What *The Quiet Man* Said: Shifting Contexts and the Polysemy of the Text

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From Romanticism to Complexity

IN 1952, *THE QUIET MAN* WAS the top-grossing film of John Ford's career. It was nominated for best picture, supporting actor, screenplay, art direction, set design, and sound recording and went on to win Oscars for direction and color cinematography (Gallagher 278–79). The film continues to enjoy broad popularity. It is a perennial favorite on American television around St. Patrick's Day and on Irish television at Christmas. Released on video in 1985, it sold more than 200,000 copies within the first four years in Britain. In 1996, a readers' poll in *The Irish Times,* published in Dublin, proclaimed it to be the best Irish film ever made (Gibbons 4).

Despite its popularity, from the time of its premiere through the end of the twentieth century, *The Quiet Man* faced criticism as the essence of the "emerald-green romanticism" (H. Kennedy 24). The film was derided as "one of the plagues of March, right up there with green beer, plastic leprechauns, and Brendan Behan anecdotes" (MacKillop 169). Like many Hollywood films set in Ireland, *The Quiet Man* was criticized for presenting a simplistic, romantic image of a country as seen through the eyes of a nostalgic outsider. These critics viewed *The Quiet Man* simply as an image encoded by director John Ford, the son of Irish immigrants, to be decoded by a theorized audience of Irish immigrants and their Irish American children. Discussions of the film were mostly limited to this nostalgic preferred reading that relied on romantic agrarian visions of Ireland and broad stereotypes of the Irish people, often referred to as "stage Irishness" due to the theatrical roots of this performative style (Lourdeaux 109; Rockett, Gibbons, and Hill 196; Slide 82–83).

Faced with *The Quiet Man*'s continued broad popularity over the past fifty years, some scholars have begun to reevaluate the film. The aspects earlier described as stereotype have become "comic excesses" that articulate the sense of loss felt by Irish emigrants (Pettitt 64). Dismissing Ford's film as a romantic bit of "émigré nostalgia" is now viewed as "missing the point," for the film contains contradictions and excesses that ask viewers to question the nostalgic picture postcard narrative that is placed before them (65–66). The film now offers a new complexity as Ford departs from his normal rigid structure and narrative coherence to instead engage in a "dialogue with his narrative structures—a contrast between illusion and reality and a discourse on the illusion of illusion" (McLoone 52–53). After noting that critic Richard Schickel once called the film "among the most witless and vulgar movies ever made by a supposed major director," Gibbons proceeds to devote a 120-page monograph to situating the film as a critical turn in Ford's work (18–19). *The Quiet Man*'s inclusion of Irish myths and stereotypes enables the director to question the dynamics by which they operate and the realities they purport to reflect. Ford's Irishness

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became central to his later task of "retriev(ing) the American dream by transferring its sympathies from White European legacies of colonial expansion to the rights of other cultures and indigenous peoples" (Gibbons 104).

In light of these recent reevaluations of *The Quiet Man,* this article examines the film as a polysemic text in which a nostalgic preferred reading might coexist with more recently theorized dialogic readings that call the preferred reading into question. This polysemic complexity is the key to understanding the broad popularity of Ford's film with a variety of audiences.

Intertextuality and the Viewing Experience as Mosaic

According to Fiske, any meaning, including the preferred reading, occurs when the text is activated or made meaningful by the social and intertextual relations that surround the viewer's experience with the text (3). Fiske sees a text's popularity as linked to the text's openness or the extent to which the text exists as a site of struggle that invites challenges to a dominant or preferred meaning (5). The viewing experience may be best understood as a mosaic of content, medium, and context. It is out of the relationship of these three parts that meaning is formed as texts metonymize or convert complex issues into understandable metonyms, forms, or symbols and provide subject positions for the audience (Brummett 110–12). Although content and medium remain constant, differing localized experiences and expectations of the medium may bring about shifts in the context portion of the mosaic. These contextual shifts may result in a variety of potential meanings.

For each viewer, the story of the titular Quiet Man's return to Ireland becomes activated through his or her individual localized experiences and perceptions of Ireland. Through the theorized preferred reading, the activated text may then function as a symbol in which Irish American viewers might see an articulation of their own relationship with an Irish homeland. Similarly, the film's broader popularity in America may lie in the meanings that are activated through an intertextual relationship with the secondary text of the immigrant experience as a national myth. This level of intertextuality seems likely for the film's popularity to have extended beyond viewers of Irish American heritage. Although the idea of the Quiet Man as a symbol of both the specific Irish American experience and the more general immigrant experience may explain the film's broad appeal with American audiences, such a reading of the text still ignores the success of the film in Ireland and fails to explain the pleasure the text provides for an Irish viewer (McAleer 12). The popularity of *The Quiet Man* with Irish audiences may relate to Fiske's notion of the text as a site of struggle for meaning that encourages Irish viewers to challenge the preferred reading through the secondary text of their localized experiences.

Through a close reading of the film, this article reveals *The Quiet Man* to contain textual cues that encourage viewers to construct meaning through their differing contextual relationships with the text. For Irish American viewers, the meaning of the text relies on what *The Quiet Man* says, the preferred reading, and how that reading functions as a symbol for the viewer's Irish American experience. This preferred reading might also be extended more broadly to American viewers through textual cues that encourage the activation of meaning through the broader myth of the American immigrant experience and the Western genre. For the Irish viewer, the meaning of the text relies on those things about which *The Quiet Man* whispers or remains silent, textual cues that encourage the activation of meaning through the history of Irish political and economic struggles, as well as the history of censorship in Irish society. In each case, it might be said that the experience of viewing *The Quiet Man* metonymizes the complex issues of Irish history and the immigrant experience into a form that has been used by a wide range of viewers to make meaning through the context of their localized experiences. By examining how a range of meanings can derive from a viewer's contextual

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relationship with the text, this article reveals *The Quiet Man* to be the site of a number of rich and complex readings, which challenge earlier simplified readings and more accurately explain the enormous popularity of the film.

