

Naming and power in friel's translations



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This passage, near the start of Act Two in *Translations* shows Owen and Yolland in the process of naming the places they come across on their map of Ireland.

The characters and the text itself both deal with the issues surrounding these names and the powers names have over both people and places. The powers of destruction and creation are shown to be one of the effects of the process of naming. The beginning of the passage touches on the destructive side of naming by using the prefix 'de' ('describe' and 'denominate') twice in the words Owen uses to explain what they are trying to do by changing Irish place names; 'we are trying to denominate and at the same time describe that tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground... ' .

The prefix 'de' usually expresses a reversal or negation which in this case would mean they are 'de-scribing' i. e. 'unwriting' and 'de-nominating' which phonologically sounds as if they are taking away the names of the places, although if one looks at the semantics of the words they mean completely different things. Use of the prefix 'de' also gives Owen's remark a more negative feel, making the reader wonder if what they are doing is perhaps a bad, destructive thing rather than the constructive process it was intended to be; a theme which is looked at many times during other parts of the play and is best exemplified by Yolland's remark later in the play: 'something is being eroded'. The exploration of the ideas of creation in conjunction with naming are mentioned only twice in this passage but is very important to the play as a whole.

Owen and Yolland both draw parallels between Ireland and Paradise at the close of the passage. Yolland claims that 'It's really heavenly' and Owen mentions both heaven and God when he exclaims 'For God's sake! ... you think it's Eden'. This obviously and immediately makes one think of creation in relation to the story in the Bible.

There Adam names all the animals, trees (and probably places), thus finishing the creation process. However it is easy to notice that what Yolland and Owen actually seem to be doing is taking away names which is the very opposite of the creation story. There is an interesting similarity between this and a story by Neil Gaiman called 'In the End', which describes the creation story in reverse order finishing with 'after that there was nothing but the silence in the Garden, save for the occasional sound of the man taking away a name from another animal'. The creation theme is mentioned again on p. 40 when Yolland tells Owen that 'the maps... an't be printed without these names', suggesting that a place doesn't really exist without a name which belongs to it and so by giving new names they are creating new places. The stage directions at the start of the scene tell us that 'one of the blank maps is spread out on the floor'. However if we simply listen to the words Owen is using such as 'on past Burnfoot.

.. there's nothing here...

until we come down here to the south' and 'we now come across that beach' it sounds as though he and Yolland are actually walking across Ireland and changing the names as they see the places. Although the map on the floor is a significant prop it would not be very visually noticeable to the audience

making this effect even stronger. Linking the maps to the places in this way means that changing the names on the maps has a big symbolic impact. They are not simply altering names on maps but are altering the places themselves. The symbolic impact of changing a places name is a theme which is present throughout the passage. Owen shows us the difficulty of capturing the full identity of a place in a new, manufactured name which hasn't undergone the slow process of growing along with the place it is meant to represent.

We are trying to denominate and at the same time describe that tiny area of soggy, rocky, sandy ground where the little stream enters the sea'. This same attitude is shown a little later in Owens challenge ' the name of that ridge is Druim Drubh. Put English on that, Lieutenant! '. In Ireland a places name often gives information not only about how it looks but also about other factors such as it's history which is shown later in the play during discussion of ' Tobair Vree', a name which ' keeps piety with a man long dead'.

Something a new name could never do in the same way. A persons name is often also more than what they are called but represents who they are in the more philosophical sense . Owen's mistaken name is perhaps the most significant exemplification of the power names have over a person's identity. He is visibly uncomfortable being called Roland ' George, my name isn't.

.. ' and the use of the new place name Burnfoot in the same sentence as Owen's incorrect, anglicised name ' Good, Roland. Burnfoot's good' suggests

a similarity between the two. Bun na hAbhann, has a meaning to the locals which the name Burnfoot couldn't convey.

It hides the local history of the place just as Roland hides Owens Irish heritage, thus masking a key part of his character. There are many examples of the role names play in identifying a person's character both in this passage and in the rest of the play. We are told that Maire Catach's surname directly reflects her appearance: 'Curly haired; the whole family are called Catachs' and so makes up a part of her identity and character. The mysterious 'Donnelly twins' are also mentioned briefly in this extract.

Always referred to together their joint name seems to reflect the way in which the rest of the community see them, i. . as one unit rather than two separate people. We as the reader never meet the twins so the way in which we perceive them depends entirely on their names and the few lines said about them.

The name Donnelly is a stereotypical Irish name making us believe that they are probably stereotypically Irish in their nature. The origin and meanings of their name give us yet more insight in to their character. Named after the rebel chieftain O'Donnell Ulster who tried to stop the Tudor conquest in 1598 the twins rebellious behaviour seems to be living up to their surname.

Names have also been shown to have importance earlier in the play, for example in the first act when the name of the baby being christened would show the community who it's father was, another example of a name creating part of a persons identity. This idea has foundations in mythology.

Knowing a persons true name is often said to either give one power over the person or to know the persons true ' essence' and self.

Juxtaposed with the references to the pagan, mythological powers of names are references to their spiritual and religious side. Owens positioning in this scene is described in the stage directions as ' on his hands and knees', consulting the map. This could be interpreted as symbolising worship of the map and therefore of his country which fits in with the idea of Ireland as the holy land of Eden. His position over the map looks to the audience as if Owen is ' playing God' with this representation of Ireland. It portrays the process of naming as a holy act in itself, which would back up the idea of naming being a creative (or destructive) force. Yolland adds to the references to prayer when he asks Own to ' just say the names again for me.

.. n your own language' and then ' repeats the names silently after him' whilst looking out of the window. Once again it is uncertain whether this picture of silent worship is meant to be seen as worship of the country he is looking at or identify the names themselves as being in possession of spiritual power. The theory that names in Translations have the powers seen in the previous examples gives rise to the question - who is in possession of this power? Manus's dominating appearance at the start of the extract shows us that the people who understand the language and names of a place have power over those who don't.

Manus 'emerges from upstairs and descends' (in itself connotating superiority) down upon Manus. Although Yolland previously claimed that Manus's ' Irish air has made me bold' it becomes evident that his new found

courage is present only in the face of his British superiors who do not understand the language and culture of their surroundings to the extent that Yolland does. Manus's arrival on stage, and his use of Gaelic intimidates Yolland who is reduced back to phonologically weak phrases from his old idiolect such as ' sorry- sorry? '. The emergence of the British soldiers who descend upon the Irish reverses this situation. As the names are changed to English it becomes the British who now hold the power that these names have as they are the ones who can use and understand them.

They hold the power to create and to destroy places because they are in charge of what does and does not exist on the maps. If by changing the name of a person or place one has control over its nature then it would follow that by making the names English the soldiers are slowly wiping away, or in Yolland's words ' eroding' the culture and essence of Ireland.