

# A Poetic Reading of Symbolism in Richard Murphy's *The Woman of the House* (\*)

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## **Abstract**

Many critics have questioned Richard Murphy's loyalty to his Irish identity. Because of his Anglo-Irish ancestry, he was positioned between two fighting literary traditions: the Irish and the British. Nonetheless, a fair appreciation of the poet's oeuvre illustrates his devotion to his motherland. He restlessly centers his poetics on recovering and exploring the Irish cultural heritage. Therefore, the current study investigates Murphy's *The Woman of the House* on two levels. The first analyzes the elements of the elegy in the poem. This section is narrowly personal oriented on lamenting the death of his grandmother and enumerating her distinguished personal traits. Digging deeper leads to the second level which discloses a series of symbols. They primarily demonstrate the appalling consequences of the island's colonial history and engage with the lost Irish national legacy. Among many other symbols, wedding rings, cholera, and Irish literary figures are employed as emblems of the Irish Gaelic heritage, the evils of imperialism, and the individuality of the Irish literary tradition, respectively. Hence, the target of the present study is unveiling one of Murphy's masterpieces through the lens of symbolism to accentuate the poet's sincere Irishness. Unlike Murphy's other collections, the book-length poem has not witnessed a significant critical reception. Accordingly, examining it contributes to the canonical literary appreciation of the Irish poet.

## **Keywords:**

Richard Murphy, *The Woman of the House*, Irish poetry, Irish history and identity, imperialism

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## المخلص:

لطالما كان ولاء ريتشارد مورفي لهويته الأيرلندية موضع تساؤل من قبل العديد من النقاد. لقد وضعوه بين تقليدين أدبيين متضادين، ألا وهما الأيرلندي والإنجليزي، بسبب أصله الأنجلو أيرلندي. ومع ذلك، فإن التقدير العادل لأعمال الشاعر يوضح ولائه لوطنه الأم. يركز شعر مورفي بشكل متواصل على استعادة الماضي الأيرلندي واستكشاف تراثه الأصيل. ولقد تم توظيف *سيده البيت* في الدراسة الحالية للتحقق من دقة هذا الرأي. لذلك فإن البحث يتناول هذه القصيدة في ظل مستويين من المعنى. الأول ذو توجه شخصي ضيق يتعلق برثاء جدته وسرد سماتها الشخصية المميزة. وبالتعمق أكثر تحت هذه الرسالة السطحية، تكشف المناقشة النقاب عن سلسلة من الرموز. الوظيفة الأساسية لها هي إظهار العواقب الوخيمة للتاريخ الاستعماري للجزيرة، ومن خلالها يحاول الشاعر أيضا الخوض في التراث والتقاليد الثقافية الأيرلندية المفقودة. من بين العديد من الرموز التي تظهر في سياق أحداث القصيدة، يُلاحظ كيف استخدم الشاعر خواتم الزفاف والكوليرا والشخصيات الأدبية الأيرلندية كرموز تشير على التوالي إلى التراث الغالي الأيرلندي، وشرور الاستعمار الذي مزق بلاده، والشخصية المتفردة للتاريخ الأدبي الأيرلندي. ومن ثم، فإن الهدف من هذا البحث هو الكشف عن إحدى روائع مورفي من خلال العدسة الرمزية لإبراز الهوية الأيرلندية الصادقة للشاعر وتسلية مزيداً من الضوء على إخلاصه لأبناء وطنه. ومن خلال الاضطلاع على الدراسات التي تناولت شعر مورفي نقداً وتحليلاً، يمكن القول أنه على عكس دواوينه الشعرية الأخرى، لم تشهد هذه القصيدة الطويلة استقبلاً نقدياً ملحوظاً. وبناء على ذلك، فإن تناولها بالدراسة والتحليل في هذا البحث يسهم في التقدير الأدبي للشاعر الأيرلندي. وفي هذا الإطار سيتم شرح استخدام الرمزية في القصيدة شرحاً وافياً بعد عرض الأجزاء الثلاثة للمرثاة.

## الكلمات المفتاحية:

ريتشارد مورفي، *سيده البيت*، الشعر الأيرلندي، التاريخ والهوية الأيرلندية، الاستعمار

## Introduction:

Richard Murphy (1927-2018) was an Anglo-Irish poet “born to an Irish diplomat father and a Scottish mother” (Heaney, 2018). He wrote six volumes of poetry and was influenced by Dylan Thomas, John Milton, and William Wordsworth. He was awarded several literary prizes like the A.E. Memorial Award for Poetry (1951), the first prize of the Guinness Awards (1962), the British Arts Council Award (1967 and 1976), and others. According to Heaney, he wrote

about Islands, fishermen, landscapes, and seascapes in a language that is objective and concrete (1977, p. 18). The elemental characters and incidents of his work “are rendered as aspects of the world we inhabit” (p. 18). As for his poems, they are “built from self-contained units,” namely “each line is a self-contained unit, almost a gnomic utterance” (p. 27).

*The Woman of the House* is a personal elegy, a meditative lyric poem lamenting the death of Murphy's grandmother. Despite its well-crafted poeticism and inspiring Irish flavor, it does not seem to have attracted the attention of critics. To the author's knowledge, it appeared briefly in an article by Heaney tackling Murphy's major works in a special issue of the *Irish University Review* (1977). Therefore, the study bridges this research gap by presenting a close analytical reading of the poem's symbolic structure and poetic techniques along with identifying its elegiac borders. Symbolism is a literary device that uses symbols, be they people, objects, places, events, or abstract ideas to represent something beyond its literal meaning. Examining Murphy's use of symbolism in addition to language and imagery exhibits a direct link between the elegy and commemorating the national Irish identity. Hence, historical studies tackling both the British colonial presence in Ireland and ancient native traditions are consulted to establish connections between literary interpretations and historical contexts. Such connections testify to the poet's loyalty to his Irish heritage despite his Anglo-Irish origins. It will turn out that the many accusations that had long offended Murphy for being a poet clinging to two opposed identities are not well grounded. In addition to consulting historical records, critical and literary studies of Murphy's poetics are used for a better understanding of the poet and in reference to the elegy. Analyzing *The Woman of the House* in light of the former methodology proves how the poet is tied to the Irish literary tradition through the persona of his grandmother.