A Consistent Narrative Text

If Jameson is correct, and there are a finite number of interpretations in a textual situation, then it seems any constraint on meaning relies on those elements of the textual situation that remain constant (30–31). The constant would be the discrete text of the film. The variables that would create changes in meaning would be the social and intertextual relations of the viewers. To accurately describe how these changes in meaning might occur, it seems useful to begin by outlining the narrative content of the film that will remain constant.

The Quiet Man is the story of Sean Thornton (John Wayne), an American ex-boxer who returns to Innisfree, the Galway village where he was born. He and his mother fled Ireland for America when he was just a boy. He has returned with the hopes of buying back the family farm and settling in the village. At first, he is welcomed into the community by many of the locals who remember his family. Trouble begins when he buys the land from the Widow Tillane (Mildred Natwick), a woman of Anglo-Irish heritage and one of the largest landholders in the village. Red Will Danaher (Victor McLaglen), another man in the village, has had his eye on the property. The sale to this American foils Red Will's plans to marry the Widow Tillane and consolidate their landholdings. As Sean Thornton settles into the family home and begins to replant the land, he meets a young woman and falls in love. He reluctantly goes through the proper channels of the local matchmaker Michaeleen Oge Flynn (Barry Fitzgerald) and arranges to meet the woman's family and ask permission to court. It turns out the woman is Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O'Hara), the sister of Red Will Danaher. Her brother, holding a grudge over the land deal, refuses to give his permission for Sean and Mary Kate to court.

Nonetheless, with the help of the matchmaker Michaeleen, Catholic priest Father Lonergan (Ward Bond), and Protestant Reverend Playfair (Arthur Shields), Red Will is tricked into believing that the Widow Tillane will marry him as soon as he gets his sister out of the house. Red Will therefore agrees to let Sean and Mary Kate marry. After the wedding when he finds out he has been tricked, Red Will refuses to hand over his sister's dowry to the new couple. This is fine with Sean, who cares little about the money, but Mary Kate refuses to consummate the marriage until her dowry is paid.

At first, Sean is reluctant to challenge Red Will. Sean has sworn off violence since he killed a man in his last fight as prizefighter in America. Over time, the absent dowry becomes a constant friction between Sean and Mary Kate. Finally, she decides to leave Sean and run away to Dublin. Faced with the loss of his wife, Sean demands that Red Will pay the dowry. Red Will refuses, and this leads to a fight, which in turn becomes a donnybrook, a community affair with all the men in town joining in the brawl. At the end of the film when Sean wins the fight, marital bliss is restored, and he is accepted into the community.

In the concluding scene of the film, even the Protestants and Catholics have learned to get along. When the Protestant Reverend Playfair is in danger of being removed by his bishop for having so few parishioners, the townsfolk pretend to be a crowd of Protestants waving to the visiting bishop as he rides through town in his motorcar.

These are the basic narrative events that remain constant for the viewing experience of all viewers. Through shifts in the contexts that each viewer brings to the viewing experience, different meanings may be created from these common narrative events. By first establishing some contextual frameworks that may activate meaning for three theorized audiences—Irish Americans, other Americans, and Irish viewers—this article can then proceed to review the narrative cues of the film in some detail and discuss some of the potential meanings that may be activated for viewers.

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An Irish American Context

On the surface, *The Quiet Man* seems to encourage a nostalgic preferred reading that mirrors an all-too-common romantic vision of Ireland as a "rural world divested of material cares" (Rockett 199). This mythic pastoral Ireland has been linked to Panofsky's notion of soft primitivism, which "conceives of primitive life as a golden age of plenty, innocence and happiness" (Rockett 198). This nostalgic vision of Ireland is assumed to appeal to the immigrant Irish and their Irish American children within the domestic audience of this Hollywood production. The existence of these viewers within an American domestic audience is directly a product of the great Irish diaspora that was brought on by the famine of the 1840s, and this community's presence complicates this theorized nostalgic preferred reading. Irish men and women accounted for over 35 percent of the immigrants who entered America from 1840 to 1860. By the 1870 census, the entire population of the United States was reported as 38.6 million, of which 1.9 million had been born in Ireland (Griffin 141–43). The impact of this large population of Irish immigrants on the United States would be multiplied by a variety of social factors, including the influence of the Catholic Church and intermarriage. By the second half of twentieth century, over forty million Americans would claim some portion of Irish ancestry (Goldstein and Hout 64). This suggests that for roughly one in seven Americans, the nostalgic preferred reading of *The Quiet Man* is activated through a personal narrative of their ancestors' flight from Ireland.

Although there may be a romantic image of Ireland as a lost homeland, with many of the characteristics Panofsky describes as soft primitivism, it seems hard to imagine these Irish American viewers seeing Ireland as some lost golden age of plenty (Rockett 188). The famine immigrants would have been well aware of the poor economic situation of those who remained behind. In fact, they used their own economic prosperity in America to aid their relatives in Ireland. These Irish immigrants would enclose over one million pounds annually in their letters home. Having relatives in America became an important economic strategy for Irish family survival. Children were raised for emigration with the hopes that their success in America would reduce economic pressures on the parents back home (Foster 76). For the children and grandchildren, Irish immigrant family narratives likely would have included stories of these economic realities and would seem to temper any romantic image of Ireland presented by *The Quiet Man*.

