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Rhetoric of Popular Culture

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The Butcher's Apron lyrical analysis

The song I chose to analyze for this assignment was *The Butcher's Apron* by the Irish band The Wolfe Tones. The band is comprised of Brian Warfield, Noel Nagle and Tommy Byrne. The band's name comes from Theobald Wolfe Tone, the man regarded as the father of Irish republicanism.¹ The Wolfe Tones' songs are known throughout Ireland for their mixture of traditional Irish music and rebel music. A rebel song is one that protests against the perceived establishment. In Irish rebel music the establishment is the English Empire, as England has in the past oppressed and subjugated the Irish people to imperial rule. Even today there exists animosity due to Northern Ireland being a part of the United Kingdom, thus dividing the island of Ireland. This is where the title comes from. The term "butcher's apron" is an Irish republican term for the Union Jack, the flag of Britain. The lyrics of *The Butcher's Apron* originate from a poem written by Henry Dupre LaBouchere, a french immigrant to England in the 19th century who later became a politician and writer.² I believe Warfield decides to use this poem as the basis for his song because it is critical of the English Empire which compliments his agenda, and because LaBouchere supported Irish nationals. The verses have been "remixed" by Warfield in order to appear more song friendly. The song does not present a story or a narration, but rather is presented as a history lecture mixed in

with emotion. Being a rebel song, this tune would obviously portray a negative image of the English Empire. Warfield does just that, his lyrics list the conquered nations and the suffering that was brought to the people by the Crown. Warfield, the lead singer and songwriter, starts the song off by asking a question, “where is the flag of England,” and quickly responds with “go north, south, east or west.” A reference to the vastness of the once global English Empire, stretching from New Zealand to Africa and beyond.

“The Maori often cursed it with his bitterness dying breath, and the Arab hath hissed his hatred as he spat at its folds in death, and the helpless Hindu feared it, and the Kenyan did the same, and the Irish blood hath stained it, with a deep indelible stain.”

This prominent verse shows the style Warfield uses in his ballad. A concoction of fact with diction that appeal to the listener's sympathy. The verse “wherever there's feeble races...you'll find the butcher's apron,” suggests that Warfield views the English as having a racial-superiority mentality. “Wherever there's wealth to plunder or land to be possessed...the English flag is there” heavily implies that the English are solely seeking foreign lands to exploit their natural resources for their own personal glory. Christian missionaries are also mentioned in the tune's lyrics as shown in the phrase “go where brute forces triumphed, and hypocrisy makes its lair.” The word hypocrisy references the fact that the conquerers considered themselves Christian, yet constantly violated their own commandments in their colonial conquest. *The Butcher's Apron* is not all ambiguous and it would be very difficult to misinterpret the meaning. The whole song is a satirical ode to the authoritarian nature of the English Empire from the perspective of the oppressed.

The conditions the speaker are painfully spelled out with each phrase. As an Irishman, the speaker sees himself as a jaded citizen of a proud country, tired of the actions taken by England against him. The Irish have seen themselves as the ripped tatters of the said “butcher’s apron” for as long as memory serves. The message of oppression bleeds through the words and rhythm of the song, creating a sort of mental tapestry to marvel at as the beat drives on. Freedom to speak in the form of song has allowed this medium of expression to cross any politically correct lines it could cross if it was merely an oral appeal. The message is directed both at the English who knowingly recall their actions abroad, as well as to anyone who will listen. Creating awareness is the best way to garner support for any cause, and by putting it to a catchy tune and providing some culturally relevant melody it carries more weight than expected.

Blatant use of emotional rhetoric provides the element of pathos to the lyrics. Using terms such as “bloody”, “feeble races” and “ruthless slaughter” certainly don't make any logical or credible appeals. It aims right for the heartstrings and sensibility of the listener. The song is logical in the sense of history and facts pertaining to the Irish citizens and how they have been treated by the English, and ethos is evident in the artist of the lyrics. The songwriter feels he is entitled to his opinion in the song because of his nationality, and rightfully so. Warfield is credible in his own right as an Irishman. These appeals are arranged in levels of relevance. The least relevant is logos, as most of the incidents in the lyrics are somewhat common knowledge and don't need to be explained. This is the underlying theme. Ethos is above logos as it would be silly to hear this song or read the lyrics in any other style than a traditional Irish song and written by anyone else. To have an effective story told, the storyteller is more important than expected. The Pope cannot be held credible in his office if

he were to moonlight as a freelance matchmaker. He wouldn't be taken seriously. As any good Irishman could tell you, the idea of the Pope is no laughing matter. Lastly, pathos tops the levels of appeals as the most relevant with its heavy-hitting persuasive messages. The lyrics aim to get the listener thinking about how they perceive the English and its government. *The Butcher's Apron* paints such an anything-but-rosy picture of the ruling nation of the United Kingdom that it's difficult to walk away from the experience with a remotely positive shred of thought to cling to.