Various parts of *The Woman of the House* are told in flashbacks. This technique is cleverly employed to illuminate the grandmother's life details which inevitably involve provoking the Irish past. Many events of this past had been the direct outcome of the colonial presence of Britain in Ireland. Consequently, the poetic narrative of these bitter events is best read in light of the literary theoretical tenets of colonialism. Osterhammel defines colonialism as "a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonised people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonised population, the colonisers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule" (2005, p. 16). The more than eight hundred years of English political and military involvement in Ireland reflect numerous aspects of this definition as will be disclosed in the coming discussion. The discussion falls into two major sections. The first disintegrates the elements of the elegy as employed by the poet in honoring the memory of his grandmother. The second section explains Murphy's preoccupation with symbolism to expose England's ugly face and to unearth his country's history.

## **Discussion:**

Murphy tends to be an anonymous observer of incidents in his poems. Nevertheless, he chooses to be an active participant in the poem under study which is entirely written in the first-person point of view. Moreover, the poet is well-recognized for exerting judicious control over his material and keeping a partiality to classical formalism in his poetry (Meihuizen, 2011, p. 53). *The Woman of the House* is no exception. The poem's uniform structure comprises twenty-six quatrains. Regarding rhythm, lines are regularly metered in iambic pentameter. Quatrains, on the other hand, are not restricted by

one consistent rhyme scheme. The varied patterns of rhyme scheme used in the poem suggest the poet's sorrow and disturbed psyche. It is noted that there is heavy dependence on alliteration throughout most lines for creating internal music. Melodious entanglements between alliterative /w/ and /h/ in the following line is a case in point: "It was *her house where we spent holidays*" (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 115, italics mine). Other instances of internal rhyme include consonance as in "[r]ings and elopements" and "Lever and Lover" as well as assonance as in "overseas/need" and "land/than" (pp. 116-17, italics mine). Generally speaking, the technical use of diverse sound devices reveals Murphy's interest in creating his own music in every single line. Enjambments are employed within almost all stanzas for a flowing narrative. However, caesuras interrupt many lines for pausing and contemplating the rich history of the grandmother and the country. Each quatrain ends with a period, thus, representing a complete idea that should be fully assimilated before moving to the next.

As indicated in its subtitle, the elegy is "*[i]n memory of my grandmother Lucy Mary Ormsby whose home was in the west of Ireland 1873-1958*" (p. 115, italics original). The subtitle signifies "a strong regional dimension" of Murphy's poetics – evident in referring to her home and Western Ireland – and a firm commitment to "accurate historical narratives" (Heaney, 2018). The accurate historical narratives can be illustrated in the grandmother's birth and death dates, a lifespan that witnessed critical phases of Irish history. Examples include the 1916 Easter Rising, the 1919-1921 War of Independence, the 1922 Irish Free State, the 1922-23 Civil War, the 1937 Constitution that re-established the Republic of Ireland, and World War II (1939-45). Consequently, from its very beginning, the poem is understood to be in memory of his grandmother as well as the troublesome Irish history.

“On a patrician evening in Ireland,” Murphy states in the first stanza, “I was born in the guest-room” of the grandmother’s house (1959/1979, p. 115). The opening lines date to 1927, the poet’s birth date. The word “patrician” implies the grandmother’s belonging to the Irish Protestant aristocracy that reaped the fruits of the British Imperial existence in Ireland. This idea is emphasized later in the poem when the poet refers to her as the “[m]istress of mossy acres” (p. 116). Additionally, the poet relates her richness in stanza eight to “the fruits of a family tree” (p. 116). He points to “[a] china clock, the Church’s calendar” which are prestigious possessions that symbolize ancestral wealth (p. 116). Her aristocracy did not seem to have prevented her from conserving her native identity or feeling her countrymen’s misery. This notion is embedded in the poem. For example, the poet in the same stanza observes that her mossy acres were kept green by “[g]ardeners” (p. 116). The gardeners are depicted as being “polite” to their mistress who provided them with “incomes” to lead a dignified life (p. 116). She used to secure “incomes waiting to be married for” (p. 116). To illustrate, these incomes were so plentiful that laborers were expected to be married for them; generous incomes enabled them to sustain a family.

Having set the poem’s setting in the opening stanza, Murphy ends it with the following rhetorical question: “May I deliver her from the cold hand / Where now she lies, with a brief elegy?” (p. 115). Despite his intention to write a brief elegy, the poet came up with a long piece enumerating this influential and kind woman’s merits. The rhetorical question brings the reader to the time of the grandmother’s death and the bitter moments at her funeral. In fact, going back and forth among many time periods is a notable technique employed all over the poem to reveal a sense of loss. The coffin in the lines is metaphorically compared to a cold hand grabbing the grandmother’s still body. In addition, the cold hand itself is a metonymy of death. Despite the depressing implications of these images, the poet claims his ability to deliver her from the forgetfulness of death by immortalizing her memory in a poem. In doing so, he resembles William Shakespeare’s belief in the

ability of poetic composition to eternalize people in "Sonnet 18" when he states: "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (1609/2002, p. 417).

### **The Elements of the Elegy Unfolded:**

Murphy follows the conventions of the elegy in writing this poem. The three stages of traditional elegies include expressing sorrow, praising the idealized dead, and consolation.

