

DIALECT, GENDER, AND COLONIALISM IN *THE REAL CHARLOTTE*

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Abstract / résumé

This article analyzes how in *The Real Charlotte* Edith Somerville and Martin Ross use idiomatic speech, dialect, and accent as means to challenge traditional notions of a unified Irish national identity or culture. While some critics read such code-switching in terms of class, this article pursues this phenomenon in terms of gender and colonialism. The multiplicity of different dialects and discourses within the novel and the ability for characters to move between them implies that it is almost impossible to impose a single interpretive strategy or rubric onto Irish experience or identity, thus illustrating the fluid nature of language. As a result, identity—individual or national—becomes a much more difficult project. For Somerville and Ross, individual and national identity are both composed and camouflaged by language.

Key Words: Dialect, Hiberno-English, Gender, Colonialism, Identity

Cet article montre comment dans *The Real Charlotte* Edith Somerville et Martin Ross utilisent tournures idiomatiques, dialecte et accent pour contester la vision traditionnelle d'une identité et d'une culture irlandaises unifiées. Tandis que certains critiques appréhendent ce jeu avec les codes en termes de classes, cet article examine ce phénomène à travers les notions de *gender* et de colonialisme. La multiplicité de dialectes et de discours différents au sein du roman, ainsi que la capacité des personnages à passer de l'un à l'autre, laissent entendre qu'il est pratiquement impossible d'imposer des catégories ou des stratégies interprétatives univoques sur l'expérience et l'identité irlandaises, démontrant ainsi la nature mouvante du langage. En conséquence, le projet de construire une identité, individuelle ou collective, devient beaucoup plus difficilement réalisable. Pour Somerville et Ross, les identités individuelle et nationale sont à la fois construites et masquées par le langage.

Mots-clés : dialecte, Hiberno-English, gender, colonialisme, identité

On the edge of a political and cultural revolution, Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century provides an insightful look into the dialogic relationship between language and nationalism. The literature of this period provides a uniquely situated lens through which one can analyze the attitudes and reactions to the Gaelic revival and the newly formed Irish Renaissance. As Seamus Deane notes, "Irish literature tends to dwell on the medium in which it is written because it is difficult not to be self-conscious about a language which is simultaneously native and foreign"¹. However, while most literary critics and historians focus their attention on (male) Renaissance writers like W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and James Joyce, some of the most penetrating writing was actually written prior to these Revivalists' work. *The Real Charlotte*, written by Irish cousins Edith Somerville and Martin Ross (Violet Martin), is a brilliant book analyzing the complex relationship between language, culture, and imperialism in late nineteenth century Ireland.

Many critics dismiss *The Real Charlotte* as a typical, traditional nostalgic representation of Irish Big House culture. Sean McMahon maintains that "the particular interest of the works of Somerville and Ross is that they catch the whole system in full bloom before the winds of nationalism and the late awakened English liberal conscience scattered the petals"². Although

¹ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, London, Faber, 1985, p. 13.

² Sean McMahon, "John Bull's Other Ireland: A Consideration of *The Real Charlotte* by Somerville and Ross," *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 3:4 (1968), p. 122.

one can easily read the datedness (1968) of this last idealistic picture of Ireland, as recently as 1988, James Cahalan similarly claimed that Somerville and Ross were “traditional” novelists who provided realistic portrayals of Irish life at the turn of the century. While I agree with Cahalan that Somerville and Ross were able to “capture extensively and effectively a panorama of Irish society”³, I think he ignores their innovative approach to language and culture. Declan Kiberd, Ann Owens Weekes, and Nichole Pepinster Greene are a few of the literary critics who have approached the works of Somerville and Ross with the necessary level of theoretical insight and sophistication. Declan Kiberd writes of Somerville and Ross’ “decentered narrative”⁴, but he is more interested in the text’s subtle exploration of consciousness and identity than its use of linguistic structures. I agree with Weekes’ reading of *The Real Charlotte*’s “Bakhtinian world in which the voice of authority—apostolic, paternal, social, or authorial—is constantly being undermined by the parodic voices of those not fully suppressed”⁵. While Weekes’ analysis of discourse is concerned with social and linguistic constructions of gender, I am interested in how Somerville and Ross use idiomatic speech, dialect, and accent as means to challenge traditional notions of a unified Irish national identity or culture. Greene, while also writing explicitly on dialect use in the novel, reads such code-switching in terms of class. I am more interested in pursuing this phenomenon in terms of colonialism and gender. The multiplicity of different dialects and discourses within the text and the ability for characters to move between them implies that it is almost impossible for one to impose an interpretive strategy or rubric onto Irish experience or identity⁶. Many critics describe this difficulty as “a rift between [Irish] experience and culture”⁷; however, I read this rift as the untranslatability of language (as well as experience) into Irish culture.