Likewise, political struggles in Ireland would remain an important issue for generations of Americans of Irish descent (Somerset Fry 238). Irish Americans have consistently worked on behalf of Ireland's interests through American politics. In 1897, the Irish National Alliance was formed to lobby against English interests in American politics. In 1920, Irish Americans opposed President Wilson's League of Nations as an instrument to increase the influence of the British Empire in international affairs. During World War II, the American Friends of Irish Neutrality supported Ireland's decision to stay out of the European conflict. As a result of pressure from Irish American groups, President Roosevelt warned Britain that any attempts to move against Ireland would have strong repercussions in the United States. More recently, from the late 1960s to the present, various Irish American organizations have worked on behalf of the peaceful settlement of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland (Griffin 22–28).

Although a nostalgic longing for a romanticized Irish homeland may explain part of *The Quiet Man*'s appeal to an Irish American viewer, any meaning activated through the context of Irish American history would have to take into account the famine, the immigration to America, and the ongoing political struggles in Ireland. The following first close reading suggests how these Irish American viewers might negotiate a more complex reading that includes both the nostalgic/romantic and political/economic meanings of the film.

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Narrative of a Romantic Image and Economic Reality

The Quiet Man opens with a picture postcard image of an Irish castle whose likeness is reflected across a lake in the foreground of the shot. This double image of the real and the reflection are captured in an Irish American reading of the film. Opening on this romantic vista to tell the story of Sean Thornton's return to Ireland suggests the character has a nostalgic view of the country. Over the course of the film's narrative, Sean will be forced to come to grips with both the image and the reality of Ireland if he is to truly reclaim his Irish heritage. He will confront the romantic image and economic realities of Ireland first through the reclaiming of his family land and second through the courting of Mary Kate Danaher.

When Sean arrives at the train station, the narrator, Father Lonergan, tells us that he did not look like an American tourist: "not a camera on him, and what was worse, not even a fishing rod." This opening description of Sean Thornton conflicts with the postcard image of the title sequence. If Sean has neither camera nor fishing rod, his journey will not likely be one of a tourist. He will somehow go beyond the romantic surface in his encounter with the country. At his arrival, the film cues the Irish American viewer to expect more than pretty pictures and fishing stories.

On the ride in from the train station to Innisfree, the viewer learns that Sean was born here. He reveals his identity to Michaeleen Oge Flynn, the carriage driver who meets him at the station. He tells of how he and his mother went to America and how she died there when he was only twelve. He goes on to describe his own life of hard work in the steel mills of Pittsburgh. His story is a testament to the harsh realities of life in America for the Irish immigrant. Whereas he describes the steel mills as a hell on earth, he calls the ruins of his family's farm in Innisfree "a little piece of heaven." In this way, the reality of the immigrant experience is contrasted with his nostalgic image of Ireland.

Likewise, this nostalgia for the country of his mother is reflected in his first glimpse of Mary Kate Danaher. As he stands looking out over the land on which he was born, he sees her driving a flock of sheep into the fields. In this moment, Mary Kate seems to be the very image of his mother, alive again, in the country of her youth. Throughout the remainder of the film, Sean's romantic pursuit of Mary Kate seems to be an effort to restore his connection to that past. This process of reconnecting with his Irish past will become the site of conflict over the meaning of that past. This courtship will cause Sean's nostalgic/romantic vision of Ireland to accommodate the political/economic realities of Ireland.

Sean begins his pursuit of Mary Kate by trying to speak to her after mass. He soon finds he will get nowhere unless he follows the customs of the Irish. He must slowly turn away from American ways and become more like the Irish. Sean follows custom and allows Michaeleen Oge Flynn to act as matchmaker. Michaeleen arranges the meeting with Mary Kate's brother, Red Will Danaher, so that Sean can ask for permission to court. At this meeting, the romance is shoved aside by the land conflict between Sean and Red Will. Sean's purchase of the land from the Widow Tillane has upset Red Will's plan to marry the widow and consolidate their land holdings. Mary Kate is asked to leave the room as the men discuss the situation. This scene could be read in terms of the powerless position of women in a patriarchal society or, more specifically, in Irish society. When viewed through an Irish American context, however, the scene seems to be about the shift from a romantic to an economic view of Ireland. Both Mary Kate and the romantic content of the scene are pushed off screen as the economic conflict of Sean and Red Will takes center stage.

Throughout the narrative of the film, romantic interests are clearly linked with economic interests. Red Will is convinced to allow the courtship to proceed only when he is tricked into believing the courtship will help his own relationship with the Widow Tillane. His interest in the widow is never presented in romantic

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Photo 1: Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O'Hara) and Sean Thornton (John Wayne) stoop to retrieve her dowry in *The Quiet Man* (1952). Photo courtesy of mptvimages.com.

terms. He seems far more interested in the economic union of their landholdings than in the marriage. It seems that economic issues are constantly overriding any attempts at romance in Ireland.

Once Sean and Mary Kate successfully trick Red Will and get to the altar, the viewer would expect their romance to continue, but once again, economic issues intrude. When Red Will learns he has been tricked, he denies Mary Kate her dowry of 350 pounds in gold. The couple goes home to live together on the Thornton ancestral farm, but Mary Kate refuses to consummate the marriage union without first having her dowry. For the Irish American viewer, the scene seems to say that the romantic Ireland can exist only if the economic issues are addressed. Mary Kate tells Sean as much: "Until you have my dowry, you haven't a bit of me, myself. I'll still be dreaming of those things that are my own as if I'd never met you." The film seems constantly to complicate the romantic image of Ireland with the issues of land ownership and economics. Similarly, for Irish American viewers, their romantic attachment to their own ancestral home is complicated through their personal histories of the famine and the economic conditions that caused their ancestors' immigration to America.

