claire Keegan, *Walk the Blue Fields*

Introduction

One of the most important issues in the philosophy of religion is the relationship between God and the universe. Traditionally, there have been two forms of this relation. In one of these forms, the relation between God and the universe has been conceptualized as one in which God remains immanent to the universe while in the other form he has been thought as transcendent to the universe. Some monist and materialistic thoughts as well as pantheism might be given as examples for the former while theism and deism might be given as

examples for the latter. Associated mainly with the ideas of Spinoza, pantheism regards God and the universe as integrated and joined with one another and erases the duality between the two. All the things that have been created are considered to be connected with God and be manifestation of God; therefore, all creatures are the same and one with God. In pantheism, all the attributes of God are apparent in the things created. In other words, God is not separate from the universe He has created; He is universe. Similarly, everything is God. The whole universe and its laws are reflections of God. Human beings are also pieces from God.

The Historical Foundations of Pantheist Thought in Literature

Historical roots of pantheism might be dated back to the ancient philosophy of nature, especially to the views of Thales and Anaximander, who were later followed by such figures as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, whose works bear traces of nature-based pantheism. Dermot Moran places special emphasis upon Johannes Scottus Eriugena as far as the roots of pantheism are concerned while counting the names of some other philosophers: “Dionysius, Eriugena, Eckhart and Cusanus all maintain both that God is in all things as their essence and that all things are in God” (Moran, p. 133). Neoplatonists Bruno and Spinoza left notable effects on the improvement and development of pantheist philosophy. As for the term itself, Irish-English philosopher John Toland is believed to have coined the term in 1705. Toland might be regarded as both the first pantheist and the first materialist because he believed in the sacredness of the universe in its material or concrete form. He believed that the universe was a divine being. Toland might be considered to have led a kind of scientific pantheism. Born into a Catholic family, Toland later in his life converted to Protestantism and became a highly controversial figure in religious circles with his works, especially with *Christianity not mysterious*. He tried to overcome this bad fame by establishing connections with powerful people of his times. However, these attempts are likened to “poisoning young men” (Sullivan, p. 1) by Thomas Hearne, the English diarist and antiquary. He is said to have uttered the following words to define his religious belief, which is simultaneously a manifestation of his pantheism: “The sun is my father, the earth my mother, the world is my country, and all men are my family”. Despite his universalism, Toland’s ideas were mostly perverted by many figures and authorities of his time.

Pantheist thought generally followed two paths: it took God as the origin or root and then reached creatures or started with the creatures and reached God accordingly. The former of these paths regards God as the ultimate truth, while the latter makes the truth as identified with the universe and regards God as the sum or total of the things present. In Spinoza’s perception of God, one can see that this God is not the one who does whatever He wants with His own free and absolute will; this God is the one who does what turns out to be necessary or obligatory by causes, a God who is in a sense forced to do so. This is not a God without will; this is a God on whom everything depends as an inevitable result of the system of divine manifestations. Spinoza defines it as such: “Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived” (Spinoza, p. 14). Therefore, God is also in nature and is nature.

Pantheism has manifested itself in various religions and cultures all around the world. Many religious traditions, as well as works, bear traces of pantheism. One can find these traces in, for instance, Hinduism, especially in the doctrines of Advaita Vedanta, in Jewish Kabbalah, Celtic spiritualism, and Islamic Sufism. As for literature, and, specifically English literature, pantheist themes and images are generally found in Romantic literature: "In the eighteenth century, the poets had seen the universe as the beautiful handiwork of God; the Romantics were able to see it as full of human significances and full of a life which answered to man's" (Piper, p. 1). One can easily discern the traces of pantheist philosophy in the work of Goethe, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Emerson. The works of Walt Whitman, D. H. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers also offer pantheist reflections. The works of Wordsworth are examples of a kind of 'poetic pantheism' where one will find the poet's personal experience of nature surrounding him. It is a state of ecstasy or trance felt by the poet when he beholds nature and when he feels oneness or unity with nature. In the poems of Wordsworth, the poet intuitively feels that all the elements of nature including himself are in harmony with one another, which brings great admiration for nature and which is not only based on joy. Nature does not give joy or pleasure only for pantheist poets like Wordsworth; it is also what helps the poet reach God's existence and what appears as concrete evidence of this existence. Perception and experience of nature will naturally bring one to the love of nature, human and God because both nature and humans are reflections of God and his light as his creatures. Therefore, pantheist literature rejects the image of God as hidden and obscure, and it instead supports the idea that God is apparent in and on the universe. For the romantic poet, nature is simply magnificent and beautiful; this beauty reveals the art of its creator.

