

Assignment 2 – HPCS 5014 – Representations of Brittany.

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Discuss the theme of death in literature about Brittany.

Introduction

This essay will discuss the theme of death within literature about Brittany by looking primarily at the short story titled ‘The Sign’ by Villiers de L’Isle-Adam as well as ‘The Eight omens of Death’ by Le Braz, and the poem ‘Evil Landscape’ by Tristan Corbière. Reference will be made to background information relating to the Ankou, before finally looking at two contemporary examples of the theme of death within writing about Brittany.

In his book ‘La Poésie des races Celtiques’, Ernest Renan made the statement, when describing American poetry, that they were “a mysterious race, with a sense of the future and the secret of death”.¹ If we look through literature about Brittany, either written by Bretons, or by other French authors, we can find many references to death and how this is perceived as normal within Breton culture. If we look at Anatole Le Braz and the translation of “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne” by A.E. Whithead, we can find that in the introduction, which was written by L. Mariller, the quote

Distinction, indeed, between the natural and the supernatural does not exist amongst the Bretons, not at least in the same sense that it exists amongst us. For them the living and the dead are equally the inhabitants of this world and they live in perpetual intercourse with one another.²

This noting of how normal death is regarded as being within Breton culture can give us an indication as to why we might find so many references to the theme of death within Breton Literature. If something is regarded as being perfectly normal, why would it be hidden away rather than being written about?

The Sign

The short story titled “The Sign” by Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, is taken from his larger work *Contes Cruels* (Cruel Tales) that was published in 1883.³ Within this tale we can find many references to death and the supernatural, although most are subtle. For example, we will find no direct reference to *L’Ankou* which is the Breton personification of the collector of dead souls. In this way, Villiers, although being Breton by birth, avoided being labelled as a provincial Breton writer and so be in the position that his work would be more appealing to the

¹ Wikipedia, *La Poésie des races Celtiques* (2015) <
https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/La_Po%C3%A9sie_des_races_celtiques> [accessed 11 December 2021].

² A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.23.

³ Britannica, *Auguste, comte de Villiers de L’Isle Adam* (2021)<
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Auguste-comte-de-Villiers-de-LIsle-Adam>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

Parisian market. The narrator of the story, we find out as we read through it, is native to the Breton region in which the main part of the tale is set and is returning to Brittany to visit an old friend who is a priest. We can then link the narrators Breton origins to a reference from the beginning of the tale in which it is stated

I reached home under the influence of the hereditary spleen whose black obsession frustrates and reduces to naught the efforts of the medical faculty.⁴

The use of “black obsessions” and “hereditary spleen” suggest an obsession with death that the writer is not able to escape from by virtue of being Breton himself, even though in the case of the narrator, this has a negative effect upon his health which modern medicine has not been able to assist with.

As we go further into the tale, and after the narrator arrives at the presbytery, we are shown that the steps to the front door that have been polished and cared for are in fact made from old gravestones, on which lettering can still be seen.⁵ This particular use of gravestones at the threshold of a house suggests a level of practicality on the part of the Bretons who have re-used old stones in this way, but also a level of acceptance and familiarity with death in that the stones should be placed face up so that the lettering can be seen. This also creates a link between what might be seen as a place of peace or sanctuary, in that the building was the home of a priest, and to death, thus normalising it in some way, as well as creating a portal between the two worlds by placing the gravestones at the threshold to the house.

Further into the tale the narrator recounts his experience during the night when he was visited by the vision of a priest, the face of whom was hidden under a hat, and who was offering a cloak to the narrator.⁶ Again this offers an attempt at providing chilling narrative for the reader, but also subtly references Breton folklore in that a warning is given of an impending death, although at this stage of the story we do not necessarily realise that this is an omen.⁷ The particular visual theme is repeated towards the end of the tale when the priest offers his cloak to the narrator, thus further hinting at the fact that the narrator had indeed witnessed an omen, which is ultimately confirmed when the narrator is eventually told of the priests death.

In the same section of the story, we are also told that a “bird of the night, with a horrible cry passed between us”.⁸ Again we have a veiled subtle reference to death with the bird of the night, an owl, being regarded as a helper for the Ankou. Ellen Badone, in her article ‘Death Omens in a Breton Memorate’ stated that

A number of different types of event are emically recognised as *intersignes*. The most common of these is the call of the ‘Death Bird’ in the neighbourhood of a person who is about to die. This bird, known in Breton as *Labous an Ankou* is sometimes, but not exclusively identified as an owl.⁹

⁴ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.183.

⁵ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.186.

⁶ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.192.

⁷ Celticbreizh, *Facing Death: Representations of the Ankou* (2018) < <https://celticbreizh.com/facing-death-representations-of-the-ankou> > [accessed 12 December 2021].

