

December 1970

Comment and Review – Liam O'Flaherty's Ego-Anarchist

H. J. O'Brien

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

O'Brien, H. J. (1970) "Comment and Review – Liam O'Flaherty's Ego-Anarchist," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol7/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

(2) Comment And Review

Liam O'Flaherty's Ego-Anarchist

H. J. O'Brien

Liam O'Flaherty's fifth novel, *The Assassin*, is the last of his Dublin-centered thrillers.¹ Like *The Informer* and *Mr. Gilhooley*, *the Assassin* uses Irish Revolutionary activities as a backdrop for the psychological analysis of one central figure, Michael McDara. The plot of *The Assassin* details the steps taken by McDara for the assassination of an important representative of the Irish government.² With his accomplices McDara is intent upon an idealistic anarchist's "propaganda of the deed." Theoretically, the assassination is supposed to lead to a stateless society with a weak leader at the top, policed by true Anarchists dedicated to the perpetuation of a weak leadership of the state. But shortly before the commission of the deed McDara confesses to his girl friend that he is in fact an Ego-Anarchist in search of power. McDara's real motive for committing the murder of the government official is to prove himself a superman, to assert his right to transgress moral conventions. After the murder, McDara loses his faith in Ego-Anarchism, and, pursued by guilt, by the loss of God, and by the sense of moral implication in the crime that is the modern world, he resolves to commit suicide.

The third person narrator's inside view of McDara's neurotic mind reveals two personalities: one feminine and the other masculine. The latter despises McDara's body and it plunders ideas for what is useful to it. Thus it is like the intellectual side of O'Connor's personality in *The Black Soul*, like the rational half of the curate's personality in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, and similar to the cognitive part of Commandant Gallagher's personality in *The Informer*. The narrator of *The Assassin* describes McDara's Feminine personality as the seat of McDara's creative genius. "It was a genius, capable of conjuring up, with exciting vividness, emotions, passions and brilliant inspirations, all of them awe-inspiring. It had a feminine attribute, because it was negative, hysterical and cunning, preying on his other personality, just as woman preys on her mate."³

McDara's two personalities provide the interior conflict of goals. When confronted with his girl friend's love for him McDara's feminine personality wants to comfort Kitty and pray to God. However, McDara's masculine personality wants to force Kitty to be silent and not bother him with her concern for their future together. When Kitty pleads with McDara to give up his plan for the assassination and go away with her, McDara's masculine personality wonders how he ever became interested in "these mystical lunatics."⁴

While love is a passion that belongs properly to McDara's feminine personality, the propaganda of the deed will be executed by his masculine personality. The narrator's description of McDara's feelings while under the influence of his masculine personality

reveal him in an “ecstasy of limitless pride that surpasses the ecstasy of love because it is hard.”⁵ As McDara’s mind is split into two personalities, so, too, his imaginative projection of his encounter with the man he plans to assassinate is based on two opposing forces that will momentarily collide, with the victory going to the more powerful masculine force. McDara is confident that he will possess unfathomable power after he assassinates the tyrant.⁶ The narrator’s inside view of McDara’s mind is objective with no overt effort made to enlist the reader’s sympathies for McDara. But the dual patterns of two personalities, of two conflicting forces that become two parts of one whole with the stronger part surviving, make it clear that McDara has moved beyond the border of sanity before he commits the murder.

Interlocked with McDara’s neurosis and his anarchism are his ideas, the feelings representing religion. Before the assassination McDara talks with two accomplices in a dramatized scene with the accomplices clashing verbally with each other before accepting McDara’s anarchistic plan. McDara argues that the tyrant head of the Government must be destroyed. As the tyrant impedes the progress of men, so, too, religion with its bonds of superstition prevents man from progressing. “Our people must make a great gesture of defiance before they can free themselves. They must trample on everything. On God too.”⁷ In a dialogue between McDara and his girl friend, Kitty, religion is called by McDara “this Christian worship of the slave, this bastard humanitarianism.”⁸ Neither a Christian nor a Communist, McDara claims his real reason for assassinating the government official is his personal desire for the freedom of a God. “I am doing this because I want to be free. To cut every cord. It’s only when a man cuts every cord that he approaches nearest to being a God”⁹

After the assassination, McDara flees from the scene of the crime and enters a church where Sunday mass is about to begin. The narrator ironically records the “lazy, bored voice” of the priest reciting the prayers at the foot of the altar and the narrator describes McDara whispering to himself: “The lout cannot approach the altar of God. There is no God.”¹⁰ The narrator plunges the reader into the depths of McDara’s mind with a dramatized report of several stages of experience recreated in McDara’s thoughts as the mass goes on. Thus McDara feels the exaltation of a predatory animal, the ecstasy of power of a man who is God-like, sleep following on the tension of the planned assassination, fear accompanied by the loss of ecstasy, thoughts of his mother’s love, submission of self to the love of Christ, and a feeling of ferocity. As the priest elevates the host McDara strikes his breast while realizing he has lost the innocence of childhood, the God of childhood, and the people of his childhood. McDara recognizes himself as a murderer. Feeling no repentance, McDara accepts nothingness and leaves the church in a state of shock. Resolving to commit suicide McDara confesses to himself that it is useless to struggle if he can’t kill his conscience and he wonders: “Is there a God, then? Some unknown Being, of whom I never dreamt.”¹¹

While the distance between the narrator and McDara along an intellectual axis and a moral axis of value does not vary, since there is no indication of opposition to or sympathy for McDara, the distance between the narrator and other revolutionaries is one

of total opposition as revealed in the ironic description of women revolutionaries. All of the women revolutionaries are described as basically selfish people. Kitty Mallett, McDara's girl friend, mouths phrases about the holy act of assassination while the narrator plumbs her mind for the selfish motive of regarding the assassination as a gesture of revenge against her family for having objected to her revolutionary activities. At no point in the novel does the distance between the narrator and the revolutionaries diminish.

The narrator's total opposition to the revolutionaries represents a moral judgement of their activities. Hence *The Assassin*, like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, associates morality with the traditional detective story, but unlike the Russian masterpiece, O'Flaherty's novel does not force the reader to think on the deeper level of morality, and therefore escape from the standard over-simplifications which many people substitute for thought. The murderer, Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment* is like McDara in so far as he considers himself to be emancipated from the moral law before committing his crime. Only after imprisonment is Raskolnikov converted through the selfless prostitute Sonya's love to admit that the principle of the superman is incompatible with man's nature. McDara in *The Assassin* is offered no insight, no compassionate love; only the meaningless absurdity of the abyss that confronts him. Although McDara recognizes that his crime has not made him into a superman but has instead given him a burden of guilt from which he cannot escape, he sees no alternative to his despair.

In *The Assassin*, then, O'Flaherty interlocks religion, anarchy, and neurosis in his representation of McDara's psychological disillusionment before the hopelessness of reality. The third person narrator's inside views describe the lifting of the veils of illusion from McDara's eyes and these inside views are reinforced by dialogue which reveals McDara's disillusionment in dramatized scenes.

Tullamore, Ireland

¹ London, 1928.

² Paul-Dubois has noted that O'Flaherty's novel was based on the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins on July 10, 1927. See "Un Romancier Réaliste en Erin: M. Liam O'Flaherty," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 15, 1934, pp. 884-904.

Vigian Mercier noted the same basis for the assassination in his Ph. D. thesis (Trinity College, Dublin, 1945), p. 206.

³ *The Assassin*, p. 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 180, 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.