It is important to differentiate between Irish language and Hiberno-English. Historically, the shift in Ireland from Irish to English as the national language began in the seventeenth century but took place predominantly in the nineteenth century. From 1800 to 1891, the number of Irish speakers declined from three million to 38,121 monoglot speakers noted in the census of 1891⁸. There have been many explanations proposed to explain this dramatic change⁹: “the Great Famine, the education system and the consequent growth of literacy in English, the urbanization and commercialization of the role of English in political, legal, and administrative life; the desire for Irish speakers to abandon the language,” etc.¹⁰ What can be concluded, however, is that Irish became the language of “the outsider, the marginalized, the dispossessed, the rural backward poor,” and English represented “the language of political and cultural

³ James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel: A Critical History*, Boston Twayne Publishers, 1988, p. 92.

⁴ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, London, Random House, 1995, p. 76.

⁵ Ann Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition*, Lexington, U of Kentucky P, 1990, p. 70.

⁶ Nichole Pepinster Greene, in “Dialect and Social Identity in *The Real Charlotte*” (*New Hibernia Review* 4.1 [Spring 2000] pp. 122-37), describes this move as “code-switching”: “Code-switching occurs in bilingual or bidialectal communities [...] where ‘each code is associated with a different set of social values’” (p. 126).

⁷ Quoted in W. J. McCormack, *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition, and Betrayal in Literary History*, Cork, Cork UP, 1994, p. 5.

⁸ Gearóid Denvir, “Decolonizing the Mind: Language and Literature in Ireland,” *New Hibernia Review* 1.1 (1997), p. 45.

⁹ One explanation which Denvir doesn’t consider is the refusal of those surveyed to admit to knowing and/or speaking Irish during this period. It was well known that Irish-speaking people were discriminated against and even punished for using their native tongue; it is not surprising, then, that perhaps those surveyed well less than forthcoming about their linguistic habits.

¹⁰ Gearóid Denvir, “Decolonizing the Mind: Language and Literature in Ireland,” p. 45.

hegemony, spoken by the insider, the privileged, the ruler and the urban middle and upper classes”¹¹. And all of this was the result of political, economic, and cultural colonization of the Irish by the English. As Albert Memmi explains, “the colonized no longer knew his language except in the form of a lowly dialect. In order to emerge from the most elementary monotony and emotions, he had to borrow the colonizer’s language”¹². Ultimately, as Benedict Kiely has pointed out, the Irish novelists at the end of the nineteenth century found themselves caught between three languages: Irish, Anglo-Irish (or Hiberno-English), and Standard English A¹³.

While many writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth century actually wrote in the Irish language, Somerville and Ross used it infrequently in their works. Instead, they were more interested in a specific Hiberno-English as it is spoken in Ireland. Hiberno-English is a variety of the English language spoken in Ireland which developed from the English settlers in Ireland beginning in the seventeenth century¹⁴. It has specific pronunciation patterns, syntax, and linguistic rules that make it unique, yet derivative, from traditional Standard English. As Alan Bliss explains, “Irishmen learning English [...] had to rely on teachers of their own race, whose own English was very different from Standard English, so that there was nothing to check the progressive influence of the Irish language”¹⁵. As a result, not only were the “archaisms” of seventeenth century English preserved, but they were combined with and compounded by Irish linguistic modes and ways of thinking¹⁶. Such distinctions show up particularly in *The Real Charlotte*.

Writers at the end of the nineteenth century consciously sought a more realistic portrayal of Irish life and people, and one way to accomplish this was through language. As Gifford Lewis notes, until then, such authenticity in scene, dialogue, and representation was rare¹⁷. The curious thing about this shift was that it was accomplished in *English*. As both Declan Kiberd and Gifford Lewis note, the debate over Irish national identity at the turn of the century was held in English, and in order to persuade those in power (England) and their audience (also England), Irish writers needed to compose an Irish identity available and somewhat understandable to the English reading public¹⁸. But it is not so easy to persuade and critique one’s audience at the same time. As Mikhail Bakhtin notes, a speaker in a text must orient his discourse toward the conceptual framework of his listener; then, he must break through that conceptual framework and construct his own discourse on “alien territory” in order to be able to “get a reading of his own word, and on his own conceptual framework”¹⁹. Writers like Somerville and Ross had to subvert

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² Quoted in Gearóid Denvir, “Decolonizing the Mind: Language and Literature in Ireland,” p. 46.

¹³ Benedict Kiely, “Dialect and Literature,” in Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *The English Language in Ireland*, Dublin, The Mercier Press, 1977, p. 97.

¹⁴ P. L. Henry, “Anglo-Irish and its Irish Background,” in Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *The English Language in Ireland*, Dublin, The Mercier Press, 1977, p. 20.

¹⁵ Alan J. Bliss, “The Emergence of Modern English Dialects in Ireland,” in Diarmaid Ó Muirthe, *The English Language in Ireland*, Dublin, The Mercier Press, 1977, p. 17.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

¹⁷ Gifford Lewis, *Somerville and Ross: The World of the Irish R. M.*, Middlesex, Viking, 1985, p. 9.

