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Laura B. Vandale

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Woman Across Time: 
Sister Judith Remembers

by LAURA B. VANDALE

No Country for Young Men by Julia O’Faolain, “one of the most accomplished Irish writers of her generation” is, as Jay Halio has described, “a darkly comic story concerned with the position of women” (Halio 580). Dark in that it certainly has its share of death and mystery, the novel nevertheless retains a twisted touch of comedy, which challenges the readers’ emotions; we laugh sometimes only because otherwise we would cry. This sense of painful comedy is embodied by the women characters throughout the story. For, despite a title which might lead one to believe otherwise, No Country for Young Men is unavoidably about Irish women. In particular, it is about Judith Clancy, the old mad nun great-aunt of Grainne and Michael. Through Judith we see how the lives of women in Ireland have been, are, and no doubt will continue to be affected by war, politics, men, and the Church. What sets Judith apart from other women is that she has dared act on her own initiative—refusing to be completely squelched by the limitations generally placed on women—and has suffered punishment for doing so for the rest of her life. Furthermore, Judith is symbolic of Ireland itself, bringing to mind the Caitlin Ni Houlihan/Shan von Vocht myth. Although Ireland ultimately controls her behavior, Judith never loses her passionate love for it; indeed, she lets nothing stand between her and what she believes to be the good of Ireland and its people.

A cross-generational story, No Country for Young Men employs old Judith’s amazingly lucid flashbacks of her youth to tell essentially two stories at once. In the one we have a young Judith surrounded by political upheaval in the troubled Ireland of the 1920s. Through her associations with Owen, her sister’s revolutionary fiance, and Sparky Driscoll, an American IRA supporter come to evaluate the situation and drum up funds back in the States, Judith is entrenched in the fight for a free Republic. In the other “present-tense” story, the aging Sister Judith finds herself removed from her familiar convent surroundings and placed in the home of her great-niece Grainne and family. Another “American for the Irish cause,” James Duffy happens to enter Judith’s life and —along with Grainne—works towards uncovering some of the unclear details of past IRA actions. The two stories, seemingly completely independent of one another except for Judith’s existence in both, are actually intricately interconnected as we read of generations of deceptive, volatile relationships and the parallel deaths of two relatively innocent young American observers.
Essentially it is Judith, the link between past and present, about whom Ann Weekes writes when she says, “The madness that forces women to act against their best judgments and against their best interests is, in No Country for Young Men, associated with the political confusion that has affected Ireland for over sixty years” (101). Operating within this political confusion, Judith would probably not agree that she acted at all against her best judgment or interest when she killed Sparky Driscoll. She was doing what she thought necessary not only to protect Owen’s political and marital position but also to protect her sister from the winsome ways of the persuasive young American. But subconsciously, on an emotional level somewhere beneath her fiery exterior, Judith is obviously bothered by what she has done, for she represses the entire event—not to mention much of the history of that time—and only remembers many years later through the constant jarring of her memory by practically everyone she encounters. In her position as a woman, her rash behavior is seen as madness; madness, however, was not what caused Judith to kill Sparky. His death was the result of a blurred definition of “acting in the best interest,” which grew out of that chaos commonly called politics.

Whether or not she consciously recognizes it, Judith’s entire life has been influenced and shaped by politics, although in an interview with James Duffy Judith says, “Politics? Ah, I’d be no help to you there. . . . They kept me in the dark. I’d be no help to you about politics” (121). The “political confusion” Weekes refers to was unavoidable to a girl of seventeen whose family thrived on the turmoil:

What bound the family together was their Republicanism. In the yard, behind the family pub, a coal pile and stacked porter barrels provided a ladder for quickly scaling the back wall in time of need. Unknown young men came and went unquestioned, sleeping on the kitchen settle or in the guest bedroom. Kathleen’s fiancé, Owen, was active. Eamonn, their elder brother, had been killed when Judith was fifteen. Seamus too was with the lads. Only their father held back. . . . What difference was it going to make if and when they got their Republic? he asked. . . . But he was over-ruled in his own house. (20)

For the young Judith, political unrest was so much a part of her daily repast that she failed to see any of it as “politics”; at the Clancys’, “patriotic” support was a common fact of life.