⁸ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.192.

⁹ Ellen Badone, ‘Death Omens in a Breton Memorate’, *Folklore*, 98.1 (1987), 99-104 (p.99).

The fact that Villiers, as the author of the tale, was able to build this into the story would suggest that he had a good knowledge of the folklore and superstitions relating to death in Brittany.

It is also interesting to note that Villiers set the tale as having taken place at the end of October. Although within the tale he refers to the “autumn solstice”¹⁰, which is a mis-nomer as solstices would occur in either June or December, he also states that the narrator “wanted to enjoy the latter fortnight of the enchanted month of October”.¹¹ In this way, ignoring the misnomer, Villiers is directly placing the tale around the time of Samhain/Halloween which would have had obvious connotations with death for his readership.

Le Braz

Anatole Le Braz, although educated in Paris, was a native of Brittany and eventually became a professor of French literature at the university in Rennes, the capital of Brittany.

One of his best known works is “La Légende de la Mort” which Britannica.com notes contains “vividly poetic retellings of the legends of death – stories, traditions and practices – Le Braz collected in Brittany”.¹² Just from the name of this piece and that the stories collected within it are from the Breton region, would suggest the importance of the topic within Breton folklore and culture.

If we look at the tale “Eight Omens of a Death” that is contained within this work, we can find many examples of how death is related within Breton culture. The tale is narrated by a widow and relates to the omens that she saw that foretold of her husband’s death. We have seen in the tale from Villiers the use of omens to foretell a death and this theme is repeated within this tale collected by Le Braz, suggesting that this may be a common theme within Breton culture and folklore. Where this particular tale differs is on the timescale over which the omens occur. In the tale from Villiers the omens occur only a few days before the death of the priest, However, in the tale collected by Le Braz we have a time period of seven months from the first omen to the death of the husband.

In one of the first omens that we are told of is when the widow heard her husband call out to her only for her to find out that he was fast asleep.¹³ Whilst the text is relaying this to the reader as an omen, it could easily be discounted as a person merely calling out in their sleep, perhaps as the result of a dream or nightmare.

However, later in the tale we are told how the widow heard a “violent beating at the door”.¹⁴ This is much more easily relatable to our understanding of the folklore relating to the Ankou as it is reported that the Ankou will knock at the door of a house before collecting the soul of the dead person from that house.¹⁵ Continuing with this particular omen, the widow tells us that there was “the murmur of a crowd of people coming into the house, countless feet

¹⁰ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.183.

¹¹ Auguste Comte de Villiers de L’isle Adam, *Contes Cruels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.184.

¹² Britannica, Anatole Le Braz (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anatole-Le-Braz>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

¹³ A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.75.

¹⁴ A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.77.

¹⁵ The Paranormal Guide, *Ankou* (2013) < <http://www.theparanormalguide.com/blog/ankou>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

ascending the stairs”.¹⁶ This particular omen introduces another aspect of Breton folklore relating to death, namely *L’anaon*, who are regarded as the souls of the dead that had not passed into the other world.¹⁷

A final reference to take note of is the use of a creaking cart coming to the house in the lines “But immediately the jolting of a cart fell upon my ear”¹⁸, before continuing “The creaking of an ill-oiled axle-tree became more and more distinct. Ere long I heard it strike the gable end of the house”.¹⁹ Both of these lines give us a very clear link to the legend of the Ankou whereby the Ankou collects the dead souls in a wheel barrow or cart that has a creaking wheel, and knocks at the door of the house before collecting the dead person.²⁰

As with the tale from Villiers, these would suggest that Le Braz had a good knowledge of the folklore of Brittany. However, where “La Légende de la Mort” differs from the work of Villiers, is in that the tales recounted by Le Braz have been referenced as having come from specific people and on specific years. In the case of “Eight omens of a Death” we are told that the tale was related to Le Braz by a schoolmaster to whom the tale had been related from an “an old weaving woman of Pluz-unet” in 1891.²¹ In this way the works of Le Braz show a potential for greater perceived authenticity as they are received as ‘real tales from real people’.

Corbière

The final author that this essay will look at is Tristan Corbière and specifically his poem ‘Evil Landscape’. Although largely unknown until after his death, Corbière is now highly regarded and cited as being an early influence on the works of T. S. Elliot,²² and also as being a precursor to the surrealist movement in art.²³

The opening words of the poem “Sands of ancient bones”²⁴ gives a suggestion that the shoreline that he is referring to could have been made from or contain the bones of dead sailors or perhaps other sea creatures. This theme is reinforced as the line continues “The moaning tide of Death-Knells”²⁵ and perhaps giving a more obvious indication of links to death by referring to the sound of bells that might have been rung in a church as part of a funeral service. At the end of

¹⁶ A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.77.