¹⁸ Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 92; Gifford Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 9. David Martin argues that writing in English for an English audience makes Somerville and Ross colonial writers; that is, “their values, standards, and outlook are English, undoubtedly colored by the Irish scene and Irish habits. To have realized the Irish experience more fully would have been to break radically with the ideological categories which formed their thought [...]” (“*The Castle Rackrent* of Somerville and Ross: A Tragic Colonial Tale?” *Études Irlandaises* 7 [Dec. 1982], p. 53).

¹⁹ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, U of Texas P, 1981, p. 292.

their critique of the imperialist project in Ireland at the same time that they sought to create an accurate representation of Irish life and culture²⁰. The disparity between an “accurate” depiction of Irish life, discourse, and culture and the critique, however, complicates the (English) reader’s understanding of that culture until it becomes impossible to tell the difference between the ‘real’ portrayal of Ireland and imperial stereotypes of the Irish and their culture.

Combined with an awareness of post-colonial theory, Bakhtinian heteroglossia is an insightful methodology through which to address modes of discourse in a novel such as *The Real Charlotte*. Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as “another speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (324)²¹. For Bakhtin, discourse “is never unitary”²²; instead, “it lives [...] on the boundary between its own context and another, alien context”²³. But even this dialogism does not happen simply on a dualistic level. There is not just one voice speaking to or reacting against a single other one. Instead, Bakhtin’s double-voicedness is based on or is a result of a larger “fundamental, socio-linguistic speech diversity and multi-linguagedness”²⁴. The very manner in which Somerville and Ross composed their books is an example of heteroglossia. They often had to write “sporadically, in the midst of a spate of other distracting activities and frequently interrupted by the separation”²⁵. Somerville wrote that “our work was done conversationally. One or the other—not infrequently both simultaneously—would state a proposition. This would be argued, combated perhaps, approved, modified; it would then be written down by the (wholly fortuitous) holder of the pen, would be scratched out, scribbled in again”²⁶. What one sees in this description is a dialogic relationship between different ideologies, discourses, and ideas²⁷.

These dialogues between discourses do not just create meaning on the level of language systems alone; rather, they become ways in which to transmit, combine, and translate ideologies. In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said translates much of Bakhtin’s theories on narrative and heteroglossia into the imperial project. Like Bakhtin’s claim, “language is never unitary,” Said writes culture is never unitary: “partly because of the empire, all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic”²⁸. Therefore, much like discourses and language systems depend on each other in Bakhtin’s system, Said argues that cultures in the imperial project mutually inform and influence each other; one must “take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded”²⁹. Gearóid Denvir claims that language is “the

²⁰ Even so, many critics still claim that Somerville and Ross “sold their intimate knowledge of Ireland in order to remain living in it” (Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 69). So, to some extent, many readers felt that Somerville and Ross’ “accurate” portrayal of Irish life was as guilty of perpetuating the stage-Irish myth as their predecessors.

²¹ M. M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 325-326

²⁵ John Cronin, “Somerville and Ross,” *The Anglo-Irish Novel*, Vol. I: *The Nineteenth Century*, Totowa (NJ), Barnes and Noble, 1980, p. 140.

²⁶ Quoted in Wayne Hall, *Shadowy Heroes: Irish Literature of the 1890s*, Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 1980, p. 71.

²⁷ While Bakhtin’s translator uses the word ‘language’ in his definition of heteroglossia here, Bakhtin’s theories are predominantly interested in the use of *discourses*; that is, he analyzes the ways in which different characters, narrators, and the author him/herself adopt and sometimes parody modes of speech based on subject position.

²⁸ Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Vintage, 1993, p. xxv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

second phase of the colonial process”³⁰, working like what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiongo describes as a “cultural bomb to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves”³¹. The result is that Hiberno-English, as it is spoken in Ireland, becomes a “palimpsestization” and “peasantization” of the Irish language³². Language and literature, in particular, become unique sites from which to critique and understand the imperial project.

Even in adolescence, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross realized that there was a unique alliance between their Irish heritage and the English language. They realized that Ireland, as a nation, had two languages. In 1886, they began *The Buddh Dictionary: A Dictionary of Words and Phrases in Past and Present Use Among the Buddhs*. Somerville described the dictionary as:

the froth on the surface of some hundred years of the conversation of a clan of violent, inventive, Anglo-Irish people, who, generation after generation, found themselves faced with situations in which the English language failed to provide sufficient intensity, and they either snatched at alternatives from other tongues or invented them³³.

Similarly, in 1920, they published a response to Dr. P. W. Joyce’s study, *English as We Speak it in Ireland*. Joyce’s study set out not only to explain the many ways in which Modern Irish was influenced by the English language (a contentious topic in itself), but it also explained various characteristics and patterns within Irish speech including “assertion by negative of opposite,” “exaggeration and redundancy,” and “the Devil and his territory” along with other sections on idiomatic speech, the use of proverbs, etc. In their article, “The Anglo-Irish Language,” Somerville and Ross wrote that while Hiberno-English is believed to be the same as Standard (i.e., “British”) English, that belief is a “fallacy; it [Hiberno-English] is a fabric by Irish architects with English bricks, quite unlike anything of English construction [...] it is a tongue, pliant and subtle, expressing with every breath the mind of its makers”³⁴. It is clear that Somerville and Ross believed that Hiberno-English is unique to Irish experience, culture, and history, and that attempts to portray it merely as another version of Standard English were not only misleading but unjust.