Traditional Irish music is upbeat and seemingly excitable, rousing emotions simply through feverish tempo and cheery instruments. This ironic twist on the delivery of the message makes the lyrics much more poignant. It takes a bit of sarcasm in the up-tempo and major chords to give the message a tasty bit of intrigue. It almost becomes a drinking song that any happy or even angry Irishman could partake in, clanging foamy chilled glasses of Guinness together while stumbling through the words, knowingly singing of terrible occasions. It reminds me of "Ring Around the Rosy", a child's play song with a dystopian meaning but sung with a tauntingly silly tune.

The song is one of the more popular Wolfe Tones songs. The Wolfe Tones are not that well known within the United States, but everyone is familiar with them in Ireland. Due to the historical conflicts between the Republic of Ireland and the English Crown, the lyrics can definitely be seen as controversial. British unionists and royalists are likely to not take kindly to the tone and mockery of their nation's symbol. This has already been proven, as an Ulster unionist politician complained to the Irish airline Aer Lingus for offering The Wolfe Tones as in-flight music. Comparing the lyrics of the songs to Al-Qaeda and Osama Bin-Laden, Roy Beggs successfully convinced Aer Lingus to remove the songs.³ Clearly this event

demonstrates that the song can most certainly be seen as “doing harm” by a certain group, while it is considered speaking truth to power by another. What Beggs fails to fathom is that it is vital to empathize with Warfield and The Wolfe Tones. As understanding their perspective will create more dialogue and room for compromise between the two conflicting parties. If the English unionists will not heed the cries of those who have been under their boot, relations will certainly not improve. An oppressed people will naturally harbor contempt for their enslavers, and when strive to be free will be labeled “terrorists.” If Warfield's intention is to stir up controversy and discussion, this piece would accomplish that goal.

The Butcher's Apron lyrics

Where is the flag of England? Go North, South, East or West. Wherever there's wealth to plunder or land to be possessed. Wherever there's feeble races to frighten, coerce or scare. You'll find the butcher's apron, the English flag is there!

It waits upon blazing hovels where African victims died, to be shot the explosive bullets or wretchedly starve and die, and where the pirate hammers the isles of southern seas, at the peak of the hellish vessel the English flag is free!

The Maori often cursed it with his bitterness dying breath, and the Arab hath hissed his hatred as he spat at its folds in death, and the helpless Hindu feared it, and the Kenyan did the same, and the Irish blood hath stained it, with a deep indelible stain.

Where is the flag of England? Go North, South, East or West. Wherever there's wealth to plunder or land to be possessed. Wherever there's feeble races to frighten, coerce or scare. You'll find the butcher's apron, the English flag is there!

It is floated on scenes of pillage, it is flaunted on deeds of shame. It has waved o'er fell marauders, as they ravished with sword and flame, it has looked upon on ruthless slaughter, and massacred dire and grim, and has heard the shrieks of victims drowning the jingo hymn.

Where is the flag of England? Seek lands where the natives rot. Where decay, and assured extinction must soon be a people's lot. Go search for once glad islands where death and disease are rife, and the greed of colossal commerce now fattens on human life.

Where is the flag of England? Go North, South, East or West. Wherever there's wealth to plunder or land to be possessed. Wherever there's feeble races to frighten, coerce or scare. You'll find the butcher's apron, the English flag is there!

Where is the flag of England? Go sail where rich boats come. With shoddy and loaded cottons, and beer and Bibles and guns. Go where brute forces triumphed, and hypocrisy makes its lair. In your question you'll find the answer, it was and still is there!

Where is the flag of England? Go North, South, East or West. Wherever there's wealth to plunder or land to be possessed. Wherever there's feeble races to frighten, coerce or scare. You'll find the butcher's apron, the English flag is there!

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