As far as the English romantic poets are concerned, it might be claimed that there is an admiration for an active universe that is far from passive. This approach to the universe contrasts with the Enlightenment perception or image of the universe, which is fundamentally founded upon reason. The romantic perception and experience of nature and the universe are sentimental and emotional. As far as romantic poets are concerned, even religion is emotional: "To the romanticist, religion is exclusively emotional, and by emotion, he does not mean that state of rapt concentration out of which proceeds the vision of a medieval saint; he means nothing more than the operation of the senses" (Cerf, p. 617). Poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge do not only observe nature in admiration; they also observe God, feeling a great admiration for him. Even when the romantic poet does not observe nature, he has images of nature in his mind, and this recalling is also spontaneous, like the written form of the poet's feelings.

Nature in Wordsworth is what enables spiritual rise and what provides spiritual tranquillity. Nature shows Wordsworth the vanity of the world and directs him to what is unchanging and eternal. While enabling him to realise the vitality in everything created, it also helps the poet to grasp the essence of creation: "It can hardly be denied that Wordsworth approaches this region of spiritual elevation, and he has the distinction of being the only outstanding romantic poet who did so" (Cerf, p. 618). He has a superior position in this respect compared to Coleridge even, which led to controversies among his contemporaries about his religious beliefs. In these controversies, Wordsworth was sometimes labelled as a faithful Christian, sometimes as a pantheist, and sometimes as an atheist, which was wrong as he never rejected religion totally but tried to find an alternative and a truer way to reach God through nature. Nature was a teacher for him, and he taught the poet how to distinguish between true and false religions. Although being united with nature might be associated with accepting a passive role, this very passivity paradoxically empowers the poet. Still, pantheism stands in dark contrast to traditional perceptions and understanding of religion,

which do not come to terms with passivity and impose an active role on believers. As for the pantheist poet, he prefers to be lost in and among even the least important elements and/or reflections of nature and the universe, himself being a part of nature and the universe.

Wordsworth is not the only poet who might be associated with pantheism. It is possible to find traces of pantheism in the works of writers and poets simultaneously representing Celtic spirituality. Yeats' first sentences in his *The Celtic Twilight* demonstrate his desire to "show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who would look where I bid them". The poet is dissatisfied with "this marred and clumsy world"; therefore, he intends to prove that there are still very beautiful things to show to people. This beautiful and alternative face of Ireland is to be found in the fairy tales and memories of rural Ireland. Yeats regards himself as the one and same as the typical Irish peasant. For him, there is an essential similarity between the ideas of the rural Irish and those of himself. His works, especially *The Celtic Twilight*, place an emphasis on the union between humans and nature. Yeats, who spent most of his childhood and early youth in rural Ireland, rural Ireland, and especially Lake Isle of Innisfree, represents an alternative and peaceful home that provides an escape from the depressing atmosphere of urban life. In addition, this very peace leads people to the creative power behind it and strengthens the bonds between a person and nature.

Pantheist Echoes in Celtic Christianity

Celtic culture, or, in other words, Celtic Christianity, is pantheist in nature. It might be argued that Celtic Christianity is a kind of modern Christian spiritualism. The roots of this belief could be found in the traditional English and Irish faith and rituals. As Giri suggests, "because modern Celtic Christianity, through its popular literary expressions, values nature and encourages engagement with the social and ecological crises of the world, it may be seen as representative of a new type of nature-based religion (Giri, p. 61). In this form of Christianity, God is not regarded as a creator independent from the universe; on the contrary, this God is in active and continual connection with the universe. That is why it could also be regarded as an alternative form of Christianity. In this version of Christianity, nature is like a book to be read, a kind of Bible. Celtic Christianity takes humans out of church walls and invites him/her to establish communication with nature. J. Philip Newell distinguishes between Celtic Christianity and Roman Christianity; to him, Celtic spirituality was represented by "the practice of listening for the heartbeat of God" and "lent itself to listening for God at the heart of life". In contrast, Roman spirituality "favoured a listening for God in the ordained teaching and life of the Church" (Newell, 1997, p. 1&2). Newell believes it is incorrect to limit Celtic spirituality to the twentieth century, claiming that it has existed as a characteristic aspect and defining element of the British Church since the 4th century. Although it was marginalized in time, it has managed to survive. There is a special emphasis on creation in this version of Christianity. While the dominant Christian tradition brings the action of feeling thankful for creation and the created ones solely, Celtic spiritualism invites people to feel united with the creator by making them think about those created. It seeks the creator in the middle of life, in the human body and nature, refusing the idea of creation disconnected from life. This perception has been reflected in prayers of Celtic culture; in the lines of these prayers, one will find such elements of nature as the moon, sun, sky and stars.