But Judith wants more than token patriotism. Rather than passively standing aside observing and serving the flow of the men and weapons through their doors, as Kathleen did, Judith is infected with the spirit of the men. Sparky himself calls her a revolutionary, and, although she never openly agrees with him, the reader has the privilege of access to Judith’s inner thoughts: “[After the signing of the treaty] Owen came home to find the house full of Free Staters with only Judith—who wasn’t revealing her opinions—a secret diehard” (312). Her political views have been especially shaped by Owen, whom she unadmittedly, and no doubt unintentionally, adores. Her adoration encourages thoughts most “unfeminine,” as she acknowledges that “She was viscerally on Owen’s side. The clash of wills excited her” (314). This political fervor appears to have survived the years of electrotherapy, for even as a daft old woman her political stance remains firm.
When Cormac, Grainne’s son, questions Judith about the IRA, she confesses that as a nun she cannot make a monetary donation to the Army, but she does still support the revolutionary group. When Cormac pushes her about concern over the methods of the IRA and the fact that “The Church condemns wars which cannot be won since they expose people to needless suffering,” Judith changes the subject rather than have her opinion altered by her supposed devotion to the Church (112). Her IRA ties are none too subtle; exhausted by an encounter with drunken Michael, old Judith must be carried up the stairs, but as she is she sings a fight song from somewhere deep in her past:

> “But the boys of Kilmichael were ready,  
> And met them with powder and shot,  
> And the Irish Republican Army  
> Made bits of the whole shaggin’ lot!” (94)

Judith may sing her song from days gone by, but Cormac’s hitting her up for a donation to the IRA is evidence that the song is not exactly anachronistic. Her life and associations intertwining the past with the present, Judith is the link between the political unrest of the 1920s and that of the 1970s, the two periods in which the action of the novel takes place. Sadly, she is witness to the fact that there have been few important changes in the political situation of Ireland during that time. Even as adolescent Judith permitted her emotions to be overrun by her political convictions, in typical IRA fashion, so do the youth of Ireland sixty years later. Time has not changed the fact that, even for women, it is nearly impossible to be Irish and not be political in some way, whether or not one chooses to act on those beliefs and ideals.

Politics cannot be separated from two other aspects of Judith’s life which are mentioned early in the novel as the cause of strains in her family: sex and war (21). In her youth Judith cannot escape the impact that the closely intertwined forces of war and men (who are representative of sex) thrust on her life. Because her mother died while Judith was still quite young, she has not had much female influence in her life—other than her older sister Kathleen—but has been molded by the men surrounding her, by Seamus and Sparky as well as Owen. The younger of two daughters and sent away to school for many years, Judith has not had to endure quite the same male oppression as Kathleen; yet she is still well aware that, as a female, certain expectations and limitations are placed on her. Her home was male-dominated, and devoid of motherly influence:

> Home was male territory. Judith’s sister, Kathleen, struggled without hope. . . . The house was full of men’s boots, smells of unemptied chamber-pots, a clutter of unassigned hats and macintoshes. . . . On the chimney-piece there had once been china figures but the maids had done for them. Their mother’s collection of Waterford glass had gone the same way. (20)

Judith has been raised in an atmosphere which hints at the convention that she is supposed to be something lesser because of her womanhood. Her father reinforces the notion that even God feels this way about women when he says, “What do you need . . . tormenting Almighty God? Don’t you think he has better things to do than to listen to the ulagoanings of females?” (73).
In the convent schools Judith has, from an early age, been “reminded that it was an Irishwoman’s frail morals which led to the English first coming [to Ireland] in 1169. Women bore inherited guilt” (34). Thus girls are expected to be pure and holy and virtuous, as if this will somehow make up for all the wrongs committed by women through the centuries. They are indoctrinated with the confusing knowledge that they must remain in their places as women; otherwise their powerful influence over men might be damaging. Judith recalls the reaction she and her fellow convent girls had to the visitation of one particularly teary priest: “My darling and beautiful and pure and innocent little girls,” said the priest, and a ripple of nervous hilarity ran from bench to bench. ‘How can I ever tell you the joy it brings to my heart to see innocence abloom today in this ancient, holy and sacred land of ours?’ ” (301). Weeping all the while as though in pain, he went on to talk to them about the danger of “Eve’s sin,” desiring knowledge. In the end the girls were “alight with vanity at the effect their feminine virtue had seemed to have on him, a ruined creature but mortal, holy, and moreover male” (302).