When Mary Kate decides to leave Innisfree for Dublin, Sean is pushed too far. Threatened with the loss of his wife, the American finally confronts Red Will and demands the dowry. Through the context of Irish American history, it is most interesting that Mary Kate's leaving Innisfree pushes Sean into action. Within the narrative, Mary Kate's decision to leave echoes the emigration of Sean's mother. For the Irish American viewer, Mary Kate's flight from Innisfree for economic reasons seems connected to the flight of their Irish ancestors to America.

The romantic and economic futures of the couple come together at the end of the film in a climactic fight between Sean and Red Will. Sean is forced to resort to violence in order to save his marriage from destruction. If the conflict between the romantic image and economic realities of Ireland is metonymized in the relationship between Sean and Mary Kate, then it becomes very interesting that the film ends with Sean choosing to fight for Mary Kate's dowry. In this climax, the romantic and economic conflict of the story is resolved through violence.

What meaning might be constructed by an Irish American viewer from this climactic fight? That Irish Americans must be willing to become involved on behalf of Irish economic rights?

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This reading would take into account the history of political activity by Irish Americans on behalf of Ireland. Such a meaning would reflect a much more complex reading of the film than is offered by simply attributing its appeal to a nostalgic/romantic vision of Ireland. Perhaps the appeal of *The Quiet Man* for Irish Americans is that the narrative reconciles their conflicted views of Ireland through the actions of the returning American. If the history and romance of Ireland are metonymized in the story of Sean Thornton and Mary Kate Danaher, then Sean's actions leading to a restoration of the marriage union and a happy ending might suggest to the viewer that Ireland's political and economic problems also can be solved through the involvement of Irish Americans.

American Context of Immigration and Assimilation

As noted earlier in this article, the popularity of *The Quiet Man* extends well beyond Irish Americans. This broader audience would not share the family narratives that would serve as the context from which the first suggested reading would arise. What contexts could this broader audience bring to *The Quiet Man* that would account for their pleasure in the viewing experience? The first context that might activate meaning for an American viewer is the immigrant experience as national myth. The ideas of immigration and American democracy have long been linked in our national debate. In 1797, when Congress sought to pay off Revolutionary War debts by charging a twenty-dollar naturalization tax, Jeffersonians argued that such charges were a repudiation of the republic's political heritage (Cose 9). In *Democracy in America,* Alexis de Tocqueville theorized that immigrant status was the great equalizer among citizens. The immigrant experience, having stripped notions of superiority over one another, allowed the people to embrace a sense of equality (J. Kennedy 16). In the posthumous publication of *A Nation of Immigrants,* President John F. Kennedy saw the hunger for freedom in new immigrants as strengthening "the fabric of liberty in American life" (62). Further, he encouraged continuing to welcome new immigrants as a way of reinvigorating our nation (125).

This context of the immigrant experience goes well beyond political rhetoric to the personal history of most Americans. As immigrants gave up their native languages and customs in search of greater economic opportunity, so they encouraged their children to continue this process of uniformity through education. This process became mythologized as the great American "melting pot" (Robertson 231–32).

It is within this context of the immigrant experience that meaning may be activated for a broader American audience. The myth of the melting pot personalizes this process by linking the individual to his own earlier immigrant ancestry, no matter how far removed. In this way, many Americans could potentially activate meaning through the context of the immigrant. This may be one of the contexts influencing their viewing experience of *The Quiet Man.* Through this context, the narrative of Sean Thornton might become a story of immigrant assimilation. Sean has fled America to escape the steel mills of Pittsburgh and the violence of the boxing ring. For many Americans, economic conditions and violence are also associated with the reasons their ancestors fled their homelands and immigrated to America. The process by which Sean slowly becomes part of the Innisfree community reflects the American melting pot myth.

Sean begins by holding on to his American ways and disregarding the normal Irish courtship procedures with little success. His success comes later, partially through his adoption of the Irish public courtship process and partially through a trick played on Red Will by Michaeleen, Father Lonergan, and the Reverend Playfair. Thus, Sean's opposition to Red Will's control of the courtship process must take place within the oppositional practices of his new community. For the American viewer, this is a story of assimilation in which the immigrant gets ahead in the new society by adopting both

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the public rituals and the private subversive tactics of the society.

By the end of the film, when Sean fights Red Will, the entire community seems willing to join in Sean's fight. This may suggest that Sean has been completely assimilated into their society. They share his fight for he is now one of them. This reading suggests the extent to which the contexts of the American immigrant experience and the melting pot myth might influence an American viewer's understanding of the film.

Intertextuality with the American Western

Another way meaning might be activated for the broader American audience is through the film genre of the Western. *The Quiet Man* has been labeled John Ford's "Irish Western" for the similarities between the film and his Western films (Rockett 151). To view *The Quiet Man* in relation to the Western, one must place the film within a web of intertextual meanings that derive from the notion of genre. Fiske notes that genres are both intertextual and pre-textual. He points to a set of shared conventions or formulaic elements that are derived from similarities of earlier texts and predate the existence of a new text. The Western genre is a set of "shifting provisional characteristics" that are derived from the intertextual relationships of a group of earlier films that share the American West as content (Fiske and Hartley 110–11). The Western genre creates pre-textual expectations for a viewer of *The Quiet Man*. The genre acts as an agreed code between a producer and a viewer. This code shapes the range of pleasures a viewer comes to expect in relation to a new text (112–14).