Newell finds traces of this tradition in the works and teachings of the Scottish 'heretic' Alexander Scott and the writings of George MacDonald, the novelist (Newell, 1997, p. 5).

Celtic Christianity not only emphasises the essential goodness of creation but also the essential goodness of human beings and humanity. Therefore, it questions the idea of original sin and the practice of baptism, which helps it to remove and distance itself from orthodox or dominating doctrines of traditional Christianity. In this alternative interpretation of Christianity, creation is primarily shaped around the concept of harmony. Starting his discussion in his book on the basis of the word "kosmos", Newell underlines the fact that the roots of the mentioned word in ancient Greek bring us to the idea of harmony of parts. For him, in the classical world, "everything in the universe was viewed as moving in relation to everything else" (Newell, 2011, p. vii). According to Newell, this understanding of the universe has recently been remembered again, although it was forgotten or at least ignored for centuries. Now, people become increasingly aware that they are connected to everything else apart from themselves, and that all the elements of the universe are similarly connected and interrelated. Accordingly, Newell makes a reference to Jung's "moon-like consciousness", which he defines as "a way of seeing in which we more readily perceive oneness than differentiation" (Newell, 2011, p. viii). Moon here becomes a kind of equalizer that helps people to forget their differences and feel united with all elements of nature and the universe. Moon also symbolizes the incredible power of the creator and "life's edges are not so sharply defined" under moonlight (Newell, 2011, p. viii). Moonlight helps us not to see boundaries and invites us to experience this borderless form of life. Here, we also eliminate the borders between us and everything else, making it easier for us to see and contact other people around us and the elements of nature as well as its creator. It is necessary for us to experience the feeling of unity and oneness, of which we have been deprived for long: "Moon-like consciousness is ours in dream life and meditative practice as well, as it is in some of our earliest memories of childhood when we glimpsed the "Golden World", as Robert Johnson calls it, the world of unitary vision rather than separation" (Newell, 2011, p. ix). Therefore, feeling united with nature or finding our lost connection with nature and universe will help us to have a better psychology as individuals and will thus have a healing power over our societies that have been worn off because of wars, injustice, otherization and intolerance. Pantheism or pantheistic beliefs or faiths might contribute to the emergence and foundation of a humanistic and tolerant atmosphere and societies. That will also strengthen the idea of universalism in a world which is faced with a probable and a closer end or doomsday because of climate crisis, possible abusive uses of technology and capitalistic greed. That is the main reason why humanity should be reintroduced to moon-like consciousness to guarantee a kind of survival under these conditions. Returning to moon-like consciousness does not necessitate bringing all people together around a common faith or religion; people might remain as members of their own faith; however, this is necessary for a common survival and creating an atmosphere of negotiation among people since it is necessary to remember that "our human journey began as one and that the birth of the earth and its unfolding life are one" (Newell, 2011, p. x). If we do not remember that, "we will splinter further and further into fragmented parts in which we dangerously forget the whole" (Newell, 2011, p. x). Therefore, humanity needs to get rid of the sun-like consciousness, which focuses on differences, and replace it with moon-like consciousness. It is an attempt to feel the breath of all created things and thus reach the existence of God. It is an attempt to understand that our lives are parts of the universe and the universe has parts from us, considering the fact that microcosmos and macrocosmos are one and the same. The fights, confusions and chaos in the world could only be prevented by spreading this form of

consciousness. It is necessary for all of us to realise that if our children are not good, we as parents will not also feel good. If other nations are in pain, our own nations will not be without pain. And if the body of the world is sick, it is impossible for humans to feel healthy as “wellness is found not in isolation but in relationship” (Newell, 2011, p. xiii).

Claire Keegan’s Pantheist Vision: Uniting Nature, Humanity, and Divinity

Contemporary Irish writer Claire Keegan was born into and raised by a Catholic family, which has made her aware of and closer to Celtic culture, the roots of England and English culture. Returning to Ireland after obtaining an education in the States, Keegan lived in Wales for a while. This experience not only gave her the opportunity to feel united with the nature of Wales but also helped her to get in touch with a different version of Celtic culture within the borders of England. Famous especially for her short fiction, Keegan intertwines the old and the new, investigates the shifting balances of gender and traditional lives, blends rural and pagan traditions with global consumerism, and emphasizes the crucial role that nature and art play for her characters (Luppino, p. 1). For Smith, “a remarkable aspect of *Walk the Blue Fields* is the infusion of the short story with elements of the oral folktale” (Smith, p. 194).