With this kind of repressed background it is no wonder that Judith “carefully kept herself from knowing about soppy things like love and courting” (232) and is painfully aware of how “truly shameful . . . mention of sexual matters” would be (292). She is embarrassed by Sparky’s forward manner and unsure of what to make of him when he shows her some attention:

“[Kathleen]’s pretty.” [Sparky] acknowledged now, “but you’re more beautiful. Will be.” [Judith] didn’t believe she’d heard him right. Her?
“Didn’t you know?”
She blushed and hated him.
“I’m sorry.”
“What for?” she had to ask.
“Dragging you out of childhood.”
“You have no small opinion of yourself!” There was a supply of such remarks.
“You see, it’s happened,” he teased, “you’re flirting.”
The impudence! But she wouldn’t believe him. Redheads were rarely beautiful. (212)

It is Sparky again who later torments her with talk of sex, bringing to her mind images which frighten her and cause her to run off, leaving him behind. He knows her naivete and insists on capitalizing on it:

“Why are you frightened of sex, Judith? You’re a country girl, after all,” said Sparky. “You must have seen animals.”
“Stop. I won’t listen.” But he was blocking the path. . . .
“Why are you so prudish?” he asked. “A revolutionary should be able to look at things the way they are. . . .” (299)

Revolutionary or not, Judith denies any attraction to men, chides Kathleen for her behavior towards Sparky, and is furious with herself when she discovers she has little control over her own physical reaction to the American when he kisses her. She eventually comes to an acceptance that Sparky belongs lumped into the general category of unreliable men:

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She finally decided that poor Sparky Driscoll had a deformed mind and that she should empty her own of the bilge he had poured into it. Men were unstable creatures, . . . it could be unsafe to come too close to them and this wasn’t only true of the American. (306)

For all their instability, however, Judith seems resigned to the fact that the men are the ones making the decisions regarding her country. We might believe that she has been convinced by Owen’s declaration that “the formative idea comes from the male and the clay is female: passive, mere potentiality. . . . We are their virile soul” (314). Time stands still for Owen in regard to women. He thinks of them only in relation to their usefulness for men; his big hope is that the “ancestral virtue” of “maidenly modesty” would flourish in the “new, free and Gaelic Ireland” (317). Judith apparently acquiesces to this idea of male dominance when in a conversation with Sparky she talks of the future leadership of Ireland and comments:

“Kathleen’s fellow, Owen, will be in the Dail for sure. It’ll be a country run by young men.”
“What about the women? They’ll have a say now too, won’t they?”
She shrugged. “The men in this country would never let women have a say.” (213)

Yet it is precisely this restriction that Judith, whether consciously or not, fights so forcefully. She refuses to play by the rules and stand along the sidelines cheering on the boys. Whether it was the influence of all the men in her life, or the lack of a mother to discourage “inappropriate” behavior, or a subconscious rebellion against the upbringing of the convent, Judith is stimulated by the idea of the war and energized to the point of wanting to fight herself. After the Treaty has been signed, she experiences a sense of regret:

Judith did not want the Treaty to hold. This was wrong of her for war was a means and not an end. To want it to go on was wicked—but she did want it to. She had grown up in the expectation that it would be her adulthood, her confirmation as a person. And now, when she was ready to join in it, it had stopped. (224)