Specifically, the Western genre can be viewed as metonymizing the complex history of America's West into a code of binary oppositions of desert–garden, individual–community, nature–culture, and east–west (Tudor 184). Similar binary oppositions of wilderness–civilization, violence–law, nature–culture, individual–community, and east–west seem to exist in the romantic and political/economic images of the historic representation of Ireland. Ireland has been seen as a wilderness in opposition to England as civilization. The violence in Ireland has been taken out of a political context and explained as part of the nature or character of the Irish people. This sets up Irish violence as nature and the English rule as culture. The desire of the Irish to leave the United Kingdom can be viewed as individualistic as opposed to communal. The east–west opposition also works very well, for the west of Ireland was historically wilderness, or land that was not under civilizing English rule, as Dublin and the east of Ireland were (Rockett 193–249).

Clearly, the most important cue in *The Quiet Man* encouraging the viewer to make meaning through the secondary text of the Western film genre is the presence of John Wayne in the production. The broad popularity of the film in the United States may result from the expectations of the audience based on their previous experiences with Western films starring Wayne. Wayne's image as an actor has in large part been shaped by the nine Westerns he made with Ford. The production of *The Quiet Man* falls at the midpoint of these Western collaborations. In 1952, when the film was released, an American viewer would have come to know Wayne through Ford's Western films: *Stagecoach, Fort Apache, 3 Godfathers, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,* and *Rio Grande.* For later viewers, Wayne's image as a Western hero would continue to grow through later Ford films, including *The Searchers, The Horse Soldiers, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,* and *How the West Was Won* (Gallagher 526–42).

There are a number of elements in Wayne's portrayal of Sean Thornton that could be read through the secondary texts of his other Western roles. He comes to the west of Ireland to settle land. From settlers versus Native Americans to ranchers versus homesteaders, most of the conflicts of the Western genre focus on the issue of land ownership. In buying the land, Sean has intruded on Red Will Danaher, both a native Irishman and a sheep farmer. In this situation, Sean is the homesteader who is in conflict with Red Will, both a native and a rancher. The issue of land in Irish history and

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the narrative of *The Quiet Man* seem to strongly promote a viewer's use of the Western as a secondary text.

In addition, three scenes of Sean on a horse may encourage the viewer to associate the film with the Western. When Red Will has refused to allow Sean to court his sister, Sean is seen wildly jumping fences on horseback. The second time, Sean outrides all of the other men in a horse race and claims the Widow Tillane's bonnet as the prize, thus forcing a jealous Red Will to be tricked into allowing Sean to court his sister. Finally, when Mary Kate has gone to take the train to Dublin, Sean races to the station on horseback to bring her home. It would seem difficult for a viewer to watch these scenes without somehow referencing a variety of other images of Wayne from the Western genre.

In the same way, the career of director John Ford may also contribute to an intertextual relationship with the genre of the Western. Ford directed more than 50 films in the genre from *The Tornado* in 1917 to *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1964 (Gallagher 503–43). For some portion of the audience, Ford's Western films may function as a secondary text and create a set of pre-textual expectations that they bring to the viewing experience. The relationship of *The Quiet Man* to the Western genre might encourage viewers to metonymize the complex history of Ireland. Once the broader history is reduced as in a Western, it can be solved through the use of violence. The secondary text of the Western may encourage the viewer to expect Sean Thornton to seek a violent solution. The climactic fight fulfills the viewers' expectation of violence and may account for the pleasure derived from this scene.

The Irish Context

Having suggested possible contexts for the film's Irish American and broader American viewers, there remains the contextualizing of the film for the Irish viewer. To begin with, it is important to note that these categories of theorized viewers and contexts are not discrete, and there is the potential for much overlapping context. For example, the Irish American viewer may also activate meaning through the context of the immigrant myth and an intertextual relationship with the Western genre. Likewise, these contexts and intertextual relationships may also have influence on the Irish viewer. Regardless, there remain two contexts that seem to have bearing on the potential meaning of the film specifically for an Irish viewer.

The first of these contexts is the history of Ireland's political struggle with England that dates back to the Norman invasion of the twelfth century. In 1175, Henry II signed a treaty with the Irish high king Rory O'Connor, beginning the history of a divided Ireland (Foster 306). For the next eight hundred years, England's rule of Ireland would be challenged through numerous popular rebellions. England's control of most of Ireland would end in 1922 with the signing of the partitioning treaty that created the Republic from the twenty-six counties in the south while retaining English rule of the six in the north (Corish 244). The long history of this dispute over Irish soil must be taken into account in any representation of Ireland.

The history of the English occupation of Ireland has been deeply imprinted on the nature of Irish society. Control of Irish farmland by absentee English landlords led to a tenant farmer agricultural system that increased the value of land in Irish culture. The development of the tenant farming class and the famine of the 1840s resulted in structural changes in the Irish family (Marlow 88–120). Because poor subsistence farmers would be reluctant to divide up their meager land holdings among their children, the choice of marriage or emigration for the next generation became linked to the availability of land (Brown 15–22). For the Irish viewer, the meaning of any narrative such as *The Quiet Man,* which articulates the issue of land ownership, would seem to be activated through this context of English rule and land ownership in Irish history.

