

Myth and Ritual in Liam O'Flaherty's Short Story "Spring Sowing"

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The aim of this article is to read the short story "Spring Sowing" (1924), written by the renowned Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty, in the context of psychology as well as myth and ritual. In the process, it will become apparent that the story depicts not only the annual agricultural rites performed by man for centuries in honor of the cosmic forces that bring renewal to the earth, but also the inner workings of the characters. The selection of the particular short story is two-pronged: First, it provides a wide range of themes that are found in the writer's work; and second, it reflects most successfully the author's vision. It is my contention that O'Flaherty's attempt to help modern man gain insight into the basic forces that underline the human psyche led him to borrow from Carl Jung the concept of the masculine/feminine principles. Furthermore, in order to concretize his viewpoint he employed the principles as psychic structures, and fused them with myth and ritual, thus rendering his story universal in its appeal and involving both male and female readers. Finally, it should be noted that a handful of critics have written on O'Flaherty's work but no one has dealt with the particular story, an oversight that the present contribution intends to amend.

In the story, the protagonist, Martin, represents the masculine principle that includes logic and reason while Mary, his wife, stands for the feminine principle that suggests imagination, creativity, and intuition.¹ O'Flaherty, however, was convinced that it was not enough to provide a psychological/archetypal framework for his story, and to define the psychic structures only. He needed more than just concepts derived from Jung. This realization drove him to recur to ritualistic constructs with which to blend the Jungian ideas, to strengthen the story's framework, and most importantly, to convey the complexity of his vision. Thus, Martin stands for Heaven and Mary for the earth. "Heaven and Earth," declares Mircea Eliade, "form the Androgeny, which is an archaic and universal formula for the expression of wholeness, the co-existence of the contraries or *coincidentia oppositorum*. It symbolizes the perfection of a primordial non-conditioned state."² Eliade argues that the separation of Heaven from earth manifests itself in the human forms of man and woman.³ He also postulates that the rituals connected

¹ Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977) 62.

² Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) 174.

³ Eliade, *Myths* 180.

with *Terra Mater* reveal “the mystery of how Life was born from a seed hidden in an undifferentiated whole.” In addition, these rituals also show how life “was produced in consequence of the *hierogamy* between Heaven and Earth, and how it sprang from a violent death, in most cases voluntary.”⁴ In the rituals that relate to the *Terra Mater* and the goddess of telluric fecundity where the goddesses of vegetation and of agriculture are present, the woman plays a significant role. Therefore, one cannot miss the symbolic assimilation of woman with the land and of the sexual act with agricultural labor. “The woman is the field and the male is the bestower of the seed,” writes the Indian poet Narada.⁵ In this light, the author was obliged to use the notion of duality to delineate the breakdown that occurs between the characters. By using analogies like day and night as well as a bright day-world (the events in the field) and a dark night-world (the episode in the barn), the writer projects the conscious and the unconscious as well as Heaven and Earth. As the article will show, O’Flaherty shares in Jung’s belief that the suppression of the feminine principle is an act that results in conflict and imbalance. He proceeds to objectify this belief by expounding the idea that youth and age, birth and death are part of a perpetual universal myth that focuses on man’s intrinsic bond to the earth. All along, the artist stresses the fact that modern man refuses to accept the power of the earth and nature, hence bringing about discord and sorrow.

O’Flaherty, like William Wordsworth before him, believes that nature is a teacher, a guide, and a source of spirituality. To him, the beauty of the world lies in nature, even “human beauty finds its true correspondence and biological model there.”⁶ He states that “man is nature, there is no dichotomy between body and soul, and nature does not destroy man in death except in the physical sense.”⁷ Consequently, Martin’s vehement attempt to subdue his instinctual nature as reflected in his violent behavior in digging the earth is understood but not condoned. Keeping in mind Jung and Eliade, the reader notices that Martin has difficulty comprehending the symbolic essence of his natural environment while Mary, his wife, feels comfortable and close to it. The careful selection of words, images, and symbols exposes the intensity of the conflict and the inevitable separation that results between Martin and Mary. By creating an archetypal framework for his story and attributing to his characters mythic dimensions, O’Flaherty succeeds not only in imparting a timeless and universal experience but also in analyzing such multifaceted themes as life, death, and rebirth.