It might be argued that Keegan’s works provide a suitable platform for the handling of the theme of pantheism as her works, especially her short stories, bring nature and her role as a reflection of the divine power of God. Celebrating the beauty of nature, these works emphasize that spiritual and intellectual happiness might be reached through experiencing nature. Keegan’s short stories find a mystery and a secret in nature that influences and interferes in the lives of people. Accordingly, nature is not a passive formation here; it is an active universal factor. Nature is not only what shapes lives of people; it also has an influence upon the lives of animals and other natural elements. It might even be argued that nature is like fate-determiner in these stories. It determines the fates of not only human beings but other elements of within itself.

Smith argues that *Walk the Blue Fields* “charts the tensions and anxieties of contemporary Ireland, whether that is through the presentation of the waning of individual and collective faith in Catholicism, a damaged, land-obsessed masculinity, the necessities and repercussions of truth-telling about sexual abuse and family breakdown, or a reawakening femininity” (Smith, p. 192). Thus, it might be claimed that the author describes the individuals seeking an alternative form of faith. Luppino also holds that Keegan’s short stories “often blend ingredients that pertain to the globalized, consumerist and secular outlook of twenty-first century Ireland with the narrative strategies, and the very practice, or performance, of more traditional, sometimes ancient, elements of Irish culture, such as pagan rites and beliefs or oral storytelling” (Luppino, p. 9). Actually, Keegan’s short stories offer alternatives to not only religious faith of societies; they also offer alternatives to the normalised lives of capitalist societies of present times. Re-experiencing nature might be a very good alternative option for consumerist societies which have been shut inside houses and shopping malls and which are provoked to spend more and more and consume everything. Ireland, which has been referred to with female names and images and which might thus be regarded as a reflection of nature, is depicted as a good location for the purpose of building an alternative life in these short stories. The short story tradition in Irish literature

has been noted for its emphasis on place and space. In the twentieth century, the Irish short story tradition “repeatedly located land, geography and place as central motifs”, and, in more recent decades, stories written by Anne Enright, Claire Keegan and Kevin Berry “locate place as the dominant subject and theme” (Gladwin, p. 138). In such representations of Ireland, the country is depicted with its characteristics that might host an alternative life from an ecocritical perspective, as ecocriticism focuses on communication and the interaction between nature and culture.

Keegan's *Walk the Blue Fields*, at the same time the story that gives the title to her collection of stories is about a priest who has been invited to a wedding ceremony. He will unite the couple and perform the wedding ceremony. From the beginning, the reader has a sense of a tense atmosphere and feels that there is something wrong with the wedding or that the bride and the priest do not feel at ease. For instance, the bride cannot correctly sign the formal marriage documents as her hands shake, unlike the bridegroom, who signs them without hesitation. As for the priest, although he was invited to that place as a figure familiar with the members of the families, he does not feel that he belongs there. What is more interesting is that the weather and nature accompany the sense of uneasiness; the narrator intentionally remembers to describe nature and place while talking about the people and describing the atmosphere from the beginning. The morning sun, the cloud of spring and the natural landscape all stand in the narration with some particular roles attached to them. As for the priest, he prefers to stand away from the other participants in the wedding and instead wants to watch the surroundings. He has a strong desire to unite with nature without doing what he is expected to do, and this is a desire to experience nature and feel united with her: “He would like, now, to change his clothes and turn out the country road, to cross the stile and walk down to the river... Further down, at the river's edge, he would feel calm, but as soon as he turns the key in the chapel door, he faces up the street where his duty lies” (Keegan, pp. 17-18). As can be seen, civilized life with its institutions and norms seems disturbing and limiting for the priest, who loves nature and feels freer when he is with nature. The city or town centre represents formal regulations, time management and monotony. At the same time, rural parts and nature are the places where one feels unlimited by time and rules, thus representing an alternative living style. This is where even “the wind is strangely human. A tender speech combing through the willows. In a bare whisper, the elms lean” (Keegan, p. 18). Nature is personified in the story and described as breathing like a human.