Although the Irish viewer may create meaning through much that is articulated by the text, the long history of censorship in Ireland may create a second context that specifically cues

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an Irish viewer to the issues on which the preferred meaning of the text whispers or remains silent. The history of film censorship in Ireland dates back to the silent era when the English government would regularly ban films that dealt directly with the politics of Irish rebellion (Rockett 12–14). The censorship of film and literature continued to be a common feature of Irish culture after Ireland won independence from England. The newly formed Irish government and the Catholic Church joined forces in the Censorship Act of 1923 to protect the public from "indecent, obscene, or blasphemous material" (McIlroy 21). Censorship was also used by the government to limit outside influence in the country. Over the first half of the twentieth century, the banning of serious works by American, English, and European authors reached enormous proportions. In 1954, more than one thousand books were banned in a single year. Although historian Terence Brown views this censorship as primarily a "weapon of cultural protectionism," this weapon was used to silence critics at home as well (152). The widespread use of censorship by the Irish government developed into a "censorship culture" whose efforts ranged from the total banning of abortion information to arguing that a broadcast commercial for a book of short stories by Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams would "incite crime and tend to undermine the authority of the State" (Meehan 31).

In such a censorship culture, attempts to banish certain ideas from texts may create conditions that encourage viewers to decode meanings differently. The viewer will reproduce a dominant reading of the text only if he or she is comfortable with the dominant ideology (Fiske and Hartley 64). When encountering a censored text, the viewer is still free to reject the dominant ideology that ordered the censorship. This may cause the viewer to read the text oppositionally through the context of the censorship act. This context may actually heighten the viewer's attention to those censored meanings that the preferred reading seeks to silence.

The act of censorship complicates reading classifications such as "preferred" and "oppositional." Censorship is not the act of the filmmaker or author. The censors place themselves between the author and the reader during any encounter with the text. The reader is therefore free to read in opposition to the censor, while still decoding the text in a fashion preferred by the author. Authors and filmmakers have resisted censorship through a variety of techniques that encourage the reader or viewer to "read between the lines." The use of techniques such as allegory, irony, or metaphor in the text relies on the very polysemic nature of the text. Although the text's preferred reading seems to be in line with the dominant ideology of the censor, the text may also be used by the reader to create a latent or hidden meaning that undermines the dominant ideology. In such a reading, the relationship between the author and reader may be as "co-conspirators in the communicative process" (Jansen 192–200).

Political Struggles and Hidden Meanings

An Irish viewer may be cued to search for hidden meanings in *The Quiet Man* through the listing of the official Irish censor in the credits and a variety of textual cues that the film "whispers." During the course of the film, it is revealed that Sean Thornton was previously a prizefighter and left America because he had killed a man in the ring. The presence of a hidden violent act in the text seems to be a key to understanding how the film deals with the less romantic aspects of its representation, including its representation of Ireland's long political struggle with England. How the film represents these elements may be what Fiske and Hartley would refer to as the film's "latent meaning" that is also encoded into the dominant code of the text (105). Both the articulated and the latent or hidden meaning in *The Quiet Man* may have a strong connection to the localized experience of politics, violence, and censorship for the Irish viewer and may account for the film's popularity in Ireland.

Just as the Western film proves a secondary text for American viewers familiar with the Western genre, the literary source material for *The Quiet Man* may also serve as a secondary

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text for Irish viewers. The source material of *The Quiet Man* was a short story from *Green Rushes,* a collection of stories by Irish writer Maurice Walsh. As Gibbons notes, *The Quiet Man* was one of five interconnected stories in *Green Rushes* that are set during the Irish War of Independence and its aftermath. These stories, though set in the bucolic atmosphere of the rural west of Ireland, are "haunted" by the violence of the war that remains suppressed or hidden below the surface of the narratives. In Walsh's story "The Quiet Man," the returning Irishman is haunted not by a death in a boxing ring but by his actions in the war (34–36). The secondary text of Walsh's original stories presents a context through which Irish viewers might read the film. A close reading of the film reveals how the issues of Irish–English politics, violence, and censorship may activate meaning for the Irish viewer.

The first cue to an Irish viewer that the film will speak to these issues is the choice of Father Lonergan as the film's narrator. Immediately, this narrative convention creates the expectation that the story will be told from an Irish point of view. When Father Lonergan first meets Sean Thornton, this point of view comes to the surface. Lonergan recounts the history of Sean's family and introduces the history of Irish–English political struggles into the film when he tells Sean, "I knew your people. Your grandfather, he died in Australia in a penal colony. And your father, he was a good man too, bad accident that. . . ."

For the Irish viewer, this moment may encourage the use of Irish–English political struggles as a context for the viewing experience. Father Lonergan tells us that he thought well of Sean's grandfather. Obviously, Lonergan did not view the man as a criminal. The mention of the English penal colony in Australia would cue the Irish viewer to interpret the grandfather's crime to be of a political nature. Likewise, the vague mention of the father's death in an "accident" seems to hint that there may be more to that story as well. These two mentions go by quickly, but they might cue the Irish viewer that there will be a whispered or hidden political meaning in the film. It is interesting to note that immediately after making his comments, Father Lonergan asks Sean if he would mind walking ahead so that he can discuss a private matter with Michaeleen Oge Flynn. Having demonstrated Father Lonergan's political sympathies, the film may now encourage the Irish viewer to wonder as to the content of this private conversation. Within the context of censorship in Irish society and Michaeleen's Irish Republican Army (IRA) past, as detailed in Walsh's original stories, it is possible that the Irish viewer might conclude that such a private conversation is also of a political nature.

Accordingly, the presence of Michaeleen supports this conclusion as the film continues. Twice in the film, Michaeleen is linked to the political struggle. Michaeleen takes leave of Sean and exits one scene by saying he's "off to the pub to visit with the lads and talk a little treason." Again, at the climax of the film, when Michaeleen and the lads, including former IRA commander Hugh Forbes, show up for the fight, Red Will growls, "So the IRA is in this too!"