Seamus is one of the few who is aware that there are indeed women who share Judith’s passion; in response to a sharp remark uttered by Judith, he exclaims, “Jesus . . . the women in this country are fire-eaters. You’d be afraid to be alone with one on a dark night” (289). He is the one who recognizes Judith’s need for revolutionary involvement, and he teaches her how to charge with a bayonet:

Judith had insisted on using a hay-fork. She attacked the bolster with such vigour that Seamus said he’d let her have a try with a real bayonet as soon as he could get his hands on one. It was a pity women weren’t being armed, he said. It might calm them down to do a bit of real fighting. As it was, they had no outlet and were a sight more blood-thirsty than the lads. (81)

During that restlessness of her seventeenth year, Judith is involved in her own personal revolt—against her approaching “womanness”—as well as in the political one. She equates her own developing self with sex, as something that should be suppressed: “Judith never reached the stage of being vain since she never discovered whether she was plain or pretty. She had a suspicion that she might be about to blossom, but put off the moment by slouching and wearing unbecoming clothes” (21). Judith takes pleasure at being thought a tomboy for
wearing bits of "masculine gear" and enjoys her time spent with the "boys." She resents Sparky for always being the one to remind her that she is actually an attractive young woman, and for responding to her as such. Judith would much rather spend her time charging the bolster with her hayfork in defense of the Republic of Ireland than playing the silly games men and women seem destined to play.

The confusion caused by these two intertwining and destructive forces—her passion for Ireland and her passion against her sexual awakening and attraction to men—ultimately overwhelms Judith, and she reacts by killing Sparky. Not only does he taunt her physically and emotionally, but also politically, which simply breaks the final thread of Judith's already tenuous self-control. He begins arguing with her against Owen's cause and in favor of the new Irish government, claiming that a revolution at this point would lack all justification: "She walked agitatedly away from him. Why wasn't Owen here? This man could convince anyone. He was convincing her. What hope had Owen's party with a man like this going back to America tonight to cut off their only source of arms?" (340).

So when Sparky, having no idea of Judith's emotional instability at this point nor of her practice with the hayfork, hands her a bayonet from the wall with the challenge: "Here, feel it. Weigh it. Imagine you're driving it into the guts of a real man. You wouldn't do it. Your nerve would fail you. I know" (342), Judith meets him on his own terms. Sparky obviously didn't know what he was talking about; he had no idea that Judith's devotion to Owen and the fight for Ireland was enough to drive her to murder.

Ironically, Judith sacrifices her future on behalf of a man who cannot even thank or respect her for it. In Owen's opinion women have no place in the war; rather they belong in the "domestic sphere," to which he later confines his own wife. The general assumption is that "women's role was more of a back-up one, wasn't it, in the old Republican movement?" as the Reverend Mother queries Michael when he picks Judith up at the convent (42). Judith's superior doubts that Judith could have been truly "active" before entering the convent—although she has been told Judith was—because "active" was not something women did. Even Judith, during her disturbed years and having little recollection of the past, oscillates between memories of having contributed something to the Republican movement and the feeling that she must have played no part at all. In a visit with Owen about ten years after entering the convent, she confronts him with what she believes have been less-than-satisfactory political results from the movement:

"It's funny," she said. "When the fighting was on, even during the Civil War, we felt the future was ours. If the past was as bad as ours was, then we had to own the future. It was our due, inevitable, do you remember, Owen? Ours!" She let her eyes shine out at him with irony. Judith was twenty-eight that year. She had recovered from years of almost catatonic silence. "You got your future!" (192)

And years later in a conversation with Cormac she begins to talk about what "we" were fighting for, then corrects herself to say that "they" were fighting for a new Ireland (140), as if the war were something she had observed but not in which she had participated.
Ultimately, though, it is Judith’s participation, her “accepting male definition and . . . acting in the male mode” (Weekes 96) which leaves her mad and commits her to the convent. She is punished for stepping out of bounds, not only those of femininity but also those of political correctness. The crime is not so much that she killed Sparky, but that she did not disguise the murder as an accident. It was more than convenient for the IRA to have Sparky out of the way. What could not become public was that he had been killed by those he was supposedly there to assist. So, although Judith thought she was doing something to assist Owen, she only succeeded in getting herself locked up for the rest of her life. Her punishment for “acting in the male mode” is living in a place where there are no men, where she must redirect her dedication for her country towards a life in the Church.

