

In the Shadow of *Cymraeg*: Machen's 'The White People' and Welsh Coding in the Use of Esoteric and Gothicised Languages

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To Begin at the Beginning: An Elucidation of Themes and Scope

Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*, published in 1894, is a celebrated masterpiece of late-Victorian horror, though it is but one of the formidable terrors envisioned by Machen in his prolific period of the 1890s. Like the dark and shaded lanes of Machen's Celtic landscapes, many of his shorter pieces suffer from critical neglect. While *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) have been included in thematic studies of the fin de siècle and of body horror, other equally evocative pieces have been largely ignored.¹ 'The White People' (1904), despite its frequent republishing in horror anthologies and the acclaim that it receives from fans of the genre, remains critically unexplored territory. H. P. Lovecraft, who held Machen's work in high esteem, wrote in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927) that Machen's mastery of 'hidden horror and brooding fright' attained 'an almost incomparable substance and realistic acuteness'. More pointedly, in his discussion of the 'The White People', Lovecraft writes that, though the tale is 'less famous and less complex in plot than *The Great God Pan*', it is 'definitely finer in atmosphere and general artistic value'.²

The story, though written in 1899, was not published until 1904. It first appeared in *Horlick's*, a magazine sponsored by the malted-milk manufacturer of the same name, and which was devoted to the publishing of mysteries.³ Writing with his characteristically self-effacing sense of humour, Machen said of 'The White People' that he did not 'know that the sale of the Malted Milk was unfavourably affected'.⁴ The story, detailing the supernatural explorations of a young girl in the countryside, aligns with Machen's personal interest in language and deep knowledge of obscure occult realities. The opacity of the story both inspires confusion and invites interpretation. 'The White People' is a sketch, a rather

¹ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 47-49.

² H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1973), pp. 90-91.

³ In 1900, Machen's close friend and lifelong correspondent, A. E. Waite, became the manager of *Horlick's*, facilitating the initial publication of many of the short tales that would be compiled in 1906 under the title *House of Souls* (Henry Danielson and Arthur Machen, *Arthur Machen: A Bibliography* (London: Richard Clay & Sons Limited, 1923), p. 36).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

abbreviated story that alternates between philosophical musings, folklore retellings, and flashes of imagery; Machen himself spoke of the narrative as ‘a single stone instead of a whole house’ and ‘naturally a disappointment’.⁵ These ‘flashes’ of imagery are conveyed through Machen’s description of ever-more imaginative landscapes: much of the story of ‘The White People’ is told through the narration of a young girl writing in her personal journal, known as ‘the Green Book’. Thus, large sections of the text are uninterrupted by dialogue and written using the first person ‘I’, effectively allowing the reader to immerse themselves in the experiences of the young girl as she explores the landscape and its occult properties.

As is frequently noted by critics, Machen often utilises ‘Celtic’ settings, including the Welsh Valleys and the Roman ruins of his native Caerleon; however, other connections to his Welsh identity have not been properly explored.⁶ There has been no thorough attempt to contextualise the ‘Aklo letters’ and ‘Chian language’ mentioned by the narrator within the framework of contemporary debates about the status of the Welsh language. As explored here, both Machen’s native Welsh and his invented languages pose the same threat to the supremacy of the English language, and to the material, rational world dominated by that common tongue. This essay also examines how Welsh, or *Cymraeg*, has historically been framed as a leading cause of ‘moral failings’ identified in the Welsh people; this formulation of language as a force capable of leading people astray is highly relevant to a discussion of ‘The White People’, due to the dangers that *Chian* and *Aklo* seem to present. Though it may initially feel strange to think of language usage in moral terms, a brief focus on mid-Victorian attitudes toward Welsh highlights the possibility of a degenerate, or ‘gothicised language’. An additional focus on Machen’s ‘Welshness’, in-text and out, yields vital insights into the often conflicting and contradictory representations of Welsh; in particular, it is worth noting that his place of birth and decidedly English education place his cultural identity in a precarious middle space. As regards ‘The White People’, this further confuses the reader’s ability to interpret the text’s cultural allegiances.

Here, I would like to take a moment to clarify the scope of my argument. Many readers will recall that Machen’s other short stories, most notably ‘The Shining Pyramid’ and ‘The Red Hand’ (both 1895), imply that fairies are pre-Celtic hominids, biological

⁵ Danielson and Machen, p. 37.

⁶ Aaron Worth writes that ‘Machen was pre-eminently a writer of place – of, first of all, his native Monmouthshire (later he would discover London, completing the binary landscape of his imagination)’ (Aaron Worth and Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. xi).

throwbacks to an earlier era. Indeed, other scholars have brilliantly contextualised the influence of contemporary euhemeristic assumptions on Machen's works.⁷ The ethnic makeup of Machen's supernatural worlds is not the concern of this essay, and my use of the phrase 'Welsh coding' is not meant to imply an ethnic Celtic identity, but to draw attention to the parallel 'dangers' shared by Machen's invented languages and Victorian characterisations of the Welsh language.

Cultural allegiances, coded in 'The White People' through the division of the spiritual, multi-lingual, 'real' world from the rational, materialistic world of the English, informs the reader's opinion of the young female protagonist's descent into occult language and mysticism. It is also important to note Machen's representation of female agency in the story; a critical focus on his Welshness makes it possible to explore some of the ways in which his identity as a Celt and a Welshman may have influenced this representation. The difficulty in placing Machen's cultural allegiances is particularly fascinating considering the fact that Machen wrote his most well-known tales during the literary period typically referred to as the 'Celtic Dawn'.⁸ Machen's lifetime also saw efforts on the part of the English government to suppress the use of *Cymraeg*, as well as a related rise in Welsh nationalism. The tale's use of obscure language, its Celticism, and the return to pagan spirituality intermingle with the introduction of a non-Christian definition of 'evil' within the framing narrative; this alternate definition, focusing not on morality, but on 'unnaturalness' and the 'penetrat[ion] into another and higher sphere', allows for a more nuanced understanding of the female protagonist and her actions within the text.⁹

The first part of this article therefore contextualises both Arthur Machen's cultural identity and 'The White People' within the framework of the period. This framework includes contemporary conversations regarding Welsh identity and language usage, as well as Celtic identity and its intersection with the feminine; these contexts all aid in a fuller understanding of the complexity of Machen's tale and his 'coding' of Celticism. His use of a female protagonist in 'The White People' is especially significant when one considers that detractors of Celtic literature often 'feminised' Celtic creative tendencies as a means of

⁷ Emily Fergus, "'A Wider Reality": Euhemerism and Arthur Machen's "Little People"', *FAUNAS: The Journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen*, 32 (2015), 3-17.

⁸ Also referred to as the Irish Literary Renaissance, this period saw an increase in Celtic literary production; in 1906 Maunsell and Company was founded with the express purpose of publishing Irish authors, and three years earlier the Irish National Theatre Company was founded. This period coincided with a swell in Irish nationalism and an increased interest in the preservation of Irish Gaelic.