#### ***Expressing Sorrow:***

Instead of lamenting the grandmother's death in direct expressions of grief, the poet begins the elegy with flashbacks of childhood recollections at her house. Many parts of the poem are basically narratives of family gatherings where the children were swamped by her love and amused by her talk and tales. Contemplating his ecstasy at these distant moments is a clear signifier of the poet's sense of loss and sadness. Numerous sections of the elegy are dedicated to these memories as in the following excerpts. "It was her house where we spent holidays," the poet recalls, "With candles to bed, and ghostly stories" (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 115). According to Meihuizen, most of Murphy's "holidays were spent in western Ireland at Milford with his grandparents and his mother" (2006, p. 160). The grandmother's house was the children's ideal destination for enjoying a cozy familial atmosphere, and her heart and mind overwhelmed her grandchildren with care and love.

The grandmother's heart is described in an original image as a "lake" in which "we were islands / Where the wild asses galloped in the wind" (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 115). Waterscapes and islands have much to do with Murphy's poetic tradition. Frag emphasizes that Murphy is best known as a poet of the sea; the titles of two leading volumes, *Sailing to an Island* (1963) and *High Island* (1974), are products of his years as a fisherman and boat operator in Connemara

(2019, p. 50). The lake in the former lines symbolizes wisdom, power, grace, and beauty which are all special traits of the grandmother (Marrin, 2005). Furthermore, lakes are commonly associated with mythical and magical powers which suit the bedtime ghostly stories she used to narrate. The children in the preceding image are compared to islands in her heart's lake to imply how each of them is engulfed by her love. Islands are symbols of isolation which suggest the children's isolation from their world when they enter the grandmother's house and dwell in her magical heart. There, they enjoyed unrestricted freedom which is understood from the scene of wild asses galloping in the wind on islands. On a symbolic level, the words "wild" and "wind" point to the ultimate joy of freedom. Moreover, they are grouped by alliteration through the repetition of the airy /w/ sound to reinforce this meaning with the resemblance of the sound to the actual sound of the wind.

Regarding the grandmother's mind, the poet believes that it "was a vague and log-warmed yarn / spun between sleep and acts of kindness" (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 115). Through this extended metaphor, her mind is compared to a yarn which is as vague as the mystical stories formed in it. The yarn is, further, described as a warm log in a direct indication of her flowing love. Sleep and her acts of kindness are likened to the borders of a loom weaving warm pieces of love and kindness endlessly. The interrelated metaphorical depictions of her mind are followed by an original simile: "She fed our feelings as dew feeds the grass / On April nights" (p. 115). The grandmother's persistent emotional nourishment to the children is equated to the significance of dew to grass. She is compared to nature's most essential element and life source: water, while the children are equated to the symbol of innocence and purity: grass. The image proposes her great value in the children's hearts for being a source of reassurance and care. Therefore, the poet declares by the end of the stanza: "[O]ur mornings were green" (p. 115). The morning and the green color are vivid symbols of new beginnings and renewal. Hence, the poet emphasizes the



cathartic effect of being in his grandmother's house even if it was for a limited time during holidays.

The poet keeps drifting through the memories of "those happy days" and remembers how "in spite of rain / We'd motor west where the salmon boats tossed" (p. 115). The use of visual imagery in the lines emphasizes the children's happiness while they watched rainfall, a common feature of the island, particularly its west coast. Their enthusiasm for spending a day by the salmon rivers and the random movement of boats by tender wind are also brought to mind. Instead of narrating how the children spent their day, the poet prefers to refer to the grandmother's artistic tendencies: "She would sketch on the pier among the pots" (p. 115). She makes use of the inspiring atmosphere surrounding her to release her creative powers. Visual imagery is employed for the second time when the poet allows the reader to have a look at her drawings: "Waves in a sunset, or the rising moon" (p. 115).

Besides the technique of juxtaposing the happy days of childhood against the present loss of the figure that once tendered this happiness, the poet evokes bitter sorrow in the reader by narrating heart-aching details of the grandmother's last agonizing days at the hospital. "At last," says the poet wistfully, "she was removed / To hospital to die there, certified" (p. 117). The phrase *at last* suggests that she had suffered from ill health prior to her death. Her relatives were aware that her illness was so severe that she needed to be hospitalized with a faint hope of recovery. However, her death was highly anticipated as indicated in the second line. The use of the word *removed* instead of *taken* denotes her helplessness and physical weakness. In addition, *removed* means that she was taken off from her house against her will to the hospital. This idea shows how she was emotionally and physically attached to it. The lines end with the word *certified* which means that she soon was certified dead by doctors. Once dead, "[h]er house, but not her kindness, has found heirs" (p. 117). Having lost its owner, the house in the line is metaphorically compared to a lost possession searching for

new owners, namely the grandmother's heirs. The line also implies that the grandmother had enjoyed extraordinary kindness. By means of concretization, the poet likens this kindness to a precious inheritance that her children and grandchildren could not inherit.

After declaring the grandmother's death in the preceding lines, Murphy returns to the time of her stay at the hospital with more painful details. "Compulsory comforts penned her limping soul," he remarks, "With all she uttered they smiled and agreed" (p. 117). Apparently, she used to be a spirited active person busy all the time with the house affairs and those surrounding her until she was compelled to rest. Her compulsory comforts at the hospital are metaphorically compared to a cage imprisoning her soul. Her soul is depicted as being limp to denote that she was approaching death. The pronoun *they* in the second line refers to the medical staff that attempted to comfort her as much as possible during her last days. They were waiting for the sad moment of departure while she was still holding on to life. Hence, when "she summoned the chauffeur" to take her back home, "no one obeyed" (p. 117). It was just a matter of time, and the "chrome hearse was ready for nightfall" (p. 117). A hearse is a vehicle for carrying a coffin to a church or a cemetery; therefore, nightfall symbolizes the end of her life.