Through Mary, the writer presents the image of the Earth as Woman and as Mother. Yet, the *Terra Mater* that gives birth to all beings is also associated with

⁴ Eliade, *Myths* 183.

⁵ Qtd. in Eliade, *Myths* 185.

⁶ Richard Thompson, *Everlasting Voices: Aspects of the Modern Irish Short Story* (New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1989) 66.

⁷ O’Flaherty qtd. in A. A. Kelley, *Liam O’ Flaherty: The Story Teller* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976) 69.

death. Hence, man comes from the earth and returns to it when he is interred after his death, achieving in this way his long awaited reunion with *Terra Mater*. Moreover, Mary's behavior proves what Eliade pointed out in his argument about *Terra Mater*. "Each woman," he said "ought to find herself in direct contact with the Great *Genetrix* and let herself be guided by her in the accomplishment of the mystery of the birth of a new life so as to share in her benefic energies and her maternal protection."⁸

"Spring Sowing" is about Martin and Mary, a newly wed couple that sets out at dawn, one day in February, to perform their first spring sowing. "By sowing," argues Paul Doyle "they and nature are fulfilling primeval obligations—a covenant which is an intrinsic part of living." The ritual is supposed to "hallow and perfect" their union and bring on a feeling of satisfaction.⁹ Through the act of sowing, they will be initiated into the mystery of mating. The story echoes the *hierogamy*, which proceeds and assures that the harvest is a ritual repeated every year. The divine marriage between Heaven and Earth is projected in Martin and his wife as they set out to celebrate the ritual of sowing the earth. As the events of the story unravel, the imitation of the divine marriage "re-actualizes their regression into the undifferentiated wholeness that preceded differentiated Life, and from which the Cosmos emerged. It is by such a symbolical and lurid reintegration into the pre-cosmological state that they hope to ensure an abundant harvest."¹⁰ In this context, the very act of sowing the earth entails participating in a rite that demands the initiate to go through death in order to create. Thus, sowing the earth requires that Martin and Mary unite their efforts, and eliminate division that is, eliminate their ego, in order to ascertain that the earth will yield fruit.

Martin and Mary are depicted as young, strong, and enthusiastic about the act of sowing the land at the time when nature is in the process of rejuvenation. At the same time, the act of going out for a day into the field, designates the journey through life which the newlyweds are expected to take. Furthermore, setting out for the field projects the archetypal quest that lifts the story of the Irish farmers from the specific geographic locus, and turns it into a universal experience wherein all men and women may participate at all times and places. The wisdom gained is supposed to help the couple understand and accept each other as well as develop their individuality. The couple's labor from dawn to dusk is significant since it assumes the value of a ritual. They know that they will have to perform repeatedly these rites for the rest of their lives. They will set out every dawn fresh and rested, and return home at dusk aching. By outlining the day's events in the life of Martin and Mary, O'Flaherty imposes the traditional structure of beginning, middle, and end to his story.

⁸ Eliade, *Myths* 166.

⁹ Paul A. Doyle, *Liam O'Flaherty* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971) 47.

¹⁰ Eliade, *Myths* 196.

In the opening paragraph, O'Flaherty points out numerous contradictory elements with the sole purpose of implying the incongruity of the landscape. Beneath the vast wasteland one senses signs of regeneration. To emphasize the significance of the feminine principle the writer has Mary "rake" the "live coals" that lie "hidden" underneath the "ashes" all night.¹¹ Hence, he associates fire—symbolic of life and creation—with Mary. She tries desperately to free the fire from the ashes; at the same time she thinks of ways to revive the spark in her relationship. Throughout the story, Mary tries to light up the pervading darkness that surrounds her and Martin. The writer parallels the darkness that permeates the universe with the emotional state of the couple, and juxtaposes it with the vibrant "streak of white light" that is actively at work trying to "scatter" and break up the darkness that forcefully covers the universe. In connection to the darkness that characterizes the landscape, the writer alludes to the mother archetype and the world of the dead, both connotative of seduction and devouring. Within this context, Martin's fear can be grasped as he tries to shun rather than accept the feminine principle signified by the *Terra Mater*.