Martin Ross, in particular, believed that Hiberno-English expressed a specific mode of thinking and cultural experience that was unique to the Irish. In her essay, “Children of Captivity,” she writes: “The very wind that blows softly over the brown acres of bog carries perfumes and sounds that England does not know: the women digging the potato-land are talking of things that England does not understand. The question that remains is whether England will ever understand”³⁵. The problem, Somerville and Ross believe, is not simply a linguistic one; rather, it is one of cultural conditioning. It is the

want of knowledge of the wayward and shrewd and sensitive minds that are at the back of the dialect...the shape in which thought is born, the point of the mental attack, the moment in the metre of the sentence where the weight must fall. These can scarcely be set down, yet they govern all. (“Anglo-Irish”, pp. 55-56)

³⁰ Gearóid Denvir, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

³¹ Quoted in Gearóid Denvir, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³ Quoted in Gifford Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁵ Quoted in Sean McMahon, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

They realize that English speakers can *understand* the speech of the Irish, to some extent, but they don't believe that the English can ever *know* the Irish.

While Irish does not play a significant role in Somerville and Ross' fiction, Hiberno-English dominates their style and thematic focus. Both writers felt that there was a distinct difference between Standard English, Hiberno-English, and Irish. However, while they wanted to create an accurate portrayal of Irish life and culture in their work, they were also aware of the dangers inherent in writing in an idiomatic style. Somerville writes in her memoir, *Irish Memories*:

Phonetic spelling in matters of dialect is a delusive thing, to be used with the utmost restraint. It is superfluous for those who know, boring for those who do not. Of what avail is spelling when confronted with the problem of indicating the pronunciation of, for example, 'Papa'; the slurring and softening of the consonant, the flattening of the vowel sound—how can these even be indicated? And, spelling or no, can any tongue, save an Irish one, pronounce the words 'being' and 'ideal', as though they owned but one syllable? Long ago Martin and I debated the point, and the conclusion that we then arrived at was that the root of the matter in questions of dialect was in the idiomatic phrase and the mental attitude³⁶.

Even though Somerville writes that they chose to focus on idiomatic phrase rather than dialect per se, there is a fine line between the two³⁷. Throughout their work, the writers use such phrasing as a way in which to inject "Irishness" into the text. While they claim that "Irishness" cannot be represented in language, they, in fact, attempt to do just that in their own work. They claim that they want to recreate the "wayward and shrewd and sensitive minds" behind the Irish dialect, but the only way they can achieve such an effect is through their manipulation of dialect, idiomatic phrase, and accent.

There is little information regarding Somerville and Ross' knowledge of the actual Irish language, although there is some evidence illustrating that Edith's grandfather, Thomas Somerville, was fluent in the language³⁸. Perhaps since there were Irish-speaking ancestors in Somerville's background, she had some superficial knowledge of the language. However, Irish only plays a small part in their writing, and it is often spelled phonetically rather than how it was actually written. Sometimes when referring to characters in the novel speaking Irish, the writers narrate just that: they were speaking in Irish. For example, when Julia Duffy comes to visit Charlotte early in the text, she walks in on three old women "holding converse in Irish" waiting for Charlotte to return home (*RC*, p. 53)³⁹. Similarly, in a scene between Julia and Norry the Boat, Norry is described as pledging, "Drink this to your health!" with the tag, "*she said in Irish*" (*RC*, p. 165, my emphasis). So, at one level, Somerville and Ross don't even attempt to recreate

³⁶ E. O. Somerville and Martin Ross, *Irish Memories*, London, Longman, 1918, p. 175.

³⁷ As Gerald Delahunty explains in "Dialect and Local Accent" (quoted in Ó Muirthe, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-49): "Until recently, linguists and non-linguists alike would have defined 'dialect' in much the same words as the *Oxford English Dictionary* does, as 'one of the subordinate forms or varieties of a language arising from local peculiarities of vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiom'" (p. 127). In the *OED*, accent is defined as to 'consist mainly in a prevailing quality of tone, or in a peculiar alteration of pitch, but may include mispronunciation of vowels or consonants, misplacing stress and misinflection of a sentence. The locality of the speaker is generally clearly marked by this kind of accent'" (p. 127). While Delahunty argues that linguists would protest the negative connotations of the "mis"-pronunciations, what is revealed in these definitions is the methodological assumption of a "norm" for standard pronunciation and the ignoring of cultural, class, and other "observable differences" among speakers of the same language (p. 128).

³⁸ Gifford Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

³⁹ All quotations are from *The Real Charlotte* (1894), New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 1986 [*RC*].

an accurate linguistic portrayal of the Irish language in their novel. They merely assert it is being spoken; they do not actually replicate it in their writing.