The grandmother was extremely tired of her stay at the hospital and longed for her house; accordingly, the poet zooms in on the time when she summoned the chauffeur. "Order the car for nine o'clock tonight!" she said, "I must get back, get back" (p. 117). The exclamation point at the end of the first line and the repetition of *get back* in the second demonstrate her wonder at everybody's refusal to let her leave the hospital. The grandmother's pleas were utterly rejected despite her warm invitation to the doctors and nurses to "[c]ome home and I'll brew you lime-flower tea!" (p. 117). Then, she was stormed by fragmented hallucinations of her past life events after which she calmed down and began to inspect the persons around her. "I don't know who you are, but you've kind eyes," she said (p. 117). "My children," she

sighed, “are abroad and I’m alone / They left me in this gaol” (p. 117). She was overcome by nostalgia for her normal life which became inaccessible. The hospital is likened to jail, the medical staff became her jailors, and she was left to suffer from a sense of abandonment. Her predicament, which is reinforced in the preceding metaphor, develops: “You all tell lies. / You’re not my people. My people are gone” (p. 117). The caesura in the second line signifies a pause in which the grandmother stops to contemplate her helpless case at the hospital among strangers after spending the entirety of her life in the warmth of family and acquaintances. The grandmother gets feebler and feebler until “her heart’s hammer” becomes “silent” (p. 117). Alliterative breathy /h/ brings forth a mourning tone to the metaphorical depiction of the heart whose once strong beats are equaled to a hammer to indicate its former vigor and strength. Eventually, she departed this world leaving Murphy and her family in anguish.

***Praising the Idealized Dead:***

Almost every inch of the elegy is a praise to the grandmother. Her idealized character is the core of the study, and this is evident in various stanzas. She is acclaimed for being a kind, loving woman. Her generosity and selflessness were trademarks of her personality. She was deeply appreciated for her modesty with the poor. Moreover, she was depicted as a cultured woman with a notable interest in literature and the arts. As in expressing sorrow, flashbacks are employed as a literary device to draw the reader closer to the details of her character. The following lines are a typical case where she is presented as a good-natured woman: “[T]he feckless fun would flicker her face” (p. 116). She is easily amused, and the flicker of a smile at her lips is likened to that of fire to suggest the warmth of her heart and the brightness of her gently smiling face. In addition to her gentleness, the poet explores a mystical side of hers when he remembers her “[r]eading our future by cards at the fire” (p. 116). The fricative airy /f/ sound is appropriately repeated in this line and the preceding one to convey light atmospheres

in the first line and mystery in the second. The sense of mystery gets intense by visualizing the scene of the children gathering around the night fire and listening enthusiastically to the grandmother to grip the threads of their future lives. Fire imagery apparently holds the structure of the stanza together with the poet's employment of the figurative and physical portrayals of fire. The grandmother ends her talk with "[a] signet of jokes to seal our desires" (p. 116). The two successive concretizations in the line liken her jokes to a signet and the children's passion to listen to her to an envelope sealed by jokes. The image implies her lightheartedness and how she wraps up her talk entertainingly. In addition, it becomes clear that her grandchildren never got tired of her company.

The grandmother is, furthermore, praised for having a passion for writing and an interest in Irish folklore. Murphy remarks that beside her bed, there was "a new *Writers' and Artists' Year-book* / To bring a never-printed girlhood back" (p. 117, italics original). Since 1906, this book has been a guide for writers offering them creative and practical advice on the best way to present their work and how to publish it. Describing it as being *new* means that it was recently purchased. In other words, shortly before her death, she got the new edition of the guide to help her write a book about her girlhood. This notion is deciphered from the concretization in which girlhood days are equaled to an unprinted book. The book was sadly unfinished: "The undeveloped thoughts died in her head" (p. 117). The personification compares the book's undeveloped thoughts to an embryo that departed life with the death of the life source, the grandmother. Moreover, her head by the end of the line is metaphorically likened to a womb embracing and nurturing her thoughts. "But from her heart," resumes the poet, "through the people she loved / Images spread, and intuitions lived, / More than the mere sense of what she said" (p. 117). Murphy asserts that his grandmother did not need to document her life in a book to commemorate her kind image and good intuition. They reached people's hearts in a manner better than any verbal or written expression because they gushed from

her heart. Her heart in this image is compared to a fertile garden brimming with eternal goodness.

Concerning the grandmother's curiosity about the lore of her folk, she is depicted "in her phaeton looking for folk-lore" (p. 118). The poet recalls how she used to embark on journeys in her phaeton to discover the customs, traditions, and stories of her people. Folklore is handed down among generations orally; hence, she played her role in keeping the Irish culture and identity by absorbing this legacy and passing it to her descendants. Her success in doing so is remarked in her grandson, Murphy. He was included among the keepers of the national lore of Ireland through exploring the personal and communal legacies of Irish history in his poetics (Frag, 2019, p. 43).

***Consolation:***

The poem ends with the farewell ceremonies at the grandmother's funeral:

On a wet winter evening in Ireland  
I let go her hand, and we buried her  
In the family earth beside her husband  
Only to think of her, now warms my mind.

(Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 118)

The lines are dominated by calm sounds like /w/, /h/, and /m/ to establish a funerary tone. The series of enjambments that ends with a period in the last line indicates the fast progress of events after her death and the placement of a period at the end of her earthly existence. Holding the grandmother's hand till the last moment before her burial implies Murphy's deep love for her. After death, she was reunited with her husband in one cemetery. The grandmother passed away, but she left her memories behind to keep her grandson's mind warm. The poet employs concretization to compare the memories of her lifetime's love and kindness to a fire warming him in the cold moments of separation. Once

again, memories are employed in the elegy but this time to console the poet for his loss.