The priest does not only want to escape the urban centre; he also wants to escape the present while embracing the past: “There's a pleasure to be had in history. What's recent is another matter and painful to recall” (Keegan, p. 18). History is generally narrated as something to escape, a kind of nightmarish remembrance and a burden on the shoulders of the character in most contemporary novels; however, in the eyes of the narrator and priest, it turns into a pile of lived memories. The priest likes being a part of history, being covered by it. History is a hider, a concealer with the sweet memories it keeps. The priest thus turns into a romantic who remembers the past with feelings of nostalgia. Wordsworth was also a seeker of nostalgia as he found the times of the past ages less polluted and more sincere compared to his present times, which he found sick and detached from the roots of nature and human.

The narration also hints at a probable lived experience between the priest and the bride because of the anxious manners of the bride whenever there is an occasion in which she finds herself closer to the priest. When the priest is invited for a photo together with the bride and bridegroom, he initially wants to reject it; however, he cannot escape it. When he finally accepts to be in a photo with the couple, he is careful not to touch the bride in some way and

he witnesses that the “bouquet in her hand is trembling” (Keegan, p. 19). When he insists that she must be cold, the bride’s answer is a little bit odd because she says she feels nothing. The bride is depicted as a woman who is in the middle of an undesired wedding ceremony; she does not want to be there and get married to the bridegroom. Feelings are natural; however, she feels nothing although she is expected or believed to love the bridegroom, which means she has also lost her touch with nature. As for the priest, he not only keeps the ceremony short but also decides to have a drink as the only way of forgetting about the present and turning it into a kind of illusion, something unreal.

The priest’s closeness to nature can also be demonstrated by the fact that “mostly it’s women who talk to him” (Keegan, p. 20). Women find him closer to themselves rather than men. It seems he has no good relations with men, some of whom owe him money. The priest’s closeness to women could also be explained by his popularity among them with whom he likes playing the game of complimenting. His manners are found by some incompatible with the attitudes expected from a priest. It must be read as the sign of the fact that he represents an alternative form of Christianity. In the dialogue between him and the groom’s mother, Mrs. Jackson, this incompatibility reveals itself once again. This is a small rural society where preferable alternatives are also small in number, especially for women. For instance, Mrs. Jackson’s niece, who finds the priest’s manners unsuitable, looks at the men around her and feels disappointed since she cannot find any suitable partner for her. Despite his complimenting attitudes, the priest is not regarded by Mrs. Jackson as a suitable man for marriage; he is found by her to be too much possessed by work and play. However, this image is not shared by other women around; a young woman participating in the wedding asks the priest “Is that glass half full or half empty would you say, Father?” (Keegan, p. 21), suggesting a man can only become complete through marriage. The father attempts to fudge the issue with a clever answer but she does not give up saying “...surely it can’t be one without being the other” (Keegan, p. 21).

In the memories of the priest, one can easily see the traces of a desire for a more secular life, one that is not intended for a priest. It is implied in these remembrances that the priest would like to prefer living like a more secular person, an ordinary one who does not want to remain and be seen as representative of an austere life. We learn that he was not forced to become a priest by his family although his mother encouraged him to priesthood. The priest’s decision to become a priest, it seems, is a decision of a moment of ecstasy at the chapel of his hometown, a decision which is now questioned by the very man who made it at that moment. He has a strong belief in fate as expressed by his words: “Things have their own way of sorting themselves out” (Keegan, p. 22). However, it seems he cannot convince himself of the accuracy of that sentence based on his past experiences. He seems to feel the regret for his wrong decisions. The bride’s father, Lawlor, who does not believe that her daughter made a right choice, evaluates the issue of fate based on the necessity of making mistakes; for him, people must be left free to make their own choices so that they will make mistakes because making mistakes will prevent them from making greater mistakes. This wedding is defined in very different terms by the narrator: “Weddings are hard. A man loses his daughter to a younger man. A woman sees her son throwing himself away on a lesser woman. It is something they half believe. There’s the expense, the sentiment, the no going back” (Keegan, p. 23).