When the actual Irish language is seen in *The Real Charlotte*, it is generally used by peasants and servants. Charlotte's servant, Norry the Boat, is fluent in the language and is seen throughout the novel "holding converse in Irish" with the likes of Mary Holloran and Peggy Roche (*RC*, p. 53). However, the few examples Somerville and Ross provide illustrate only a surface understanding of the language. Typically, they employ greetings such as "*asthore*" (my dear) and "*cead failther*" (a hundred welcomes) (*RC*, p. 53 and p. 224). The one sentence-length example they give, spoken by Mrs. Lydon, the tailor's wife—"Arrah! *dheen dheffeth*, Dinny! *thurrum cussoge um 'na*" ("Hurry up with the coat, Dinny!")—is easily deciphered by Charlotte, who has a surprising knowledge of the language (*RC*, p. 240). Even though Somerville and Ross only show peasants and servants speaking Irish, these characters are seen as magical beings, like witches with incomprehensible linguistic power over other characters.

For the Hiberno-English speaking characters in the novel, the actual Irish language poses a complex problem to their cultural heritage. Forcibly distanced from their native tongue by the British imperial project, they now view it superstitiously as something foreign to their own experience. For example, when Francie comes across Nance the Fool for the first time, she only sees "a bundle of rags" from which

there issued a claw, which snatched the bottle and secreted it, and Francie just caught a glimpse under the swathing of rags, of eyes so inflamed with crimson that they seemed to her like pools of blood, and heard mouthings and mumblings of Irish which might have been benedictions, but, if so, were certainly blessings in disguise (*RC*, p. 95).

Rather than recognizing Nance the Fool as a human being, Francie sees her as "bundle of rags," a frightening creature with "claws" for hands, "pools of blood" for eyes, who speaks, not in familiar Hiberno-English, but in incomprehensible "mouthings and mumblings" which might be either blessings or curses. The majority of the Irish characters in *The Real Charlotte* (except Charlotte) are unable to speak or read Irish; the result is that those who *do* still speak it wield a linguistic power over those Irish who do not. Because they can speak the original language of the people, the peasants and servants, in many ways, are more "Irish" than their employers. They are able to use discursive strategies to gain control over or avoid censure from those in power.

Various characters throughout *The Real Charlotte* use accents and dialect to conceal their ambitions or intentions. Usually, such a change also implies power and/or control. For example, when Francie meets her former lover, Hawkins, after her marriage to Roddy Lambert, she adopts a "newly acquired English accent" in order to establish a sense of distance and superiority from her past self and actions (*RC*, p. 246). This is perhaps all the more surprising since Francie begins the novel with a horrible Dublin accent:

Francie's accent and mode of expressing herself were alike deplorable; Dublin had done its worst for her in that respect, but unless the reader has some slight previous notion of a how dreadful a thing is a pure-bred Dublin accent, it would be impossible for him to realise in any degree the tone in which she said: 'But oh! Tommy Whitty!' (*RC*, p. 4)

Francie's adoption of Standard English pronunciation provides her with the (colonial) authority she needs to face her former British lover. It suggests a level of maturity—social as well as sexual—that she has not yet, in fact, achieved. Francie's supposed sexual knowledge as a married

woman makes her seem alien to Hawkins, and her self-possession makes him more (sexually) frustrated and in love than before. The fact that Francie chooses to adopt an English accent instead of a more genteel Irish one perhaps signifies the underlying and unspoken imperial presence. At the same time that she adopts the English accent to assume control over Hawkins, she is also no longer seen as an other; she becomes English like him. In destroying the myth of the colonized other as well as the sexual mystery of the virgin, Francie is able to break through the cultural stereotypes and speak to Hawkins as an individual.

Hawkins, however, is perceived as a very different sort of linguistic threat from the rest of the characters in *The Real Charlotte*. As a member of the British militia stationed in Lismoyle, Hawkins is “more or less an unknown quantity; his mere idioms and slang were the language of another world” (*RC*, p. 94). For Francie, Hawkins is more than just a representative of a foreign colonial power. He not only promises her a more civilized culture, but he also stands for forbidden sexual knowledge and desire. Therefore, he is threatening because he is a member of the British militia and also because he introduces sexual knowledge and license into the rural Irish community. Hawkins’s profligate behavior with the local Irish women wherever he is stationed illustrates the multiples potential dangers of the (male) colonial presence.

Hawkins seems to represent a volatile, unknowable, colonial voice, one that cannot be contained or controlled by Irish culture or decorum. During Garry Dysart’s birthday theatricals, for example, Hawkins entices Francie into a secluded brougham in the back of the carriage house. From this position, both Francie and Hawkins are hidden; even though the rest of the audience can hear their stifled laughter and giggles, they are unable to locate their position. Hawkins is saved from detection by the arrival of James Canavan as Queen Elizabeth: “even Lady Dysart forgot her anxiety to find out where Mr. Hawkins’ voice had come from” (*RC*, p. 116). Hawkins’ power lies in its invisibility. He is not England itself, but he represents the colonial power to the effect that the Irish community feel threatened yet beguiled by his character—even though they don’t understand it⁴⁰.