### **Digging Deeper: Excavating Irish Identity and History via Symbolism**

Murphy was accused of writing in the shadow of the Irish and British traditions. The title of M. Harmon's edited book *Richard Murphy: Poet of Two Traditions: Interdisciplinary Studies* established this claim as early as 1978. Furthermore, naming him "the laureate of the Protestant gentry" directly questions his loyalty to his Irish origins (Murphy & Kelly, 2002, p. 152). However, Sackett argues that the poet of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy often displays a "sense of unease with his background and features attempts to reconcile Ireland's colonial history with feelings of guilt and self-consciousness as an inheritor to the gains of the British imperialist project" (2021, p. 1). The next list of symbols in the elegy emphasizes Murphy's attempts to reconcile this dividedness by unveiling his true patriotism. Additionally, the poem's symbolism places it within the broader context of Murphy's poetry which is crowded with "old houses, family memories, battles, ancestors, and the deeply traditional world of the West of Ireland" (Wixson, 1997, p. 453). Other symbols in this piece are tightly linked to the vanished Ascendancy, colonial service, shadows of the British Empire and the Indian Army, last strongholds, and extinct lineage (p. 453).

#### ***The Grandmother:***

The figure of the grandmother holds paradoxical symbolic interpretations in the poem. On one hand, belonging to the Protestant gentry makes her an emblem of British imperialism. On the other hand, the tales of her dedication to her Irish fellows unsettle the former claim and turn her into a symbol of Irishness. Throughout the poem, Murphy develops the second symbolic version of the grandmother by shedding light on her sincere Irish identity. The grandmother's situation is reminiscent of his father's in the long poem dedicated to him, *The God*

*Who Eats Corn* (1968). His father spent his life in service of the empire, occupying a number of prestigious positions as being the mayor of Colombo in Ceylon. Sackett observes how the poet attempts to undermine the colonial legacy and values that the father represents by seeking to distance him from the negative trappings of colonial identity (2021, p. 3). Along the same lines, the grandmother is distanced from this colonial legacy by disclosing her notable generosity and kindness to the poor and the needy.

Murphy calls his grandmother “Mistress of mossy acres and unpaid rent” (1959/1979, p. 116). The line points to the social inequality in Ireland at that time which “was not only accepted but was even considered by some to be ‘divinely ordained’” (Irish Origins, 2014). Belonging to the upper levels of society did not blur her vision from seeing the “vast majority of the Irish population [who] were rural working class – oppressed, impoverished catholics [sic]” (“Ireland”). Therefore, she believed that it was her duty to offer help by not demanding rent from the unprivileged. It is worth noting in this context that the colonial conflict in Ireland had extended to religion with the Irish people divided into a Catholic majority seeking independence from England and a Protestant minority supportive of British rule. Catholics were severely suppressed on all levels and suffered extreme poverty, a theme adopted by many Irish authors. For instance, referring to his people’s poverty in the third section of “At a Potato Digging,” Heaney writes: “A people hungering from birth” (1966, p. 33). Like Heaney, the grandmother was aware of her Irish fellow’s severe suffering. Hence, “[s]he crossed the walls on foot to feed the sick” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 116). The line underscores her modesty as she roams around the houses of the poor on foot to feed the sick.

The grandmother’s generosity with rural laborers and poor peasants is an emblem of Irish generosity. In fact, generosity has been one of the fine traits of the Irish people till the present time. It is reported that “Ireland was the most generous country in the world per capita in

terms of GoFundMe donations this year [2021] – the third consecutive year in which it topped the global charts” (Heaney, 2021). Murphy develops this idea when he remarks how his grandmother “bandaged the wounds that poverty caused / In the house that famine labourers built” (1959/1979, p. 116). The line alludes to the Great Potato Famine (1845-52) in which the Irish people suffered from starvation, disease, and emigration. It was caused by the failure of the potato crop in successive years. The Irish were dependent on it for most of their nutrition; consequently, the country lost about a quarter of its population at that time. The poet summons the memory of landless laborers who used to be paid for by having a potato plot. During the famine, they lost their main income source. As a result, they turned to common labor like building houses. Others worked as servants; some of their descendants worked at the grandmother’s house which is understood from the phrase: *in the house*. The poet employs concretization to depict their agony. He likens poverty to a thrusting sword causing deep cuts in their bodies. Their open wounds were bandaged by the grandmother’s generosity.

The grandmother “[g]ave her hands to cure impossible wrong,” the poem goes, “[i]n a useless way” (p. 116). The lines are a follow-up to the former open wounds image. The impossible wrong is the wrong done to the Irish people during the famine by the mismanaged policy of the English government. “Too little relief was provided,” writes Clark, “it was provided in the wrong ways; it was, except at the very beginning, always too slow and too late; emigration was not adequately controlled or assisted; no adequate attempt was made to grapple with the evil social conditions which were part cause of the trouble” (1957, p. 56). The result was that “Ireland probably lost two million of her population, many dying in utter misery” (p. 56). This wrong is described as being *impossible* to indicate the difficulty of assimilating these facts by any sane person during such a critical time in the Irish history. The impossible wrong is described as a profound wound in the Irish body, and the grandmother attempted to cure it. Nevertheless, her effort to aid



the later generations of the famine's victims is depicted as being useless to imply the event's repercussions that were too severe to be eroded.