By choosing his words carefully, O'Flaherty succeeds in imbuing the natural landscape with cogent features that personify it and hence makes it a major player in the life of the couple. The story begins on a "cold, dry, and starry" February morning. Yet, in the cold, dark heaven one detects stars, the only sign of light. The "crowing" cocks announce the approaching dawn, and at the same time, disrupt the peaceful ambiance of the early morning (7). As has already been mentioned, the signs of fertility and rebirth are present in the first lines of the story, although the elements of sterility and death supercedes them. The choice of discordant words and images in the opening paragraph prepare the reader for the ensuing strife between Martin and Mary.

Having devoted a few lines to the external scene, O'Flaherty moves to depict the internal state of his characters. In "Spring Sowing" as in all his other stories his "forte is action and the emotion that produces action and is in turn colored by it."¹² He exposes the thoughts of his characters and delineates their attitudes that give rise to the conflict. The event that arouses diverse feelings in each of the newlyweds is the ritual of sowing. Anxiety, fear, happiness, and expectation are some of the feelings they experience. They are described as "bad humoured and yet very excited with their first sowing." Gradually, it becomes evident that the imminent event has a completely different meaning for each one. Each experiences different feelings about "the glamour of the day on which they were to open up the Earth together and plant seeds in it" (7). Mary is thrilled at the thought of "her first mating," believes the day is meant to bring her and her husband harmony and satisfaction. O'Flaherty points out that she is anxious to share

¹¹ Liam O' Flaherty, "Spring Sowing," *Selected Short Stories of Liam O'Flaherty* (London: New English Library, 1970) 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹² Thompson 67.

the experience with her husband. She looked “hardly more than a girl, red cheeked and blue eyed,” and like a child “munched her bread and butter”; whereas Martin is depicted as sensing the “glamour” of the day only in connection to what the act of sowing represents for him alone (7). His mind is fixed on just one thought—whether he would be able to prove himself a man worthy of being the head of a family by doing his spring sowing well. While Mary considers the ritual of sowing the earth an opportunity to bring them closer, Martin sees it as a contest, and sets out to accomplish it singularly. Tension springs from an inherent difference in their nature as man and woman, and from the manner by which they address the crucial event: the ritual of sowing the seed. In his effort to prove himself a man, Martin refutes the feminine principle symbolized by Mary. Unconsciously he alienates himself from nature, and indirectly suppresses the creative, emotional, and intuitive aspects of his psyche. Even the act of sharing breakfast fails to establish a rapport between them. O’Flaherty describes them eating “in silence and bad humoured”; neither the bread they eat nor the tea they drink can dissolve the distance between them, for “they both felt in a bad humour and ate, wrapped in their thoughts” (7).

The incident in the barn strengthens the sense of conflict and disharmony. When Martin and Mary enter the barn to prepare for their first spring sowing or mating, Martin falls over a basket. His anger is quickly aroused, and his remark that “a man be better off dead than ...” suggests that he resents his wife’s presence because he considers her a challenge to reckon with (7). Within the context of the *Terra Mater* myth, the basket symbolizes the womb, and explains why Mary places the seeds in it. Thus, tripping over the basket reveals his annoyance for losing his balance as well as his inability to accept Mary. On another level, Martin identifies Mary with the Great Mother that echoes the shadow, the temptress, and the destructive crone, all evoking deep fear in him. Thus, the Mother in the story represents both the magic of transformation and rebirth of the field as well as the underworld mentioned by the old man at the end of the story. Undoubtedly, the particular incident acquires psychological as well as mythic proportions. Since Martin represents the masculine principle, his disregard for the feminine principle underscores his inability to unite harmoniously with what Mary stands for. On the contrary, Mary attempts to pacify him and, embracing him, says: “let us not begin this day cross with one another” (8). This effort at reconciliation is significant because it reveals Mary’s intuitive understanding of the need for unity since creation depends on the union of opposites and acceptance and love of one another. In prehistoric times the cavern or the labyrinth was at once a theater of initiation and a place where the dead were buried. Taking into consideration the implications of the abovementioned incident, the barn assumes the function of the cavern, and the entrance of the characters in it signifies the mystical return to the Mother, which will be actualized by the performance of the ritual in the field. Thus, the agitation experienced by Martin on the one hand, and the placidity of Mary on the other, are perfectly natural.