⁹ Machen, 'The White People', in *The Works of Arthur Machen: House Of Souls, The Hill of Dreams, The Three Impostors, and Other Tales of the Sacred and Profane* (San Bernardino: Lowood Press, 2012), pp. 44-63 (p. 46).

denying their merits. In 'The White People', Machen grants a higher spiritual capacity to women; the young female protagonist's nurse exemplifies competence in dealing with occult forces, and it may be that lack of female guidance following the nurse's departure leads to the tragedy at the end of the text, as the girl poisons herself, seemingly overwhelmed by her revelations. The women of Machen's 1890s fiction are often rendered 'unfit' to live in the world after their encounters with occult forces. The reader is usually denied access to the subjectivity of these women and is forced to understand them through male conversation only, rarely glimpsing a complete woman. A similar 'abbreviation' of female characters can be found in *The Great God Pan* (in the case of Helen Vaughn) and in 'The Shining Pyramid' (in the case of Annie Trevor). In the context of Machen's other fictions, 'The White People' stands out as a remarkably female-led narrative: though unnamed, the female protagonist is able to detail her own spiritual explorations by way of her journal writings in the Green Book, which make up the bulk of the text. Though the story of 'The White People' begins and ends with conversation between male companions on the outskirts of London, it is overall less dominated by male commentary than some of his other works.

Precarious Identities: Arthur Machen, Anglicanism, and the 'Celtic Church'

Machen's work has an uneasy place in literary history. Though, by the end of his life, he was seen as a man of letters and undeniably literary, much of his work was published in popular magazines before later compilation. Throughout his career, Machen commented on, and probably contributed to, the idea that his is a 'dubious legacy', despite the fact that many canonical literary authors, such as Charles Dickens, first found their works published in periodical form. We can find an example of Machen's typically self-effacing attitude toward his own work in his preface to 'The Bowmen' (1914), in which he states that '[i]ntroductions [...] belong to the masterpieces and classics of the world, to the great and ancient and accepted things: and I am here introducing a short, small story of my own which appeared in *The Evening News* about ten months ago'.¹⁰ Machen implies that his own writing exists somewhere between popular and literary culture, and past attitudes toward 'genre' fiction have likely contributed to this impression of Machen as a purely 'popular author'.

Scholars have also noted that Machen and his works occupy an unusual space in terms of the religious landscape of Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: he is a radical, yet he is also a traditional Anglo-Catholic. As Nicholas Freeman writes, he was

¹⁰ Machen, *Terror and Other Writings of Machen* (Ingersoll, ON: Devoted Publishing, 2017), p. 305.

‘idiosyncratic and dogmatic’.¹¹ Machen was deeply opposed to the workings of the contemporary Anglican Church and to the materialism that he saw as detrimental to spiritual fulfilment. He still believed that Christianity had a sort of ‘supernatural collateral’, that quality that inspires faith and supports its assumption of miracles; however, he also saw the Church of England as incapable of facilitating access to religious wonder. During the 1890s, Machen explored occult magic, notably spending time engaged with the Order of the Golden Dawn, though his involvement with the organisation did not last long.¹² While his interest in exploring the occult did not wane in subsequent decades, he increasingly looked to the realm of the Arthurian in his spiritual quests; it seemed that the combination of Celtic myth and the affinity for the miraculous present in his Anglican upbringing sustained a nearly lifelong passion. Machen ‘longed for a spirituality that satisfied his own burning certainties about the presence of wonder all around’ him, and explicitly coded the mythology as Welsh.¹³ This Celtic ‘coding’ is a move illustrated by Machen’s interest in the Nanteos cup, then held in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth; he believed the cup to be a strong candidate for the Holy Grail.¹⁴ Machen carried out extensive correspondence with lifelong friend Waite on the subject of the Graal, or Holy Grail, Machen eventually arriving at the theory that Arthur’s knights were actually Celtic saints.¹⁵

His dabbling in the occult, his investigation of Celtic Christianity, and conservative Anglican Catholic upbringing are all important here, in that they further serve to place him in a precarious position in terms of cultural identity. Within the context of Wales, the Anglicanism that Machen was born into had, by that point, been coded for decades as culturally English, not Welsh. It has been argued that Machen’s ‘Celtic Church’ is actually a

¹¹ Nicholas Freeman, ‘Arthur Machen: Ecstasy and Epiphany’, *Literature and Theology*, 24 (2010), 242-55, (p. 243).

¹² The ‘Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn’, as it is termed, was devoted to the study and practice of the occult, metaphysics, and the supernatural. Its membership surged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The movement’s teachings often focused on making contact with ‘the divine spark’, that locus of creativity and divine consciousness which motivates artists to achieve their greatest works (see Susan Johnston Graf, *Talking to the Gods: Occultism in the Work of W. B. Yeats, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and Dion Fortune* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), p. 8). It has been suggested that perhaps Machen’s quick disenchantment with Golden-Dawn teachings was a product of the advanced occult knowledge that he already possessed before his induction. He was knowledgeable enough to realise that the secrets being imparted behind the walls of the Isis-Urania Temple were freely available to anyone willing to spend time searching out reading material and researching various libraries. While he enjoyed the spectacle of Golden-Dawn ritual, he did not care for the gatekeeping practiced by elder members (ibid, pp. 59-60).

¹³ Freeman, pp. 244-48.

¹⁴ Machen, Roger Dobson, Godfrey Brangham, and R. A. Gilbert, *Selected Letters: The Private Writings of the Master of the Macabre* (Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1988), pp. 40-41.

¹⁵ In his introduction to Waite’s ‘The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail’, Machen writes, ‘I am of the opinion that the story is of Celtic origin, and that the knights are Celtic saints in armour’. Machen and Waite spent endless hours in the British Museum researching the Grail legend (Freeman, pp. 47-48).

tired myth initially created during the Reformation to justify the presence of an Anglican Church independent of Rome. In this formation, the ‘Celtic Church’ actually justifies Machen’s Anglicanism through its tying of his faith to his native land; it also offers ‘unbroken sacramental continuity’.¹⁶ Yet Anglicanism in the mid-late Victorian period became hopelessly entwined with one of the biggest insults the Welsh people had ever publicly endured.

Blue Books: The Gothicisation of the Welsh Language

Anglicanism is infamously associated with the *Brad y Llyfrau Gleision*, or ‘the Treason of the Blue Books’.¹⁷ The term ‘Blue Books’ refers to ‘The Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales’, published in 1847. The damning report, released during the aftermath of the Rebecca Riots of the 1840s,¹⁸ often repeated the common prejudices held by Anglican clergy operating in areas with strong nonconformist and Methodist leanings.¹⁹ The language used in the reports has often been seen as ‘colonial prejudice at its most blatant’.²⁰ Among other claims, the report published the letter of an Anglican Reverend operating in Troed-yr-aur, who claimed that the evening meetings of Welsh nonconformists were just opportunities for illicit sex between youths, who were said to remain overnight in the haylofts.²¹ The reports, and the connection to Anglicanism, had a galvanising effect on Welsh nonconformists, who now had proof that Anglican clergy did not have Welsh interests at heart. The Anglican Church began to be presented as ‘an alien institution, contemptuous of the Welsh people, their language, culture and religion’.²² Machen, growing up the son of an Anglican vicar, may have suffered from the challenge of navigating disparate religious and cultural identities. The contents of the 1847 Education Report ‘gothicised’ the Welsh, as

¹⁶ Ignatius, ‘Arthur Machen, Anglicanism, and the Legend of the “Celtic” Church’, *FAUNAS: The Journal of the Friends of Arthur Machen*, 31 (2015), 3-19 (p. 16-17).

¹⁷ H. G. Williams, ‘Nation State versus National Identity: State and Inspectorate in Mid-Victorian Wales’, *History of Education Quarterly*, 40 (2000), 145-68 (p. 145).

¹⁸ The Rebecca Riots are often seen as the impetus for the creation of the report, specifically because the use of the Welsh language often impeded the ability of English forces to quell the disturbances (see Jane Aaron, *Welsh Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), p. 51). The response of local farmers to unfair taxation involved agricultural workers dressed as women, or ‘Rebeccas’, in traditional Welsh dress, smashing toll gates, the physical manifestation of tolls and taxation during the economically challenging time. While destroying toll booths, often one or more of the Rebeccas recited Genesis 24:60: ‘And they blessed Rebekah and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.’