***The House:***

The house is the second key symbol in the poem with various incidents taking place in or by it. Houses are literary symbols commonly associated with protection, safety, comfort, and identity. Nonetheless, the house in the poem has a broad suite of other associations connected to the false reputation that Murphy acquired in literary circles due to his Anglo-Irish ancestry. The grandmother's house was one of the "Big Houses" in Ireland. From the eighteenth century on, writes Mortimer, the Big House "was the center of wealth, power, and influence. These Big Houses were normally inhabited by Ascendancy families, Anglo-Irish in blood and Anglican in faith..., [and] it is broadly true that they were far removed from their fellow-countrymen in political loyalty, religion, and education. Their way of life and social outlook seemed to belong to another world" (1991, p. 209). Hence, the grandmother's house becomes a negative symbol of national detachment. However, the general context of the poem shows Murphy's adherence to his Irishness despite the legacy that he did not choose to inherit. When the poet mentions that "her house, but not her kindness, has found heirs," he suggests that the house is a mere inheritance that does not necessarily imply loyalty to Britain (1959/1979, p. 117).

***The Rangoon Prints and the Crimean Medal:***

The poet takes the reader on a journey among the antiques of the grandmother's ancient house by referring to "the Rangoon prints and the Crimean medal" hung on the wall (p. 116). The Rangoon prints are not mere art prints, but they serve as an allusion to "the radical Irish Buddhist monk U Dhammaloka and his trial for sedition in the Chief Court of colonial Rangoon, Burma, in 1911" (Turner et al., 2020). The Court failed to put the Irishman on trial because "too many people came with him. In fact, he appeared at the centre of a huge crowd, who pulled

him in a carriage in a style normally reserved for Burmese royalty and venerated Buddhist monks” (Cox, 2020). “[T]he Indian, Chinese and Burmese bazaars all closed for the day in support” (Cox, 2020). Thus, the Rangoon prints can be seen as a national symbol that refers to a glorious event in the face of the British colonial subjugation of the Irish and Indian nations.

Concerning the Crimean Medal, it alludes to the Crimean War of 1854-56 in which France and Britain declared war on Russia. “Ireland was gripped by a kind of war fever as regiments departed and young men rushed to join up to fight” (Murphy, 2003). The public interest in the war was related to “the large number of Irishmen who were serving in the British army at this time. Irish soldiers made up around 30-35 per cent of the British army in 1854, and it is estimated that over 30,000 Irish soldiers served in the Crimea” (Murphy, 2003). Consequently, the Crimean Medal symbolizes Britain’s exploitation of the underprivileged economic conditions of the Irish who accepted to be recruited into the British army to improve their living standards. The result was that the Irish soldiers found themselves fighting in wars they had nothing to do with.

### ***Food:***

Food is one of the central symbols in the poem that commemorates the Irish heritage. Enumerating the varied types of food served to him and the other children at the grandmother’s house, Murphy writes: “Indian-meal porridge and brown soda-bread, / Boiled eggs and buttermilk, honey from gorse” (1959/1979, p. 115). These are not just food varieties; each one of them holds resonant implications in Irish history and culture. Indian-meal porridge and brown soda-bread, for instance, are two symbols of the Irish Potato Famine. The former “is the Irish name for Maize or cornmeal. Maize was introduced to Ireland during the Potato Famine of 1847 but lost its popularity in the 1960s. According to oral history, North American Indians sent maize to Ireland

to help the poor during the Famine” (Eating History, n.d.). Concerning brown soda-bread, it is considered a national culinary legacy representing Irish roots with its history in Ireland beginning in the 1830s as “an Irish tradition that has led the country through some of its darkest times” with its simple and affordable ingredients (Birtles, 2020). In the 1840s and 1850s, “widespread famine meant bread had to be made out of the most basic and cheapest ingredients available,” and soda-bread was a typical recipe (Birtles). Accordingly, it “was often the only thing on the table to eat” (Birtles).

Regarding eggs, they have long been part of Irish cuisine and culture: “For centuries, eggs have done so much more than simply nourish the body; they have soaked up mythological and folk belief, and have been used to celebrate certain religious festivals” (Iomaire & Cully, 2007, p. 1). In addition, like porridge and brown bread, eggs have their share in symbolizing the Irish people’s suffering during the Great Famine where “eggs were not eaten by the poor but sold to pay the rent.... [Moreover, eggs] were a form of cash, as they were bartered with local shopkeepers for items such as tea, bread and sugar” (p. 15). The history-filled meal is enriched by buttermilk, a drink that quenches thirst, and delicious gorse honey. Gorse, a yellow-flowered shrub, and honey bees are both native to Ireland. Consequently, they are significant symbols emphasizing the localism of the poem.

Another reference to food is brought up during the grandmother’s stay at the hospital. Shortly before her death, she pleaded with doctors to let her return home saying: “They’re expecting me. / I’ll bring the spiced beef and the nuts and fruit” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 117). She believed herself to be the one everybody was counting on and that her loved ones were anxiously waiting for her return to be overwhelmed by her love, care, and surely the generosity of her delicious food. The spiced beef in the lines symbolizes holding on to Irish traditions because it is considered a traditional Christmas Irish dish usually served with brown bread, apricots, and almonds (Leigh, 2008).

***Rings and Lace:***

Irish marriage traditions are revisited through the symbolic reference to rings and lace in the poem. The poet recollects how the grandmother used to amuse him and her other grandchildren with the stories of “[r]ings and elopements, love-letters, old lace” (p. 116). The rings and the lace are more than common wedding traditions; they are symbols of Irish culture and identity. The rings refer to the Claddagh ring which “was a major part of old Irish wedding traditions” (ConnollyCove, 2022). “It is usually given as a promise ring and the couple wear a matching pair” (ConnollyCove). Concerning the lace, it is an emblem of the hand-fasting tradition that takes place during wedding ceremonies. It is an ancient Celtic custom where the hands of the couple are bound together with lace to represent their commitment to each other (ConnollyCove).