While Mary seeks for a way to impose emotional equilibrium, Martin's antagonistic attitude that stresses domination, suppression, and division makes her efforts futile. The event in the barn reflects Mary's first failed attempt to get closer to Martin. She fails because he remains impenetrable and aloof even after they embrace and he calls her "pulse of my heart, treasure of my life." Mary considers his words of affection hollow, void of feeling, and thus shrugs them off. Meanwhile, seized by awkwardness, Martin "pushes her from him with pretended roughness," and exclaims, "come, come girl, it will be sunset before we begin at this rate" (8). Although for Mary, Martin is her protector and lover, she cannot ignore the fact that he also possesses a violent tendency that arouses apprehension when she is around him.

O'Flaherty shifts to the natural environment after introducing his characters in two episodes that reveal their thoughts and emotions through their behavior. This time the imagery is intended to convey the meaning of fullness vividly, since the sky looks "as if it were going to burst in order to give birth to the sun," while the "birds are singing" the praise of the day (8). However, the "gray" neutral color at the crack of dawn and that "white streak" are reminders of the gray ashes that have covered the fire over the night. The air remains chillingly cold, and later in the day when the sun is high in the sky the reader is alerted to the fact that there is "no heat in the light of the sun," exactly as there was no heat coming from the fireside (9). The particular detail describes the natural environment and coincides with the lack of warmth between Martin and Mary as well as the unwillingness the former shows in effecting a change in their relationship.

Martin's eagerness to commence without Mary in raising the first "sod" leads to an intense emotional buildup. Actually, it is another indication of his egotism and effort to subject the female. After this boastful declaration of superiority on Martin's behalf, Mary tries to reconcile once more with him, but fails. This effort is a repeat of Mary's first attempt in the barn. She drops the seeds carelessly on the ridge and races to Martin "with the excitement of a little child" (9). She puts her arms around him so that she can partake in the raising of the sod. Unfortunately, Martin pushes her away in a much more violent way than he did earlier. This very act reveals his heightened emotional state, and emphasizes the wedge he has drawn between them. He gruffly says "now for God's sake, girl, keep back" (9). This violent act of repudiation exposes his desire to prevail as well as his insistence to avoid any union or sharing with Mary. Furthermore, his behavior reflects a lack of compassion and understanding. Ultimately, the reader observes that the convergence of the two principles aborts, and that the couple's relationship is not only strained but also hostile. The writer states that Martin's "eyes had a wild eager light in them, as if some primeval impulse were burning within his brain and driving out every other desire except that of asserting his manhood and of subjugating the earth" (9). It is clear that the driving force behind Martin's actions is his innate desire to prevail. Mary recognizes his intentions immediately and reacts to his brutality by "[drawing] back and

gaz[ing] distantly at the ground" (9). From this moment onward the couple separate, and communication between them seems impossible.

By the middle of the story, the tension culminates and the rift between Martin and Mary is intensified when he digs the earth. "Martin cut the sod, and pressing the spade into the earth with his foot, he turned up the first sod with a crunching sound as the grass roots were dragged of the earth" (9). O'Flaherty conveys effectively the violation of the earth by man through the symbolic act of ruthlessly uprooting the sod. By beating the black earth fiercely with his spade, Martin reflects his fear and frustration. The scene is loaded with sexual connotations. Furthermore, the hostility that characterizes his attitude toward *Terra Mater* reveals his alienation from her. The "crunching" resounds as the earth is being torn apart and the sod dragged out of it. It is a fierce image, which intimates the complete split between the masculine and feminine principle, Heaven from earth, as well as man from the earth. The sod is the central symbol of the story because of its duality. It represents Martin and Mary, Heaven and earth, the upper and the lower, light and darkness, and the conscious and the unconscious. The sod consists of two parts: that which sprouts above the surface of the earth, and that which is deeply rooted below the surface. It comprises two halves contingent on one another for survival. Hence, the sod objectifies effectively the contradictory concepts that permeate O'Flaherty's story. The abovementioned event expressly underlines Martin's repressive attitude on the one hand, and his insistence on ignoring the value of the feminine principle and the earth on the other. Finally, the sod denotes the totality and the wholeness that Mary perceives and yearns for and that Martin rejects and fights.