Indeed, the Irish viewer's formation of political meaning is supported later in the film when Father Lonergan and Michaeleen become involved in a conspiracy to aid Sean in the courtship of Mary Kate. On the day of the great horse race, the pair orchestrates the tricking of Red Will Danaher. Michaeleen and Lonergan have already convinced Red Will that Sean may court the Widow Tillane, since Red Will has denied him permission to court Mary Kate. When Sean wins the race and captures the Widow Tillane's bonnet, Red Will is convinced that the American is after the rest of the Widow's land. Michaeleen and Lonergan convince Red Will that the widow would marry him if he could first get Mary Kate out of the house. In this way, Red Will is tricked into allowing Sean to court his sister.

Although on the surface this scene might be viewed purely as a romantic conspiracy, the issue of land is ever present. The contexts of the Irish political struggle and censorship may encourage the Irish viewer to go beyond the surface and seek a hidden meaning to this conspiracy. From this viewpoint, it is interest-

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ing that Red Will is convinced to give up his Irish sister Mary Kate to Sean Thornton in order to gain closer ties with the Anglo-Irish Widow Tillane. Each of these characters may function as symbols that combine to metonymize the political history of Ireland. By examining each character, we may better understand how the film activates meaning through the complex Irish political history for an Irish viewer.

Earlier in the film, when Sean first meets the Widow Sarah Tillane, she recounts her family history in Ireland as going back to the Anglo-Norman settlers. From an Irish viewpoint, the widow can be read as representing the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class. The period of Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland began in 1690, after King William's forces defeated the Jacobites at the Battle of the Boyne. The Widow Tillane is a descendent of the English Protestant landlords who controlled large portions of Irish agricultural land. These Anglo-Irish formed the dominant social and political class in Ireland for the next two hundred years, until the rise of the Catholic Nationalist movement in the late nineteenth century (Foster 134–73).

Throughout the film, the relationship of Red Will and the Widow Tillane is focused on his desire to expand his land holdings. In this context, Will's decision to give up his Irish sister in return for closer ties to the Anglo-Irish Widow Tillane can be read as a metonymy of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The Irish who felt loyalty to the English crown gave up the twenty-six counties of the south in order to establish Northern Ireland with a strong tie to England. In this context, Red Will can be viewed as representing these Anglo-Irish loyalists, and thus, the conspiracy against him in this matter takes on a political meaning. This political reading seems to be encouraged by a musical cue in the film. When the scene opens, two men, who will later be identified by Red Will as IRA men, are playing a traditional Irish revolutionary ballad titled "The Rising of the Moon" (Fallis 100). This song that tells of a historic nighttime rebellion against English rule would be very familiar to Irish viewers. The presence of the song cues these Irish viewers to link the nighttime raids of Irish rebels on English soldiers to the well-disguised trick that is being played on Red Will by Father Lonergan and Michaeleen Oge Flynn.

Of course, the scene in which the marriage papers are signed invites a further linking of the narrative to the treaty signing of 1921. After the marriage vows have been taken and the marriage is complete, Red Will (the loyalist) announces his intended union with the Widow Tillane only to be spurned by her. It is then that Red Will realizes he has been tricked and refuses to pay Mary Kate's dowry. Sean declines to fight him over this economic issue and is satisfied with his romantic union with Mary Kate. However, when the couple get home, trouble begins over the missing dowry.

As cited earlier in the discussion, in an Irish American reading of the film, Sean's courting of Mary Kate can be viewed as his seeking to reestablish connection with his mother and his Irish heritage. For an Irish viewer, Mary Kate may function strongly as a symbol for Ireland itself. The symbolizing of Ireland as a woman has its beginnings in the Celtic view of nature as feminine. The use of a woman to represent Ireland grew under English penal-law censorship in the eighteenth century, when the rhetoric of political rebellion could be disguised through an allegory of Mother Ireland as a helpless victimized woman (MacDowell 10–11). These feminine representations of Ireland continued in Irish culture, from the long-suffering mother of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* to the prevalent Irish tourist-board images of the red-haired Irish colleen.

This representation of the nation as a woman becomes an important context through which the Irish viewer activates the meaning of Mary Kate Danaher. After the wedding, Mary Kate tells Sean, "Until you have my dowry, you haven't a bit of me, myself. I'll still be dreaming of those things that are my own as if I'd never met you." As she makes this statement about her missing dowry, she separates herself from Sean by means of a half door. Sean and the viewer see half a woman. If Mary Kate is read through the historic representations of Mother Ireland, then Mary Kate (Mother Ireland) is

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divided by the door (a border) and denied her dowry (economic security). Through the political context, this moment seems once again to represent the situation in Ireland after the partitioning Treaty of 1921. The northern industrially developed counties of Ireland were separated from the Republic of the south. The Republic was denied the economic base from which it could draw security. Mary Kate is refusing to consummate the marriage; as such, she is questioning the marriage union and denying the existence of a future generation. Similarly, the partitioning of Ireland undermines the existing union of the Republic and denies the economic future of the next generation.