In many respects, Pamela Dysart represents the point of intersection between the unreadable Irish and the imperial British. Pamela is the ultimate reader of both cultures: “her finger was always on the pulse of the person to whom she was talking” (*RC*, p. 49). Her “imaginative sympathy” (*RC*, p. 219) allows her to see through many, though not all, of the linguistic and cultural maneuvers that both groups make. While Pamela’s position closely resembles Charlotte’s (she makes the same cultural and linguistic shifts between class, dialect, and even nation), she is the only sympathetic Anglo-Irish Ascendancy character in the novel that seems able to bridge the colonial gap between British power and Irish culture. For example, Pamela voices her goodbye to the militia captain, Cursiter, “in the soft voice that was just Irish enough for Saxons of the more ignorant sort to fail to distinguish, save in degree, between it and Mrs. Lambert’s Dublin brogue” (*RC*, p. 270). Pamela moves between Hiberno-English and Standard English dialects in order to mediate between her ‘other,’ ‘foreign,’ or ‘alien’ identity as an Irish woman and her imperial ties to Britain as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy. Pamela’s ability to manipulate the dialect also allows her to create a colonial identity for herself

⁴⁰ The Irish characters in the novel vacillate between admiring and resenting Hawkins. Wayne Hall defines this oscillation as “the Irish paradox.” Following Douglas Hyde, Hall explains how the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist middle class and its writers, in particular, “alternately imitate England and then resent that imitation” (*op. cit.*, p. 57). The backlash of such imitation was a further commitment to all things Irish: language, traditions, national identity, and, most importantly, cultural heritage. In the novel, then, Hawkins simultaneously provides a threat and a foil to that culture and heritage.

that will be more poignant or perhaps sexually effective with the colonial captain. Her ability to move in between the two in her “soft” voice provides an allure that perhaps pure Hiberno-English or pure British English would not allow. As Pamela illustrates so well, language and discourse become means through which one not only challenges (or reinforces) colonial ideologies of the colonized, but they may also become a way in which each character may define herself in relation or opposition to those cultural and imperial discourses.

In other situations in *The Real Charlotte*, the *loss* of dialect can reveal weakness and cultural subterfuge. It can signify a loss of control or power within a given situation. When Roddy Lambert is overcome with jealousy over Francie and Hawkins’ relationship, he betrays his true emotions to Christopher Dysart: “During this recital, Mr. Lambert had been deficient in the accent of gentlemanlike self-importance that in calmer moments he was careful to impart to it, and the raw Limerick brogue was on top as he said, ‘Yes, by George! I remember a time when she wasn’t above fancying your humble servant!’” (*RC*, p. 159). For Lambert, this slippage before Dysart is particularly humbling. Throughout the text, Lambert sees Dysart as his rival—socially, economically, and sexually—as well as a role model. Frustrated by Christopher’s competition for Francie’s attention, Roddy believes that “if [he] could read *The Field*, and had a more spontaneous habit of cursing, [he] should be an ideal country gentleman” (*RC*, p. 70). Cultural and class identity for Roddy are simply the case of changing one’s linguistic habits. For him to let down his accent of “gentlemanlike self-importance” before Dysart is like admitting sexual and social impotence. Not only does he betray his love and jealousy for Francie, but he also admits his lowly social origins. In losing his accent of gentility and social standing, Lambert forfeits his sense of self-importance in relation to the colonizer.

Charlotte, of course, is the most adept manipulator of dialect in the novel. She is described as being “addicted to a ponderous persiflage” (*RC*, p. 28), and she has a strong affinity with language. She is an avid reader and consumes pulp fiction as well as intellectual texts in various languages. Ultimately, she most accurately represents the dialogical and heteroglot relationship between language and imperialism. Charlotte has “many tones of voice, according to the many facets of her characters, and when she wished to be playful she affected a vigorous brogue, not perhaps being aware that her own accent scarcely admitted of being strengthened” (*RC*, p. 12). When she converses with others, Charlotte merely adopts the dialect appropriate for the persona she has created for her audience. When speaking to servants or peasants, for example, her voice is often sharp with authority and disrespect. When Francie first comes to visit her at Tally-Ho, Charlotte easily chastises the cab driver before she quickly shifts into her ingratiating welcome for her cousin: “‘Take your car out o’ that, ye great oaf!’ she vociferated; ‘can’t ye make way for your betters?’ *Then with a complete change of voice*, ‘Well, me dear Francie, you’re welcome, you’re welcome’” (*RC*, p. 21, my emphasis). Charlotte easily moves between tones of voice and accent depending on who she is speaking to at the time. For Lady Dysart, Charlotte speaks in a “bluff, hearty voice which she feels accorded best with the theory of herself that she had built up in Lady Dysart’s mind” (*RC*, p. 12). Rather than acting according to her ‘real’ opinions, emotions, and personality, Charlotte assumes a ‘theory’ of identity that mandates a different persona for each acquaintance.