When the moment to cut the first sod approaches, Martin's animosity peaks. He divests of his heavier garments, ignoring the cold, "spits" on his hands, "seizes" the spade and exclaims: "now you are going to see what kind of a man you have, Mary" (8). Mary retorts to his audacious expression by saying "aren't we boastful this early hour of the morning? Maybe I'll wait till sunset to see what kind of man I have got" (8). The difference in their point of view is clear. Mary tries to point out to Martin that manliness, at least to her, does not involve suppression and denial of the female. The aggressive manner in which he takes hold of the spade suggests power and strength, and as the story progresses, Martin's desire to prevail is underscored as well. At the same time, Mary's liveliness wanes, as she becomes aware of the pronounced separation from Martin. The ritual of plowing the land and sowing the seed loses its original sacredness and meaning since the hope for a union between her and Martin dwindles. It is apparent that her excitement is subdued exactly as the fire that was buried under the coals. As he boasts about his manliness by throwing off his heavier attire she meekly shies away as though seeking shelter from the cold and "ties a little shawl closer under her chin" (8).

As the work of the couple gets underway, the reader witnesses the distinct difference in the duties that each is assigned. Martin “measures” the ground and then proceeds to lay the line out the length of the ridge while Mary places the seeds in rows. The apron in which she keeps the seeds suggests her role as the bearer of fruit and provider echoing the Greek goddess Demeter. Therefore, the particular image of the woman and the apron highlights the duality on which O’Flaherty based his story: sterility and fertility. In mythology, Demeter brings about a severe drought when Pluto abducts her daughter, Proserpina, thus forcing him into a pact with her. She agrees to lift the scourge from the earth only after he decides to allow her daughter to return to her every spring. With this allusion, the concept of death is obliquely introduced in the story, hence alarming both Martin and Mary, as will become evident later. Moreover, the particular myth represents the Eleusinian initiation that descended directly from an agricultural ritual based on “the death and resurrection of a divinity controlling the fertility of the fields.”¹³ As Mary empties the seeds frantically on the ground, she divides them in rows of four, three, and four. Her action points out that she can use her reason as adequately as her intuition and creativity, for she knows that all faculties are needed in sowing the earth. Martin, however, fails to perceive their significance. As she watches his fierce treatment of the earth, she becomes fully convinced that the union that would have brought balance and harmony in their relationship will never occur. Feeling desperate, she “pick[s] up her seeds and beglins] to spread them rapidly to drive out the sudden terror that had seized her at that moment when the first sod was turned up and she saw the fierce hard look in her husband’s eyes” (9). O’Flaherty suggests that Mary and the earth, and by implication nature, are treated alike by Martin. First, by pushing Mary away forcefully, and second, by witnessing the impetuous manner by which he attacks the earth, the writer exposes his ignorance of the feminine principle as well as his rejection of it. Mary, on the other hand, instinctively knows that it is impossible for man to win a battle against almighty nature. Certainly, she firmly believes that man must join forces with nature and work with it.

This separation between Mary and Martin takes on universal dimensions as it extends to all the young men and women tilling the earth. The conflict between Mary and Martin is maximized, and set against a vivid background as all the other men are depicted “work[ing] madly, without speaking” and the “women spread[ing] the seeds” (9). Moreover, the men are seen “jump[ing] on their spade shafts ferociously and beat[ing] the sods as if they were living enemies” (9). The keyword describing the antagonistic relationship between man and nature is “enemy.” Obviously, the men have no respect for the very ritual they set out to perform. Martin and the other men who are sowing the earth show great physical strength, but in reality they are weak because they ignore the value of *Terra Mater*. Thus, they resemble the little birds that struggle to secure their sustenance

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 111.

by dashing “under the spade to secure their food,” disregarding the imminent danger (9).

