At the Gateways of the Day Short Guide

At the Gateways of the Day by Padraic Colum

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Overview

As the nineteenth century progressed, Polynesian culture in Hawaii was shaken first by indigenous reform and then by the strong external challenges of Christian evangelism, Western economic expansion, Asian immigration, and American political domination. By the early twentieth century, Polynesian self-respect had ebbed; the traditions of this once-proud people were being forgotten. At the Gateways of the Day and its sequel, The Bright Islands, were commissioned in an attempt to preserve aspects of traditional Hawaiian culture.

As a nationalistic Irishman, Colum sympathized with the islanders, whose culture, he felt, was threatened in ways similar to that of Ireland's. His collection of skillfully narrated stories reflects deep appreciation for the traditional literature, myths, and folktales of the islands.

About the Author

Padraic Colum seems to have been destined from his earliest years to become a storyteller. He was born Patrick Collumb, on December 8, 1881, in Ireland's County Longford. Until age six, he lived at the Longford workhouse, where his father taught. There Colum heard the stories—both the traditional Irish folktales and the personal experiences— of the old, the sick and injured, and the poor who took refuge there. When his father lost his position at the workhouse, Colum, his brothers and sisters, and his mother went to live with his mother's family. During the next three years, he spent much time with his uncle Micky Burns, a dealer in domestic fowl and a great singer of songs and teller of tales. Colum sometimes accompanied his uncle on buying and selling trips, hearing his stories, and seeing life on the farms and in the towns of rural Ireland. Colum's formal education began at the age of nine, when he entered school in Sandy Cove near Dublin, studying under a talented teacher named Denis Condon. During his student years Colum took great pleasure in reading widely and memorizing a great deal of verse.

At seventeen, Colum left school for a position as a clerk with the Irish Railway in Dublin. At that time Dublin was the center of great nationalistic and artistic ferment. He soon joined the Gaelic League and changed the spelling of his name to Padraic Colum. An aspiring poet and dramatist, he was "discovered" in 1902 by William Butler Yeats and subsequently made a mark for himself by writing poetry and reviews, and by writing and acting for the Abbey Theater and the Theatre of Ireland. In 1912 he married, but he and his wife, Mary (Molly) Gunning Maguire, found that they could not make an adequate living in the literary world of Dublin. In 1914 they visited the United States, where they made their home—with some interruptions—for the rest of their lives.

In 1916, as much by chance as by choice, Colum found himself publishing children's stories, first in the New York Sunday Tribune and then in books. He contracted with Macmillan to write collections of original children's stories and a series of collected stories from world mythology retold for young readers. The first works in this series so impressed members of Hawaii's legislative Commission on Myth and Folklore that in 1922 they asked Colum to research the traditional stories of the islands and revise them for a children's audience. In January 1923 Colum traveled to Hawaii and for the next four months studied Polynesian traditions and literature, in the Bishop Museum and in the field. As a result, he published two collections of stories, At the Gateways of the Day and The Bright Islands.

The Colums lived happily and successfully together for over four decades. Although frustrated as a dramatist after his early theatrical successes, Colum continued as a productive poet, a writer of occasional adult fiction, and a prolific author of children's literature. He and his wife were respected critics and lecturers, who were active in the American and Irish literary worlds. After Molly's death in 1957, Colum continued to write and lecture until 1970. He died on January 11, 1972, in Enfield, Connecticut.

Setting

Most of Colum's stories take place on the islands of Hawaii, although in some cases the setting extends to the south and west as far as Tahiti or even New Zealand. Several stories are set in mythical lands under the sea or in the sky.

Colum vividly evokes the diverse geographical features of the islands— the beaches, cliffs, mountains, volcanoes, clearings, groves, jungle, running rivers, and waterfalls. In many stories the sea plays a key role. Colum also describes the trappings of traditional Polynesian life—thatched houses, tapa cloth, flower leis, traditional foods, canoes, weapons, and the war helmets and elaborate feather capes worn by the men. During his visit to Hawaii, Colum was particularly impressed by the labor and craftsmanship evidenced in the making of these capes.