The priest feels that his position does not necessarily signify respect when he witnesses the behaviour of the men at the Gents. One of these men, Donal Jackson, does not bother to hide his dick after finishing his urinating. Although another man attempts to invite the priest to disregard that scene of impertinence, the priest hears that they are laughing after he has

left. This is a sign of changing attitudes towards men of religion: "There was a time, not too long ago, when they would have waited until he could not have heard" (Keegan, p. 23). In an age when people seem to have lost their faith, the priest's position also seems to have lost its significance and turned into a symbolic one, something that is believed to be got rid of but still considered necessary because of the tradition behind it. There are some notifications related to priesthood's loss of favour among people; for instance, people prefer to visit a man called Chinaman for cure of their illnesses, physical and psychological, although they know that he is not a Christian. In addition, the priest in vain tries to find a chair reserved for him at the dinner table and cannot find. While sitting at the table with the relatives of the bride and bridegroom, the priest also feels that he is forced to be there. The narration gives the first serious sign of what might have happened in the past that now put the priest into a difficult situation. Drinking so much is only an indication of this unrest. When the priest goes to have another drink, he learns that the bridegroom has paid for it. He has the drink and can see the smile of the bridegroom, which makes him question whether Jackson might have known the truth about his life and past experiences. At the Gents, Jackson calls his dick "a fucken ornament" and immediately after says "much lie your own" (Keegan, p. 23), which must be read as a sign of the revelation of a secret in priest's life. A comment made by the groom's aunt at the dinner table is another sign of a dark secret in the life of the priest. When she sees that the priest is placed between the bride's uncle and herself, she says "I see they've put you down with the rest of the sinners" (Keegan, p. 24). The use of the expression "the rest of" is notable here; it is as if the priest is just another sinner like many ordinary people attending the wedding. The priest cannot make any comment after hearing that. And finally, in the conversation about the Chinaman, there is a comment related to the way white cloth gets and shows stain. This one is also referring to the colour of the priest's uniform, implying that his pure white cloth and his own purity as a priest might be easily stained, maybe stained easier compared to other people. "'Aye,' says Sinnott with a grunt. 'And we all know the white cloth is aisy stained'" (Keegan, p. 26). When the bridegroom's brother Donal Jackson gives a speech at the dinner table and says his brother has made a very good choice adding that it is a pity that the bride does not have a sister, Sinnott once again "looks hard at the priest and smiles" (Keegan, p. 27). Sinnott's family name, which combines the words 'victory' and 'boldness', seems to have been reflected upon his personality as he dares to say what others do not dare to say. His comment leads to a deep silence at the dinner table and although some try to change the subject of the conversation, the priest feels disturbed and once again cannot help having a suspicion that the expression targets him. When the priest witnesses all these offending acts and events and when he realizes that the bride is not happy at all, he wishes to get rid of that stage as soon as possible and remain alone.

Yet it is not the improper attitudes of those at the wedding that really disturb the priest. The main reason behind his discomfort is that he is not in and with nature here at the wedding with all these people he finds acting. The priest has a life closely tied with nature; he takes long walks on the roads of nature. Nature is sincere and not artificial. She does not "act" unlike most of the people at the wedding. Nature is silence and means being away from nonsense talk. For the priest, being in and with nature is equal to breathing while the atmosphere of the wedding makes it impossible for him to breathe. Nature will not mock him; on the contrary, she will understand him unlike these people who disturb him with inappropriate manners and who titter behind him. Nature is richer although the wedding's dinner table seems to offer more because she offers what is necessary and sufficient only. Moreover, she satisfies the soul together with the body unlike the atmosphere of the wedding, which is intended to gratify the body and the stomach only. Nature is embracing and is not prejudiced; she covers everyone without making discrimination while those at the

wedding have not been able to get rid of their prejudices, especially racial prejudices. For instance, while they talk about the Chinaman, Mike Brennan refers to his fear of dogs and Sinnott says “He’d probably ate the bloody sheep dog” (Keegan, p. 25), which is a comment filled with racial prejudice. The Chinaman, by the way, represents an alternative way of living compared to the lives of those at the wedding. People go and visit him to find a cure although no one knows exactly what kind of a cure he is providing for people and illnesses. The Chinaman is another man of nature as he prefers to live in and with nature. Such people like the priest and the Chinaman draw the attention of people as they offer alternatives to their own lives. They are both attractive and enviable. That is, people turn them into targets of wonder and jealousy at the same time. Their reason behind their visit is not known exactly: “I don’t rightly know, Father. All I know is there’s people goes to him” (Keegan, p. 25). Even though they might find nothing extraordinary in the attitudes of the Chinaman or find no cure for their sicknesses, he is still out of type when compared to the rest of the society in the town. The same might be said for the priest as well and it might be argued that both the Chinaman and the priest are the exotics of that place.