¹⁹ Wales had undergone a Methodist Revival in the eighteenth century; Methodism continues to be the faith most associated with Welsh identity to this day.

²⁰ Janet Davies, *The Welsh Language: A History* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014), p. 66.

²¹ Davies, p. 66.

²² Williams, p. 152.

scholar Jane Aaron explains in her ground-breaking study, *Welsh Gothic*. Gothicisation is, for Aaron, a process by which people who are considered backward, unreasonable, and uncivilised are rendered ‘other’, as a way to distance them from the dominant culture. To gothicise a people is to create a power imbalance through a fiction that paints the dominant group in a positive light by contrast with the gothicised minority; the depiction of those who are gothicised may change based on the needs of the dominant group.²³ For instance, a minority group in possession of significant natural resources may become a target; once a group is transformed into ‘the other’, maltreating them becomes far easier for the larger society to justify. ‘Gothicisation’, in its literary form, is the mode by which literary villains are created, be they the witches of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘Young Goodman Brown’ (1835) or the African natives of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). An understanding of this social-cultural process as a way to justify both physical and cultural violence is crucial; it goes beyond the literary. The rhetoric of the 1847 report portrays the Welsh people as dark, primordial figures labouring underground; the mines of the South-Wales Valleys become a metaphor for the intellectual darkness in which their attachment to *Cymraeg* leaves them:

The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and communal prosperity of the people. Because of their language the mass of the Welsh people are inferior to the English in every branch of practical knowledge and skill [...]. [The Welshman’s] language keeps him under the hatches [...] he is left to live in an underworld of his own and the march of society goes completely over his head.²⁴

The Commissioner’s Report, it should be noted, coded the evils caused by lack of access to English in moral, rather than practical, terms. The legacy of the ‘Blue Books’ in late nineteenth-century Wales is, I argue, key to understanding Machen’s fictional use of ‘foreign’ and obscure language; this is most apparent within ‘The White People’, due to the text’s coding of language usage in terms of boundary crossing and sin. The 1847 reports, as well as the 1861 ‘Revised Code’, prompted much of the nationalist sentiment and the joining of Welsh nonconformists with the remains of the Welsh antiquarian movement; it also resulted in the resurgence of Bardic culture, which led to the first National Eisteddfod in Aberdare in 1861, two years before the birth of Arthur Machen.²⁵ The *eisteddfod*, now a yearly

²³ Aaron, pp. 50-51.

²⁴ This is a direct quotation from the 1847 Commissioner’s Report; Aaron extensively analyses the phrasing of the report in her study (*ibid*, p. 52).

²⁵ This code, while not explicitly prohibiting Welsh-language use in schools, changed the way in which the government paid for education and was a huge detriment to the language. Under the new system, a capitation grant of 12 shillings was paid for each child every year to their school of attendance; however, up to two thirds of that sum could be withdrawn should the child fail to satisfy inspectors in their performance in maths and English reading and writing. Basically, a teacher’s livelihood became predicated on their students learning

celebration of Welsh culture, language, and artistic output, has its roots in an event first held in the twelfth century by Rhys ap Gruffudd in Cardigan.²⁶

Complications to Welsh Identity: The Ambiguity of Machen's Monmouthshire

If mid-Victorian arguments concerning the negative influence of *Cymraeg* had been valid, Machen would still have been protected, having been born in Monmouthshire. Along with Radnorshire, Monmouthshire was one of the Welsh counties in which native-language use had lost ground early on. While Welsh had remained the primary, and in some cases, sole language up until the 1860s through much of Wales, in Monmouthshire the percentages were much lower, though concrete data is not available until the late nineteenth century.²⁷ The census of 1891, the first systematic attempt to quantify Welsh-language usage, found that within the county of Monmouthshire only fifteen percent of respondents over the age of two spoke Welsh; furthermore, this statistic is skewed by the high percentage of speakers in the district of Bedwellty. In the district of Newport, which contains Machen's beloved Caerleon, the 1891 census reported less than twelve percent Welsh fluency.²⁸ Monmouthshire had already found itself in a unique position after the 1536 Act of Union. The Act, passed during the reign of Henry VIII, incorporated Wales into England's legal system; it also positioned English as the language of the courts of Wales, and prohibited any person who spoke Welsh from holding public office of any kind.²⁹ Oddly, when Wales was incorporated through the Act of Union, Monmouthshire was put under the legal jurisdiction of Westminster, rather than the newly formed Court of Great Session in Wales; this led to its slowly being seen as an English county by many, though culturally and linguistically it was no less Welsh than any other Western county in the sixteenth century.³⁰ Despite this, Machen never did become fluent in Welsh, though he did learn French, having undergone a fairly traditional English

English, giving them a pecuniary interest in discouraging Welsh-language use in schools. Though not uniformly enforced, some teachers took up the practice of the retributive 'Welsh Not' system; this promoted students 'tattling' on each other for being caught speaking Welsh, with the passing on of a wooden marker or paddle to the offending child. Those who ended up with the marker, often carved with the initials 'W. N.' for 'Welsh Not', at the end of the day, were paddled (Davies, p. 75).

²⁶ Ibid, p. 44.

²⁷ Welsh monoglots were not unusual in the late-Victorian period in Wales, particularly in the North and in Southern mining communities, as large concentrations of people from smaller villages came to the mining communities for the promise of work (ibid, p. 20).

²⁸ J. E. Southall, *The Welsh Language Census of 1891, with Coloured Map of the 52 Registration Districts into which Wales is Divided* (Newport, Monmouthshire: John E. Southall, 1895), p. 8

<<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112000597200>> [accessed 2 September 2018].

²⁹ Davies, pp. 33-34.

³⁰ The confusion continues until the Local Government Act of 1972, which clarifies Monmouthshire's status as a county of Wales.

education.³¹ This is not surprising, considering the fact that educational advancement and English-language use were inextricably connected in this period.³²

Despite his lack of Welsh-language fluency, scholars have noted that Machen was deeply steeped in Welsh hagiography, history, and legend; few Welsh authors have used their heritage to as great an advantage.³³ The technical confusion regarding Machen's birthplace, his Anglicanism, and his lack of Welsh fluency have led some to question, even deride, his claim to Welsh identity. His critics have referred to him as a Welsh writer who would have preferred to be English and who felt that he was contaminated by Welshness.³⁴ This is despite the fact that he consistently referred to himself as 'a native of Gwent' and attributed much of his success as an author to his place of origin.³⁵ Nonetheless, Machen's literary life often took him out of the Welsh countryside in which he sets much of his work written in the 1890s. He left for London in 1883, and many authors tend to refer to him as an exile.³⁶ This is not surprising, as he had been known to voice similar sentiments; writing in his *Autobiography*, Machen states that his idea of comfort was defined by the whitewashed Welsh farmhouse, rather than the plush hotels of London. He even went so far as to portray himself as 'an Israelite exiled'.³⁷ Indeed, critical attention should be turned to the city of London, which is often referenced in his works, to illuminate Machen's nuanced relationship with his place of exile. The argument can be made that Machen's contact with English culture was detrimental to his written representations of Wales, especially if we look at works like 'The Shining Pyramid', in which Croesyceiliog is infested with dark entities who kidnap village girls for the purpose of sacrifice. However, it can likewise be argued that he gained the ability to write from English and Welsh perspectives simultaneously.³⁸ He was therefore able to navigate the tensions between Welsh and English identity and language; no matter their own relation to

³¹ In reviewing the findings of the 1891 Census, a strong divide in fluency between the West and East in Wales emerges; there is a similar divide currently, though it runs North and South, with the North having much higher language fluency and continuity. In 1891, the Census recorded that 54.5 percent of the Welsh population over two years old spoke Welsh. However, this is rather skewed; Radnorshire, a county in Mid-West Wales, had the lowest percentage of speakers at 6 percent, while the county of Cardiganshire in the East was found to have a 95 percent Welsh-speaking population (Davies, pp. 81-82).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³³ Mark Valentine, *Arthur Machen* (Bridgend: Seren, 1995), p. 138.