***Cholera:***

Starting from 1817, world countries were plagued by cholera which reached Ireland in 1832. The “disease struck first at the major ports. Thereafter, during 1832 and 1833, it spread to almost every corner of the country, claiming some 50,000 lives” (Fenning, 2003, p. 77). That organism “thrived wherever sanitation was poor and social contact intense. In Ireland, the commonplace ‘dunghill near the door’ combined with the popularity both of wakes and of frequent evening visits to neighbouring homes, provided optimal conditions for the spread of contagion. Even in parts of the capital, the filth of some lanes and overcrowded houses was [sic] horrendous” (p. 77). Therefore, the coming reference to cholera in the poem is symbolic of the despondent life that the Irish led under British rule. Additionally, the former reference to neighborly visits, though being a factor in the disease outbreak, is a symbol of social solidarity. This solidarity among the Irish countrymen was the outcome of hundreds of years of colonial oppression. The grandmother was born about forty years after the

pandemic, so she narrates cholera stories that were passed down to her from older generations.

“Cholera,” the poem goes, “raged in the Residency” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 116). The rage of cholera is metaphorically likened to that of a monster. The monstrosity of the disease was evident in being highly contagious and in its ability to kill “very painfully, often in three hours, almost always in less than twelve” (Fenning, 2003, p. 77). Being infectious, “cholera struck not only the destitute but even the rich” (p. 77). Therefore, the word *Residency* suggests that its rage had reached the residence of the official government and royalty. ““They kept my uncle alive on port,”” said the grandmother while informing her grandchildren of their family and country’s history (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 116). As mentioned earlier, ports witnessed the first encounter with the disease. Like many others, the grandmother’s uncle was kept there in a hopeless attempt to contain the disease and save lives.

### ***Sepoy Mutiny:***

The uncle’s compulsory stay in the port, according to the grandmother’s narration, “saved him to slaughter a few sepoys” (p. 116). The line refers to the Sepoy Mutiny, a major uprising in India in 1857-58 against the rule of Britain. The British recruited soldiers in large numbers from colonized Ireland to suppress the rebellion of colonized India! Like the Crimean War, the mutiny symbolizes the evil social, political, and economic impact of colonialism in Ireland. Gannon remarks how Ireland’s elite educational infrastructure immediately adapted for imperial service to exploit the opportunity provided by the introduction of competitive recruitment in the British army (2020). Bleich explains how Britain’s colonial attitudes “influenced millions of people, structuring their education, work, and laws, and shaping their identities and interactions with each other and with outsiders” (2005, p. 171). This was the case during the mutiny; in consequence, by the mid-

nineteenth century, Irish soldiers “comprised between 40 and 50 percent of British military personnel” in India (Gannon, 2020).

The grandmother’s uncle was one of those soldiers who joined the military service during the mutiny. His engagement in slaughtering *a few* sepoy indicates his lack of interest in the fight. The situation is resonant of W. B. Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” The Irish airman fighting in World War I on the British side against the Axis powers states: “Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love” (1919/2000, p. 111). Like the airman, the uncle did not hate those he fought, the Indians, or love those he guarded, the English. It was a fight for profit. The symbolic implications of the Sepoy Mutiny are in accord with Sackett’s claims of the poet’s “at-times transgressive attitude towards the history, role, and legacy of British imperialism, from which his own family’s elevated status and bounty is derived” (2021, p. 2). Thus, the poet’s social background should not be the only determiner of his Irish loyalty; a more comprehensive judgment is required.

### ***Galway:***

After sharing in the Sepoy Mutiny, the grandmother’s uncle “retire[d] to Galway in search of sport” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 116). The line celebrates the strong and long maritime culture of Ireland as well as native sports. These symbolic associations are triggered by the reference to Galway. Meihuizen observes a sturdy relationship between the creative self and a particular place for the construction of identity in Murphy’s poetry (2006, p. 161). Murphy employs this harbor city on Ireland’s west coast to construct and revel in his Irishness. To explain, Galway is famous for Galway Gaelic Football, Galway Hurling, and many other Gaelic sports which are undoubtedly part of the Irish consciousness. Therefore, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was founded in 1884 to revive and nurture traditional, indigenous sports and pastimes (GAA, n.d.). “Until then all that was Irish was being steadily

eroded by emigration, intense poverty and outside influences” (GAA). On this level, the uncle’s retirement to Galway in search of sport symbolizes a search for his Irish identity in an attempt to stick to the roots.

### ***Irish Literary Figures:***

Murphy’s description of his grandmother’s home library in the poem entailed referring to prominent Irish literary figures like “Lever and Lover, Somerville and Ross” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 116). They symbolize Ireland’s cultural legacy and individuality. The line points to Charles James Lever (1806-1872), a Victorian Irish novelist, who presented Ireland’s historical, social, and political landscape in his work (Skinner, 2019, p. 9). Concerning Samuel Lover (1797-1868), he was an Irish songwriter, composer, and novelist whose “pen and pencil illustrated so happily the characteristics of the peasantry of his country” (Cousin, 1921, p. 245). Somerville and Ross are the surnames of Edith Somerville (1858-1949) and her cousin Violet Florence Martin (1862-1915) who wrote under the pen name of Martin Ross. This Anglo-Irish writing team released a series of fourteen stories and novels that “chronicled the declining fortunes of their class, the Anglo-Irish gentry, in the decades before Irish independence” (Women in World History, n.d.).