While Charlotte recognizes that she has the ability to alter her dialect and tone, she does not see discourse itself as dialogical. In Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, novels are always dialogic; discourses are in conversation with one another. But Charlotte is more interested in control and domination than dialogue: “She had the unusual gift of thinking out in advance her line of conversation in an interview, and, which is even less usual, she had the power of keeping

to it” (*RC*, p. 52). Charlotte goes into every conversation, then, seeing it as a one-sided activity in which she asserts her own discourse, personality, and ideology onto that of another person. Not only does this admission reveal Charlotte’s self-involvement, but it also illustrates her self-control and power over others. As Edward Said perceives, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them”⁴¹. Thus, Charlotte uses her ability to change dialect and accent, not as way to connect with other characters and social classes in the novel, but as a way to “block” them in order to assert her own agenda. As the most powerful character in the novel, perhaps it is not surprising that Charlotte’s philosophy of discourse is the most similar to that of imperialism.

Both speech and cultural discourse allow the Irish to communicate with and elude the colonial paradigm on many different levels. Not only is Charlotte skilled at adjusting her dialect to entertain the higher echelons of Lismoyle society, but she can also move within the peasant sphere. She knows enough Irish to “shock [...] those who were uncertain as to its limitations” (*RC*, p. 240). Charlotte’s knowledge of the Irish language makes her a threatening figure for the peasants in the novel. They are not allowed to have any clandestine conversations without her knowledge, and she has the ability to interpret both their language and their actions. She has “the absolutely accurate business memory of the Irish peasant, a memory that in few cases survives education but, where it exists, may be relied upon more than all of the generations of ledgers and account books” (*RC*, p. 52). Charlotte’s power lies not only in her possessing the actual language of the Irish peasants, but, more importantly, in her ability to adopt their cultural discourse(s) and knowledge. The fact that she knows how to do business “the peasant way” makes her a formidable force from which it becomes very difficult to protect oneself. As a result, when Charlotte ventures into the booths and stalls of the shopping district, she becomes a mode of surveillance, controlling the peasant class for the colonial project.

Both speech and cultural discourses allow the Irish to communicate and elude the colonial paradigm on many different levels, and Charlotte’s power within the novel evolves from her ability to move in between these different discourses. By participating in traditionally forbidden discourses like business, Charlotte breaks down typical gender as well as linguistic expectations, and, as a result, she becomes a dangerous force to those who uphold those structures—both the peasants and the upper class Ascendancy as well. For example, when Charlotte joins the men discussing the Land League bill at Lady Dysart’s tennis party, the archdeacon is filled with dismay and fear: “The archdeacon fixed his eyes seriously upon her; Charlotte’s playfulness always alarmed and confused him” (*RC*, p. 13). To those in power like the clergy, Charlotte’s maneuvers suggest a threat to traditional hierarchical notions of power, gender, and social roles.

One reason Charlotte is such a threat to the other characters in the novel is that, like the example of Hawkins, no one has the discursive knowledge to discern “the subtle grades of Irish vulgarity” in Charlotte’s voice (*RC*, p. 12). To Lady Dysart, Charlotte is merely an entertaining buffoon who keeps her from perpetual boredom. While the authors seemingly argue that it is Lady Dysart’s radical social views that make Charlotte palatable, in fact, Somerville and Ross are subtly criticizing her and their English audiences for failing to hear or read Charlotte’s linguistic manipulations. Because Charlotte shows some kind of education and literacy—Lady Dysart “welcomes a woman who could talk to her on spiritualism, or books or indeed on any current

⁴¹ Edward Said, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

topic” (*RC*, p. 12)—Charlotte’s dialect becomes “to English ears, merely the expression of a vigorous individuality” (*RC*, p. 12).

Francie admires Charlotte for “the ease with which she accepted her surroundings, and discoursed of high and difficult matters with her hostess” (*RC*, p. 103), but she is unable to see how Charlotte often simultaneously affects the role of the stage Irishman in order to manipulate others into her mode of thinking or into doing her will. Similarly, while Lambert has “raised himself just high enough from the sloughs of middle-class society to see [Charlotte’s conversational] vulgarity [...] he did not stand sufficiently apart from it to be able to appreciate the humorous side” (*RC*, pp. 67-8). Roddy can recognize the linguistic maneuvers Charlotte makes in her playful belittling before the Dysarts, but he is not far enough away from them to assume an attitude of superiority or translation—nor to see how Charlotte works on him. As one can see, characters who are in much the same position as Charlotte in regard to challenging colonialism through language can “read” her linguistic transformations. However, not even these characters can see through Charlotte’s words to her real underlying nature⁴².