³⁴ Aaron, p. 71.

³⁵ In his autobiography, he states his belief that anything that he had thus far accomplished in literature was due to his being born in the heart of Gwent: 'As soon as I saw anything I saw Twyn Barlwm, that mystic tumulus, the memorial of the people that dwelt in that region before the Celts left the Land of Summer' (Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen* (London: Garnstone Press, 1974), pp. 17-18).

³⁶ Freeman, p. 248.

³⁷ Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen*, p. 21.

³⁸ Aaron, p. 76.

the native language, all Welsh writers are affected by these tensions precisely because *Cymareg* has always been a political battleground.³⁹

The 1890s saw an increase in Celtic literary production, though the general tendency is to focus on Irish writing due to the prominence of high-profile figures like Irish poet W. B. Yeats, along with George Moore and George Bernard Shaw. The period, known alternately as the ‘Celtic Dawn’, or the ‘Irish Literary Revival’ or ‘Renaissance’, saw Irish writers networking with self-identified ‘Celtic’ authors, creating a sense of community and appreciation that coincided with a swell in both Irish and Welsh nationalist feeling. Those working in this period found themselves consciously or unconsciously working against the destructive attitudes of literary critics who had, for decades by this point, belittled the abilities of their non-English British contemporaries. These detractors, interestingly, often devalued Celtic production through a ‘feminisation’ of the Celts and their creative tendencies. For example, Matthew Arnold’s *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) was particularly damaging, informed as it was by very little knowledge of Celtic history or anthropology; it praises the Welsh in one measure while belittling their works in the next, often using patronising language. Arnold, oddly enough, uses terms like ‘Celt-Hater’ and ‘Celt-Lover’ to describe the detractors and champions of Celtic literature; despite his often patronising language and linguistic discrimination, he seems to think of himself as the latter.⁴⁰

Linguistic discrimination, specifically the English coding of the Welsh language as degenerate and dangerous, is important in examining language use in ‘The White People’. In the Education Report of 1847, Commissioner Lingen referred to ‘the manifold evils inseparable from an ignorance of English’. He expressed the beliefs of many who derided the continuance of the Welsh language as a hindrance to the spread of English culture in Wales. This spread, and the resulting homogeneity, was desirable to many; Lingen echoes this sentiment: ‘through no other medium than a common language can ideas become common’.⁴¹ Beyond that, such ideological stances assume that the spread of English culture would have the ‘civilising’ effect necessary to combat the moral degeneracy mentioned elsewhere in the report. Machen’s ‘The White People’ does seem to point to the danger of involvement with ‘obscure’, minority languages; in light of this, it is tempting to ask whether he might be deferring to the assumptions made by people like Commissioner Lingen and Matthew Arnold. This may be an overly simplistic response; while Machen often writes through the

³⁹ David Lloyd, ‘Welsh Writing in English’, *World Literature Today*, 66 (1992), 435-38 (p. 436).

⁴⁰ Matthew Arnold, ‘On the Study of Celtic Literature’, in *Celtic Literature*, pp. 1-152 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1905), pp. 26-33.

⁴¹ Quoted in Williams, p. 152.

perspective of characters that represent the material world of 'London', it can't be said that these men represent Machen's exact worldview.

'The White People' is particularly interesting in that it features three distinct worldviews as regards obscure language. The young female protagonist interacts directly with occult linguistics and, page for page, her perspective dominates the text. Cotgrave, a character in the opening and closing sections of the text, is introduced to Ambrose through a mutual friend: he represents the material world of London within the text; unsurprisingly, there are many aspects of the girl's tale that he 'do[es] not grasp at all'.⁴² Ambrose, a hermit who guides the opening and closing sections of 'The White People' and introduces Cotgrave to the Green Book and the girl's story, acts as a literal intermediary; tellingly, he also lives on the outskirts of London, on a high hill from which the city, that 'awful spectacle', can be seen (p. 48). The three responses to obscure language and the occult practice attached to it, as showcased in Machen's tale, provide a sense of complexity that seems absent from other Machen narratives, especially those dominated by the Southern English, or London, view of reality. I would argue that the story's openness to heterogeneity of tongues and religious practice makes 'The White People' read as less 'horrific' than other stories that Machen wrote using similar subject matter.

The 'Truer' Reality: Language, Materialism, and Male Loss

Machen's use of language in 'The White People' is therefore very much open to interpretation – there is very little specificity as to its exact application in calling forth the occult, nor is there any elaboration on linguistic matters. Communicating by way of a series of notebooks, the young author of the Green Book deliberately keeps information from others, including us, the readers; though she doesn't expect an audience, she leaves the Green Book relatively unsecured, unlike other books which contain more dangerous secrets. Some secrets she 'must not write down': these, are apparently even more dangerous (p. 48). The reader is left with many questions. For instance, it is by no means clear which of Machen's invented languages is primary in her exploration of occult magic and the faery realm. She writes that she knows the *Chian* language, as well as the *Aklo* letters, which may be some sort of cipher or runic system (p. 48). This also suggests that there may be different classes of faeries speaking different languages or dialects. Tellingly, she learns the *Xu* language as a baby. She remembers seeing the little white faces of the faeries around her cradle; they spoke

⁴² Machen, 'The White People', in *The Works of Arthur Machen*, pp. 44-63 (p. 62). All further references are to this story are placed in parentheses in the body of the essay.

to her and she learned their language through these interactions, though she remembers little of *Xu* now (p. 49).

This sense of the ‘lost’ language of youth, or language learned in the home, is important in understanding the connection between Machen’s invented languages and *Cymraeg*. In the aftermath of the 1847 Education Report, and even into the mid-twentieth century, children felt the pressure of English linguistic supremacy. Welsh was often looked upon as a dead-end language, and school children seeking academic and professional advancement were expected to shed their home language in favour of English, as English, in many ways, represented the possibility of material success.⁴³ Because language is mentioned in passing, through the journaling of the female protagonist who is the narrative focus of ‘The White People’, it is therefore more important to understand the function of Machen’s invented languages, than to attempt to sort out the linguistic cosmology of the world. There are many hints within the text that all of these languages, pictograms, and codes are ways by which the young girl accesses a ‘truer’ reality than that which is offered through the English language. English, the text seems to imply, opens material, not spiritual, doors.

In the beginning of her narrative in the Green Book, the girl writes that, about a year previously, she had discovered ‘the real names of the days and months’ (p. 48). These, she writes, are among the secrets that must be kept hidden in other notebooks. The extreme need to keep this knowledge secret hints at the devastation of revelation yet to come. If something as seemingly straightforward as seasonal nomenclature is beyond the knowledge of the human race, a thing to be secreted away, it is apparent that humanity is completely out of touch with this higher ‘reality’. The girl is also able to call up Alala, an entity whose nature is never elaborated on. She does this only when completely alone, in her room or in some isolated wood, with her eyes and mouth shut; it requires only the faintest whisper from the girl to make Alala come. Once Alala is present, the reader is not privy to the nature of the girl’s interaction with the being. As this suggests, language, as portrayed in ‘The White People’, embodies a secret truth, and the shadow of the Welsh language looms large in ‘The White People’, not because Machen’s invented languages are linguistically coded as Welsh, but because of the similar threat they pose to the hegemonic domination of the English language, the language of materiality and socio-economic status.