¹⁷ unpublished paper by Heather Williams, Death in Brittany.

¹⁸ A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.78.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Oxford reference, *Ankou* (2021) < <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095414434> > [accessed 13 December 2021].

²¹ A. E. Whithead, *Dealings with the Dead Narratives from “La Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne”*, (London: George Redway, 1898), p.79.

²² Britannica, *Tristan Corbière* (2021) < <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tristan-Corbiere> > (2021) [accessed 13 December 2021].

²³ Poetry in Translation, *Corbière: Selected Poems from ‘Les Amours Jaunes’* < <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineascorbierepoems.php> > (2020) [accessed 13 December 2021].

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

the first verse we also have the phrase “devouring great worms”²⁶ making reference perhaps to human decomposition after burial.

Within the third verse of the poem, we find what is perhaps a more obvious reference with Corbière referring to washerwomen “The Pale washerwoman spreads around the dead’s dirty linen on the ground”²⁷ In this way we can believe that Corbière is referring to Les Lavandières or the *canard noz* that are part of Breton folklore. Les Lavandières are washerwomen who are reputed to wash the shrouds of people who are about to die.²⁸

In these different sections of Corbière’s poem we can find metaphors for, and links to death, as we have done within the works of Le Braz and Villiers, providing the close associations with death that can be found within Breton literature and culture. However, where Corbière differs from Villiers and Le Braz is in the style of his writing. Where Le Braz is collecting tales and writing them down from an oral tradition, and Villiers is creating fiction that draws upon the folklore of Brittany, Corbière creates a very dissonant image with his use of language that may not be entirely comfortable for those reading his works.

The wider context and conclusions

All of the texts so far examined are from the mid to late 19th century, so the next obvious question is how is the theme of death represented in current culture?

In 2007, French graphic novelist Christophe Babonneau started to illustrate the works of Le Braz. However, Babonneau has altered his visual depiction of the Ankou by no longer showing him as a skeletal figure, but instead showing him as an old man, although he has retained the wide brimmed hat. He has also retained the squeaking wheel of the Ankou’s cart to make his depiction of the character more recognisable for his readership.²⁹ By updating the visual depiction and by using the medium of graphic novels, Babonneau is making the legends of Breton mythology accessible for a modern readership and different demographic than would potentially be reached by the 19th century texts.

We can also look at the website for Brittany Ferries to gain an understanding from a tourism perspective. As might be expected, this is aimed at promoting tourism to Brittany and is specifically aimed at the UK market of holiday makers.

Although the site makes reference to different burial chambers that may make interesting excursion whilst on holiday in Brittany, such as the chamber at Dolmen de la Croix, and the chamber at Gavrinis³⁰, the tone used within the site is of a more romantic picturesque view of Brittany rather than the darker and slightly more sinister mythology that is presented within the works of Villiers, Le Braz and Corbière. Instead, it chooses to focus on sites linked with

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Poetry in Translation, *Corbière: Selected Poems from ‘Les Amours Jaunes’* < <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/klineascorbierepoems.php> > (2020) [accessed 13 December 2021].

²⁸ Wikipedia, *Les Lavandières* (2021) < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Lavandi%C3%A8res > [accessed 13 December 2021].

²⁹ Celticbreizh, *Facing Death: Representations of the Ankou* (2018) < <https://celticbreizh.com/facing-death-representations-of-the-ankou> > [accessed 14 December 2021].

³⁰ Brittany Ferries, *Breton Myths and Legends* (2021) < <https://www.brittany-ferries.co.uk/blog/explore-mystical-brittany-a-land-of-myths-and-legends> > [accessed 14 December 2021].

Arthurian legend such as the forests of Paimpont and Huelgoat or more religious sites such as Dol-de-Bretagne where St Michel was reputed to have fought the devil.³¹ This is perhaps to be expected of a tourist website, as most holiday makers may find references to the Ankou somewhat off-putting when planning their holidays. However, what it does show in relation to the question of this essay is that folklore and a more sanitised view of death in the form of historical monumental sites are still regarded as important for the Breton region and its economy.

From all of the texts examined, it is possible to see that all of the first three, Villiers, Le Braz and Corbière draw upon the close association that Brittany has with the topic of death. Although these texts all take a different style in how they represent this relationship, with some being less obvious than others, it is still possible to understand that the language, themes, and images used all have common ancestry in the mythology of Brittany, with it being possible to argue the same common ancestry for the contemporary texts as well even though they may not draw upon the same theme of death in such an explicit way.

Word count: 2530

³¹ Brittany Ferries, *Breton Myths and Legends* (2021) < <https://www.brittany-ferries.co.uk/blog/explore-mystical-brittany-a-land-of-myths-and-legends> > [accessed 14 December 2021].

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