While the purpose of the text is to reveal the ‘real’ Charlotte, the text repeatedly refuses to illustrate what that true character is. Instead, the reader is enticed by hints of a ‘real’ Charlotte rising to the surface. The reader is continually tempted with such teasers as: “The real Charlotte has seldom been nearer to the surface than at this moment” (*RC*, p. 173), and Francie had “learned, like her great-aunt before her, the weight of the real Charlotte’s will, and the terror of her personality” (*RC*, p. 192). However, that personality is never fully revealed; it remains hidden:

The movements of Charlotte’s character, for it cannot be said to possess the power of development, were akin to those of some amphibious thing, whose strong, darting course under water is only marked by a bubble or two, and it required almost an animal instinct to note them. Every bubble betrayed the creature below, as well as the limitations of its power of hiding itself, but people never thought of looking out for those indications in Charlotte, or even suspected that he had anything to conceal (*RC*, p. 222).

Although this passage seems, on the surface, to argue for a coherent, stable identity for Charlotte, it really claims the opposite. Charlotte’s character is “amphibious,” undeveloped, and “darting.” What the passage implies is that character (or identity) is a slippery entity, unknowable, and indeterminate. No one can read the depths of Charlotte’s experience or knowledge, so no one can ever know who the ‘real’ Charlotte really is. For Ireland, identity, like language, is a fragment process, continually in a process of becoming.

In criticizing Charlotte as a monstrous leviathan, the text suggests not only a fear of social mobility and the destabilization of the Irish middle-class, but it also implies a cultural fear of women in positions of economic and social power⁴³. Many of the characters’ resentment against

⁴² Again, while Nichole Pepinster Greene aptly points out the importance of class in such scenes (*op. cit.*, p. 125), I think it is equally important to point out the colonialist relationships underlying such exchanges. We should not ignore the fact that the Dysarts, as the local Ascendancy family, have strong ties to England and the British colonial project, and that their superior class position in the novel is directly tied to that historic event.

⁴³ While Nichole Pepinster Greene recognizes that “gender is unstable” in the novel and that “gender roles are often reversed” (*op. cit.*, p. 137), she concludes that gender alone is an insufficient determinant in analyzing the use of dialect and language in the novel. However, I think Greene underplays the importance of Charlotte’s gender when she analyzes her linguistic variability and power. I believe that it is exactly because Charlotte is a woman that she is seen as so threatening to the other characters in the novel. She is described as a “wild beast” (*RC*, p. 229) and even “evil” (*RC*, p. 236). Perhaps a male character with Charlotte’s code-switching abilities would not be seen as so monstrous.

Charlotte in the novel are a result of her outwitting them in business ventures. There are dozens of male characters throughout literature guilty of embezzling inheritances, doing shady business deals, and even murdering other characters, but I would argue that few of them are treated to the kind of contempt, distaste, and vilification as Charlotte Mullen—solely on the account of her status as a woman⁴⁴. Even though Somerville and Ross continually avoid revealing who the ‘real’ Charlotte actually is, the closest we get to her tragic flaw is her “ready abandonment of herself to fury” (*RC*, p. 236). While Charlotte’s temper is certainly something to behold, it does not necessitate personifying her as a “wild beast” (*RC*, p. 229). It is her ugliness that dehumanizes her, as well as her powerful temper, business acumen, and social ambitions. Even though the authors condemn Charlotte for her failure to adhere to traditional gender, social, and linguistic roles, they also ask the reader to pity her:

It is hard to ask pity for Charlotte, whose many evil qualities have without pity been set down, but the seal of ignoble tragedy had been set on her life; she had not asked for love, but it had come to her, twisted to burlesque by the malign hand of fate. There is pathos as well as humiliation in the thought that such a thing as a soul can be stunted by the trivialities of personal appearance, and it is a fact not beyond the reach of sympathy that each time Charlotte stood before her glass her ugliness spoke to her of failure, and goaded her to revenge (*RC*, p. 236).

Somerville and Ross argue that Charlotte has been humbled and stunted by her personal appearance to the point where it has affected her character. In fact, they argue, Charlotte is in many ways not to blame for her anger at the world; it is simply a very human reaction to the failure to live up to the traditional expectations for (good- or at least average-looking) women. Due to her poor looks, Charlotte has been denied marriage and motherhood. And because she was unable to fulfill those roles, Charlotte sought out a replacement in the realm of business. But this success, rather than compensating for her poor personal appearance, serves to exaggerate her abnormality, her difference from ‘normal’ women.

The power in Charlotte’s characterization lies in her ability to manipulate traditional discourses of language, social class, and gender in order to break through such typical cultural stereotypes. Somerville and Ross’ use of dialect in the novel serves to illustrate the fluid nature of language, and, as a result, identity—individual or national—becomes a much more difficult project. As Declan Kiberd explains, “the Irish self, by contrast, was a *project*, and its characteristic text was a process, unfinished, fragmenting. It invited the reader to become a co-creator with the author and it refused to exact a merely passive admiration for the completed work of art”⁴⁵. For Somerville and Ross, individual and national identity are both composed and camouflaged by language.

⁴⁴ Much of this analysis is a reflection of continued discussions with my colleague, Nainsi Houston, at Creighton University, and my reading of Charlotte’s character is greatly indebted to her.

⁴⁵ Declan Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 20.