Despite their occult power, however, it is by no means clear whether Machen represents obscure languages as innately horrid. The everyday world of material concerns is

⁴³ This conflict was dramatised in Emyr Humphreys’ 1958 novel, *A Toy Epic* (Emyr Humphreys, *A Toy Epic* (Bridgend: Seren, 2012)).

depicted here as fundamentally disconnected from that which is 'real'; this 'true reality' is so far beyond human understanding that there is horror in it. Pulling back the curtain reveals too much for the human mind to comprehend without consequence; in this case, consequences present themselves through the young protagonist's suicide. Despite Ambrose's interest in the girl's story, and his own study of alchemy, he believes that 'it is no doubt better for the great mass of people to dismiss it [the occult/faery realm] as a dream' (p. 62).⁴⁴

Notably, before the girl hints at this second reality, Ambrose the hermit has already alluded to it in the first section of the narrative of 'The White People'. Machen's tale is told in three parts; the first and third revolve around the conversation between Ambrose and Cotgrave, concerning the horror of the 'profoundly unnatural', during which Ambrose introduces the Green Book to Cotgrave. The young girl's writings in the Green Book make up the second and largest section of 'The White People'. Speaking of the profoundly unnatural, Ambrose claims that people feel it when they are in its presence, or that 'we should if we were natural: children and women feel this horror you speak of, even animals experience it. But with most of us convention and civilization and education have blinded and deafened and obscured the natural reason' (p. 46). As mentioned earlier, the young narrator first became aware of the other world, that of 'the White People', as a baby when she was visited by them and taught the *Xu* language. The fact that she only barely remembers the language implies that humanity 'blunts' itself, and that each individual loses their abilities to sense 'true reality' through contact with the modern, materialist world. Children and babies, who have yet to be 'formed' by society through their interactions at school, have an openness that still allows them to sense and learn naturalistically; the baby girl learns *Xu* not through books or lessons, but through listening and gurgled attempts at conversation. Somewhat paradoxically, in the story, women, who remain within the home, completely avoid the 'tampering' of society, as a result of the very restrictions and conventions that society places on them. Natural faculties capable of sensing evil, and accessing a truer reality, are therefore all negatively affected by humanity's extensive interactions with the world of societal expectations and business. As discussed above, Machen had a personal distaste for materialism, which he blamed in part for the spiritual ineffectuality of the modern Anglican

⁴⁴ The consequences of revealing too much have been explored elsewhere in Machen's work. In referring to the Welsh protagonist Lucian's habits in *The Hill of Dreams*, Aaron notes that 'healthy English boys cannot bear such decaden[ce]'; Aaron also comments on the fact that the spiritual dabbings of Helen in *The Great God Pan* are not that different from Lucian's, but, because Helen's actions are viewed through an English lens, they turn horrible; it is the destabilising threat that Helen poses to the nineteenth-century upper-class London view of the feminine that makes her monstrous (Aaron, p. 76).

Church.⁴⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that, within the narrative space of the story, this personal conviction makes its presence known. Machen's separation of gendered spaces works to make us aware of the division of materialism and spirituality. Through male eyes that have lost touch with non-material concerns, spirituality may indeed become gothicised, the realm of the 'other'.

Compartmentalised Narratives: The Gendering of Space and Language

As this suggests, 'The White People' effects an almost complete spatial and narrative separation of male and female characters within the two primary narratives: Ambrose, Cotgrave, and their mutual male friend frame the narrative of the young female protagonist, who is never named; their commentary bookends but never overlaps with her experience, establishing the men as authority figures whose commentary have an outsized influence on our reading, despite their temporal and experiential distance from the Green Book. In any case, the use of 'frame narratives' serves a very specific function. Stories that use a hybrid form of narrative transmission, such as 'The White People', appear to connect varied voices into a unified whole; however, the often disparate nature of these voices also creates a competition among narrators.⁴⁶ Framing narratives equally serve as a means to comment on encapsulated narratives, as evidenced by Ambrose's opening and closing remarks in Machen's tale. 'The White People' begins as Ambrose is in the process of explaining his philosophical viewpoints, which seem at first fairly radical, to a new acquaintance, Cotgrave. These views are actually largely in keeping with Catholic sensibilities, offering in essence an echoing of the Fall; like Eve in her attempt to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, the unnamed female protagonist also attempts 'to gain the ecstasy and knowledge that pertain alone to angels'.⁴⁷ Machen's connection to the hermit first becomes apparent when Cotgrave enquires about the hermit's religious affiliation, to which Ambrose replies that he is a member of the 'persecuted Anglican church' (p. 46). This connection is also apparent in Ambrose's conflation of the knight Sir Galahad with St Paul (p. 47). This mirrors strongly the author's own spiritual and intellectual explorations of the Grail myths and Celtic Christianity.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Freeman, pp. 244-48.

⁴⁶ Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), p. 123.

⁴⁷ Susan Jennifer Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), p. 181.

⁴⁸ Machen even went so far as to develop his own theories concerning the correspondence of Arthurian knights with their appropriate saints. He also researched connections in the surrounding legends of St David, patron saint of Wales, with Joseph of Arimathea, the first steward of the Grail (Machen et al, *Selected Letters*, p. 42).

It is therefore not difficult to ‘read’ Arthur Machen in the character of Ambrose. This reading of Ambrose as a sort of Machen-surrogate gives Ambrose’s philosophical musings more authority within the scope of the text. It also colours how we understand Ambrose’s judgement of the girl’s self-destruction at the end of the text. However, we must not forget that Ambrose is an intentional construction to guide our reading, and we should be wary of over-stating his connection to Machen lest we assume his philosophical musings are indicative of the ultimate meaning of the text. It is arguably more useful to think of Ambrose as an intermediary between the spiritual and material worlds. Like Machen, Ambrose guides the narrative, introducing the reading audience and Cotgrave, a visitor from London, to the Green Book, which Ambrose procured after the death of its female writer. Ambrose hands the notebook to Cotgrave with the instruction that Cotgrave read it to further his understanding of their conversation: this directive to read kicks off the girl’s narrative (p. 48).

While the framing narrative is wholly male, the girl’s narrative, as noted earlier, is almost completely devoid of male characters, and those that are present are inactive. The girl’s mother is dead by the time the protagonist begins writing in the Green Book, though she was present for part of the girl’s childhood. Her absence is one of the first markers of the gothic in the story. Where there are gothic heroines, there is also a preponderance of dead mothers littering the fictional landscape.⁴⁹ This is often a narrative necessity, as mothers ‘oppose[s] the narrative need for deviance and instability’ that is central to gothic storytelling.⁵⁰ While mothers (ideally) benefit society by creating stability in the home, they do not benefit the creation of a dark and deviant tale.⁵¹ With that stabilising influence gone, the young protagonist of ‘The White People’ is left to the care of her father and nurse. The girl’s nurse, central to her occult explorations, represents a form of womanhood that stands even further apart from convention and the materialism of the civilised world, due to her status as one of the underclass. The nurse’s access to the ‘deeper reality’ at the heart of ‘The White People’ is likely increased by this separation; however, the girl’s narration makes it clear that her nurse has also learned about occult ritual from her great-grandmother, a fellow practitioner (pp. 55, 57).