After being subdued by the men, the women fall into their subordinate roles. They become their husband’s “helpers” and run to the village to fetch their meals. Once more, the significant act of sharing a meal, which should have been a communion between them, is only a superficial ritual since they continue to remain distant. Martin remarks proudly, “is there anything in this world as fine as eating dinner out in the open like this after a good morning’s work? I have done two ridges and a half more than any man in the village could do” (10). Martin’s words sound ironic to Mary’s ears for “a good day’s work” should have been done conjointly with his wife. Mary, instead, does not share Martin’s feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction since she realizes the futility of their efforts as she “wistfully” looks at the black ridges. Unlike Martin, Mary feels a true affinity with nature, so as she sits on the “grassy knoll” beside her husband she immerses herself in nature and achieves peace of mind and tranquility (10). She experiences the wonderful feeling of oneness, harmony, and balance that Wordsworth felt in unique moments of union with nature. “As the light smoke was rising from the freshly turned earth, a strange joy swept over her. It overpowered that other feeling of dread that had been with her during the morning” (10). For a moment, nature phases out the disappointment and restlessness that filled her heart. Mary believes that each being contains within him the whole intelligible world, while Martin’s way leads to the elimination of the All of which he is a part. Thus, according to her, the union between them will lead to the creation of the undifferentiated state when Heaven and earth were still united. Unity involves both working together in sowing the earth, and as has already been shown this is far from the truth where Martin and Mary are concerned. He fails to see that the “unified with the All and the One” is the only means to see “all things ‘in himself,’ or, more precisely, ‘as himself’ and not differentiated from himself.”¹⁴ Furthermore, he fails to see that opposites can coexist without ceasing to be different.

During the couple’s lunch break, O’Flaherty describes a brief but superficial union between Martin and Mary. The former lacks respect for the latter and declines to have her share with him in their first spring sowing. Everything Martin says and does is an assertion of his ego. This is reflected in the thoughts that race through his mind as “he looked around at his neighbors’ fields boastfully, comparing them with his own,” then “he looked at his wife’s little round black head and felt very proud of having her as his own” (10). His attempt to unite with her by “shyly taking her hand” does not arouse in Mary any feeling (10). After lunch they go their separate ways in order to continue their individual work. At day

¹⁴ Rudolph Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 66.

fall, the young men feel exhausted mainly because of antagonizing the forces of nature, and working against them.

The old man that makes his presence by the end of the story resembles the all-seeing Tiresias. He is described as “almost bent double over his thick stick” (11). He is “the representative of the previous generation,” and “a reminder of the cyclic nature of all things on earth from the seasons, to the seeds.”¹⁵ Moreover, he is able to pass judgment on the young men and expose whatever faults he perceives. He is also in a position to appraise the young couple’s work because of the wisdom he has gained over the years. Obviously, he has learned that the energy of the newly wed couple equates “the immemorial forces set stirring by the fecundation of the earth in spring.”¹⁶ This line of thought led A. Kelley to argue that O’Flaherty’s “attitude is not pagan but only an attempt to redress the unity between man and nature which has been weakened or overthrown by Christian interpretation whereby the supernatural replaced the natural instead of reinforcing it.”¹⁷ The old man’s experience shows that the youthful desire to conquer the earth and to subjugate the feminine principle should be forsaken since there is no way that man can win over nature—the earth and his psyche. After all, the cyclical process in nature goes on regardless of man and his activities. The old man has also learned that all should remember that all men are a part of nature, and that fighting her translates into fighting a part of themselves. He also reminds Martin that man is bound to the earth, which achieves ultimate triumph in death. Through the words of the wise old man, O’Flaherty incorporates ingeniously the metaphor of nature as the mother and all men as her prodigal sons who are destined to return one day to her bosom. He also predicts that the “breed is getting weaker” because man foolishly considers nature an enemy and fiercely fights her (11). Because the aged man’s attempt to convey his knowledge to the young generation goes unheeded, he tries to shock them into realization when he declares that they are losers because of their attitude. Indeed, the writer, like the old man, confirms that the prophecy has already come true and hopes that the old man’s advice that is reflected in his vision will be reconsidered. O’Flaherty is still hopeful that humanity can still be saved from spiritual death. If only man converts his body into a boat so as to reach eternal life, and hire him—the old man—as the spiritual master to stir it. In this way, man will cross “over the ocean of nescience, which is material existence,” and achieve the undifferentiated state of oneness.¹⁸