We have hints throughout the story that Judith did not choose her vocation, but the reason behind her forced participation in convent life is not revealed until near the end of the book. Devotion to God really had nothing to do with her becoming a nun. Strangely, in a book which is centered around the life of a nun, there is a blatant absence of God in the novel. The irony of Judith—a nun without any definite faith in God—is richly symbolic of a Catholic Ireland without any definite faith in the Church. The Irish people in No Country for Young Men display a lack of adherence to a pronounced faith, despite how much the Church dictates their lives, especially the women. As Judith is eventually rejected by the Church, so the Irish people seem to feel abandoned by God. They have turned their sights towards other rewards, as Michael suggests when he calls the people of Dublin “success-worshippers, as materialistic as the inhabitants of any other city” (48). Owen Roe further claims that the Church no longer has any power and that the country is run by the Catholic laymen, rather than Church officials (48, 49). The Church is present yet essentially powerless in Ireland, and present but essentially meaningless to Judith.

Resonating with Owen Roe’s claim of the ineffectiveness of the Church is the speech by Sister Mary Quinn, one of the new “modern” nuns, professionally styled and tailor-dressed. In defense of changes taking place in the convent and as encouragement to other nuns to follow suit in her “dynamic commitment” to change, she says, “The Church . . . is a living organism. An organism which fails to adjust to change risks being fossilized and ultimately exterminated” (24). As part of this change, the young nuns are to move to poor parts of cities and find work there. Some of them are assigned to look after the “oldies” who “may be more of a hindrance than a help in the society to which [they] are returning” (26).

But Sister Judith is a “special” case, and we see her practically rejected by the Church. The Reverend Mother justifies sending Judith away into the arms of not-overly-welcoming relatives with,

“No that we are going public, it would jeopardize the impact of our overall effort if . . . Can you imagine Sister Judith Clancy who, as we all know, regrettably—well, she’s seventy-five and a bad seventy-five and there are things distressing to consider which must be considered nonetheless . . . You do know that her delusions are not all religious?” (26)

Judith is abandoned on the premise that she might damage the Church’s image—
an argument coming from one who has supposedly vowed to put aside “worldly things,” like catering to others’ opinions. Michael refers to Judith as a repudiated bride of Christ (68), and Grainne certainly sees Judith’s removal as a betrayal when she says to James,

“From what I can make out, she seems to have had an appalling life.”

“Why? Because she was a nun? But mustn’t that have been a free choice?”

“. . . It wasn’t her having gone into the convent I meant but the fact that she then had to come out. Imagine: after fifty-five years! The monastic alternative was never gay but used to be reliable. Repudiation was never in the contract when you became a bride of Christ. If Jesus is a Judas . . . then. . . .” (100)

No one is more distressed or confused by the staggering changes in her life than Judith herself. Although she sometimes considered God a “fair-ground trickster” playing with her mind, she had become relatively comfortable in her life as “an abducted bride” of Christ (283) and does not follow the new routine in the new place. Grasping for something recognizable, she asks Grainne for her habit, not realizing she’s not worn one for six months, since the sisters abandoned them. Her disrupted life “back in the world” has left her feeling as isolated as ever, if not even more so:

Sister Judith felt she was living behind a sheet of glass. A shroud. Some insulating chemical. She was cut off and had no rights. No place of her own. No privacy. Words dripped away, rolled, disappeared, like beads from a broken rosary. She was getting too tired to try and find the right ones for what she felt. . . . Judith wished she was dead herself. She nearly was. Diminished. Isolated. Glassed in .

Glassed out. (200, 202)

Judith fears that she is an “uncharitable old thing. And proud” and that now she must be doing her Purgatory on earth for sins committed during her life (202).