The nurse serves as a kind of surrogate mother, though we are left questioning whether or not she exerts the stabilising effect of a ‘natural’ mother. In this formulation,

⁴⁹ Ruth Bienstock Anolik, ‘The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode’, *Modern Language Studies*, 33 (2003), 24-43 (p. 25).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Anolik also theorises the ‘Missing Mother’ as a literalisation of the woman’s legal death under the system of *coverture* (*ibid.*, p. 26).

‘stability’ is defined by a sense of the girl’s physical and mental well-being; it cannot be defined through homemaking. In fact, the nurse directly challenges the stability of the home. One of the magical acts she performs, and teaches to the girl, is the ability to turn a house upside down without anyone realising: all the home’s material objects, such as china and chairs, are up-ended, causing fear and chaos (p. 60). This opposition to home and hearth, represented by the symbolic act of home-wrecking, is further emphasised by the nurse’s insistence on imparting ‘secrets’ outdoors; ‘[w]alls have ears’, she claims (p. 60). No harm comes to the girl while under the nurse’s tutelage, but it is important to note that the nurse disappears when the girl is about thirteen or fourteen, two years before the writing of the *Green Book* (p. 60). This may imply that the nurse did in fact have a stabilising influence, guiding the girl through interactions with the faery world in a way that was controlled and safe. However, this remains ambiguous, precisely because the piecemeal nature of the girl’s narrative disallows concrete knowledge. While Ambrose assumes that the girl’s trespass into forbidden knowledge accounts for her tragic end, it is entirely possible that, had the nurse remained, safe interaction with the world of ‘the White People’ may have been possible.

While the girl’s nurse is deeply involved in her life, her father is represented as an absentee. We know very little about him, materially speaking, but his identity is key to understanding the way that Machen codes spaces as feminine or masculine, a distinction which maps out the division between the spiritual and material worlds of the Welsh (or *Chian* or *Aklo*) and English, respectively. Upon telling her father one of her nurse’s stories, about a little ghost, he becomes enraged, insisting ‘it was not true at all, and that only common, ignorant people believed in such rubbish’ (p. 59). According to the girl’s father, the mystical world of the nurse is associated with that which is ‘common’, lowly, and illogical. The nurse’s beliefs, and her sharing of these stories and beliefs, is seen by the father as an attempt to contaminate the girl. Rather than calmly informing the girl that the story is just a fairy- or folktale, her father reacts violently, erupting with classist anger. The nurse, with her folktales and the secrecy provided by the linguistic difference that she embodies, is characterised as backward, much the way the Welsh are characterised in the 1847 Education Report. After her father’s outburst, the nurse and the girl’s interactions are kept secret forevermore, and her father is shut out of their female-dominated space. The only other thing we learn about the girl’s father is related to us by Ambrose at the end of Machen’s story. He was known to Ambrose, who describes him as a lawyer ‘who thought of nothing but deeds and leases’; the news of his daughter’s death, unsurprisingly, therefore comes as a huge surprise to him.

Being absent, and ‘always [leaving] her very much to herself’ (p. 63), he had no knowledge of the girl’s esoteric wanderings or of any personal issues that might have driven her to poison herself. In fact, his daughter is a relative stranger to him.

Beyond that, the girl and her father literally speak different languages; they operate in different worlds, precluding a common understanding. The girl, who spends her hours speaking the languages of the faeries, is a universe away from her father’s world, dominated by law and legal language; despite their common knowledge of English, the girl doesn’t engage with her father or his material preoccupations. His sole concern for ‘deeds and leases’ is code for the ‘convention and civilization and education’ that Ambrose derides as blunting man’s natural faculties (p. 46). Her father’s insistence on keeping folktales away from his daughter comes from the same sense of the practical, which divides the world between that which is important, and that which is frivolous. As I’ve been arguing, this coding of ‘the practical’ often runs along lines defined by gender and culture. The lawyer’s arguments against folktales are similar to those used against Welsh-language speakers in the Victorian period. Matthew Arnold, in his essay on Celtic literature, noted that anything of importance, or anything the world would care to hear, would need to be spoken in the proper language – English.⁵² The Welsh language, like the folktale, is ‘common’ and vulgar; both are incapable of saying anything worthy of being heard. This division of the world into practical and non-practical, and the coding of these differences as both gendered and cultural (via the vehicle of the folktale), serves as a method for disregarding certain experiences.

Different forms of knowledge are positioned as just as irrelevant and disposable. The irony of ‘The White People’ is the fact that these ‘discardable’ and frivolous forms of learning, specifically linguistic and folkloric, actually constitute the ‘truer reality’ posited by the framed narrative. It is human disengagement from this other world that makes its comprehension sublimely horrible. For those who have built their lives on material concerns, contemplating the possibility that their lives are founded on illusion is indeed a horrifying prospect. It is this perspective, written into largely male, largely London-born characters, that informs the gothicisation of the occult in many of Machen’s stories from the 1890s. ‘The White People’ is exceptional precisely because the majority of the narrative is written through the eyes of a female participant in occult activities who has actively shunned the

⁵² Arnold’s desire for linguistic homogeneity drove him to say that the Cornish people were better off for the loss of their language. Speaking of the presupposed extinction of Cornish, Welsh, and other Celtic tongues, Arnold states that ‘it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come, and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time’ (Arnold, p. 10).

material. Even though the girl comes to no good in the end, the text as a whole demonstrates a sympathy toward her efforts.

Bishopsgyte: Machen's Auto-didacticism and 'Secret' Language

It is also useful here to note that Machen had a strong interest in educating himself, introducing an illuminating distinction between conventional education and the auto-didacticism that characterises his own language learning, as well as that of story's female protagonist. In researching the letters of Machen, particularly those written to Waite, it becomes quickly apparent that Machen was particularly interested in languages beyond the knowledge of the average learner, those that were a less-common feature of organised education. His enthusiasm can be seen throughout his life, whether through his fiction or through his personal correspondence. In a 1907 letter to Waite, he speaks of 'Shelta', the language of those known as the Irish Travellers. In particular, he notes the 'secrecy' of the language as a positive attribute; he revels in having overheard a 'secret Gaelic language' in so banal a place as Euston Road.⁵³

This interest in language is both intellectual and personal. In a 1927 letter, Machen expresses his pride to Waite on finding out that his son preferred the study of Hebrew over physics.⁵⁴ Having learned French during his fairly traditional English education, Machen himself spent time in the 1880s and 1890s translating French texts as a way to survive financially in London.⁵⁵ Significantly for my argument here, despite Machen's fluency in French, he never romanticises that language; it is never spoken of in the same terms as those he dabbles in for his own intellectual curiosity. Throughout his fiction, personal correspondence, and other writings, certain languages, such as Welsh and Hebrew, hold a mystery that French never embodies for him. In his autobiography, Machen writes that he was at one point knowledgeable enough in Hebrew characters to read the Yiddish signage that littered the walls of London's East End. 'I remember', he writes in his autobiography, 'being much amused when I had deciphered a most mystic, reverend-looking word and found it read "Bishopsgyte"'.⁵⁶ As this suggests, language is often represented by Machen as a 'cipher' that encodes deeper mystical knowledge – thus the irony about his 'discovery' of 'Bishopsgyte'. This motif, in which relatively obscure forms of language (specifically

⁵³ Machen, *Selected Letters*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ The letter refers to his son, Arthur Hilary Blaize Machen (*ibid*, p. 48).

⁵⁵ These include the *The Heptameron* in 1886, *The Fortunate Lovers* in 1887, and *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova* in 1894 (Machen, *Arthur Machen: A Bibliography*, pp. 5-6, 9-10, 23).