Colum's stories generally reflect the Polynesian social structure, though he omits many details about violence and sexual mores that he found inappropriate for a work intended for young adults. Some stories show the lifestyle of the alii, the warrior-chieftain caste; others depict the life of the common people. Colum discusses the religious system of tapu, or taboo, in general terms.

Social Sensitivity

Traditional Polynesian society was promiscuous and warlike. Colum generally avoids addressing these facets of the culture in At the Gateways of the Day. His original sources were more frank in their depiction of the traditional culture, but Colum intended these stories to give "an image of life to kings and soldiers, to courtiers and to ruling women." He explained, "As in all stories not intended for children, much has had to be suppressed in retelling them for a youthful audience."

Traditional Polynesian society strictly subordinated the women to the men.

Mark Twain, who visited the islands about sixty years before Colum, left this account of the woman's role: "Her place was to do all the work, take all the cuffs, provide all the food, and content herself with what was left after her lord had finished his dinner." Under the tapu system, women were even forbidden to eat any fruit. Colum softens this aspect of the society in many of his stories, although he presents the woman's traditional lot clearly and sympathetically in "Hina, the Woman in the Moon."

Because of his humble Irish antecedents, perhaps, Colum presents the common people among his characters sympathetically. While he is often admiring of the nobility of the warriors and chieftains he depicts, he hardly endorses the old feudal order. Indeed, stories such as "The Arrow and the Swing," "The Fish-Hook of Pearl," and "Ha-le-ma-no and the Princess Kama" eschew the values of the traditional caste system.

Literary Qualities

Colum's carefully crafted Hawaiian stories reflect the theories of storytelling that he set forth in Story Telling, New & Old (1968). Colum felt that a story should be performed aloud, and he was much concerned with sounds— rhythms, "rhymes and chimes," and onomatopoeia, or words that imitate the sounds they denote. He believed that a storyteller should use a mature vocabulary, since if the action and the sentences were clear, young readers would not be confused, and would instead take pleasure in the new words and in the respect that the use of these words implied.

In Story Telling Colum declared that characters should be readily comprehended, "explicable at every moment, even though they do odd and unpredictable things." In At the Gateways of the Day, the plots flow naturally from the needs and desires of the sharply etched characters. The necessities of the plot do not determine character development; rather, the plot development hinges on the characters.

Colum's stories of Hawaii illustrate his concern for portraying concrete details.

Possessions—perhaps a calabash, an arrow, a canoe, or a red skirt—become aspects of characterization, or foreshadow or reflect the action.

At the Gateways of the Day gives substance to Colum's ideas concerning the importance of the imagination. Through imaginative appeal rather than by ethical precept, the stories inculcate a sense of kindliness, of adventure, and of the mysterious —of "boundless possibility."

Themes and Characters

Several of Colum's stories are romantic myths or legends that feature the hero's successful quest for a spouse or consort.

The hero usually employs magic or trickery to obtain the object of his affections, a device that suggests the mystical and the deceptive nature of love. In "The Story of Ha-le-ma-no and the Princess Kama," the protagonist's sister uses her magical powers to help him win the princess. In "The Woman from Lalohana, the Country under the Sea," Hina, the goddess of the moon, is lured from her undersea dwelling to live with King Koni-Konia. The ocean carries Hina's brothers, in the form of fish, in a great flood over all the land in search of Hina.

But she, the king, and all his people escape by climbing into treetops on the highest mountains. In "The Arrow and the Swing," a commoner, Hi-ku, and a princess, Ka-we-lu, alternate in pursuing each other. The story ends with Hiku devising a way to bring Ka-we-lu back from the kingdom of the dead.

Several stories recount heroic exploits, where the protagonist prevails because of craftiness or great strength. In "The Boy Pu-nia and the King of the Sharks," the protagonist tricks the king of sharks into killing his ten retainers, one by one, and then tricks him into beaching himself so the people can kill him with knives and spears. In "The Seven Deeds of Ma-ui," Colum assembles from many sources an account of the great Polynesian folk hero Ma-ui, who raises the sky, wins fire for human beings, and dies in an attempt to win immortality for humankind. Ma-ui is typical of Polynesian heroes, Colum tells us in his notes, in that he was the youngest of his brothers. Indeed, many of the other protagonists of these stories are underdogs in some sense.