### ***The Grandmother’s Children and Land Laborers:***

Talking to the medical staff during her stay at the hospital, the grandmother says: “The children overseas no longer need [me]” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 117). Having exerted her motherly duty in bringing up her children, the grandmother leaves them to open up their future abroad. The children’s migration symbolizes the Irish diaspora resulting from political instability and lack of employment in the country. Her children were among the 8 million men, women, and children who emigrated from Ireland between 1801 and 1921 (Irish Genealogy Toolkit, n.d.). About 80% of those emigrants “were aged

between 18 and 30 years old” (Irish Genealogy Toolkit). Thus, Ireland sacrificed its youth to foreign countries in an attempt to escape the economic damage caused by its colonial history. “Some economists,” argues Gottheil, “regard the colonial system as an extraeconomic hegemonial relation designed exclusively for exploitation”; as a result, it pushes people away from their countries (1977, p. 83). Hence, there is a tight relationship among migration, economy, and colonialism.

When her children left Ireland, the grandmother never felt lonely because she was surrounded by “[p]eople she loved” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 117). They “were those who worked the land” (p. 117). The line emphasizes the shared love between her and the downtrodden Irish citizens “[w]hom the land satisfied more than wisdom” (p. 117). The line sheds light on the agricultural history and culture of the country that dates back thousands of years. The land in the line is depicted as a caring mother satisfying the needs of those laborers. This motherly depiction of the land is common in the Irish literary tradition. Portraying laborers at harvest time in “At a Potato Digging,” Heaney writes: “Heads bow, trunks bend, hands fumble towards the black / Mother” (1966, p. 32). When the grandmother’s land laborers “’ve gone” like her children, “a tractor ploughs where horses strained” (Murphy, 1959/1979, p. 117). The poet demonstrates the laborer’s desperate social and economic conditions when he observes that “[s]ometimes sheep occupy their roofless room” (p. 117). Those laborers’ departure further symbolizes the Irish diaspora having escaped their degraded life in search of better work opportunities in foreign countries. The emigration of the grandmother’s children and land laborers suggests that the Irish diaspora was a bitter reality among the Irish from all social classes. The phenomenon peaked during the Famine years but continued to be the destiny of many for tens of years to come.



## Conclusion:

*The Woman of the House* is a landmark of Murphy's poetics that emphasizes his alignment with native history and anti-colonialism. The poet's belonging to the Protestant Ascendancy barely barred him from realizing his countrymen's suffering. The symbolic study of the poem helps unearth significant elements that testify to the Irish traditional heritage and to many bitter phases of the country's extended political strife under colonialism. The poem is primarily an elegy lamenting the death of his grandmother. The poet reveals the bright side of her character that leads her love to dwell in the hearts of her children, grandchildren, and close acquaintances. Nonetheless, he manages to turn the elegy into a patriotic revival of his Irish roots through her figure as well as her personal and ancestral tales. Consequently, the poem manages to play a dual role: it commemorates Murphy's grandmother and celebrates his Irish loyalty. As a matter of fact, the poet's direct reference to Ireland in the first line of the opening and concluding stanzas registers a note of patriotism that wraps up all symbolic allusions to Irish identity and belongingness.

Flashbacks are skillfully employed in building up the elegy. Murphy recalls the exceptional days he used to spend at his grandmother's house on holidays with other family children. Thus, he manages to express his deep sorrow by lamenting the loss of those happy days. In addition, he displays his grief by invoking the sad memories of the grandmother's stay at the hospital while she approached death. Concerning praising the idealized personality of the grandmother, the poem abounds with implicit and explicit references to her gentleness, modesty, generosity, and cultured upbringing. By the end, Murphy seeks consolation in memories that were said to warm his mind and heart by recollecting her kindness and love.

Reading through the elegiac poetic narrative by means of symbolism discloses Murphy's devotion to the Irish identity and history. The grandmother is the central symbol of the poem. Her Anglo-Irish ancestry was supposed to distance her from the Irish cause. However, the poet manages to portray an opposite image by highlighting her generosity and modesty toward the poor and landless laborers. Simultaneously, she incessantly displayed sincere engagement with the plight of the Irish Catholic majority. In doing so, the poet brings attention to social inequality and poverty in the country, an expected outcome of colonialism. One of the emblems of colonialism in the poem is the grandmother's house. The Protestant aristocracy houses were the product of Britain's existence in Ireland. Nonetheless, Murphy explains that inheriting such houses does not involve denying one's national consciousness. Inside the house, the poet refers to the Rangoon prints and the Crimean Medal. The former is a symbol celebrating the failure of the British to put the Irish monk on trial for sedition. The latter symbolizes a shameful side of the colonial hegemony where the impoverished Irishmen were made to serve in the British army to secure their living. The same dilemma was repeated during the Sepoy Mutiny. The Mutiny led to dramatic changes in the Irish educational system to suit the increasing involvement of Irish soldiers in the struggle in pursuit of job opportunities.

As the poem develops, Irish food traditions and marriage rituals are demonstrated in honor of Irish culture. The poet remembers how the grandmother used to serve them varied types of food. Porridge, brown soda-bread, and boiled eggs are mouthwatering meals. However, for an Irish audience, they are emblems of the traumatizing events of the Great Famine and economic deterioration. Furthermore, Murphy recollects her interesting stories of rings and lace which stand for and revive Irish marriage traditions of Celtic origins. The poem leaps from traditions to disease by moving to the 1830s when Ireland was plagued with cholera. Murphy brings about the horrific event in the poem to symbolize Britain's biased policies in Ireland.

Place holds essential symbolic connotations in Murphy's poetry. Thus, the reference to Galway triggers the Irish maritime culture and the Gaelic sports practiced there. Both of them are original aspects of the country's legacy. Besides place, referring to some of the grandmother's favorite literary figures in the poem illuminates the Irish prominent literary tradition. By the end of the discussion, the grandmother's children as well as land laborers' migration comes as an emblem of the Irish diaspora because of the deteriorating conditions of the country under British rule. Hence, symbolism can be said to have resolved Murphy's lifetime dilemma of double identity. Beyond its elegiac borders, *The Woman of the House* is a rich poetic account of the Irish past and culture.

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