But what are these great sins for which Judith is paying? When the men were rewarded for so-called revolutionary killings and made heroes of, it is patently unjust that Judith receives a life sentence in the convent for a killing that protected the cause. Here is something more than merely a political cover-up. In addition to Judith’s being the archetype of the struggle of Irish women, she ultimately symbolizes Ireland itself. The country has a long history of conflict and disruption, political confusion and emotional turmoil, and people acting out of passion rather than in their own best interests. And, in spite of the attempts to hold women responsible for all of Ireland’s problems, there really is no definite source of blame for Ireland’s incessant violence. As Judith feels she is serving time for something she does not completely understand, so are the Irish still paying a price for inherited conflicts. Judith demonstrates the destructive pattern of which her country is also a victim: haunted by the past, bewildered by the present, and uncertain of the future. Like Judith’s mind with its “power of suction” and “unfathomable layers,” Ireland’s history is a bog, composed of centuries-old layers of peace and strife, and sucking up generations in its never-ending quest for some sort of stability.

As a representative of her country, Judith additionally invokes the portrayal of Ireland in Irish folklore. While the characters of Grainne and Kathleen redact
the Gráinne-Diarmuid tale, Judith’s presentation in the novel reminds us of the legend of Caitlin Ni Houlihan/Shan von Vocht. Judith, the displaced old woman taken into the O’Malley household for shelter, elicits the memory of the Shan von Vocht in Yeats’s “Cathleen Ni Hoolihan.” She brings to the family tales of the past, of fighting and death of a time gone by. She is “Mother Ireland,” a figure who somehow does not quite fit into the current times; Cormac labels her “one of the dead generations” (140). Like Yeats’s Old Woman, Judith’s heart is not quiet and she is troubled by too many strangers in the house. She has visions of men who have died and men who will die. And she herself is responsible for two men who, although not Irish, die as a result of their associations with her. Judith appears to be a harmless, helpless old woman, but she is cursed and carries death with her as a burden of her past history.

Because of the construction of the novel, Judith, the dried up old hag, is simultaneously the dynamic young figure of Caitlin Ni Houlihan. As a vibrant, passionate young woman she symbolizes the “magic, irresistible lure” described in the old myth (Weekes 93). Kathleen’s statement “[Sparky]’s starry-eyed about Holy Ireland. Caitlin Ni Houlihan . . . has yer man’s interest” (35) is loaded with implications of Judith as Caitlin once we discover Sparky’s attraction to the younger sister. This Caitlin Ni Houlihan, however, struggles against any attraction men may have for her, perhaps because of her superstitious fear of the luring power of a woman. Yet, intentionally or not, she does finally lead a young man to his death for the sake of the Ireland she loves.

In their youth, Judith, Owen, and the rest of the “revolutionaries” cling to an idyllic image of a united Ireland where differences are forgotten and peace replaces violence as the common fare. They are willing to attain this dream through fighting, the only way they know to make themselves noticed. W. B. Yeats wrote that Ireland is “no country for old men,” but O’Faolain argues further that neither is it a country for young men. Hopeful for their futures while they are young, they live to see visions erased as the violence persists, but the united Republic never emerges. If death does not take them first, as in the case of Judith’s brothers, political moves come to determine their lives, as happened to Owen, who was raised into a position of political success while lowering Judith into the void of electroshock and lost memories.

Yet Judith, not a man at all, survives with her revolutionary drives intact. Despite her shattered hopes and disturbed mental state, the forces of war, politics, the Church, and male domination cannot suppress Judith’s spirit. Although she has paid the price for her youthful “rash behavior, we are left with the sense that, if she were to go back to her seventeenth year, Judith would repeat her performance. For such “repeated performances” are embedded in Ireland’s history. The rashness of youth is juxtaposed with the confused identity of old age. Finally, the painful irony lies in the possibility that Judith is indeed “Mother Ireland.” A not too hopeful picture is painted of a fractured Ireland, a country which, like Judith, is caught between the struggles of past and present, aware that its young men have died before, but unable to control the events leading them once again down the path towards devastation.
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