Perhaps the most remarkable story in At the Gateways of the Day is "Hina, the Woman in the Moon," which deals with the subjugation of women in traditional Polynesian culture. "A weary woman was Hina," Colum begins. He goes on to tell of her labors and her loneliness.

Her son went sailing from island to island, robbing people, and her daughter went to live with the wild people in the forest. Her husband had become bad-tempered, and he was always striving to make her do more and more work.

Hina longs to be at rest, and eventually, with great effort and tribulation, she climbs the rainbow to the moon, taking with her the calabash that holds all her possessions. Here she finds rest, and here she can be seen to this day.

Topics for Discussion

1. In these stories, characters often have magical or supernatural help in achieving their goals. Is this extraordinary help more important than their own human efforts?

2. Many lovers in these stories are parted, and several are later brought together again. For example, consider "Ha-le-ma-no and the Princess Kama" and "The Arrow and the Swing." What factors cause the lovers' partings? What factors lead to their reconciliations?

3. What activities and qualities typify young men of the chieftain and warrior class? Which of these qualities does their society deem to be most important?

Why?

4. Describe Polynesian religious beliefs as they are reflected in these stories.

What are the gods like? How do they relate to people? What is the nature of death?

5. How do men and women relate to one another in these stories? Is one or the other of the sexes consistently dominant?

6. Colum felt that the characters should be "explicable at every moment, even though they do odd and unpredictable things." What odd and unpredictable things do the characters in these stories do? Are their motivations always clear?

7. Colum said that although the events of a story should seem to be spontaneous, they should actually have an underlying pattern. What is the underlying pattern in "The Seven Great Deeds of Ma-ui" or "Au-ke-le the Seeker"?

8. Is there anything especially effective about Colum's use of language? What effect does his practice of repeating phrases have? How is sound important to the stories?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the Polynesian caste system with the Hindu caste system or the European feudal social structure.

2. Compare figures in one or more of these folk stories with those from stories in the Western tradition—for instance, the daughter of the King Ku-ai-he-laui with Cinderella, Au-ke-le the Seeker with the biblical Joseph or with Odysseus, the Me-ne-hu-ne with leprechauns, or the Polynesian gods with the Greek gods.

3. Compare the impact of Western culture on Hawaii with the impact of British culture on Ireland. Compare the political relationship of the United States and Hawaii with the political relationships of England and Ireland.

4. Use the encyclopedia to write an account of the settling of Hawaii by the Polynesians.

5. Compare Western and Polynesian ways of relating to the environment.

For Further Reference

Bowen, Zack. Padraic Colum: A Biographical-Critical Introduction.

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970. Bowen was a friend of Colum's as well as a student of his work, and Colum helped him to prepare this study. It contains an account of Colum's life and separate chapters describing and evaluating his poetry, drama, fiction, biographies, and essays.

Colum, Padraic. Story Telling, New & Old. New York: Macmillan, 1968. This essay was originally part of The Fountain of Youth. It is a clear, concise, and appealing account of Colum's ideas about storytelling that underlie his work with the legends and folktales of Hawaii.

Sternlicht, Sanford. Padraic Colum.

Boston: Twayne, 1985. This book, like Bowen's, is a comprehensive account of Colum's life and work. It includes a useful bibliography of works by and about Colum.

Trilling, Lionel. "Mr. Colum's Greeks."

Griffin (December 1956): 4-15. Trilling evaluates the artistic achievement and cultural significance of Colum's retelling of myths and legends for young readers.

Related Titles

Colum followed At the Gateways of the Day with The Bright Islands. This second collection retells Hawaiian myths, stories from Polynesian sources beyond Hawaii, and quasi-historical stories about the deeds of kings of the islands. Colum later revised stories from both of these volumes and published them as Legends of Hawaii.

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