For the priest, the wedding, the dinner served, the speeches given by the pillars of the families etc. are nothing but a stage. He cannot find any sincerity in all these. The narrator seems to agree with him as taking photo of the wedding cake is described as an obligatory act by the narrative (Keegan, p. 28). The priest is also forced to give a speech; he stands up and “says grace without feeling any of the words” (Keegan, p. 29). This is a very difficult speech which turns into a platform of questioning faith for the priest. He begins to question his faith in God; the usefulness of his prayers. He asks where God is because, like most people who question their faith, he also wants to see Him act, prevent evil, and establish justice: “Lately, when he has prayed, his prayers have not been answered. Where is God? he has asked. Not, what is God? He does not mind not knowing God. His faith has not altered- that’s what’s strange- but he wishes God would show himself” (Keegan, p. 29). These words are from a priest who is not a typical Catholic or Protestant. He believes God exists; however, he wants Him to show Himself to him. He just waits for a sign. God’s showing Himself is necessary for the priest because he is well aware of the fact that God’s revelation might be the only solution for his personal problems. Bored among these people, the priest looks for a source of consolation, and God will provide him with this source.

The dance scene of the narration proves to be very dramatic and even tragic for the priest as well as the bride. The pearls in the bride’s necklace slip off as the string of the necklace breaks during dance. The priest attempts to collect some of the pearls and is emotionally affected by the warmth of them because that warmth reminds the priest of the warmth of the bride’s body: “It is warm in his hand, warm from her. This, more than anything else in the day, startles him” (Keegan, p. 30). The priest has been disturbed by many things and people at the wedding; however, this proves to be the strongest and most effective one, which makes the reader have questions about the relation between the priest and the bride. When he puts the pearl that has slipped off into the hand of the bride, he can see that she is about to cry although she manages to hold herself. If she could not hold herself and cry, the priest would be ready to “take her hand and take her away from this place” (Keegan, p. 30). The narration places emphasis upon the role of fate in people’s lives here: “two people hardly ever want the same thing at any given point in life. It is sometimes the hardest part of being human” (Keegan, p. 31). The priest understands this with the bride, although he can, for now, do nothing to change the situation. He finds himself in a battle with his own self; he wants to be a better priest, one who has a more respectful place and position in the sight of God but he knows that he cannot prove to be one of such traditional ‘good’ priests. He knows

that this is almost impossible as a human being because being a human means being natural. And loving someone is also a natural thing for a man. And the priest also knows that God does not expect him to suppress his natural desires.

For the priest, being far from the madding crowd of the wedding equals peace of mind and soul. It is not the wedding, the meal and the music that are worth looking at as signs of beauty and peace but the trees, the wind, and the birds of nature. He wants to get rid of everything associated with and peculiar to civilized life and wants to be lost in the wilderness. He does not need anything to guide him because he knows nature will guide him and help him find his way. Going into the wilderness means reaching peace again, and when he hears "the comforting noise of the river" (Keegan, p. 32), he knows he is on the right way. His walk in nature is a means of cleaning the mind from all the unnecessary issues of the world and being united with God, a means of refreshment, a kind of reset for body and soul. Here is where "the peace is deeper as always simply because it's still there" (Keegan, p. 32).

The story invites the the reader to think more about the love relationship between the priest and the newly-married bride. He is visited by her to get a Mass card signed for her mother. The priest invites her to his house, and she goes in to avoid offending him. A touch of the priest is misunderstood by the girl and this is where their love starts. Nature plays a significant role also in their relations; this time, she acts as the concealer of the love between the priest and the girl. Nature is a hiding place where a natural form of love could be experienced both bodily and emotionally. In other words, it is nature where proper, unpolluted love could emerge. Society cannot understand what true love is and remains prejudiced while nature is the only one that can understand the innocence of the love between the priest and the girl. The narrative gives the main reason for the end of the relation between the lines. The bride of today's wedding cannot resist the power of norms prevalent in society and thus reveals that she prefers to be on the side of society instead of staying within the borders of nature. She wants the priest to give up priesthood, which is not accepted by the priest. The priest manages to ignore society as he is a man of nature and has the power to resist its norms, although he is involved in an inappropriate love relationship. For him, the rules of nature are beyond the norms of society and more powerful than these norms. However, his lover cannot do that.