Narrative of the Returning Irish and Political Resolutions

A political context can also explain why an Irish viewer would identify with the struggle of the American Sean Thornton against the Irishman Red Will Danaher. Although Sean is constantly referred to as "the Yank," he is of Irish birth. For the Irish viewer, Sean is one of the 43 percent of Irish-born men and women who were forced to leave Ireland out of economic necessity in the years following the famine. The rhetoric of the Irish Nationalist movement laid claim to these people as Irish. Those who immigrated to America and elsewhere were often referred to as "the nation beyond the seas" or "the greater Ireland" (Brown 29). In this context, the story of Sean Thornton's return could be viewed as a romantic fantasy of Irish emigrants returning to fight and reclaim the land of their birth. Sean as a character is linked to the heroes of Irish rebellion. When Sean first enters the village pub, the men there are suspicious of him, until an old man remembers the name Thornton. The old man, like Father Lonergan in an earlier scene, asks if Sean's grandfather was old Sean Thornton, who died in a penal colony in Australia. Once Sean confirms this proud rebel lineage, all of the men in the pub crowd around the bar and drink with him. The scene ends with yet another Irish rebel ballad as they sing "The Wild Colonial Boy," a song that tells the story of an Irish rebel who fled Ireland for Australia, where he was hunted by English soldiers. Through a combination of Sean's lineage and the use of this song, an Irish viewer might come to identify this "Yank" as a returning Irish rebel.

Through the context of Irish history, the narrative of *The Quiet Man* seems to metonymize the complex political and economic struggles in Ireland. Sean (the returning exiled Irishman) tricks Red Will (the loyalist) into a marriage contract (the partitioning Treaty of 1921), only later to be forced to fight (the continuing rebellion) for Mary Kate's (Mother Ireland) dowry (economic security and Northern Ireland). After the fight, the family is reunited as Red Will and Sean patch up their differences and sit down to a meal prepared by Mary Kate. The economic issue resolved, both the returning exile and the loyalist enjoy a peaceful coexistence. In the final scene, Red Will begins the courtship of Widow Tillane. The economic issues resolved, the loyalist is now free to express his affection for an Anglo-Irish heritage.

Although the film seems to encourage the Irish viewer to reduce the meaning of the conflicts in Ireland to pure economic issues, one of the most interesting aspects of this reading is its treatment of the Protestant–Catholic conflict, a similar reduction or metonymy that is often part of the discussion of Irish history. From the Jacobites' defeat at the Battle of the Boyne to the recent "troubles" in Belfast, the Irish–English conflict has continually been categorized as between Protestants and Catholics rather than as between loyalists and nationalists. In reality, the rise of Irish Catholicism in the late nineteenth century seems more closely related to the church's stance on the economic issues of land reform and private property than to any theological differences with organized Protestantism (Brown 15–22). When the history of English colonialism and Irish rebellion is reduced to an ill-defined religious conflict, such economic issues remain hidden. *The Quiet Man* seems to invite the viewer to question previous religious characterizations of the conflict.

The Protestant Reverend Playfair befriends the Catholic Sean Thornton and keeps secret Sean's violent past as a prizefighter. He also

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assists Father Lonergan and Michaeleen in tricking Red Will into allowing the marriage to take place. Throughout the film, Reverend Playfair is shown to be a respected and well-liked member of the community. A subplot in the film involves the impending visit of his superior, a Protestant bishop who wants to transfer him from Innisfree because of the lack of parishioners. In the last scene of the film, everyone, including Father Lonergan, who borrows a scarf to hide his Roman Catholic collar, lines the road pretending to be a Protestant well-wisher, and they all cheer as the bishop rides through town. The Irish viewer would likely read this scene to be a direct challenge to the often used Protestant–Catholic reduction of the historic English–Irish conflicts. *The Quiet Man* offers pleasure to the Irish viewer by refuting this common reduction. In its place, Irish viewers are encouraged to activate a variety of meanings through their local knowledge of the economic and political history of Ireland.

Conclusion

As *The Quiet Man* refutes the Protestant–Catholic reduction of meaning in the English–Irish conflict, so this article has sought to refute similar critical reductions of the film to a single meaning and to explore how the more recently theorized dialogic readings of the text might operate. Early readings seem to limit the site of meaning to the film as a discrete text. On a theoretical level, these readings deny the intertextual influence of secondary texts, the role of the reader in creating meaning, and the polysemic nature of popular culture. Understanding the broad box-office appeal of the film seems to call for a critical framework that extends beyond the discrete text to suggest how the film might be read by a variety of viewers within such a broad audience.

The viewing experience of *The Quiet Man* offers each viewer an interaction with a mosaic of content, medium, and context. As Brummett suggests, it is out of the relationship of these three parts that meaning is formed (110–11). Although the medium and the content remain constant, the contexts that each viewer brings to the experience are shifting. For Irish American viewers, meaning may be activated through the contexts of their Irish American family history. Other American viewers may create meaning through the contexts of the immigrant experience, the American melting pot myth, and the conventions of the Western genre. Finally, Irish viewers may activate the meaning of the film through their local knowledge of Irish history, including the issues of land ownership and influence of censorship in Irish society.

This article has sought to present *The Quiet Man* as one of Ford's most complex texts in relation to its audience. Although this theorized audience can be divided into these categories of Irish American, American, and Irish, an actual viewer's experience is not similarly limited. The context of the Western genre could function for any viewer familiar with the Western. The context of the immigrant experience common to Irish Americans and Americans might also affect Irish viewers whose relatives immigrated to America. Finally, the history, economics, and politics that form a context for the Irish viewer may likewise activate meaning for any politically aware viewer. Rather than view these contexts as discrete secondary texts, it seems more useful to see them as further examples of the diffuse texts that each viewer brings to his or her individual viewing experience. It is through interaction with these numerous diffuse texts that each viewer constructs his or her own context. It is through these shifting contexts that the consistent content and medium of *The Quiet Man* derives its polysemic nature. By narrowly limiting the film to a romantic preferred reading, many scholars ignore the polysemic nature of the text and thereby deny both the contexts and the variety of human experience by which viewers derive meaning and pleasure from the film-viewing experience.

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