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 41.

pictograms) unlock ‘truths’, is used to horrific effect in ‘The Shining Pyramid’, and with irony in ‘The Red Hand’. This motif is carried forward into ‘The White People’, where language is used to ‘unlock’ that which is ‘real’. Auto-didacticism is valued as the higher pursuit in both Machen’s own life and in ‘The White People’. French, English, and the legal language of the protagonist’s father are tools used to navigate the material world, unlike *Cymraeg*, *Chian*, Hebrew, and the *Aklo* letters, which are capable of navigating deeper, spiritual realities.

For Better or Worse: Intersection of Celticism and the Feminine

In ‘The White People’, as noted above, there is a conflation of femininity with esoteric learning, Celticism, and language, set against a male backdrop defined by materialism, convention, and practical English values. There is also a latent attention within the text to what we would now think of as feminist concerns. In many ways, Machen’s characterisation of the female protagonist is more in line thematically with a female-written gothic tale, though painting Machen as a feminist in modern terms would be a stretch in light of his other works. In gothic writing, the shortcomings of male authors’ conception of the feminine are often apparent by the level of constraint exercised upon the female characters. In male-written gothic tales, women are frequently hopelessly incarcerated or emotionally and physically maltreated; the female body is often abused and constrained. One tangible example of this gothic convention is visible in Charles Maturin’s novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820); the character of Isadora, restored to the human world after having grown up isolated on an island after a shipwreck, finds her life and person controlled intermittently by a series of male family members, by her husband (the titular Melmoth), and finally by the Inquisitors who imprison her and her child.⁵⁷ Edina Szalay argues that gothic tales written by women, on the other hand, tend to portray women in control of their lives and possessed of significant powers of reasoning.⁵⁸ Sybil, of Louisa May Alcott’s short tale ‘A Whisper in the Dark’ (1877), is typical of the female-authored gothic heroine.⁵⁹ However, the nameless female heroine of ‘The White People’ is possessed of a level of agency unusual for male-authored gothic works. What is more, the girl and her nurse form a female society of two, engaging in homosocial bonding that does not require the interaction and approval of men;

⁵⁷ Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Mineola: Dover Editions, 2017).

⁵⁸ Edina Szalay, ‘Gothic Fantasy and Female “Bildung” in Four North-American Women Novels’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 6.2 (2000), 183-96 (p. 148).

⁵⁹ Louisa May Alcott, ‘A Whisper in the Dark’, in *American Gothic from Salem Witchcraft to H. P. Lovecraft: An Anthology*, ed. by Charles L. Crow, 2nd edn (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 170-93.

indeed, the female protagonist, after realising that her father cannot or will not engage with her interests, completely closes the circle, cementing the ‘femaleness’ of the rest of her narrative.⁶⁰ The closure of the circle constitutes a denial of the material realm that her father represents as well as a strong statement of the importance of her esoteric explorations.

It is worth noting here that the intersection of Celticism and the feminine has taken strange turns, especially in the nineteenth century; while feminine energy has been a source of power in Welsh nationalist circles, the linking of Celtic identity and feminine stereotypes has been instrumental in dismissing Celtic literary production. Early nineteenth-century French theorist Ernest Renan referred to the Celts as ‘a feminine race’.⁶¹ In Arnold’s *On The Study of Celtic Literature*, he derides the Celts for their innate sentimentality, which he sees as an ever-readiness ‘to react against the despotism of fact’.⁶² The Celtic rebellion against fact, Arnold asserts, has hobbled them in the world of politics and business. He compares the Celts to the ‘Latin races’ by citing a shared love of company and bright colours, implying an innate frivolity within the Celtic temperament by tying it to attributes associated with femininity and racial ‘others’.⁶³ Nowhere in Arnold’s assessment of Welsh or Celtic participation in public spheres, or lack thereof, as he would argue, does he acknowledge the difficulties posed by the complete hegemonic domination of the English language over those institutions.⁶⁴ We should also note that Arnold often quotes the aforementioned Renan as an authority when referring to the femininity of the Celts; he states that Renan, ‘with his eyes fixed squarely on the Bretons and the Welsh, is struck by the timidity, the shyness, the delicacy of the Celtic nature, its preference for a retired life, its embarrassment at having to deal with the great world’.⁶⁵ The description is reminiscent of many passages found in Coventry Patmore’s poem ‘The Angel in the House’ (1862), in which the poet idealises the perfect wife.⁶⁶ Current conceptions of race, national origin, and culture make Arnold’s arguments seem very simplistic, despite their influence at the time; his broad brushstrokes delegitimise cultures through the use of caricature. The demeaning of cultures through feminine metaphors is always harmful to both, as it assumes extremely limited ranges of behaviour.

⁶⁰ Lois Tyson, ‘Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism’, in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 302-42 (pp. 310-13).

⁶¹ Ed Madden, *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 197.

⁶² Arnold, p. 102.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁴ In Wales, the legal domination of the English language had been written into law since the aforementioned 1535 Act of Union.

⁶⁵ Arnold, p. 100.

⁶⁶ Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, ed. by Henry Morley (London: Cassell & Company, 1891), p. 28 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4099/4099-h/4099-h.htm>> [accessed 2 September 2018].

These presumed limitations stand in stark contrast to Machen's text: his female protagonist finds herself happening upon forms of language and learning that thrust her into new worlds of experience unimaginable to the average man.

Beyond these limiting associations, which are innately racist and sexist, there has long been the perception in popular lore that Celtic cultures have historically afforded women more agency than other cultures. Often these claims hearken back to strong matriarchal figures like Boudicca; however, it is very difficult to determine the accuracy of the claims concerning historical Celtic feminism. Indeed, there is a human tendency to 'back-project', romanticising the past and aligning a historical periods' values with current ones.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, in the period in which Machen was writing, some examples can be identified. The early period of Welsh nationalism, which began with the founding of *Cymru Fydd*, saw the rare alignment of nationalism and feminist discourse.⁶⁸ Women's rights, notably, were even written into the Constitution of the *Cymru Fydd* movement in 1895. The movement, which focused on self-government for Wales, was unusual in that feminist and nationalist issues were not initially viewed as being at odds. Historically, scholars have recognised that many nationalist movements expect feminism to take a secondary role to the nationalist cause.⁶⁹ The joining of Welsh nationalist and feminist concerns came about in part due to the rhetorical strategies used by the writers of the 1847 Education Report to shame the Welsh. Areas of the report focusing on the moral degeneracy of the Welsh population often place blame with the nation's women; they are figured in that text as 'failed moral guardians of the nation'.⁷⁰ The report also quotes a letter from an Anglican clergyman who claimed that most of the Welsh women who he performed wedding ceremonies for were already 'in the family way'.⁷¹ This rhetorical strategy, another damaging way to conflate Celtic and female identity, brought about a need to defend both Welsh women and wider Welsh culture from slander. Thus, the joining of Welsh feminist and nationalist concerns was effectively forced by the mutual slandering of both. Interestingly enough, this focus on Welsh women also led to discussions concerning the role that women played in language transmission: while it would be erroneous to assume that Welsh women were more devoted to the vitality of the language,

⁶⁷ Juliette Wood, 'Perceptions of the Past in Welsh Folklore Studies', *Folklore*, 108 (1997), 93-102 (p. 94).

⁶⁸ Welsh for 'Young Wales'.