Discussion and Conclusion

The central character's desire to be reunited with nature is not a manifestation of comfort but consolation, not for ambition but yearning for a cure. The underlying feelings of regret and disappointment are consolidated by past experiences and social discrepancies, which makes him search for new, untrodden paths because walking deeper into nature means lessening the pain of a broken relationship. Instead of returning home and resting after such a tiring and difficult day, he prefers to take shelter in 'Nature'. Apart from these seemingly-borderless lands, he also wants to share his sadness with another man of nature, the Chinaman, although he does not do it intentionally. In other words, he does not actually want to see the Chinaman; however, some mysterious force or some invisible bond leads him to his caravan. He is like those many around who seek remedy. "Living happily in a clean place on his own" (Keegan, p. 37), the Chinaman is depicted as a wise man because he intuitively feels that the priest has some trouble of problem although he claims he has no trouble in his life. He

touches the priest, which is shocking for the priest as he has not been touched for three years. The Chinaman's method of healing is made up of touches on different part of the body; it is like a healing massage. And touch is also natural and has been found to have a healing power in many studies in recent years. What is natural is essentially healing and therapeutic. Touching is also an important element in the priest's relation with the newly-married woman, the former lover of the priest: "How lovely it was to know her intimately" (Keegan, p. 36). The Chinaman intends to help the priest's body and mind to get rid of the smallest pieces left from that relationship. His massage is intended to help the priest get rid of the pain left in his mind and body because of that love. He is successful because he does not mind what he will take at the end of his services. He has a simple life and has not lost his bonds with nature. His treatment methods are intended to help people regain their bonds with nature.

Leaving the caravan of the Chinaman, the priest feels better as he was reminded of the fact that man can recover if he is together with nature: "The spring has come, dry and promising" (Keegan, p. 38). It is nature that is going to fill him with hope about future, with the power to continue living despite the blows of life itself. Looking at the beauty of nature, the priest once again remembers that God is also to be found in nature: "Where is God? he has asked, and tonight God is answering back. All around the air is sharp with the tang of wild currant bushes. A lamb climbs out of a deep sleep and walks across the blue field. Overhead, the stars have rolled into place. God is nature" (Keegan, p. 38). Here, the priest is like a pantheist; he finds God in the middle of nature, in what He has created while he also witnesses the perfect harmony between God and the things created, the elements of universe. No miracles are needed for the priest to make him sure that God exists. Even the most ordinary, the most common can remain as evidence of God's existence. The way of finding God and feeling united with Him is through being in nature.

Barry Cerf states that romantic religiosity is associated with a desire to lose oneself in the universe, a yearning "to become a part of the cosmic stream" (Cerf, p. 617). For Cerf, this desired dissolution in and with nature may be only possible through ecstasy, and there are two roads for the emergence of this ecstasy: woman and nature. The priest has both: he loves women, does not hesitate to fall in love with a woman, and even has sexual relations with her, although he is a priest and is not expected to do so, and he has very close bonds with nature. He feels no shame when remembering his intimate moments with his lover. What is natural is worth experiencing for him. And love is perhaps the most natural feeling a human has. What is natural should not be avoided, hidden, or forbidden by religion. Through love of nature and women, the priest is on the true way of reaching God and being united with the universe. Pantheism offers an alternative to traditional Christianity also in this respect. While the God of Christianity has been considered male and rejected by feminists, pantheism "opens the way to difference, to alterities of every sort" (Jantzen, p. 267). Thus, it might stand as an alternative belief that will provide a kind of reconciliation in the feminist debate against religion that stems from the idea that religion itself is male-centered. For Jantzen, there is a pantheist projection of divine female or female divine (Jantzen, p. 277). Both nature and women, with their reflection of the beauty of creative power and femininity, enable oneness with God while at the same time offering an alternative to traditional interpretations of faith in the Christian world.

Through the lens of Celtic pantheism, *Walk the Blue Fields* challenges traditional views of divinity and religion, presenting nature as a powerful medium for spiritual connection and reflection. The relationship between nature and religion has been a matter of philosophical and religious debate for centuries. Nature has been evaluated as a means of

reaching God and is considered a reflection of creative power. Pantheism and other religious beliefs have regarded nature as a demonstration of God's existence and shaped themselves based upon recognizing this reciprocal relation. Celtic pantheism remains a form of belief or a form of alternative Christianity in that it also attempts to find a reflection of God in nature. Claire Keegan's *Walk the Blue Fields* presents a picture of a priest who is not a traditional priest as he also tries to find God in nature and what is natural, not within the Church walls. This priest feels that what is natural is allowed by religion and might not necessarily be sinful. He believes God is in nature and sees his existence in different elements. The study shows how the characters' 'natural life' and 'life in nature' yield a genuine moral expression and perception through unmediated natural experience. The study concludes that envisaging nature as a potential realm of spiritual connection and reflective involvement brings creative power and healing cure.

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