By sundown Martin’s “bones ached and he wanted to lie down and rest,” but his egotism drives him to insist that “it has been a good day’s work” and that Mary should be proud of him (11). It is obvious that Martin does not change, and that means he will continue to ignore nature throughout since the story aims at

¹⁵ Kelley 13.

¹⁶ Thompson 68.

¹⁷ Kelley 68.

¹⁸ Eliade, *Rites* 102.

presenting a schema of his life. He fails to see that his persistence to resist union with his wife is associated with rejecting the feminine principle and fighting *Terra Mater*, and that will inevitably lead to everlasting sorrow and despair. On the contrary, he is convinced that he has won his battle with nature and has subjugated the earth, and is filled with pride for the five ridges he has done. Ironically, he fails to envision himself as a slave who is doomed to serve the earth, "the next day and the next and all [his life], when Spring came [he] would have to bend [his] back and do it until [his] hands and bones got twisted with rheumatism" (12). In sharp contrast to Martin, Mary understands and appreciates the old man's words. The experience of the day has helped her attain a measure of wisdom for "it seemed to her that it was a great many years since they had set out that morning" (11). Mary, the writer suggests, is not only united with *Terra Mater*, but she is also capable of feeling the joy and harmony this union yields. Still, her happiness is incomplete because Martin refuses to hearken to what she says. Yet, the fact that she tries helps Mary overcome her exhaustion fully. Indeed, "all her dissatisfaction and weariness vanished from [her] mind with the delicious feeling of comfort that overcame her at having done this work with her husband" (12). Furthermore, the author refers to the fact that the "soil gives forgetfulness" to all who remain close to it (11). By implication, Mary refers to the same idea when she says, "night would always bring sleep and forgetfulness," in reference to the darkness and death associated with the earth (12). Both the old man and Mary know that the earth is the harbor man seeks because there he can find peace and oblivion. Although the story starts with spring, renewal, and life, it ends with a meditation on death, not as a final stage but as a transition to rebirth. In other words, the conceptual is reflected in the metaphorical as the darkness of the night. The light breaking through dawn parallels the burning fire that is covered by the ashes, and signifies rejuvenation springing from sterility. Furthermore, to underscore the conceptual and metaphorical framework of the story, O'Flaherty intertwines the concepts of life and death, fertility and sterility with the symbolic characters.

In conclusion, the story outlines a twofold perspective represented by Mary and Martin. On the one hand, the recognition that man should be a part of nature inspires harmony and balance in him; on the other, the choice of alienation by insisting to subject nature results in discord and pain. Within the writer's vision death as portrayed by the covered ashes is initiatory since it is linked with the commencement of life and is thus not an end. It coincides indisputably with the sowing of the earth every spring, as the story has outlined. "In rites and myths death is never final, but is always the condition *sine qua non* of a transition to another mode of being, a trial indispensable for regeneration; that is to the beginning of a new life."¹⁹ A union between Martin and Mary suggests an acceptance of the idea that man is a part of nature, and implies that both may undergo regeneration like nature. Certainly, O'Flaherty concurs with the old man, and he

¹⁹ Eliade, *Myths* 224.

set out to convey his vision as realistically as possible by blending psychology with myth and ritual. The choice of symbolism and the use of archetypes offered O'Flaherty the means to deal with a universal truth: man's connection to *Terra Mater*. By interweaving the archetypes, he defeats time since past, present, and future blend in the traditional rite of sowing the seed. Therefore, the story becomes a record of timed and repetitive events, though diachronic, in a universe where man continues to arrogate his domination over nature.