⁶⁹ Kirsti Bohata, 'En-Gendering a New Wales: Nationalism, Feminism, and Empire in the Fin de Siècle', in *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 59-79 (pp. 60-61).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁷¹ In fact, the clergyman in question also stated that he offered to refund the marriage fee for any couple whose child was born after nine months of marriage. According to the Reverend, only one couple had been able to accept his offer in six years (Davies, p. 66).

their role in the home, away from the world of commerce, meant that women were more likely to be Welsh monoglots.⁷²

The Female Agent?: Issues in Framed Narration

As all of this suggests, questions about female agency are impossible to avoid in reading the conclusion of 'The White People', not least due to the perplexing suicide of the young girl. We are left to wonder if her death represents an indictment of the girl's descent into obscure occult forces. The framing narrative, in which Ambrose the Hermit comments on the girl's actions, does not take a moral stance on her deeds, though he believes that she did the right thing in ending her life, stating, 'no, there was not a word to be said against her in the ordinary sense' (p. 63). His refusal of moral judgement, of course, is largely due to the fact that Ambrose's initial argument does not frame good and evil in moral terms at all. His argument concerns overreach, trespass, and a crossing of the boundaries set by the nature of one's essential being. As noted earlier, Ambrose is also a surrogate character constructed by Machen as an intermediary between worlds; he is meant to guide our reading of the girl's narrative, which is at times chaotic. However, this sense of narrative weight given to Ambrose's commentary is problematic: it raises the issue of the male gaze. Does Ambrose hold power over the girl's narrative? Does he hold 'the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world'?⁷³ Arguments could be made in either direction due to the text's inherent ambiguity; however, it is important to note that, in the beginning of the tale, Ambrose hands Cotgrave the Green Book as a means to confer authority on his own philosophical system of good and evil.

It may be troublesome that Ambrose uses the girl's story to prove the validity of his own philosophy; the girl is not alive to protest misinterpretations of her narrative. It is also probable that she would not want her experiences used as exemplary of 'true evil'. On the other hand, Ambrose's belief in the authority of her narrative, dominated as it is by foreign languages, folklore, esoteric magic, and female homosociality, shows that he is more in sync with sensibilities coded as female, imaginative, and Celtic, than with male sensibilities represented by the practicality, cultural conformity, and legal interests of the girl's father. Ambrose effectively exists 'in between', though he lives just outside of London, that 'awful spectacle' (p. 48) and the centre of the English world. Machen has described London in much

⁷² It was also believed that the language of the mother, or 'Angel in the Hearth', determined the language used in the household (Davies, p. 67).

⁷³ Tyson, 'Feminist Criticism', in *Critical Theory Today*, pp. 79-128 (p. 97).

the same way in other writing; in *The Hill of Dreams*, a novel considered by critics to be his most autobiographical work, his protagonist refers to London as ‘one grey temple of an awful rite’.⁷⁴ Machen, and his surrogate, Ambrose, therefore align themselves with the occult forces of the young girl against the backdrop of English society.

Given that Ambrose does not indict the girl for her trespasses, how is the reader meant to view her act of suicide at the end of the tale? One way to contextualise the girl’s suicide is by understanding the narrative models applied to transcendental horror literature. The imaginative nature of ‘The White People’, and the girl’s acquisition of knowledge beyond traditional understanding, certainly places the story within that realm. John Clute’s model for understanding the plot arcs of transcendental horror theorises horror narrative as progressing by ‘seasons’ or stages.⁷⁵ In this model, the last stage of transcendental horror narrative produces an ending to the story, as the world revealed by the text is no longer ‘storyable’. There is no way to continue the narrative because the revelation is beyond human understanding. This accounts for the often abrupt endings of transcendental horror stories, such as those by Lovecraft. This ‘abruptness’ is built into the storytelling medium through which the girl narrates her story – the Green Book. The nature of journaling is such that the writer has agency over what, and how much of the story is told. The girl is careful what she reveals to readers of the Green Book; as she puts it, ‘I have a great many other books of secrets I have written, hidden in a safe place, and I am going to write here many of the old secrets and some new ones; but there are some I shall not put down at all’ (p. 48). She asserts her authorial agency through her decision to keep certain information within her own private domain.

Conclusion: Forced Endings and the ‘Unstoryable’

Additionally, her decision to stop writing in the Green Book forces an end. We find out through Ambrose that there is a sequel; however, she chose to stop writing in what she considered her less guarded notebook. We can only guess at the continuation of her story and

⁷⁴ Freeman, p. 242; and Machen, ‘The Hill of Dreams’, in *The Works of Arthur Machen*, pp. 200-77 (p. 256).

⁷⁵ The four stages of Clute’s model are as follows: the first stage, ‘Sighting’, allows the protagonist and audience to glimpse the terrors to come; the ‘Thickening’ realises many of the portents of the ‘Sighting’. The third stage, ‘Revel’, sees ‘the field of the world [...] reversed’, and includes the manifestation of terrifying truths; the last stage, the ‘Aftermath’, is detailed above (Gary K. Wolfe and Amelia Beamer, ‘Peter Straub And Transcendental Horror’, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 18.2 (2008), 217-31, (p. 218)). Notably, the first stage, ‘Sighting’, is related to Freud’s idea of the uncanny; the terrors are often portrayed as feeling vaguely familiar. The opening of the girl’s tale in ‘The White People’ illustrates this; she writes that she had early interaction with the faery element, even going so far as to remember them singing in strange tongues above her bed.

her occult practice; perhaps the secrets were too profound, or perhaps, like Clute's 'Aftermath' stage, she saw the narrative as becoming 'unstoryable' due to the force and strangeness of her revelations. We should also note that it is a part of gothic convention, especially in the fin de siècle, to assert that some things are too horrible to be spoken of.⁷⁶ This seems to inform Machen's narrative choices: he disallows readerly knowledge, while also making it clear that there is much more to the girl's story than we are being told. The narrative we are privy to is censored and compartmentalised. While the girl means to stop the narrative, through her cessation of the Green Book, we discover the truth of her suicide through the intervention of Ambrose. He forces a narrative continuation of sorts through this intervention, but he cannot provide enough information to give the reader a sense of 'closure'. This lack of closure is compounded by a lack of a clear message about the nature of 'good' and 'evil', which is interesting, considering the fact that Ambrose initially introduces the Green Book to Cotgrave as a way to illustrate his notion of good and evil. While Ambrose tells us that he later found and smashed the Roman idol that was instrumental in the girl's explorations, he never condemns the girl for her desire to explore other realms or to engage with other languages, just as he never condemns her choice to end her own life. If we think about the girl's suicide as an adjacent act to her discontinuation of narrative in the Green Book, perhaps there is agency to be found even amid profound horror.

'The White People' is a tale interested in the confluence of Welsh and female identity against a backdrop of materialism and cultural homogeneity dominated by the English language. Ambrose's interest in defining true evil belies the effect of Machen's story, which is to confuse rigid attempts at definition. This leaves the reading audience with questions about the 'ideal reality' in which humanity is meant to live; the text suggests that it may be too late to return completely to the naturalistic, spiritual world dominated by other tongues. Machen presents two worlds, yet seems to indicate the dangers of both, as the text navigates the complications presented by linguistic hegemony, cultural and gender identities, and non-standard spirituality. Machen, in writing 'The White People', indicates a greater fascination with navigating those complications, those two worlds, than in choosing wholly to indict either. As a Welshman engaged with the profoundly English world of the London literati, he was no stranger to negotiating dual identities. 'The White People' stands apart from much of Machen's 1890s fiction because of the multiplicity of voices that guide the text. This narrative style forces the reader to navigate complications, rather than providing easy

⁷⁶ Hurley, p. 38.

answers. This layering of complications, I argue, is where the joy of the text lies, and indeed what makes 'The White People' such a joy to reread.

Here, I end my narrative, not with a poisoning, but with the cessation of a sentence.